

jeopardy. I want to learn about resources of support and safety in the group first, before I can feel happy about taking risks. And so it goes. We may have exercises in the various forms of listening and counselling that are possible, specially with family groups.

So what goes on, then? We discuss our varying experience. For instance, one of us had visited a group of young mothers who meet at the local health clinic. Two of them told him how they had gone through a period of post-natal depression and how much they would have welcomed someone to talk to. They would be very glad, they said, to help any other young mother in a similar predicament. Another woman with mental hospital experience as an agoraphobic is very willing to look after others who may suffer similarly. I am at present particularly interested in school leavers without jobs, or young people trained for a particular job, like teachers, but unable to get started. This is only an idea at the moment, and I would like to hear from others who feel similarly, who would like or who already have started such groups, to see how they can help each other, if they can, possibly to practice interviewing skills and such like. Although it is part of my job with the local authority to help start neighbourhood and self-help groups, it is not in my job specifications to concern myself with school leavers or other unemployed as such. Still, there are plenty of other people in any community, lonely and unhappy, who can help each other.

We discussed publicity. I had compiled a list of nearly 50 outlets, local and national, publications which carry 'coming events' or 'diary' columns and who may well be willing to print notices of such meetings. Since then I have been told of several more, all free of charge.

What else happened? We practiced group leadership skills, and particularly how to keep quiet and let the group develop its own initiative and energy. We practiced listening and counselling skills, role-exchange, psychodrama, and other client-centred experiential exercises, and we practiced on each other to develop skills to cope with fear, stress, threat, conflict, low energy, frustration, happiness and joy . . .

In the present climate of cut-backs in the social and community services such self-help community groups and action groups as can be established or establish themselves, are all the more vital. Social and community workers always talk about preventive work but staff shortages and pressure of remedial work make it all but impossible. Perhaps a little encouragement from these services towards such initiatives and ideas might not come amiss.

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Willow O'Men

## Woman's Right to Choose

*. . . It was woman's reproductive biology that accounted for her original and continued oppression, and not some sudden patriarchal revolution, the*

*origins of which Freud himself was at loss to explain . . . Shulamith Firestone, 1973.*

## I

It's a long story. It started with my reading Balzac and other French middle-class writers who described the life and love-life of the highly educated and intelligent ladies who were the centre of artistic and cultural life in the last century. At sixteen I admired and envied those fascinating 'madames' running their cultural circles and having a social life too. At seventeen I discovered Simone de Beauvoir and her book *The Second Sex*. Having read it I realized what I felt already: my destiny need not be solely as housewife and mother. Consequently I did not marry. Needless to say that my friends did not understand me. Women's lib did not exist yet.

## II

I had boyfriends and several very stable relationships as an eligible Miss. I got pregnant three times. The first two pregnancies happened in Germany when I was a student. The first guy vanished when he heard about his luck; the second one offered to marry me. But we could not afford a child. Everybody told me to keep the baby except for my widowed mother who knew the tough reality of bringing up two kids without a Daddy. It was my mother who managed to find a Doctor for me after I had searched for four months without success - her family Doctor, who helped out to do Mum a favour. Abortion was a crime in those days; even a scrape was illegal. Needless to say I got plenty of advice about how easy and enriching it was to be mother, wife and student at the same time. Needless to say the enthusiasm came from people who were *not* in that position.

## III

The third time I got pregnant in Britain. After eight years on the pill I had to come off it because of the side-effects getting too dangerous. The Family Planning Association told me regretfully that they hoped I could regain fertility as recent research indicated that the pill can induce infertility if taken too long.

The one and only time I forgot the cap, six weeks only after being off the pill I got pregnant. The FPA thought I was ill, they couldn't believe I was pregnant. I hoped I was ill, but I *was* pregnant. This time everything was arranged quickly and smoothly, by a consultant who did it privately on the N.H.S. (!)

Needless to say this consultant was very 'understanding' and 'all for women's freedom' because I paid and was middle-class.

## IV

After the third pregnancy I knew I did not want a child, I was now 32 and happy in my profession. I do love kids but I hate being restricted and housebound. I don't want my 'own' family, a conventional nuclear family with all its oppressive mechanisms.

So I decided to have myself sterilized. Needless to say, people told me I was 'selfish', 'mad' or both. And wouldn't I want a pretty and intelligent kid like me. Adopted children are never like your own blood; it's never the same. To be truly a woman you don't want to miss that unique fulfilment of motherhood. All that jazz.

The people supporting me in the decision were the people who cared for my needs and health including mum who had always hoped to have grandchildren.

## V

Eventually I had 'it' done. The weekend in hospital was lonely and I felt rather ill. Most of my friends disapproved of my decision and didn't visit me. I recovered quickly. Three tiny little cuts remain. That's all. *THAT IS ALL!* Except now I don't have to swallow a pill every day which changes my hormonal and emotional balance. I feel very healthy. I feel very good; and feel free. All these gloomy predictions of friends failed: I am the same person, I did not regret 'it'. I did not suddenly develop a craving for kids; I did not get depressed afterwards. I still am a woman and no sensible man has rejected me because of 'it'. And I did not become a 'crazy sexmaniac' which somebody predicted, too.

I just has not changed a thing in me or my life except for the fact that I cannot give birth since 'it' happened last year.

Needless to say society rejects 'it' (unless you are a working class woman with a couple of kids. Then the FPA kindly advises and arranges free sterilisation or hysterectomy . . .).

## VI

Even a lot of my friends are shocked and have distanced themselves. I don't blame them; the system glorifies motherhood.

I tend to hide 'it' and tell people that I cannot have children. At work I would not dare tell the medics who refer people for psychotherapy to me. They might stop sending couples for instance. It's bad enough not to be married at my age, but to have chosen 'it' - 'something must be wrong with her, mustn't it'. Or is she one of those women's libbers - that would be even worse! You can't win.

### References

The French novelists and:

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- 3 *The Dailectics of Sex. Shlamith Firestone*, 1972. Paladin.
4. *Kommune 2. 1969*. Berlin. (a collective description of a commune).
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