In Rochester, New York, women came together to fight Snuff and other pornographic movies in their communities, but found that ad hoc organizing efforts were not enough. They discovered that if they forced one movie out of town, another appeared at a theater down the street. If they succeeded in closing down that theater, they still had to face the magazine racks filled with pornography at their local grocery stores. When they opened their daily papers to the entertainment section, they were confronted with ads for pornographic movies, live sex shows, exploitive magazines. It was clear that continuing action was needed.

"Fighting Pornography" was written for this book by two members of Rochester Women Against Violence Against Women, a group of women who met at an ad hoc demonstration and stayed together to become one of the most effective anti-pornography organizations in the country.

Playing Soon: Penetration. Unbelievably violent . . . graphic . . . a double turn-on. He always hurts the one he loves. Some women deserve it.

A group of about ten women, many of them strangers, met one summer afternoon in 1976 to discuss possible strategies to stop a local movie theater from showing Penetration. We decided to create our own poster with our own message—to alert the community to the true meaning of the advertisement for the movie. Our message read: "The Monroe Theater's movie promotes rape. No women deserve it." Their obscene poster was removed; the movie was never shown.

This action against a pornographic movie marked the beginning of an active feminist group in Rochester—a group committed to
exposing rapist culture and to identifying pornography as another weapon used to perpetuate women's slavery. Many of us had avoided confronting this cornerstone of male culture, and, like most women, we were virtually ignorant about pornography. When we looked more closely, we noticed the direct verbal and visual threats and the theme of violence common in pornographic movies and magazines. As a result of political actions and extensive discussion with women we have learned a great deal—about the meaning and function of pornography and about women's need to destroy it. And we are still learning.

After our almost instantaneous success against *Penetration*, our informal group disbanded. Many of the same women came together the following spring, however, for a spontaneous feminist media campaign. We redecorated Rochester with large, colorful, silk-screened posters produced for various holidays: “Smash Patriarchy” for International Women’s Day, “Child Bearing Is Slave Labor” for Mother's Day, “Lesbian Pride” to mark Gay Pride Week (during the height of Anita Bryant’s crusade in Dade County), “Smash Patriarchy” again for Father's Day. That summer we also printed signs reading, “Woman Hating Propaganda Sold Here,” which were pasted on stores and movie theaters selling “men’s entertainment.” Seeking to stir public consciousness, we saw these posters as provocative, and hoped to generate awareness and discussion of feminist concerns. Word of our nocturnal postering expeditions spread; women drawn to unorthodox feminist activity met each other.

The public display of radical feminist messages encouraged extended conversations about women, media, propaganda, censorship, violence against women—and our legal rights. We had always regarded freedom of speech as a given and unquestionable right, and we found ourselves contradicting this freedom for pornographers. Our thinking was clarified somewhat when we considered the denial of free speech to women and the exclusion of women's voices in practically all popular culture. Furthermore, these thoughts were confirmed by our experience. In 1977 *A Boy and His Dog*, a film which concludes with the cannibalization of a woman by the boy and dog referred to in the title, played at the University of Rochester. When women distributed leaflets pointing to the misogyny of the movie, especially in the final scene, men at the university declared this a case of “censorship,” and the debate began. The effects of this controversy extended far beyond the university campus—the brutali-
zation of women would not be silently tolerated; the fact of feminist resistance became known in Rochester.

When a movie called Nazi Love Camp came to Rochester in June 1977, the radio ads promised "Women beaten, women tortured, and more . . . Come see Nazi Love Camp." Again women met and discussed strategy. We decided to picket one theater, a drive-in, that evening. Within five minutes of our arrival, sheriff's deputies informed us that we would have to leave—for our own safety. Since there was no sidewalk, they told us, we might be hit by a passing car and be injured. When we questioned this order, we were threatened with arrest. Although our action was legal, we realized that our civil rights were irrelevant to the police. Persistence would lead to jail. In spite of our outrage, most of the women who went to the drive-in that night were not willing to risk arrest. Several women had children, and many had commitments which could not be postponed or ignored. Also, underlying our decision to obey orders was a fear of the unknown—we did not know if our protests against this movie would be defended by other women or if, instead, we would appear ridiculous. The police effectively intimidated us. We left.

The next day, a smaller group—five women—formed a picket line outside another theater showing Nazi Love Camp, one housed in a Holiday Inn in downtown Rochester. Before we arrived, someone had painted, "Their Profit, Our Blood. This Movie is a CRIME Against Women" on the side of the building. Again the police were called and our names, addresses, and ages dutifully written down, but we refused to leave. One woman was searched illegally. Another woman was threatened by a theater employee while a police officer listened. Our cynicism and our militancy grew.

Through feminist newspapers we learned about Snuff and its extreme brutality; we also learned that feminists in other cities had protested this movie. In October 1977 Snuff came to Rochester and played at the Holiday Cine theater, and we quickly organized a picket line there. A few of us felt discouraged when the demonstration ended, and no one had made plans to continue the protest. We also doubted that mere picketing would be effective. While carrying signs and chanting slogans in public was a new experience for some, as well as a departure from traditionally female, "ladylike" behavior, this action seemed too mild, almost passive, considering the violent and threatening nature of Snuff. Our instinct with this film, as in the past, was to use a direct approach. We never seriously considered
appealing to men in power to intervene on our behalf (for example, asking the district attorney to ban the movie). We preferred tactics which might undermine rather than reinforce the legitimacy of their authority. Also, established methods worked too slowly. The situation was urgent—the theater held “continuous showings daily” of a movie that was characteristically different from other pornography in that it went farther than ever before.

We read on the poster: “The Bloodiest Thing that Ever Happened in Front of a Camera.” We saw displayed on Main Street a woman’s body cut into pieces by a pair of bloody scissors. This was how they advertised *Snuff*. It seemed appropriate to destroy that poster; it was the least we could do. The next morning four of us went to the theater, spray-painted the doors and chained them shut, put glue in the locks, broke the display window, and ripped up the poster. We were then arrested by plainclothes police, who had been told by a “confidential informant” that some kind of “overt action” was going to happen at the theater. (We learned this months later when our lawyers obtained access to the file in the district attorney’s office.) During our brief stay in jail, many more women learned of *Snuff*. The protests intensified. A large sit-in was planned but never carried out, since the movie left town ten days early. We had acted in desperation, had not planned our arrest, and did not foresee the consequences of this action. The apathy that preceded our militant action disappeared after our arrest. Rather than alienating women, our dramatic and direct action inspired others to demonstrate against *Snuff*.

Now four of us were facing prosecution; the initial charge was a felony—criminal mischief. A defense committee formed to support us. We chose a name for ourselves: Rochester Women Against Violence Against Women (RWAWAVW). We had serious doubts about the value of participating in the judicial system, which is run by men to serve male interests. As feminists we wanted to bring our views inside the courtroom and do things on our own terms as much as possible. The assistance of a lawyer who shared our politics and respected our goals was crucial. A feminist attorney from nearby Buffalo enthusiastically offered her help.

Refusing to accept the system’s definition of guilt, we rejected plea-bargaining offers. We sensed that many women would support us and realized the political advantages of a trial: It could be a valuable opportunity for feminists to organize. What happened outside the courtroom was perhaps more important than anything that happened inside.
Not everyone in Rochester was comfortable with illegal tactics, especially when they involved the destruction of property. Some people described our behavior as violent. The defense committee responded by emphasizing that the real crime was *Snuff*. We claimed that breaking a window to stop this crime was justified—in this culture women are terrorized every day; we are treated as the property of men, and our freedom to live without being the victims of male violence is limited. Our punishment for fighting back against *Snuff* pointed out how pervasive such violence is, and the part that the legal system plays in it. When we talked to women about these issues, it seemed we had hit a nerve. Large numbers of women attended a series of benefits held to raise a defense fund. The discussions which had begun in two’s and three’s and small groups widened and deepened and grew more public. Women began to identify themselves as political activists.

The defense committee met regularly to prepare for the trial. We grew closer and stronger; working collectively we learned necessary skills. The defense committee spoke in public, produced literature, distributed posters, organized meetings, communicated with the mass media, helped develop a legal strategy for the trial, mobilized women to come to court, and even arranged for child care in the Rochester Hall of Justice. We were ready; we were in a strong position.

At the beginning of the trial, the judge suddenly realized he knew the family of one of us and disqualified himself. Months dragged by as we waited for a new judge. No judge would take the case, and the theater owner would not let the district attorney drop the charges. We grew weary of waiting, so we demanded a trial. The original judge then requalified himself and planned to try only three of us. We feared procedural issues would obscure the real reasons for our trial. Also, many of our political goals had already been accomplished. So we accepted a plea bargain that had been offered earlier. Pleading guilty to disorderly conduct (a violation) a year after our arrest allowed us to move on to other projects. This also gave us the freedom to take credit publicly for destroying the *Snuff* poster. Many women came to our sentencing and, violating prescribed courtroom behavior, applauded our statements to the judge. Our sentence was $100 restitution to be paid to the owner of the Holiday Cine theater. We never paid. The defense committee was dissolved.

Rochester Women Against Violence Against Women still exists. It continues to work to increase public awareness about the anti-
woman messages in pornography and other media, and to initiate direct action against the public display of cruelty to women. We have developed a slide program which relates pornography, especially violent pornography, to the mainstream of American culture by placing images from Hustler and Penthouse and “hard-core” pornography next to fashion photographs, general advertisements, and fine art. In discussions following the slide presentation, we urge women to develop strategies to discourage this view of women-as-commodities and women-as-victims; for example, by confronting sons, husbands, or other male relatives who buy pornography, or by joining in demonstrations against local pornography merchants.

In addition to speaking at various meetings and in classrooms, etc., we collect and distribute feminist literature on pornography. We have reprinted numerous articles, and we periodically produce leaflets which explain why pornography is misogyny and describe our group's activities.

While education on pornography and its meaning for women is essential, such a program is incomplete—discussion should inspire action. In Rochester, RWAVAW provides a base for organizing women to take direct action against pornographers and their accomplices. For example, after one slide presentation, about thirty of us decided to visit a local pornographic bookstore, thereby disturbing business as usual. Another evening a group of women loudly and rudely disrupted a screening at the University of Rochester of the sadistic movie The Story of O; the showing was discontinued. In addition to creating financial problems for men who choose to sell women's bodies as entertainment, these kinds of actions have enabled women to ally ourselves with other women to oppose our common victimization. Furthermore, our actions inevitably have led to more discussions.

We are continually learning and refining our thinking when we engage in these discussions and actions. Most women immediately make connections with the issues we raise. Men, on the other hand, often feel threatened as they see women becoming stronger and more vocal; maybe this is because we are challenging their identity as privileged males. Connecting pornography to all forms of woman-hating, we demand its elimination. At the same time we recognize the deeper, long-term transformation that must occur in order to abolish misogyny. Legislative solutions will not do. We advocate militant and direct action by feminists. Our methods have proved successful; our numbers are growing. This organizing on the local
Taking Action

level is the foundation for a serious challenge to the tradition of male rule.*

* Ed. Note: Martha Gever has recently produced a documentary videotape entitled “A Crime Against Women,” which deals with her arrest and the issues that are raised when women confront men about violent pornography. The tape is available for rental or purchase by writing 668 South Ave., Rochester, N.Y. 14620.

Rochester WAVAW is not the only group which has concluded that direct, militant action is the best way to combat the spread of pornography. In 1977, in Denver, Colorado, a group called The Bluebird Five used cans of spray paint to deface a pornography theater showing violent pornographic movies. More recently (1979) and more well-known, feminist Marsha Womongold shot a bullet through the window of a store in Cambridge which sold pornography. Womongold later told reporters that she believes that educating the whole society to understand how pornography hurts women is too slow a process. She reached the “lamentable conclusion that feminists must also act outside the law to effectively confront this abuse.” She has written a pamphlet entitled Pornography: A License to Kill. See the Bibliography for information on how to obtain it.