An anthology of radical feminist writings from the current women's movement. Forty-five articles ranging from the personal to the theoretical and drawn largely from the feminist annual NOTES.
Men and Violence

The following is a transcript of a taped consciousness-raising session. It is one of twenty such tapes produced for WBAI-FM Radio in New York City.

The WBAI consciousness-raising group, consisting of seven women, was formed in the fall of 1970. The women met every week—sometimes twice a week and on Sundays—in the WBAI studios to produce a CR tape on a specific topic. The topics included Adolescent Puberty Rituals (How I First Learned About Menstruation), Housework, Masturbation, and Monogamy.

The program was broadcast in two parts on Fridays at noon. The daytime hour was chosen to reach women who, because they have small children and other female responsibilities, are often unable to join a CR group. During Part I of the program a forty-five minute edited version of a tape was played. During Part II women in the audience phoned in and did their own consciousness-raising on the air. The first broadcast of the CR program received more mail than any other first broadcast in WBAI history.

Members of the group are Kate Ellis, Sebern Fisher, Marian Meade, Vivian Neimann, Gloria Schuh, Mary Winslow, and Rosemary Gaffney (who unfortunately was absent the night "Men and Violence" was taped). The program was produced and edited by Nanette Rainone.

SEBERN: I just started a new job with a messenger service, and in the last two days when my son has been on vacation from school, he's been riding in the car with me mainly to save me from tow away zones. He's nine years old. And, as we go around the streets of New York, he points out to me every time a man is looking in my direction, or, which is more obvious to me, when a man is whis-
ting at me. And he has this kind of grin on his face whenever he does it.

Finally today I asked him why he felt so compelled to point it out, and he said that he really didn’t know. But it seems that he was getting a grandstand view of male chauvinism and enjoying it, just as he was enjoying the sights of the World Trade Center or the heliport, you know? I came in on that level.

And it became difficult because I was dealing with that issue of the whistling which was out there, and here was my kid who was reflecting it all in my car. So I turned on the radio, which was the only thing to keep them... to keep all the sounds out.

GLORIA: What I feel is rage. I mean I feel outraged in terms of the street and in terms of my position on the street, in terms of the fact that the streets are owned by men. I just feel that the men stake out the street and each block is owned by different men, and that men travel those blocks with the consent and permission of other men. Women travel those blocks also with the consent and permission of men, but on a different level, in that you are at any time susceptible to those whims in far more of a real way than those men are.

You know, it’s becoming a well-known thing that women in the movement hate to be whistled at. They hate to be stopped in the street. I mean, men laugh at it—other women laugh at it. They say that we’re too sensitive, that we’re too upset, that we get too outraged and that it’s really a compliment to be stopped and to be whistled at and to be thought pretty and that we should start worrying when it stops.

But what I find outrageous is the fact that their fantasy can be activated into a reality at any time. And you’re the object of it, so that you cannot escape. That’s what happened tonight. I mean, we were coming to the studio and Vivian and I had stopped in front of a store, and a man came up to her and asked her for twenty cents. She said “No,” and she proceeded to walk into the store. He blocked her way and he shoved her against a plate glass window. And he called her a strange name. And all I could feel was contained rage, because if I hit him, he would’ve killed me. He was really a violent man. Much larger, much stronger. And I had no effective way of dealing with it.

If it happened again when we walked out of the studio, there
would be no way of dealing with it. If you walk up to the police, as I wanted to do, the reality is that they probably wouldn’t deal with it, because it’s much too frequent. So you have to begin to choose your neighborhoods and choose the hours, and choose the circumstances that you can be out.

And that’s the rage I feel as a woman. That complete physical powerlessness in a situation. And the only way of dealing with it is to react with some sort of violence, which women don’t want to do. I don’t want to become a man, in the sense of becoming someone that can beat the crap out of another person. Yet, the only alternative women have on the street is to become a part of the street. To react in the same way men do, which makes them immune in the sense that nobody walks up to a huge man in the street and beats him up, or presumes upon him.

**KATE:** Or asks him for twenty cents, even.

**GLORIA:** Well, they might ask, but they’ll ask politely. And certainly they’re not going to beat someone up over twenty cents. It’s really so heavy.

**SEBERN:** So what are you going to do?

**GLORIA:** I’m going to start learning to be violent, I guess. I mean I can only contain for so long my pure thoughts about how one power structure shouldn’t presume upon another, and how you don’t remove violence by being violent. That theory works only until you’re ripped off against a wall or raped, or someone you know is killed. And then you begin to see that powerlessness is not the answer to that kind of street situation.

**KATE:** Because, in fact, it’s not simply nonviolence, it’s nonviolence combined with powerlessness, which doesn’t make any sense at all.

**GLORIA:** I just remember an incident when I was visiting one night, and a man who was a friend of this family started to talk to me. I was talking about the movement, and I was telling him about myself and who I was and what I was doing. He tried the usual thing about, well, you should wear lighter colors and you’ll look better. And I just ignored him. I didn’t pick up on any of that.

Toward the end of the evening we were talking about women and men’s natural superiority over women, and he kind of looked in my direction. All of a sudden he became very agitated and said, “Well, if I really wanted to right now, I could kill you. I could beat the
shut out of you.” And I looked at him and I said, “Probably, but that doesn’t make you a superior person.” And he said, “But I really could. You know, I really could beat you up.”

I’ve noticed a degree of violence that men have in relationship to me. I think maybe that’s their second line of action when the first line doesn’t really work. You know . . . like when they walk up to you . . .

KATE: A male chauvinist would say that you provoke that.

MARY: You only provoke it by assuming any kind of equality. The moment you begin to assume equality is that moment that it’s provoked—if you want to use that word.

GLORIA: That’s why the man stopped Vivian. And called her what he did. Like, which was a cold bitch. But the thing is that it was because she was walking down the street as though she had a right to be there. And as though she, you know, she was walking into a store, she wasn’t aware of anybody, she wasn’t looking at anybody . . . we were just talking. But I’ve noticed more and more that whenever we’re together there’s less of an attempt to pick us up than an attempt to be violent, because it’s happened a couple of times.

SEBERN: Then there’s the story of a friend of mine who went into a coffee shop-bar setup with her child in Pennsylvania. And the proprietor of the place came over and said that “You’ll have to get that out of here.” And she thought he was speaking of the chicken leg which the little boy was eating, and she went to great lengths to assure him that she was going to buy some food for herself. And he said, “No, I don’t mean that, I mean your child. He is too young to be up so late.” It was nine o’clock.

She became incensed, enraged. He was not only telling her that—that she couldn’t partake of the services everybody else had, but he was also putting it in the context of her being a bad mother. She’d no other way than, you know, giving him a very hard time, trying to rouse up the other customers who were bored with the whole scene, to get any kind of action going, and the feeling was overwhelming.

Her husband picked the child up and left because he didn’t want a fight, which not only had undercut her argument, but really fulfilled a fear that, sure, that guy could and would beat somebody up over the issue of a child being up too late for his ethical standard.
And, as he pushed her out the door, he said, “You know, you’re a woman, and I could really beat you up.”

GLORIA: It’s so depressing.

SEBERN: But the level at which we take that in. You know, it’s not only the circumstances that come from outside. It’s the level to which you accept that in day-to-day situations which doesn’t allow you to have an instantaneous reaction, and know that you’re taking somebody off guard and chopping them or kicking them, but tells you rather that you have to submit to constant punishment of this kind.

KATE: Has anybody here... has anybody here ever been... I meant my husband really beat me up once. I mean really just absolutely tore me apart.

The way this arose, really, had a great deal to do with my own inability to express anger at him. And what I would do instead was burst into tears. I mean, there’s some kind of relationship between bursting into tears and being beaten up.

And whenever I would do that with him, he would say, “I can’t deal with you when you’re so upset. Come back and talk to me when you’re in a rational frame of mind.” I would’ve liked to do anything to him. I just don’t know quite what. To me this was just the most totally frustrating thing that he ever said: “Go away while you’re so upset and then come back.”

Now of course he couldn’t deal with anger at all—we kind of complemented each other on that. I cried and he withdrew. The thing is, though, that finally the dam just broke and he lost control of himself completely. This was a thing where I was—I was just hysterical and upset with him, and I just wouldn’t go away and control myself. I just kept coming back at him and coming back at him and finally he had just had as much as he could take and, though he was a very, very controlled person and found my anger hard to deal with and found his own anger hard to deal with, right in front of our son, who was two at the time, and who came over to me after, when I was lying on the ground and really just—just—I mean for about ten minutes my husband just absolutely pummeled me like he was crazy.

But when I look back on that now, I think, you see, it was a time when I was asking him to move out and nothing was happening. The very next day he went out and got himself an apartment and
moved out right like that. And so in a certain kind of way, it seemed to me at that time that at least Wayne finally did something. I mean, he saw only two alternatives: total withdrawal or the total opposite.

SEBERN: Because of the anger that has been repressed in us, the six of us in the room could eventually, you know, send this city like they had never seen King Kong.

GLORIA: But you see men allow themselves that option of becoming violent. Women don’t. Not even with other women who they can beat up! Or even particularly maybe with their children. But that’s the only visible way we allow ourselves an outlet: toward something totally powerless like a child or an animal.

SEBERN: Or yourself.

GLORIA: Or even yourself. But anything that has a modicum of consciousness, I mean, you just can’t do it.

MARY: I was thinking just in relation to what you were saying, Kathy, about how we cry and they hit. Even when it doesn’t come to that. Even when it’s just a simple argument, there’s always the potential for that kind of violence, even if you’re in a situation where you’re not getting hit or never have been.

Still, sometimes just the anger of my husband has made me realize, you know, why any anger is so intimidating, because ultimately for it to become physical is the only place it can go unless you begin to defuse that anger by doing something else or stopping the conversation or redirecting things, or becoming passive, or dropping the whole thing. It’s always there with men.

KATE: I married my husband, who was 6’4”, and I married him because he was tall and because I’m 5’8” and I somehow had a thing that finally I was accepting my role because he was big and strong.

And so, I mean I didn’t ask to be beaten up, although in looking at it afterwards it seemed like a very masculine thing for him to do somehow since I had been nagging him because he never really asserted himself.

GLORIA: The thing that concerns me about the whole incident on Eighth Street tonight was the fact that if I had thought about it, and I guess I did think about it, in the split second of Vivian walking through the door and him standing there just totally smug, you know, smiling—I could have, you know, kicked him or hit him. I
could have hit him back and I didn’t. I could have taken him totally by surprise and really hurt him, and I didn’t. I was within three inches of him and he was totally secure about the fact that no one was going to retaliate. And I didn’t do anything.

And I can kind of back that up even further because when I was young I played with boys all the time. I was a tomboy. And we used to roughhouse and kid around and wrestle, and I was equally as strong as them. I never felt weaker than them because they were all about my age and I didn’t really think in terms of strength... that these people were more powerful than me.

At ten I was having this puppy love kind of thing with this little boy on the block. And something I had done—I think I beat him in baseball or something like that—something ridiculous—and he turned around and he punched me in the arm. And my first reaction was to hit him back. And I had my hand up to hit him and I just stopped. There was no fear that he was going to beat me up, because we were equally strong at that point. I’m sure he’s now stronger than me physically, but a boy of ten and girl of ten are about equally matched, since I was even bigger than him physically. He was a little boy, and I didn’t hit back. And I think somehow that was a turning point for me.

MARY: The interesting thing to me is Gloria’s being ten years old and an equal physical match and still not doing anything about it, which seems to me even more distressing.

I was thinking about my children who are very used to fighting with their father—roughhousing. My daughter is two years older than my son, so you’d think she’d be better at it, and she was up to a certain point. But now, at the age of eight, she’s begun to play all sorts of so-called “feminine” games where instead of coming in punching, she runs around or pinches toes or does all kind of devious things that really are not part of the scene. Whereas my son, who’s smaller than she is, you know, still fights very directly with his fists or butts with his head, but it’s all very direct, head-on. She’s already pulling away—not liking real physical contact—would rather play tricks or use an implement, something to get distance between her and her father. So it starts at a very early age where women begin to dislike or be conditioned to dislike any kind of real aggressive behavior.

VIVIAN: I don’t travel the subway too much any more, but when
I did every day I encountered two or three incidents always with extremely well-dressed businessmen, and slapped them each time across the face. And it works. Because they were really horrified. And I think it tends to make them think twice about doing it again. I don’t recommend it at twelve midnight when the train is empty and you’re looking at a man who possibly might have a knife on him. But if it’s a packed subway and the man looks like he can be intimidated, I would say slap him across the face. But I should add to that that in the subway, most of the people were outraged at my behavior.

SEBERN: Yeah. That’s what happened to me.

VIVIAN: Very strange. But the men especially thought I was just really horrendous.

GLORIA: The men, of course, because they’ve probably done it to a hundred women. I mean, I don’t think it takes anything perverted or abnormal about a man making advances towards a woman in the subway. It happens every day. I see it. You know, you can see the men just walking around, going from one woman to another. The big thing seems to be to impose yourself in front of a woman and to make her aware that you’re there and you have the power to do something. More than even doing it. I mean I’ve had men just stand over me ominously, and you can always pick up those vibrations whether or not they’re doing anything to you—you can just kind of look up and know that these men are just really gloating about the fact that you’re uncomfortable and you’re suddenly rearranging yourself and you’re checking to see that nothing’s showing and you’re really upset and uncomfortable. And eventually maybe you’ll even get up and move your seat. And I think that’s an element too about it. That it’s the feeling of power over you, aside from any cheap thrills they might get from rubbing up against you.

I remember a movie related to this. It was about a girl, a very normal young high school student. The girl was coming home from school. She got off the subway. She had this whole picture of romantic love, because she’d seen this couple that she knew on the train and they were holding hands and stuff and it was very obvious that she was this very romantic kind of schoolgirl. So she’s walking home through the park in broad daylight, and she’s pulled into the bushes and raped. And the whole rest of the story focused on the changes that this girl went through and her inability to accept the
fact that violence had come into her life, and had shattered so many illusions at once. And the whole inability to—not only react to the violence while it was happening, but to accept the existence of it in her own head. She couldn’t even accept the fact that it existed at all.

For many of us, during a great deal of our lives, we have been protected in one way or another by either our family or by a strong male—a man who was going to shield us in some sort of way from the existence of violence. It’s that lack of ease in that situation. That lack of knowing what your chances are. What your chances for escape are, what your chances to hurt that person are, the way any good fighter could estimate. A woman, I don’t think, has that ability, and can only say “Well, he’s going to kill me if I even raise my hand.” So you don’t do anything. When, in fact, maybe it would be better to fight because maybe the element of surprise would allow you to get away. Maybe it wouldn’t. But the thing is you have no real way of assessing it because you have no experience. I think that’s a part of it.

KATE: It seems to me that the reason we have such difficulty responding adequately either to being attacked or being put down or being used in some way, being disregarded, whistled at or whatever, is that on the one hand there is objectively a great deal of real danger, and to a certain extent if we’re sensible we’re going to back away. I mean that’s a sensible reaction to real danger. But on the other hand we have internalized our fear of invoking male anger, and that we carry around within us—this powerlessness. We’ve allowed it to shape us on the inside so that internally we’re debilitated and there are also external conditions that are really threatening. The combination of the two really, I think, is too much.