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.
Rape: An Act of Terror
by Barbara Mehrhof and Pamela Kearon

Pamela Kearon and Barbara Mehrhof were founding members of Redstockings and are now active in The Feminists.

To see rape within the system of female oppression is to understand its non-accidental and non-arbitrary nature and to gain insight into its special purpose for the class of men. There is no group other than slaves that has been singled out for such systematic and total exploitation and suppression as the class of women. The condition of woman exceeds the bounds of the definition of oppression and in the modern Western world her situation is unique.

We are given to understand that in Western society the rule of law operates in contradistinction to the rule of men. This implies that society is built upon principles derived from Nature or God which are generally assented to by the governed. By its nature law deals in generalities; the governed are viewed as equal and indistinguishable. Women and slaves, however, have traditionally existed outside this rule of law, since law is the means by which the public affairs of freemen are stabilized. The public realm is where male interest groups vie with each other to create history and the world of things. Its essence is visibility and therefore it constitutes accepted Reality. Women and slaves are relegated to the private sphere which is the vague, hidden, unseen world of superior/inferior relationships. The definitive activity of the private sphere is labor—that is, the maintenance of biological life for oneself and others. This is the function of women and slaves.

Copyright © 1971 by Barbara Mehrhof and Pamela Kearon, and reprinted with permission of the authors. The article first appeared in Notes From the Third Year.
The imposition of the duty to labor exemplified in marriage cancels out whatever “paper rights” (i.e., legal or public) women might possess because it maintains her private status—servant to the male. It is in this that women are distinguished as a group and subjected to a rule of governance by which they are treated differently from other citizens. This rule of governance is the direct rule by men. This fact, that woman qua woman exists outside the protection of the law, is crucial in understanding rape and how it can be used by men as a terror tactic.

The justification of this rule of women by men is the Ideology of Sexism, which from a single assumption seeks to explain the meaning of human life. It posits the human male as the highest expression of Nature, his destiny as Nature’s development. Thus, anything which interferes with this destiny, or his needs or desires, must be controlled or suppressed—all of the natural world, including the human female. Male dominance over the female is therefore a natural condition. If man is the highest expression of Nature, it follows that man is the Good. Woman, having a will and her own self-interest, is a potential obstruction to male destiny and is therefore a priori Bad, Evil, the Criminal—and consequently the justifiable Victim.

The Ideology of Sexism is totally inured to experience or history. Its basis is not male achievement but rather maleness itself. So the ideology is not subject to criticism or adjustment despite the obvious existence of droves of grotesque or pathetic male individuals. Like Nazism and racism which also posit superiority a priori, sexism is grounded in a physical manifestation of the assumed superiority. For Nazism it is blond hair and blue eyes, for racism skin color, for sexism the penis. But skin, eye and hair color are physical traits which are—simply exist. They cannot engage in activity. There is, then, no unique act which affirms the polarity Aryan/Semite or white/black. Sexual intercourse, however, since it involves the genitals (that particular difference between the sexes selected by the Ideology of Sexism to define superiority/inferiority), provides sexism with an inimitable act which perfectly expresses the polarity male/female. The Reality created by the Ideology makes the sexual act a renewal of the feeling of power and prestige for the male, of impotence and submission for the female. Rape adds the quality of terror.

Terror is an integral part of the oppression of women. Its pur-
pose is to ensure, as a final measure, the acceptance by women of the inevitability of male domination. The content of terror includes the threat of death, destitution and/or inhuman isolation for the female. The most important aspect of terrorism is its indiscriminate-ness with respect to members of the terrorized class. There are no actions or forms of behavior sufficient to avoid its danger. There is no sign that designates a rapist since each male is potentially one.\footnote{Psychologists, for example, have revealed that there are no significant emotional differences between rapists and other men.} While simple fear is utilitarian, providing the impetus to act for one’s safety, the effect of terror is to make all action impossible.

The earlier and more thoroughly the woman is terrorized, the more completely she is incapable of acting against the existing Reality modeled on the Sexist Ideology and brought into being by the power of the male class. As long as one is free to act one can invalidate and transform reality. When free action is eliminated one can only incorporate reality as created by others, or go mad or die. The woman assaulted by a rapist is not merely hampered by real or imagined lack of kinetic energy relative to the attacker; she is also restricted by her fragile sense of her own reality and worth. Rape is a punishment without crime or guilt—at least not subjective guilt. It is punishment rather for the objective crime of femaleness. That is why it is indiscriminate. It is primarily a lesson for the whole class of women—a strange lesson, in that it does not teach a form of behavior which will save women from it. Rape teaches instead the objective, innate and unchanging subordination of women relative to men.\footnote{This refers as well to other terror tactics aimed at women—including sex murders and gender-determined assaults and murders.}

Rape is justified by the Ideology of Sexism. Its most explicit justification is the least publicly expressed. But all rationales exhibit the same tendency to favor the male over the female:

1. In the first instance (going from most extreme to most liberal), rape is seen as arising directly from the overwhelming male sex urge and/or need for violence. But since man is good, to tamper with those powerful forces which are part of his nature is harmful and detrimental. Men must be conditioned in order not to rape. To rape is the highest expression of male freedom, therefore rape is good. Though an extreme position among males, or, more specifically, one that is not often openly articulated except by certain
male "revolutionaries," this basic attitude reinforces and gives validity to all other rationales for rape.

2. Rape arises from the provocation of the female—in the very existence of her body or in conscious or unconscious signals indicating she would like to be "taken." This view has more popular currency, but instead of locating the source in the male, it is found in the female. Here rape is bad—but the fault and the shame belong to the woman.

3. Rape is the result of frustration to the male sex urge or need for violence. The fault here is with civilization or society, which has limited legitimate male outlets. Deprived of a universal sex orgy or the legendary promiscuity of yore when no girl ever said "no," and denied the supposed exhilaration of the much-glorified hunt, men are forced to act in a way which even they do not approve of. However, the socializing tendency is designated as female, so that woman is still the source of the act—though this time indirectly.

4. A male has been hurt. He is a member of an oppressed class or has been defeated by early psychological experiences. Rape is an understandable expression of hostility toward "society," which has cheated him of his ambition and fulfillment in the world. That the woman is his victim is unfortunate. But he has looked around and seen women who are more forceful than himself or more educated and knowledgeable. This is the greatest sacrilege recognized by Sexist Ideology. It is only to be expected that he would strike out against women in general to regain his manhood. Depending on the politics of the particular rape apologist, it is argued that we must all work for a socialist revolution or to restore the father to his rightful place in the family. But this is the most sentimental and insidious explanation of rape because it ensnares countless women into jeopardizing their own safety and freedom by leading them to pity the male and his "lost manhood."

5. The rapist is crazy. This is an apolitical explanation of rape which, if it appears in its pure form (and it usually doesn't), excuses the male without condemning the female. It says that rape is something void of self-purpose—like lightning, like thunder, like erupting volcanos. It ignores the difference in class between the male rapist and the female victim. His choice of victim and the form his hostility takes are dictated by his rights and her function in the male world. In the conduct of the Boston Strangler case, for
example, the police constantly sought the reasons for the death of his thirteen victims either in the women’s own conscious behavior or in some unconscious signals they may have been emitting. Yet they sought to explain the actions of Albert deSalvo, the confessed killer, by his past sufferings. The search was clearly for the criminal in the victim, the victim in the criminal.

Rape supports the male class by projecting its power and aggressiveness on the world. For the individual male, the possibility of rape remains a prerogative of his in-group; its perpetration rekindles his faith in maleness and his own personal worth.

Rape is only a slightly forbidden fruit. It is assumed to be condemned by law in our society, yet an examination of law reveals that it’s forbidden quality is more of a delectable fantasy than reality. In New York State, for instance, the law stipulates that the woman must prove she was raped by force, that “penetration” occurred, and that someone witnessed the rapist in the area of the attack. Although the past rape convictions of the defendant are not admissible evidence in a rape trial, the “reputation” of the rape victim is. The police will refuse to accept charges in many cases, especially if the victim is alone when she comes in to file them. In New York City only certain hospitals will accept rape cases and they are not bound to release their findings to the courts. Finally, the courts consistently refuse to indict men for rape. Rape is never defined in marriage in the U.S.A. This simply means that a husband always has the right to take his wife by force regardless of her inclinations. It is next to impossible to press rape charges against a boy friend, male acquaintance, or male with whom one has had a single date. In North Carolina, only a virgin can claim to have been the victim of rape.

It is clear that women do not come under the law on anything like an equal footing with men—or rather, that women as women do not enjoy the protection of law at all. Women as victims of rape, unlike the general victim of assault, are not assumed to be independent, indistinguishable and equal citizens. They are viewed by the law as subordinate, dependent and an always potential hindrance to male action and male prerogative. Rape laws are designed to protect males against the charge of rape. The word of a peer has a special force; the word of a dependent is always suspicious, presumed to be motivated by envy, revenge, or rebellion.
Rape, then, is an effective political device. It is not an arbitrary act of violence by one individual on another; it is a political act of oppression (never rebellion) exercised by members of a powerful class on members of the powerless class. Rape is supported by a consensus in the male class. It is preached by male-controlled and all-pervasive media with only a minimum of disguise and restraint. It is communicated to the male population as an act of freedom and strength and a male right never to be denied.

Women, through terror unable to act, do not test the Reality dictated by Sexist Ideology. When an individual woman manages to see that rape is an act which oppresses and degrades her and limits her freedom, when she sees it as political and useful to all males, she cannot count upon support from other women. Many women believe that rape is an act of sick men or is provoked by the female. Thus women as a class do not yet have a consensus. We have no media providing instant and constant communication; we are physically, economically and socially isolated by the institution of marriage which requires lonely labor in service to the male and primary loyalty to him.

The first step toward breaking the debilitating hold on us of the Sexist Ideology is the creation of a counter-reality, a mutually guaranteed support of female experience undistorted by male interpretation. We must build a consensus among us. Power for a group is consensus and organization. Terror depends upon the scattered, confused character of the terrorized class. We must understand rape as essentially an act of terror against women—whether committed by white men or minority group males. This is the only means of freeing our imagination so that we can act together—or alone if it comes to it—against this most perfect of political crimes.

October, 1971.