

Censorship and Self-oppression

Judy Greenway
(1976)

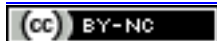
'Strength will not come through hiding or minimizing our differences'.

Arguing that difficulties in dealing with disagreements and controversy can lead to suppression of dissent and a 'tyranny of virtue' within some parts of the Women's Liberation Movement, this article from the nineteen-seventies argues for the necessity of open discussion. I have added some notes at the end to clarify some of the examples.

Published in ***Catcall 4***, September/October 1976, pp. 2-6. London: Catcall Collective. *Catcall* was a non-sectarian feminist discussion paper produced by and for women in the Women's Liberation Movement.

Key Words: censorship, diversity, feminism, politics, Women's Liberation Movement.

Copyright: This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).



Censorship and Self-oppression

The hindering of communication between members of oppressed groups is one of the mechanisms of social oppression. We are probably all aware of how the ideas of Women's Liberation are either refused space for public expression, or else presented in a distorted, trivialized, alienating or totally falsified way by the media. This is a serious problem for the Movement, but there is an equally serious problem related to it, which is the way in which ideas become distorted and suppressed within the Movement itself.

Censorship takes many forms. The most obvious, and perhaps the easiest to deal with in this context, is the refusal to publish ideas or information which are perceived as threatening. Most Women's Movement publications have some restrictions on the material they use. This is not unreasonable, provided that the nature of such restrictions is made explicit, and arises from the desire to fulfil a particular function rather than from the need to suppress dissent. As long as there are a number of Movement publications which represent different ideas and perspectives, and as long as the possibility exists for women to publish and distribute their own material, the decision not to publish something does not in itself constitute censorship. However, if a publication purports to be representative of the Movement as a whole, or to publish all available news and information relevant to women's liberation, while regularly omitting to mention particular ideas or activities, then this is a form of censorship, since readers have no easy way of knowing what kind of information is not appearing.

Sometimes a decision may be made not to publish something, not because it is unsuitable for a particular publication, but because it is taken to be against the aims of the Women's Liberation Movement as a whole. For example, material which contradicts one or more of the six demands of the Movement does not usually get published. Although this seems only logical, it could be dangerous if it meant that serious discussion of those demands and their implications was restricted. And it does seem to imply that there is no place in the Movement for groups or individuals who, while defining themselves as feminist, have principled objections to a particular demand, as for instance seems to be the case with the Women for Life group. While it is true that there is no shortage of platforms for anti-feminist opinions, I think a distinction should be made between such opinions, and challenges to existing Women's Liberation perspectives when those challenges spring from an essentially feminist viewpoint, hard though such a distinction may be to make in practice.

There are, however, more common reasons than alleged anti-feminism for refusal to print controversial material.

One is that such material is divisive, or will deepen already existing divisions within the Movement. So, for example, criticism of particular left groups may be suppressed, in case it feeds anti-left feelings in the Movement, or criticism of certain kinds of lesbian relationship may be suppressed, in case it reinforces negative attitudes towards lesbians. The accusation of divisiveness is a familiar one to feminists in all sorts of non-Women's Liberation organizations. It is generally based on a reluctance to admit the seriousness of any problems within the organization and it is hard to see that it has any more rationale when it occurs within the Movement. The problems exist whether or not they are written or publicly spoken about, and the most likely results of suppression are the distortion of the ideas of differing groups, and a consequent incomprehension of the process of growth, division and change within the Movement.

A related reason for suppressing material is that to publish it would be bad for our public image. We should work out our ideas and hold our quarrels in private. The mass media do a good enough job of misrepresenting us, without being fed stories of our problems and conflicts. We want to present the image of a unified movement. But we are not a unified movement: we are in constant battle over our aims and methods, and there can be no possible point in pretending otherwise. Any woman who comes into the Movement expecting the sunshine of sisterhood to be shining over us all is in for a sad disappointment. The mass media will misrepresent us in any case — it is their function to do so — and we have nothing to lose by showing that we are strong enough to challenge and rework our own beliefs.

Another argument is that certain kinds of information are demoralizing. It is often difficult to find realistic assessments of the effectiveness of particular campaigns and methods of working because the women involved have been so eager to encourage others and themselves in their activities, that the negative aspects have not been discussed. In the past year, following arrests and harassment by Grand Jury procedures, the USA women's movement has been torn by disagreements over questions of co-operation and compromise with the state. The resulting splits have not to my knowledge even been reported in any UK Women's Liberation publication. One collective decided not to write about the subject because it was 'too depressing'. We will learn nothing if we have nothing to learn from. There is nothing more depressing than being in the midst of rifts and failures which are never openly acknowledged and discussed — a denial of reality which is, again,

all too familiar in the rest of our lives. We know **why** we are in Women's Liberation from our daily experience; we can only learn **how** to get what we want by sharing experiences of our activities, including conflicts and failures.

An indirect method of censorship in publications can result from the context in which ideas appear. This was illustrated a couple of years ago in the *London Women's Liberation Workshop Newsletter*. There were at that time no restrictions on what material by women could be included. Over a period, anonymous articles and personal attacks created an intimidatory atmosphere. Women who may have felt like discussing a particular issue or responding to a previous item in the *Newsletter* were reluctant to do so, fearing psychic violence. Of course, we need to become strong in the development and assertion of our own ideas, and to learn to deal constructively with criticism. But the only strength which is likely to grow in those who can survive such attacks is a wholly uncreative rigidity.

The creation of an atmosphere in which it is difficult to voice certain ideas is in some ways even more oppressive than direct censorship. Such an atmosphere develops out of particular perceptions of the meaning of disagreement. Some disagreements are seen as genuine, if misguided, and yet are not discussed freely because of the kinds of reasons given above.

Sometimes, disagreement is seen as resulting from a conspiracy, as in women being described as 'agents' for male-dominated groups. Although, especially in the early days of the Women's Liberation Movement, some such groups undoubtedly saw it as a potential source of recruits, automatically to question the good faith of any woman connected with those groups is to invalidate those women's capacity for autonomous judgement, and to under-estimate the influence of our own ideas. We may (and must) question the basis of one another's politics, but that is different from discrediting someone solely because of her political background.

Conflict may be seen as a power play — perhaps one group manoeuvring To 'take over the Movement'. Individuals who put forward unpopular ideas too often or too forcefully may be thought to be similarly motivated. But the structure of the Movement does not allow 'takeover'; that is a major advantage of the small-group, anti-leadership ethos. Conscious or unconscious manipulativeness and attempts to dominate are more of a difficulty, and we have yet to work out adequate ways of dealing with them. In our efforts to do so, we need to be careful that we don't at the same time suppress independence and articulateness — we should trust our strength to handle problems, not presume our weakness (or, more usually, the weakness of other women, who may be 'mised'.)

Occasionally a particular attitude or set of beliefs seems so alien that it can't be described in neutral language. Although we don't yet publicly denounce each other as revisionist hyenas or incurable cancers, in unguarded moments images of disease and evil slip out. It is as though some of us want the Movement to be not only homogenized but pasteurized as well. Some ideas may well be destructive and anti- (rather than non-) rational, and we may not want to waste time discussing them. That is not, however, a good enough reason for suppressing them. Again, the structure of the Movement is a source of strength — if we can accept our diversity, we can use our energy to develop our ideas and practice, without feeling we have to spend time defending ourselves against the indefensible.

Another sort of approach to unpopular ideas and attitudes is personalization. One person may be presented as the embodiment of a particular set of ideas; by attacking that person, an attempt is made to discredit the ideas. This was demonstrated by some of the attacks on Selma James, when the Wages for Housework Campaign first got going in this country.

Alternatively, a person's ideas may be invalidated by giving them a purely psychological or sociological explanation, as in claims that she is racist, ageist, heterosexist, or whatever, without acknowledging the need to discuss the ideas themselves. This is not to suggest that ideas are somehow separable from their personal and social context, or that we should be exempt from this kind of criticism, but to point out that to explain something is not the same as explain it away. Once more, this is something that society is constantly trying to do to us as feminists — our beliefs are interpreted as the result of neurosis or ill-motivation, so that the 'symptoms' can be dealt with, and the content ignored.

Too often, when someone attacks a woman as a person, rather than concentrating on her ideas, the presumption is being made that she is incapable of change. People don't usually change as a result of attack; they cling to the security of their existing ideas. It is easy to forget, in our rejection of someone else's attitudes or behaviour, that none of us was born a feminist — sometimes it is our own past selves, reflected in someone else, that we despise.

These rigid perceptions of one another produce an artificial conformity, under a tyranny of virtue. Rather than be seen as failing to be feminist, some women end up by hiding what is going on in their minds and lives. One woman concealed from other women in the Movement that she was intending to get married. Feminism hadn't led her to decide against it; feminists had made it impossible for her to discuss it. Another woman didn't mention her proposed trip to a socialist country because she

expected a negative response, an unwillingness to respect her motives.¹ Probably most of us have, if only by omission, hidden things about ourselves that we felt would meet with disapproval in the Movement. Yes, this happens because we are weak and insecure — but the Movement should function to give us strength, not to weaken us further. We need to give more thought to how we can give one another the support we need to change, and to recognise that no one of us is 'liberated' — or what would be the need of a movement?

The feeling that supportiveness implies not criticizing one another is perhaps the soft side of suppression by attack — suppression by sisterhood. There is nothing sisterly in withholding criticism or glossing over disagreements. We cannot relate to one another as equals, if at all, if we are constantly denying the reality of how we feel and interact with one another. If sisterhood means anything, it means recognizing the need to be taken seriously.

The forms of censorship and self-oppression which I have been discussing seldom occur as the result of malicious intent, and are sometimes not even conscious. Mostly they seem to be related to our fears and insecurities. The consequence of believing that the personal is political is that one's whole life has to be open to challenge and change. This is frightening to recognize, let alone to put into practice. Many disagreements about principles and practice are in a very direct sense personal threats — that is, threats to the person one now is. The process of consciousness raising demands trust, and sometimes we let one another down. The hopeful expectations of sisterhood constantly collide with real diversity of interests. We have continually to struggle against the reproduction of oppressive social hierarchies amongst ourselves. It is hardly surprising that sometimes we react to dissent in unconstructive ways.

Self-oppression is one of the sneakiest weapons of social control. Before we can work out how to fight it, we have to recognize that it exists, and how it operates. It fastens on our weaknesses, and we have to find and rely on our strength. That strength will not come through hiding or minimizing our differences. If they turn out to be irreconcilable, then it is better to split openly over principle than to pretend that we are united when we are not. And when we no longer refuse to respond to each other seriously, and critically, and openly, then we can fight our common oppression as women with some hope of success.

Judy Greenway
1976

Contextual notes:

Marriage: the 'YBA Wife' campaign was active between 1975 and 1984, campaigning for legal and financial independence for women and against the specific discrimination and oppression faced by married women. Groups such as WAVAW (Women Against Violence Against Women) campaigned on issues such as domestic violence and marital rape, then barely, if at all, acknowledged as crimes. Seen in this context, the decision to marry could be seen as political, not just personal.

Socialism: Many activists in the early WLM emerged from the Left, often prompted by their experiences of sexism in a variety of socialist groups. (For more on this, see [Lynn Alderson's article from 1977](#).) Those who remained allied to such groups were sometimes regarded with suspicion as possible 'entryists' trying to co-opt the movement — a suspicion reinforced by the disruptive activities of some Maoist and Trotskyist groups in the early days. However, the decentralised structure of the movement made co-optation difficult, and in many local groups and campaigns women were able to meet and work together despite political differences. I think the particular example mentioned here refers to a visit to China.

USA Grand Jury investigations: Perceived links between women's liberation groups and (other) subversive organisations led to attempts at surveillance and disruption of the WLM by police and secret services in the USA and elsewhere. Feminists disagreed about how (if at all) to relate to women accused of involvement in such organisations as the Weather Underground and the Black Panthers.

Judy Greenway
August 2023