

Searching for the anti-sexist man

As the anti-sexist men's movement enters its twenty-first year, Mick Cooper asks: how much has it actually contributed to the struggle for women's emancipation?

'It's all very well you and your anti-sexist men's group talking about yourselves and which flower your penis most resemble', my partner said to me one night, 'but how's that challenging the economic, social and sexual oppression of women? If you really want to be *anti-sexist* why don't you do something concrete like organising a crèche or raising money for a women's minibus?'

I explained to her that through developing my emotional, sensitive side I would no longer be able to ignore the injustices of sexism and would therefore naturally fight against gender inequalities on both a personal and social level. 'But your Anti-sexist Men's Movement has been going on for years' she pointed out, 'how much in all that time has it actually focussed on the oppression of women?'

It was a question that I found difficult to avoid. Despite an initial commitment in my own anti-sexist men's group towards positive anti-sexist actions, there had been definite tendencies to drift towards more 'self'-orientated activities. Was this shift because of a firm belief in the anti-sexist merits of consciousness-raising or for a more selfish reason? I began to wonder how much I, and more importantly the Anti-sexist Men's Movement as a whole, had actually contributed to the struggle for women's emancipation.

The first anti-sexist men's group was established during 1971 in Brighton (it's not called B-Right-On for nothing!). The early members tended to be white, middle class, and university educated. More importantly, virtually all the men coming into the Movement had female friends or lovers who were developing an awareness of feminism and were now no longer prepared to put up with the sexism of their men-folk. For many men this caused both personal and political turmoil, worsened by the fact that as men they were excluded from the Women's Movement. The Anti-sexist Men's Movement offered men an opportunity to band together in their

confusion and to develop a response to feminism.

The first British Men Against Sexism conference in June 1973 was attended by approximately thirty men from eight men's groups around the country. The organisers convened the conference around four programmatic ideas: the opposition to oppression of women, liberation from the disadvantages of masculinity, liberation from sexism as a counter-revolutionary ideology, for socialism... without sexism. However, whilst three of these four ideas focussed on the oppression of women interestingly

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all four of the actual discussion groups centred on the issue of masculinity: *Men* and the family; *men* and their culture; *men* and social revolution (which was dropped), and the future of *men* against sexism. It seems that even in the early days, men were more interested in talking about themselves than about women.

The Movement grew with a Birmingham conference in 1973 followed by a Leeds conference in 1974. However, an article in the third edition of *Brothers against Sexism* later that year contained the seeds of a dispute that would bitterly split the Movement.

The article entitled *Coming Out is the Only Way Forward* argued that because sexism exists independent of the will of

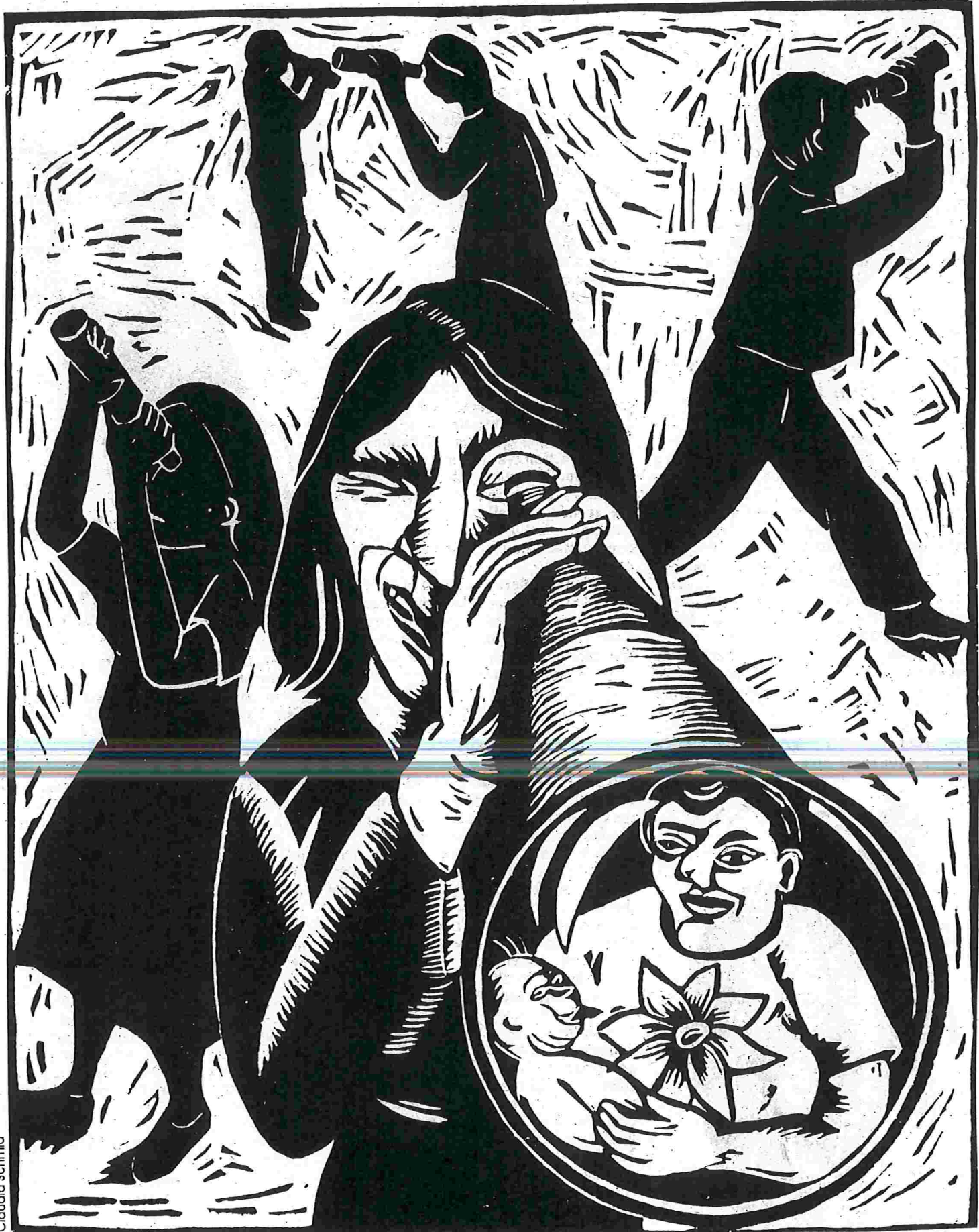
individual men, any contact between a man and a woman would inevitably result in the oppression of the woman. Men should therefore refrain from all heterosexual intercourse and learn instead to tolerate each others 'piggish' qualities. Only when men are prepared to risk their masculinity to the extent of becoming homosexual could the Men's Movement challenge sexism in the way that the Gay Liberation Movement had.

Much of the London conference of November 1974 was taken up by this issue. The plenary session was dominated by gay men venting their anger and claiming that the 'straights' should 'go gay' or 'shut-up'. They argued that the fight against sexism could only take place in the Women's or Gay Liberation Movement and that the Men's Movement should either become an auxiliary or 'close up'. Several gay men walked out after accusing the straight men of being homophobic.

The criticisms and accusations of the gay men had a profound effect on the Men's Movement. The next magazine suitably subtitled *The Pigs Last Grunt*, had a resigned and depressed quality to it. The Stoke Newington group that produced the magazine wrote that the conference was too much about men's liberation, that the workshops had nothing to do with confronting sexism as it oppresses women, and nothing to do with how men oppress women. They argued that men's groups could only serve to reinforce sexist behaviour and proposed that they should be dissolved after a period of vigorous self-criticism.

Whilst the call from the gay men to give up heterosexuality had not been taken too seriously, their attack questioned and undermined the political validity of the Anti-sexist Men's Movement. For three years after the production of *The Pigs' Last Grunt* no conferences were held and no national newsletter existed.

In April 1978, however, the Men's Movement gained renewed momentum with a London conference attended by about two hundred people. With the guilt-induced crisis of the '75 conference partially forgotten, the Movement returned to its 'men's liberation' perspective. The newsletter condemned the 'masochistic' politics of the early years and workshops at the conference



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focussed on men's issues such as non-verbal communication, co-counselling, men's writings, men and childcare, and men's groups in crisis.

Two major events occurred following the conference that helped to firmly establish the new phase of men's activity. In June 1978, the London Men's Centre was set up in an Islington basement, one night a week 'for all men struggling

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against sexism: in themselves, in other men, in society'. Its programme alternated between anti-sexist discussions (on issues such as rape crisis, violence against women, sexism in the workplace) and consciousness-raising, although in the last six months the discussions were dropped. The Centre also organised creches for women's liberation events and became involved in other forms of anti-sexist activity such as producing 'Men say No to Sexist Adverts' stickers.

The second major development in the summer of 1978 was the appearance of *Achilles Heel* - 'a magazine of men's politics'. Produced by a working collective of Socialist men who had been involved in men's groups and men's politics for some time, the magazine soon

came to play a central role in the development of the Movement.

However, in the midst of this revitalisation a new conflict was emerging that was to again divide the Movement. At the Manchester 1979 conference a workshop had been held on a series of 'commitments', statements that anti-sexist men could agree to in order to further their struggle against sexism.

Keith Motherson, as one of the main 'commitment' advocates admitted that it was frightening for men to evolve a list of ways to devolve their own power. However, he argued that to deal with the guilt feelings men had about their sexism the best thing they could do would be to recognise their responsibility and take action to change their situation. Pro-feminist action was a primary objective of the 'commitments' with support for the Women's Liberation Movement high on the agenda as well as a commitment to sharing childcare, to rigorous consciousness-raising and to outreach programmes.

When the plenary session at the end of the 1980 conference in Bristol came to discussing the commitments many men were violently opposed. They argued that the rules and regulations were patriarchal and delineating, restricting rather than liberating men. The 'commitments' group retorted that men were afraid of making sacrifices, that male individualism would fight against any restraints, and that the Anti-sexist Men's Movement was clearer about the 'men's' than the 'anti-sexist' bit. But with so much hostility towards them the commitments were withdrawn and the Movement never came to a vote.

Part of the reason for this was Paul Morrison's proposal of the 'Minimal Self-definitions', intended to show people what the Men's Movement was and to resolve any doubts in people's minds that the Men's Movement was anti-women. Whilst in content the 'self-definitions' were similar to the 'commitments', the essential difference lay in the fact that they did not compel the men in the Movement to do anything. Morrison's definitions allowed men to call themselves anti-sexist, to say that they took equal shares in child care, confronted sexism in the workplace etc., whilst not actually committing them to these activities. And what started off as 'Minimal Self-definitions' soon became maximal.

Following the failure of the commitments, the Movement's enthusiasm once more steadily declined. Newsletters came out less frequently and



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no one could be found to organise the next conference.

In June 1980, the London Men's Centre closed down. Since the beginning of the year it had been looking for premises and when it finally lost its residence in Islington, the four men who had initially set it up stated that they were tired of putting all their efforts into it with such little support. Rather, they decided, to put their energies into more directly pro-feminist activities with the setting up of 'Creches against Sexism' and 'Cash against Sexism'.

These organisations too, however, received little commitment from other men in the Movement. Whilst 'Creches against Sexism' had fifty members on its list many were erratic and irresponsible in turning up for events. Responsibility often fell on the same four people. 'Cash against Sexism' received even less support. Only 10% of the money raised came from outside the four organisers and the majority of this was from collections rather than from donations or wage percentages.

The men's Action against Sexism conference held in Manchester in May 1982, was condemned by its organisers as an unmitigated disaster. Despite its title, they claimed it was all talk and sharing of personal experiences rather than planning



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of activity. No one had turned up to the workshops on 'street action' and 'supporting the National Abortion Campaign', and not one of the one hundred and twenty-five anti-sexist men had offered to help run a creche in the evening for a 'Women in Ireland' group meeting!

The Movement appeared to be growing further away from supporting women. In March 1982, a public meeting organised by the Newham men's group on organising a response to male violence was picketed by feminists after they had been excluded from the meeting on the ground that it was for 'men only'.

A group of men at a later conference in June distributed a leaflet entitled 'How Can Excluding Women be Anti-Sexist?'. They criticised men in the Movement for complacently focussing on 'men's lives' and 'men's experiences' and for refusing to accept that for women, the problem of

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sexism is *men*. Rather than holding 'men only' conferences, they argued that if men are to develop an effective anti-sexist practice they should welcome women's criticism and be responsive to their demands. The group went on to propose that the Men's Movement should be *accountable* to the Women's Movement. In so doing they felt that men would develop an anti-sexist practice not in their own interests but in the interest of women.

Despite their suggestions, from 1982 until the present it seems that more and more focus in the Anti-sexist Men's Movement is being put on the issue of male liberation. Issue 9 of *Achilles Heel* contained no articles on the oppression of women and the 1990 conference in Bath had only one workshop focussing on the topic.

The history I have presented here is by no means full, but it raises some difficult questions for men in the Anti-sexist Men's Movement: Why did the Movement crumble when confronted by the gay men in 1974?; Why were men so afraid to make a specific commitment to challenging sexism or to be accountable to women?; Why did groups like 'Creches

against sexism' and 'Cash against Sexism' fail due to lack of support? And why is it that after almost twenty years the conferences and magazines still focus far more on the problems of masculinity than on the oppression of women? Given the historical evidence, the belief that men will fight for the liberation of women once they have liberated themselves seems particularly bland.

The crux of the problem seems to be located in the widespread notion that 'what's good for men is good for women' leading to the belief that through men 'getting to know themselves' patriarchy will magically disappear. Undoubtedly a comforting thought, but the reality is that in a society where women earn 66% of men's wages, are only 3% of its judges yet do 90% of the housework, much of the oppression of women *directly* benefits men. As conflicting social groups, men and women's class interests will not always be the same, and if men just 'do what feels good' and 'have fun' they will at best be apathetic bystanders to the economic, social, and sexual oppression of women, and at worst willing participants.

Sexism is a system that serves men's gender interests. To challenge it means that men must be prepared to sacrifice many of their social privileges. It's an unpleasant, some would say 'guilt-tripping' thought, but the history of the Men's Movement show that it is only when men have made a real commitment to challenging sexism have they come out with positive activities. Each time men have lost consciousness of the anti-sexist aims of the Movement and slipped back into a *laissez-faire* approach the issue of women has been slowly but distinctly forgotten.

There are many activities that men can undertake if they seriously wish to challenge sexism. From the workplace to the college to the home, men can identify sexist instances and formulate ways of confronting them. Challenging other men on a personal and political level is also an important areas in which men can play a part in tackling sexism. By listening to women, finding out what needs doing, and being prepared to make sacrifices, men can ultimately help in the destruction of their own power and create a more egalitarian social system. The men in the Movement that have chosen this approach and been to some extent successful suggests that it is not an impossibility.

In 1991 the Anti-sexist Men's Movement can celebrate twenty years of existence. In that time the lives of many men have been enriched through the self-analysis activities of the Movement. Many women, too, have probably benefited from the individual reductions in machismo that the Movement has brought about. But there is now a need to re-integrate more concrete anti-sexist activities into the Movement so that it can challenge sexism on a wider level. This may involve men undertaking activities that are not as much fun as playing New Games or as personally rewarding as talking about one's own sexuality, but the long term rewards of a society free of gender inequalities seems well worth the short term struggle.

This article is a condensed version of a critical history of the men's movement. Copies of the full version can be obtained from *Achilles Heel* for £1.00 including postage and packing.



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