



## **THE POWER OF THE WORD: CULTURE, CENSORSHIP, AND VOICE**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

We are politically committed women writers from around the world, involved in a range of cultural struggles. Because of our gender and our politics, some of us have been the targets of religious or state censorship. Some have known imprisonment or survived death threats. Some live in exile. Some have experienced mainly the free market forms of censorship, such as denial of access to publication, marginalization, ghettoization and stereotyping. Some have resisted such pressures by setting up alternative means of publishing women.

We have been investigating gender-based censorship since 1986, when a few of us first came together within International PEN. We have now formed a separate organization, Women's WORLD (Women's World Organization for Rights, Literature and Development) in order to initiate global feminist work on the right to free expression, as has already been done by activists in the areas of development, the environment, reproductive health, and violence against women.

Women's WORLD is concerned with two issues: 1) the importance of cultural struggle and the role of women writers in it; and 2) gender-based censorship<sup>1</sup>—the historic, worldwide silencing of women's voices—as a major obstacle to women's achievement of equality, sustainable livelihoods and peace. Our pamphlet begins with an analysis of the world crisis, and goes on to examine the role of women writers in the emancipation of women and the construction of civil society. We then look at the many ways gender-based censorship operates, and present some examples of it.

This pamphlet was written by Meredith Tax, President of Women's WORLD, and discussed at international meetings in September, 1994 and March, 1995 by a working group consisting of Marjorie Agosin (Chile/US), Ama Ata Aidoo (Ghana), Ritu Menon (India), Ninotchka Rosca (Philippines) and Mariella Sala (Peru); the September 1994 meeting was also attended by Denisa Comanescu (Romania), and Aïcha Lemsine (Algeria). The draft was then sent to a larger group of writers, who were asked for comments and examples. The administrative and publication costs of this pamphlet and the presentation of these ideas at the Non-Governmental Organizations Forum of the Fourth UN World Conference on Women were generously supported by the Arts and Education program of the Ford Foundation, without whose help our work would have been difficult indeed.

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In the ten years since the UN Women's Conference in Nairobi at the end of the Decade of Women, the world has changed so much as to become almost unrecognizable. Among these changes are:

- The accelerating destruction of the environment, which makes earth's survival an open question.
- A catastrophic subsistence crisis in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, brought about by the failures of the growth model of development and the imposition of structural adjustment policies, aided by the corruption of local ruling elites. Uneven development, conflicts over resources, and the threat of starvation have fanned ethnic rivalries, aggravated domestic tensions, and led to an unprecedented increase in the international traffic in women and children. Although Africa is the worst hit, even parts of Eastern Europe are now feeling a subsistence crisis, due to dislocations caused by war and their rush into market capitalism.
- Vast movements of population from the countryside to the city and the global South<sup>2</sup> to the North in search of employment or fleeing war and famine. While these migrations have accelerated the disintegration of traditional forms of the family and fed ethnic and racial conflicts, they have also laid a potential foundation for new, culturally diverse societies.
- The end to the Cold War period's uneasy equilibrium between socialist and capitalist "camps," and the triumph of the discourse of the North in its most extreme form—the dog-eat-dog world view of 19th century free market capitalism. In North America and the formerly communist countries of Eastern Europe, social and trade union protections and welfare state benefits of all kinds are being rolled back to encourage capital accumulation, which will supposedly create jobs. The consequences are devastating for children, the aged, and the women who must care for both in economies that offer them few options but unemployment, prostitution, and crime.
- The release of previously stockpiled Cold War weapons and nuclear technology into the world, facilitating an epidemic of wars and civil conflicts in the former Soviet Union, the former Yugoslavia, Africa, West Asia, South Asia, and Latin

America, leaving hundreds of thousands dead and creating vast refugee populations alienated from their land and self-sufficient production. A parallel development, especially in Latin America, has been the formation of paramilitary groups and narco-mafias that conduct private wars and land grabs against indigenous peoples, "dissidents," "subversives," and even street children. In response, some civil societies are becoming increasingly militarized, with large parts of the population buying arms as an answer to criminality, particularly where the state is perceived as inept or itself criminal.

- The growing dominance of transnational corporations as a global force not accountable to any state or international body, ruling partly by economic domination and partly through a global monoculture that marginalizes or wipes out local and individual forms of cultural expression and autonomy.
- The rise of religious fundamentalism, regional nationalisms, and communalism as political movements targeting women and ethnic minorities. The increasing internationalization and collusion of these movements raises the possibility of a worldwide reactionary movement similar to fascism in the 1920s and 30s.

The last ten years have also seen positive developments like the democratic revolution in South Africa, the dismantling of military dictatorships in Latin America, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the growth of civil societies in Eastern Europe. Struggles for social and economic justice, minority rights, national liberation, and the rights of indigenous peoples have begun to be linked by three international movements:

- A world movement for human rights, including the rights of women, with visible impact on UN Conferences in Vienna, Cairo and Copenhagen. Despite an early history of being used as an instrument of Northern state policy, the international human rights movement has in recent years shown its potential to humanize justice by coupling demands for economic and social rights with personal and cultural ones.
- A world movement for ecology which links the future of humanity with that of other species and the planet itself, in which feminists opposed to the growth model of economic development have begun to articulate an alternative that links sustainable livelihoods, bio- and cultural diversity, and gender rights.
- The international women's movement, of which we are a part. Like any broad movement, this has contradictions over policy, priorities, and vision, yet it alone has the potential to create the conditions that will allow women to have a voice in determining their own fate and the fate of the world.

## **II. COMPETING VISIONS OF THE FUTURE**

As the century ends, three visions of the future are before us. The first is that of the New Economic Order, led by transnational corporations, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the embodiment of a new international ruling class which is superseding national and local forms of governance. Accountable to no one but their stockholders, the transnationals move industries, crops, and populations around like pieces in a board game. Their New World Order offers us a future in which the profit motive will replace all intellectual and spiritual goals as the prime reason for human existence; in which the

only standard of human value will become cash; in which regional and cultural distinctions will slowly vanish, to be replaced by the one great distinction between rich and poor; and in which people will be valued only in terms of their market price. In the New Economic Order, all local, particular and diverse cultures will be superseded by a global monoculture that exalts sex, violence, and purchasing power, and portrays women mainly as commodities.

A growing network of conservative clerics and politicians superficially oppose the "internationalism" of the New World Order in the name of tradition and national sovereignty, making war on women and ethnic or religious minorities, while invoking a dream of benign communities ruled by them. They dislike the New World Order's encouragement of secular modernity and its assumption of universal human rights, and fear the anarchic, creative, and populist aspects of mass culture, with its glorification of individual desires and its tendency to stir up women and children against patriarchal control. Their cultural strength must not be underestimated, for they represent a serious threat to women and minorities wherever they are strong. But they do not have the economic strength to oppose the New World Order effectively and are prepared to collude with it if the price is right, as long as they can maintain local control. They offer us a future in which the world will be divided up between Export Processing Zones ruled by the transnationals and traditional enclaves ruled by them.

Our main hope is the developing alliance between the global women's movement and other progressive social movements. All our movements face the same oppressive forces: a New World Order that props up modern dictatorships, and a reactionary traditionalism that represents the worst form of patriarchal control. We have a common vision of a future in which extremes of wealth and poverty will vanish; in which human rights, sustainable livelihoods, universal literacy, and cultural diversity will become the norm; and in which decisions will be made and social conflicts resolved by negotiation, rather than force or domination.

A problem remains. While progressive social movements should be natural allies of movements for the emancipation of women, this has not always been the case. Again and again, women have fought beside men in movements for social change, only to see them set up new ruling elites that left gender and family hierarchies intact, continued to practice the power politics of dominance and submission, and resolved social and personal conflicts through violence or repression. This must change if any of us are to succeed in our goal of social transformation.

Many male revolutionary theorists have seen the struggle for women's emancipation as a "sectoral" one, like the struggles of national minorities or indigenous peoples, and concluded that it is subordinate. Any theory that creates a hierarchy even among liberation struggles, rather than emphasizing their complex, dialectical interactions, will have difficulty transcending power politics. In the words of the African-American poet Audre Lorde, "you can't dismantle the master's house using the master's tools."

In fact, female emancipation is not a subordinate struggle but a majority struggle. Today, women, particularly women of the South, make up the vast majority of the poor and politically disenfranchised people of the world, the true "prisoners of starvation" and "wretched of the earth." Thus, any movement for real transformation must make the demands of women central. And, because so many of the chains that bind women are

located in the realm of tradition rather than pure politics or economics, a thorough transformation must involve struggles over culture.

### III. WHAT IS CULTURE AND WHY DOES IT MATTER ?

Feminist theory has yet to come to grips with culture and religion, while traditionalists have tainted the word "culture" by defending "cultural practices" harmful to women. So we must pause to define our terms.

In the words of Ama Ata Aidoo, "The culture of a community really is the totality of the ways in which that community conducts its life: its births, growth, study, work, entertainment and death."<sup>3</sup> Or, as Marjorie Agosin puts it, "Culture is who we are and who we are becoming."<sup>4</sup> It is the food we put on the table, the way we cook it, the utensils with which we eat it, the relations between the people who sit at the table and the people who cook and serve, what is done with the leftovers, what is discussed during the meal, what music, dancing, poetry or theatre accompany it, and the social and spiritual values of those present—for, when we say culture, we include the visions, dreams and aspirations of humanity.

How is it possible to talk of social and economic development without talking about culture? To treat literacy and art in a purely instrumental way, as most development programs do, is to reinforce values that are part of the problem, not the solution. Do we want only materialist development? Have we no interest in spiritual and political development? How can we address the question of literacy if we ignore the question of what there is to read? Do we want women to learn to read and write merely so they can follow the instructions in packages of birth control pills? Or, as the Indian feminist Kamla Bhasin says, do we want them to be able to "read their own lives, write their own destinies, and claim their share?" As Mariella Sala puts it like this:

"Without attention to culture, sustainable development is not possible, because profound changes must necessarily be culture-related. We must understand that women's silence is as serious a problem as poverty itself, and is both the cause of poverty and its effect. It is a vicious circle that must be broken. Women writers all over the world are mute; they are without a voice because so many social institutions are deaf to their plight and totally unaware of the importance of creative expression in mobilizing people's energies for change. The impact of creative literature and its ability to point out crucial aspects of social problems and to envision better ways of living cannot be denied, yet few see that sustainable development, political equality and peace must be based on full human development, and that art and culture are therefore strategic questions."<sup>5</sup>

Carolina Maria de Jesus, a barely educated woman from a Brazilian *favela*, collected wastepaper from garbage heaps to feed her children but, fiercely intelligent, wrote in her diary every day.

"I have a mania to observe everything, tell everything, and note down the facts...We are poor and we live on the banks of the river. The river banks are places for garbage and the marginal people. People of the *favelas* are considered marginal. No more do you see buzzards flying the river banks near the trash. The unemployed have taken the buzzards' place."<sup>6</sup>

This diary not only gave her a reason to live; it gave the rest of the world a way to understand the world of the *favelas* and inspired a generation of other testimonies by Latin American women. Like Carolina Maria de Jesus, women in the early U.S. labor movement often spoke of their longing for the beauties of art and nature, so that life should not be made up merely of ceaseless toil. In 1912, women textile strikers in Lawrence, Massachusetts, coined the slogan, "We want bread and roses too!" That slogan is still appropriate. But the categories of most development programs do not have room for people like the Lawrence strikers or Carolina Maria de Jesus or their successors like Dolores Huerta, Wangarai Mathai, and Rigoberta Menchu. Because they isolate economic questions, such development programs fail to deal with the complex web of social relations that enmesh women.

A web doesn't move if you pull at only one strand; all you can do that way is break it. The historic cultures and family ties of much of the world are already under attack, if not altogether destroyed. We must find ways to preserve what remains while at the same time refusing to accept those parts of tradition that treat women and children as less than human. Imposing colonialist definitions of progress while ignoring the cultural lives of indigenous peoples has already had devastating consequences. As Ama Ata Aidoo puts it, describing the condition of Africa:

What happens to a society whose own arts have been killed off, dangerously marginalized or ridiculed out of existence through colonial intervention? What happens to such a society especially if, at the end of formal colonization, it does not seem capable of mobilizing resources, encouraging its cultural workers, or does not have any peace, necessary to recreate newer forms of cultural manifestations?...Clearly such a society would be heading towards confusion, inertia, decay and death....In Africa...both governmental and non-governmental agencies...have adopted the most pragmatic, the most insensitive and the most humiliating policies of development. This attitude either says: "the people don't know anything so let's ignore them completely," or "let's sink a few wells and sell them family planning"...

Within this view of development in Africa, nobody, but absolutely nobody, is asking about what is happening to the human body and the human mind at the end of a hardworking day. And Africans have been working hard for a long time. We have a continent filled with over 500 million of the most tired people in all history. We have been exhausted for over 500 years. Today's Africans cannot afford even the mere notion of vacation, holiday, entertainment. People have lost touch with earlier forms of rest and not acquired any new ones. How do we get even our memories to function at all when we are not rested or relaxed? What is going to happen to us? It is an enormous question. When we zero in on women, we shall confront a plight so grim it will break your heart.<sup>7</sup>

Because most programs for women's economic development, education, and political equality either bow to patriarchal culture or try to impose the culture of the developers, they have fundamental conceptual flaws.

- Their economic programs are reductionist, as if everything else would fall into place if only economic relations were changed. This is a variant of the old belief that, if you can just get women jobs outside the home, they will automatically become equal, a belief that generations of experience has disproved.
- Their education programs see women as an economic resource—in the World Bank's phrase, "women are the best investment"—rather than as full human beings. They thus promote a narrow vocational training that stops at functional literacy and low-level technical skills. Women need a broad humanistic and scientific education for the same reasons men do—so they can understand and appreciate life, give intellectual and political leadership, and make the greatest social contribution of which they are capable.
- Their programs for equality are flawed by legal fetishism, a belief that if you can just pass the right laws, women will become equal. Approaches that focus on law while ignoring culture will not change things sufficiently for the majority of women; we can all think of countries where women are equal in law but not in fact. Our problems would not be solved even if every country elected or appointed women to fifty per cent of its positions of power, for, in many countries, these women would be the wives, lovers, sisters, or daughters of important men, or members of a small group of ruling families. Besides, women politicians do not necessarily serve the interests of most women. And even if progressive women held half the offices in a few countries, that wouldn't change the relations between countries.

These approaches are flawed because they fail to address the cultural factors that impede women's progress. Programs for cultural, political, and economic development must work with, not against each other. It is naive to think that women will be helped by poverty-eradication programs dependant on World Bank loans when these loans insist on changes in the national economy that further impoverish the poor, who are largely women. It is absurd to fight patriarchal culture with one hand and fund it with the other, as do international agencies and NGOs who funnel their money for family planning and female education through religious institutions. The aim may be to reach religious women but the result is to subsidize the growth of a traditionalist bureaucracy that seems committed to the subordination of women. Campaigns for reproductive rights in the US, Poland or Nicaragua, the fight against amniocentesis in South Asia or female excision in West Asia and Africa—these are not merely struggles for better health care, but battles against traditional patriarchal culture, and they must be fought in those terms.

Cultural work that asks questions about the position of women is a central element in our strategy for female emancipation, but this work must develop in dialectic with the cultures that already exist. Culture has a life and rhythm of its own that cannot be laid out on an economic grid or simply "used" for propagandistic purposes. All too often, the cultural modules of development or health projects merely take the cultural values of the developers, dress them in local costume, and put them onstage. This is not what we mean. In the words of Ninotchka Rosca, "When we say cultural development is central, we mean that people need the time and space and access to means of cultural expression to be able to articulate their own social values." This process is as necessary to overall development as roads and wells and health care.

#### IV. CULTURAL DOMINATION AND CENSORSHIP

Until the age of mass electronic communications, most cultural forms were local or national. Cultural indoctrination was carried out mainly through educational institutions. Today a soap opera produced in New York can be seen within weeks in an Indian or Latin American village. The media have made possible a new form of cultural domination, the global monoculture, which has become a threat to cultural diversity and specificity the world over. Its products are pitched to the broadest level of taste, emphasizing sex and violence in order to reach as wide a market as possible with commercials for cigarettes, soft drinks, or beer. Throughout the world, the mass media are increasingly dominated by commercial cultural products from the North, especially the United States.

A parallel development has taken place in the publishing industries of Europe and North America, where production is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few transnational conglomerates. Ten years ago, the U.S. publishing industry, for instance, included many medium and small sized companies expressing the individual tastes of their editors. While the reading audience was somewhat smaller and "best-sellers" sold fewer copies than they do now, there was room for considerable diversity of taste, interest and audience. Now the field has been leveled; small and medium sized companies have been driven out of business or gobbled up by conglomerates, so that the major U.S. publishers are now actually a film company, an oil company, a newspaper company, etc.

These conglomerates make few concessions to individual editorial taste; their interest is the bottom line and they see writing as just another product, like soft drinks or sneakers. "Big" authors are brand names; the publishers' goal is to have writers who are different enough from each other to create a brand preference, but similar enough so that all can reach the broadest possible market. "Little" authors are of little interest, no matter what they say, unless they too can be commodified. Publishers may encourage such writers to direct their attention to some suitably commercial subject; in Chile, they tell writers, "Your stories are very well written and beautiful and maybe we will publish them someday but, for the moment, could you write a special story for us about this or that other subject?"<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Northern publishers stress the importance of turning out a book every two years, on schedule, preferably all similar in length, style, and subject matter, in order to create a predictable product line.

It will soon be possible, if it is not already, to go into the bookstores in the commercial section of any city in the world and find only the same ten international "big best-sellers", written in the North. Local literature and individual, idiosyncratic voices that emphasize language and expression will have been driven to the margins. This has already happened in the United States, as the poet Adrienne Rich describes:

"Here is a chain bookstore, stacked novels lettered in high relief luminescence, computer manuals, intimacy manuals, parenting manuals, investment-management manuals, grief-management manuals, college-entrance manuals, manuals on living with cancer, on channeling, on how to save the earth....I'm on a search for poetry in the mall. This is not sociology, but the pursuit of an intuition about mass marketing, the so-called free market, and how suppression can take many forms—from outright banning and burning

of books, to questions of who owns the presses, to patterns of distribution and availability."<sup>9</sup>

The growing world domination of the North American commercial monoculture Rich describes is an extremely unhealthy development, the equivalent in culture to the hegemony of commercially bred seeds and the practice of monoculture in farming. Both drive out diversity. Both impoverish the soil they feed on. Both produce sterile seeds, without a living relationship to their environment.

Conservative politicians and religious demagogues react to the commercial monoculture by calling for censorship. Frightened by the violence and the exploitative use of sex in the media, some in the women's movement echo their cry. As writers, we know this is not the solution, for there is no government that we trust enough to give it control over our access to art and information. We know the first people any government censors are its critics, and that anti-pornography laws have in the past often been used against women who did sex education or expressed an antipatriarchal view of sexuality. With censorship, pornography merely gets driven to the back streets and becomes a profitable illegal business, while people who offer new, critical ideas or agitate for human rights are jailed, driven out of the country, or killed.

Our dislike of censorship does not, however, mean we think all forms of cultural expression are equally benign or that the free market will encourage the best to prevail. We are repelled by the cult of violence in Northern commercial culture and the way its mass media sexualize and racialize every aspect of life, down to the exploitation of racial stereotypes and eroticized images of children in advertising campaigns. But we believe this degradation should be fought by methods that strengthen the women's movement rather than the state. Such methods include satire, public protest, criticism, consumer boycotts, and the creation of independent cultural productions by writers, artists, and film-makers whose values are not shaped by the market.

Our problems lie not in creating such works but in finding ways to get them into the hands of those who need them. When we try to do so, we run into the censorship that, in one way or another, confronts all genuine social critics and that, when added to the disabilities piled on women simply because of gender, poses a considerable obstacle to the right of free expression.

## **V. WHAT DO WE MEAN BY GENDER-BASED CENSORSHIP?**

Our definition of censorship is broader than that used by most human rights organizations, which see censorship as the silencing of writers by "jailers, assassins, or official censors."<sup>10</sup> We define censorship as any means by which ideas and works of art that express views not in accord with the dominant ideology are prevented from reaching their intended audience. Such works may be seized or banned; they may be ignored, defamed, diminished, or purposely misinterpreted, in order to silence their authors and maintain the existing order.

Every society has some degree of censorship, which it carries out by its normal means of social organization and control. In a military dictatorship, censorship is exercised by the military; in a communist country, by the "dictatorship of the proletariat;" in a market-driven society, by market forces, though the state may be necessary if these do not suffice.

Women who write on issues of state politics are silenced by the same means used to silence men in opposition, though, in practice, even these forms of censorship are affected by gender. But gender-based censorship, as we see it, is much broader and more pervasive than this official, organized suppression. It is embedded in a range of social mechanisms that mute women's voices, deny validity to their experience, and exclude them from the political discourse. Its purpose is to obscure the real conditions of women's lives and the inequity of patriarchal gender relations, and prevent women writers from breaking the silence, by targeting women who don't know their place in order to intimidate the rest.

While some of those who silence women are government officials or religious fanatics, others are parents who decide it doesn't pay to invest in a girl's education, teachers who discourage girls from having ambitions beyond motherhood, publishers who don't think it worth their while to publish books by women, and critics who are unable to take work by women seriously. Censorship often takes place within the family, where manuscripts may be destroyed, suppressed, or altered by husbands, parents, or siblings because of what they reveal about "family secrets." Fathers or husbands may also suppress or appropriate the work of their daughters or wives because they do not wish them to have an independent identity, and feel the work of women in their family properly belongs to them.

In political groups, gender-based censorship is likely to descend on any woman who blows the whistle on sexual harassment and discrimination. In addition, right-wing movements attack women members merely for violating their traditional role by becoming writers or even working outside the home. Left-wing movements, on the other hand, go after those who place too much emphasis on women's issues or say the oppression of women is not caused by economics alone. Movements of oppressed peoples will chastise those who expose sexist practices that should be talked about only "among ourselves." And feminist movements yell foul at women who question their version of the truth or criticize other women too sharply. Such pressures from one's family or closest associates often lead to the most pervasive form of censorship, self-censorship, that holding-back inside when one cannot face the consequences of speaking the truth—consequences that can range from loss of love to causing pain to being thrown in jail, pushed into exile, or killed.

Gender-based censorship can also be seen in the economic and political priorities that mandate widespread female illiteracy, and in educational systems designed to subordinate and invalidate women's experience. The terrible illiteracy in which so many of our sisters are kept is not just the consequence of poverty, overwork, and discrimination within the family; it is a social mechanism designed to ensure female quiescence and deny women a public voice. Attacks on female education are a manifestation of the same desire to keep women silent and subordinate that is apparent in death threats against women writers.

Censorship by death threat is becoming common, particularly in societies at war or gripped by religious fundamentalism, nationalism, and communalism. Rada Ivekovic makes the point in relation to the countries of the former Yugoslavia, "Censorship is the effect of any death threat that is meant more or less seriously. It can come from the militias, armed groups, "other" ethnic groups. It can be more or less legal and official in areas on the brink of war or near the war zone."<sup>11</sup>

In Algeria, gender-based censorship has taken the form of an explicit war on women, as Islamist militants have targeted women, particularly educated, "modern" ones and women journalists, for rape and murder. While the militants make war on women out of policy, government death squads disguised as militants do so to discredit the Islamists, or simply because they can. Young girls are killed merely for going to school, and more than 200 women writers and journalists have been murdered since 1983. According to Aïcha Lemsine:

"Algerian women writers live under the twin threats of religious fundamentalism and a quasi-fascist military regime. For us, women's issues are issues of survival, our financial resources are nil, and our psychological balance is weakened by fear and anxiety....The intimidations of the regime and the threats of the Islamists have one purpose: to reduce us to silence. Fear is supposed to drive us away from critical thinking and writing, or stress and exile render us unable to produce any literary creation, or the need for cash make us more receptive to the pressures of the government....For all these reasons, Arab and Muslim women need not only to have their lives saved, but also opportunities to create and write. Our voices must be strengthened; we need a network that will give us space for free expression, publication, and international media exposure."<sup>12</sup>

If female education in Algeria is prevented by murder, in other places it is deterred by sexual harassment, rape, or changing economic priorities that devalue girls. The level of literacy among girls is rapidly decreasing in the new market economies of Eastern Europe. Kenya has been the scene of mass, unpunished rapes at girls' boarding schools. In the United States, the system's abandonment of youth has taken the form of withdrawing funds for education, particularly in the inner cities where most students are minorities. Combined with the influence of the media in sexualizing youth, this abandonment has resulted in an epidemic level of sexual harassment in schools, while many girls see so little hope of further education or a career that they become pregnant before they are fourteen.

Pressures on female education and discrimination within the educational system add up to censorship, for women without education can seldom find a voice. This is its explicit purpose in Russia, according to Nadezhda Azhgikhina:

"If ten and fifteen years ago, schoolteachers wanted all their pupils to enter prestigious high schools and universities, now they speak about the importance of higher education only for boys; they insist on 'natural destiny' for girls. The pioneer of this viewpoint was without any doubt Michael Gorbachev in his famous book, *Perestroika*, where he proclaimed the importance of 'natural destiny' for Soviet women, 'so tired from emancipation.'...the result has been the growth of real discrimination....in Russia only men can apply to the most prestigious institutes, like the Foreign Affairs Institute (to become a diplomat) or the International Journalism department in Moscow State

University. Men have more places in any university department—this is the official position of deans and chairs."<sup>13</sup>

Discrimination in higher education can also be found in North America, where whole fields of study, such as surgery and the "hard sciences," are nearly closed to women. Those who trespass on these precincts are considered fair game for anything from constant sexual innuendo to murder, like the women engineering students killed by a disgruntled male sniper at McGill University. Academic women who take the alternate route and concentrate on Women's Studies will probably not be killed but their concerns may be marginalized, their work discounted, and their academic credentials questioned. In India, says Ritu Menon, "Those who write from a gender perspective are often charged with 'bias' or with practising 'unsound scholarship,' while those who are politically engaged are told to become more scholarly and not waste so much time on activism."<sup>14</sup>

Those women who persevere enough to become writers face other obstacles. Even in countries where women have made significant strides towards equality, the pinnacles of culture and politics remain almost exclusively male and are heavily guarded. In 1986, for instance, a world Congress of International PEN, billed as a gathering of the world's greatest minds, was held in New York. Out of 117 panelists, only 16 were women. When women writers called a protest meeting, Norman Mailer, then President of PEN American Center, told the press there were so few women speakers because this was a Congress of intellectuals and very few women were intellectuals.<sup>15</sup> He was also heard to say that a leading women writer "dressed like a housewife," that he was not going to let her "pussywhip" one of his male guests, and that these women were just making a fuss because they were "too old to catch men anymore." While a number of male writers supported the protestors, others criticized them for making a fuss and being ill-mannered.

If this was the situation in the U.S. after twenty years of feminist education and organizing, it is unlikely to be better in countries where the feminist movement is new and weak and the dominance of patriarchal culture has gone virtually unchallenged. Some languages do not even use the same word for male and female writer, making women writers seem even more of an anomaly. Says Nadezhda Azhgikhina:

"In the Russian language the word 'woman writer' has a female gender, and using this word is problematical for many because men begin to smile and speak about 'some stupid woman things.' As a result, most serious poets and prose writers prefer to use the word for 'man writer' to defend the quality of their creative activity. Women's creative activity is regarded by men as something inherently non-serious, non-talented, second-rate....Most important literary critics...speak about very strong, popular books written by contemporary women as exceptions to the rule."<sup>16</sup>

The situation is even more complicated for women who dare to write about the body or sex, thus becoming "bad girls." In most countries of the North, "badness" is commercially viable and women novelists are encouraged to write bedroom scenes if they wish to sell. In others, writing about sex targets women for condemnation. In Russia, for instance, fiction that touches on women's sexuality, birth, health and other "non-aesthetic" things is criticized as being written in a "dirty style" or "in bad taste." A typical statement on

women's prose appeared in the national literary weekly, the *Lituraturnya Gazeta*, which said "women have no soul because their soul is too near to their body."<sup>17</sup>

Patriarchal attitudes affect women's chances of getting published regardless of the quality of their work. Women in some countries are denied publication altogether on the grounds that women should not be writers, or that they write in a manner inappropriate to women, or that they are writing on subjects women know nothing about—for censorship assigns or disallows certain subjects and styles as "appropriate" for women, then attacks women who cross the line. Lifestyle too can become an issue; in Nepal, one established writer had problems after her divorce; publishers said, "We can't publish her; she's not even living with her husband."

In Russia, during the Soviet period, publishing houses preferred male authors and published women mainly on March 8th, International Women's Day; they still do.<sup>18</sup> Publishers have the same preference in Africa, according to many writers. Tsitsi Dangarembga, author of an acclaimed first novel, *Nervous Conditions*, published abroad, wrote about how impossible it was for her to get published at home:

"Part of my problem getting published in my own country was certainly commercial. Fiction, no matter by whom, hasn't a wide market in Zimbabwe; textbooks do...Into the bargain I was beginning to suspect that the "unsafe issues" I chose to investigate would simply not facilitate publication of my works. As a case in point, one of the rejected plays, "Baines Avenue Way," presented as its protagonist and narrator a woman who earns her living by selling her body to men. Opposite her was a second young woman, this one married, who had suffered a history of abuse at the hands of both her husband and her in-laws. This respectable married lady commits suicide outside the first woman's house where her husband is entertaining himself. I had the distinct impression that the sympathetic young male editor found these women too nasty to be allowed to exist....The entire situation was a double bind. It was imperative that someone write about these issues. Yet once the literature was written no one would publish it."<sup>19</sup>

Politically engaged writers and feminists who write honestly about the conditions of their sex, and whose criticisms hit home, have the most trouble. Often they are unable to remain in their own countries, and some meet the most severe forms of censorship: imprisonment, violence, death threats, exile, or murder. But even when there is no overt government or religious censorship, they cannot reach their audience without a struggle because of obstacles within the publishing industry. Publishing industries in most of the South are small and embattled, while, in the North, many publishers are interested only in books they think will make money. Most publishers in any country tend to shy away from voices that are too sharply critical, particularly in conservative periods. "We don't want books that are purely negative," they will say when faced with critiques of sexism, racism or colonialism, or, "Not this Sixties stuff again!" Or, "So few black people buy books that we can't afford to publish political books about the black experience."

Ama Ata Aidoo recalls the prominent German publisher's representative who told writers at the Zimbabwe Book Fair in 1992 that Europeans were tired of hearing about colonialism; they wanted to hear about something fresh, something new. Today, publishers in the US tell women "we've heard enough victim stories," or "the time for anger is past;" while those in Chile say, "we must not dwell on the sufferings of the past; this is a time of reconciliation."

If it were not for the existence of feminist-controlled alternative presses, many works of creation and social criticism by women writers would not be published at all. The novelist Flora Nwapa (1931-1993), knowing that African women were unable to get published in their own countries and feeling that Northern publishers lacked enthusiasm for their work, attempted to redress the balance by founding her own publishing company, Tana Press, in eastern Nigeria, to publish her work and that of other African women. Efua Sutherland, the Ghanaian dramatist, began a publishing house in order to make well-written, non-colonialist children's literature available to Ghanaian children. Similar responses to gender-based censorship have led to the formation of feminist presses in Asia, Latin America, and in the North.

As Ritu Menon, copublisher of *Kali for Women*, the first feminist press in Asia, says, "The resolve to break the silence has found an echo in cultures and communities across the world, and has given rise to new cultural forms. All over the world, women have spontaneously, consciously, deliberately, through periodicals, theoretical debates, books and journals, created another world, and commented on the world they lived in. In cultures where education was denied to women, they demanded it. Where access to print was difficult, they used posters, songs, and low-cost materials. If some women were diffident about writing, others took down what they said and then published it. All the testimonies by women over the last few years have come to us through transcripts, interviews, documents and dossiers put out by small groups of women, networks like *Women Living Under Muslim Law* and *Women Against Fundamentalism*; like *Red Feminista Latinoamericana y Caribe contra la Violencia Domestica y Sexual*; like *Fempres*, *Naiad*, *Firebrand*, *Sister Vision*."

Many writers, however, need to publish with mainstream publishers for economic reasons. They may also fear their work will be marginalized or ghettoized if it is published by an alternative press. But large publishers too may ghettoize work by assuming its audience is limited to women, gays, blacks, or whatever group the author comes from, as if parochialism were inevitable. Book-sellers do the same—in Chile, according to Cristina da Fonseca and Marjorie Agosin, booksellers refuse even to put books by women in their windows, saying they won't sell—a self-fulfilling prophecy if ever there was one.

Once a book is published, it must be reviewed, and book reviews are a major site of gender-based censorship. Male (or docile female) reviewers may belittle women's books because of their subject, their genre, or, simply, the gender of their authors. Such reviews usually rest on stereotypes—a writer will be criticized either for conforming to a stereotype of her group, or for failing to do so. Reviewers in the North, for instance, often find the voices of women who challenge gender subordination "shrill," "shrewish," "strident," or "unfeminine," and, if they must validate any women, will validate only those who fit a traditional conception of what women are like. Similarly, in the former Yugoslavia, according to Rada Ivekovic, "male critics, when they review women's books at all, do so in an ironic, diminishing way; some women also do that—they write as they are expected to. Male critics often refer to a woman writer in explicit sexual or anatomical terms; they can be very vulgar, especially the young ones in the student press. The stigma, 'women's writing,' or 'writing like a woman,' is seen as diminishing—women are ashamed to be labelled as women."<sup>20</sup>

The most effective way of silencing women writers is simply to ignore their books; editors do not assign them for review and the male critics who choose their own assignments refuse to do them. According to Marjorie Agosin, in Latin America this bias dooms most of the best women writers to obscurity. ("The work of Diamela Eltit was shredded by its publisher even though she is considered one of Chile's most important writers. The male literary critics who have absolute control of the press refused to review her work. Other women writers in Chile are also not reviewed. Only a best seller like Isabel Allende is reviewed, but she is reviewed negatively and accused of writing only to make money.")<sup>21</sup>

One of the main ways a society confers prestige and patronage upon writers is through literary prizes and offices. Gender-based censorship takes place when such awards are given largely or exclusively to men. Sometimes women's books are not nominated for or do not win prizes even when they are virtually in a class by themselves. In 1987, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, a culminating work in the long and distinguished career of a writer who soon after won the Nobel Prize for Literature, was passed over for the National Book Award. In 1995, the *Collected Stories* of Grace Paley—the lifetime achievement of a woman considered one of her country's finest writers—was passed over for the National Book Award in favor of a novel by an academic male writer who had already won the prize once. The judges apparently felt that even the best short stories were works of a minor genre compared to the novel and therefore could not be judged in the same terms. Short, slight, lightweight: do these terms describe genre or gender?

In Russia, even during the Soviet period when nominal equality was a goal, women were not chief editors in publishing houses, leaders in writers' organizations, or nominated for prestigious prizes. And there have not yet been women winners of the Russian Booker Prize, though in 1995 a woman, Ludmila Petrushkevskaya, was finally nominated. The failure to be recognized by one's male peers is a bitter pill for women writers, who persist in thinking their work should be treated on its merits. Ama Ata Aidoo tells of interviews with African male writers who, when asked who the important African writers are, list only men. She writes of the bitterness of seeing her first book, the formally daring and politically confrontational *Our Sister Killjoy*, which was published abroad, be ignored by male writers at home:

"If *Killjoy* has received recognition elsewhere, it is gratifying. But that is no salve for the hurt received because my own house has put a freeze on it. For surely my brothers know that the only important question is the critical recognition of a book's existence—not necessarily approbation. Writers, artists, and all who create, thrive on controversy. When a critic refuses to talk about your work, that is violence; he is willing you to die as a creative person."<sup>22</sup>

Even women who achieve international fame are often denied recognition at home. Cristina da Fonseca says:

"History demonstrates that things have not changed for women writers. Gabriela Mistral (1889-1957), the Chilean woman who was the very first writer in all Latin America to win the Nobel Prize (1945), mostly for her love poems to a man, received the Chilean National Prize for Literature only several years later and even now is remembered mainly as a very ugly woman and a lesbian."<sup>23</sup>

Chilean-American poet Marjorie Agosin has frequently found her Spanish language work dismissed by male critics because of her feminist views, but was recently awarded the prestigious Libro Di Oro, a prize given to the best work written in the U.S. in Spanish, even though the judges were three of her severest critics. The reason: manuscripts were submitted without the authors' names and she wrote in the persona of Vincent van Gogh. According to Merle Hodge, gender-based censorship is a similar problem in *calypso*—the immensely popular West Indian musical form, combining satire and political commentary:

"In the earliest stages of its development, *calypso* was a mainly female activity, eventually to be dominated by men. For generations thereafter the female calypsonian was something of an oddity. Today the numbers have grown, largely because some years ago a women's organization, the National Women's Action Committee, instituted a deliberate program of nurturing female calypsonians. This includes the mounting of an annual Calypso Queen competition, as a counterpart to the mainstream Calypso Monarch competition, which is always won by men. Only once in history has a woman won this prestigious national competition, which is seen as identifying the best calypsonian in the country. Very few women even make it to the Finals. Judges seem not to hear the female calypsonians, although there are many accomplished practitioners of the art who are women, some decidedly superior to some of the men who reap the official honors. The female calypsonian suffers a kind of invisibility"...<sup>24</sup>

Because most books for children are written by women, the invisibility of women writers has tainted the whole category of children's books, which are treated seriously only in exceptional cases, usually involving dead male authors. In Chile, for instance, children's literature is not considered real literature and is never reviewed by literary critics.<sup>25</sup> Even in the United States, with its vast children's book industry, there was opposition to including writers of children's books as a category in PEN.

But the age-old methods of silencing women are not working as well as they used to. Despite all the obstacles, an increasing number of women write and publish, stimulated by the growth of women's movements and often nurtured by alternative presses and magazines. Consequently, traditionalists who wish to keep women in their place have had to turn to more active forms of censorship. Self-appointed free enterprise censorship groups, often religious in origin, are a growth industry in the U.S. where, unlike reviewers, they recognize the importance of children's literature. Each year, Christian conservatives mount national campaigns to keep sex education materials and stories that question traditional values out of the schools and public libraries.

## **VI. CASES OF GENDER-BASED CENSORSHIP**

In addition to the forms of gender-based censorship described above, women writers experience traditional political censorship—but even then, their treatment is affected by their gender. To take an extreme example, a male and female writer may both be arrested and tortured but only the woman will normally be gang-raped or publicly branded as a prostitute. And, in fact, the types of censorship that afflict women do not come neatly packaged and separated. A woman's personal life is likely to be part of any

smear campaign or indictment against her. And politically active women writers make tempting targets because of their presumed vulnerability, not to mention the perverse titillation that persecuting them seems to provide conservative men. Several years of analyzing cases of women writers have led us to the conclusion that women writers who become human rights cases tend to be heterodox in three distinct ways:

- They remove themselves from the authoritarianism and protection of the patriarchal family. They may refuse to marry, be gay, marry too many times, marry someone from the wrong ethnic group or nationality, or simply decide they don't want to live with their parents or husband any more. In some cases, particularly in revolutionary countries, the "patriarchal family" may be the party, government, or national liberation movement.
- They write about the oppression of women in a way that offends. Often they have too impassioned or militant a voice, a voice that men call "strident" or "too angry." They may give specific examples of oppressed women, naming those who have harmed them and calling the government to account. The more specific their examples, the more likely they are to get into trouble.
- They move out of specially marked gender categories of discourse and trespass in areas considered outside of women's realm, meddling in subjects that men consider their own, like scriptural interpretation, law, communalism, corruption, national conflicts, or war and peace. They thus multiply their enemies and increase their vulnerability.

Even in cases that appear on the surface to be purely about state politics, gender considerations are often raised in the form of speculation about the writer's personal life, and her persecution is usually conducted partly through "trials by public opinion" in the press. There are many countries in which any outspoken feminist is immediately branded as a lesbian, and thus further stigmatized and endangered.

Censorship campaigns that draw on puritanical sentiments about female sexuality and notions of women's proper place threaten the freedom of all women. Such puritanism was certainly an element in the most visible case of gender-based censorship in recent years, that of Taslima Nasrin, the Bangladeshi writer who was attacked and threatened with death by political fundamentalists for her views on women and religion, and censored and denied her passport for months by a government embarrassed by her revelations about the persecution of its Hindu minority. Targeted by a long press campaign in which government, Islamists and the liberal opposition all united against her, Nasrin was eventually driven underground and forced into exile by a warrant for her arrest on charges of offending religious sensibilities.<sup>26</sup> Nasrin's case is not unique, but the tip of an iceberg. The writers below were all censored because of their ideas about gender relations, their views on state politics, or both.

Marjorie Agosin, a Chilean born poet living in the United States and writing in both English and Spanish, wrote a book published in Chile on the folk singer and human rights activist Violeta Parra. It disappeared from the market two weeks after publication and appears to have been pulped by its publisher, despite the fact that orders had not been filled.

Svetlana Alexievitch of Belarus had her early books about the lives of women and children in World War II attacked as pacifist (a gender-related term in Communist

vocabulary.) Her most recent book on the Afghan War, called *Zinky Boys* because Russian soldiers were sent home in zinc coffins, was prosecuted in the courts by former generals and the KGB, resulting in the exhaustion of her income by court costs and the confiscation of her research materials. Unintimidated, she is now writing on Chernobyl.

Judy Blume is one of many writers of children's books in the U.S. today whose works are being attacked by the religious right in massive campaigns to remove them from school curricula and public libraries. The Christian conservatives object to any children's book that treats non-traditional families, questions authority, or presents homosexuals as human beings. Other authors under attack include Maya Angelou, Annie Garden, Norma Klein, Betty Miles, Katherine Patterson, and Meredith Tax.

Lindsey Collen, a writer and activist in the trade union, squatters' and women's movements in Mauritius, who was threatened with rape and acid attacks following publication of her novel, *The Rape of Sita*, which was read as an attack on the Hindu goddess (who was abducted but not actually raped.) Sita is a common name in Mauritius and the novel was intended to show that women who are raped do not necessarily lose their "virtue." It was denounced and banned by the Prime Minister, who called for Collen's prosecution.

Maria Elena Cruz Varela, a prize-winning Cuban poet imprisoned for her criticism of the government's failure to tolerate democratic discussion, was visited in her apartment prior to her arrest by a "neighborhood committee." They dragged down the steps by her long hair, beat her, and forced her to literally eat her words (the paper was stuffed down her throat) on the street in front of her children. While she was not specifically attacked in gender terms, it is difficult to imagine a man being treated this way.

Rona Fields, an American social psychologist and expert on terrorism, has experienced both state and gender-based censorship. Her 1973 book on Northern Ireland was killed by its English publisher (Penguin) under pressure from the government and British military intelligence; her 1976 book on the Portuguese revolution was suppressed by her American publisher (Praeger) under CIA pressure; and her academic career was derailed by the fact that in 1972 she filed the first academic sexual harassment complaint, against Clark University. This complaint took years to go through the government's anti-discrimination procedure, during which time she was effectively blacklisted.

The "Five Croatian Witches" are five women writers—Slavenka Drakulic, Rada Ivekovic, Vesna Kesic, Jelena Lovric, and Dubravka Ugresic—who, because of their fame abroad and their insufficient nationalism, were subjected in 1993, after the breakup of the former Yugoslavia, to an intense campaign of personal and sexual vilification by government-sanctioned newspapers and writers' organizations, including threatening phone calls and the publication of one's unlisted phone number. Two of these writers have been forced into exile.

Bessie Head (1937-86) was born in South Africa of a black father and a white mother (put in an insane asylum because of this love affair) and, as living evidence of the violation of a taboo, was brought up in a foster home. After becoming interested in politics, she was driven into exile in Botswana, where, despite her gifts, she was unable to make a living writing because of sexist and colonialist publishing conditions—her

American publisher, for instance, gave her an advance of \$60 on her first novel—and died in poverty at the age of forty-nine.

Merle Hodge, a novelist, activist, and professor at the University of Trinidad and Tobago, was singled out for an orchestrated campaign of personal attacks in the press and threatening phone calls because of her participation in a 1994 campaign against Export Processing Zones. One caller threatened to "make a Gene Miles out of her"—Gene Miles, a woman who exposed government corruption in the Sixties, became a social outcast as a result, ending her days as a penniless vagrant.

Aïcha Lemsine found that when she wrote novels criticizing the Algerian socialist government's family code and its treatment of women militants, her books were banned and she was ignored by the print or broadcast media; only after she wrote a general work about the condition of women in other Arab countries, and it won an important prize in France, was she allowed to publish and speak in Algeria. When the military's hold on the government tightened and the threat from Islamists grew more severe, she opposed both and called for democratic rights and negotiations; she was removed from her newspaper and radio shows, her husband was pushed out of his diplomatic post, and she, like many Algerian women, was forced into exile.

Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan sociologist, had her books *Beyond the Veil* and *Islam and Democracy* banned, making them unavailable to the women of her own country in either Arabic or French. Mernissi's treatment of theology, sexuality and democracy are unacceptable to conservatives, as is her call for a reinterpretation of Islamic texts vis-à-vis the position of women.

Irene Petropolous, editor of *Amphi*, the magazine of the Greek Lesbian and Gay Liberation Movement, was fined and sentenced to five months in prison for "publishing material indecent and offensive to public feeling," namely, an editorial notice requesting heterosexual men to stop writing letters requesting sex to the gay women who put notices in the Personals section of the paper.

Margaret Randall, a poet and essayist born in the United States, gave up her U.S. citizenship because she married a Mexican and needed to become a Mexican citizen to get a work permit. After many years of living in Latin America, where she edited an important literary magazine, wrote over forty books, and supported various liberation movements, Randall returned to the U.S., married a U.S. citizen, and in 1985 applied for permanent residency. The government attempted to deport her on the grounds of her political beliefs. The fact that she had children with a number of different men did not help.

Eliane Potiguara, a writer and organizer of indigenous women in the Amazon rain forest, who was subjected to threats of violence and a newspaper campaign branding her as a thief and prostitute because of her advocacy of Indian rights. The real issue was her organizing of women and the political exposures she wrote in *Grumin*, the newspaper of her women's organization, of *latifundia* and timber baron atrocities, including chemical pollution and paying their Indian laborers in rum.

Ninotchka Rosca, then a journalist, was jailed by the Marcos government in 1972, when it declared martial law, and characterized by the military as "not only a political but a

sexual outlaw." After her release from prison, she was unable to publish anything unless the military first stamped it "approved by the government;" the one newspaper that allowed her to publish without the stamp was immediately closed. She was subjected to repeated death threats and obscene phone calls and had to go into exile to avoid being jailed a second time.

Nawaal el Saadawi, an Egyptian physician and writer, had her books censored as pornography because they contained medical information, such as that a girl can be born without a hymen or lose it by other means than sexual intercourse—such facts challenge traditional beliefs that oppress women. In 1981, she was imprisoned by the Sadat government because of her political views and, upon her release, founded the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA), despite opposition by the authorities, who denied its magazine, *Noun*, a license. In 1991, the government dissolved AWSA, confiscating its assets, and fundamentalist threats to her life forced Saadawi into exile.

Christa Wolf, the distinguished German writer who, alone of all the East Germans who reported to the Stasi in their youth, was singled out for a concerted press campaign led by West German men. Though the controversy was complex, whenever a woman is made a symbol of everything wrong in a society, one suspects patriarchal sentiments may be involved; when the woman is a feminist, internationally known for her writing, one suspects that envy and hatred of feminism are also involved and the intent may be to silence her.

In the United States, a conservative political climate and the mass media's tendencies towards seeing only one trend at a time have combined to make gender-based censorship an increasing problem for even well-established writers, if they have a controversial critique of their society or of the position of women. Andrea Dworkin and Shere Hite have moved from being highly commercial writers to being writers published by small or university presses, while Marilyn French, whose first novel was an international best seller, had her recent pathbreaking book, *The War Against Women*, reviewed in only five places.

The only way to fight gender-based censorship is to persevere in treating taboo subject matter, presenting critical points of view, and getting them published. Chinese women writers deserve special notice for their determination to write about sexuality and personal life, treating subjects like forced abortion, the one-child rule, prison camps, marital rape, and the traffic in women and children. Latin American writers have refused to let the crimes of the past be papered over by a reconciliation without justice, and have persisted in writing not only about the costs of dictatorship but about patriarchy as well, despite the fact that they are often branded as lesbians for doing so.

## **VII. Why Censorship Must Be Fought**

The subordination of women is basic to all social systems based on dominance; for this reason, conservatives hate and fear the voices of women. That is why so many religions have made rules against women preaching or even speaking in the house of worship. That is why governments keep telling women to keep quiet: "You're in the Constitution,"

they will say, "you have the vote, so you have no right to complain." But having a voice is as important, perhaps more important, than having a vote. When censors attack women writers, they do so in order to intimidate all women and keep them from using their right to free expression. Gender-based censorship is therefore a problem not only for women writers, but for everyone concerned with the emancipation of women.

Women writers are a threat to systems built on gender hierarchy because they open doors for other women. By expressing the painful contradictions between men and women in her society, by exposing the discrepancy between what society requires of women and what they need to be fulfilled, the woman writer challenges the status quo. Fadwa Tuqan, the Palestinian poet, born in 1917 in Nablus, writes in her autobiography:

"Although confined and deprived of a homeland, my father wanted me to write political poetry....I was expected to create political poetry while the corrupt laws and customs insisted that I remain secluded behind a wall, not able to attend assemblies of men, not hearing the recurrent debates, not participating in public life....Where was I to find an intellectual atmosphere in which I could write political poetry? From the newspaper my father brought home at lunch every day? The newspaper is important but it doesn't have the power to inspire poetry in the depths of one's soul. I was enslaved, isolated in my seclusion from the outside world, and my seclusion was imposed as a duty—I had no choice in the matter. The outside world was taboo for women of good families, and society didn't protest against this seclusion; it was not part of the political agenda....My commitment to life weakened as I remained secluded from the outside world. My soul was tormented because of this seclusion. My father's demands may have initiated my turmoil, but the pain always stayed with me, taking different forms throughout the journey of my life....The process of maturing was a most painful experience in body and soul. I was oppressed, crushed; I felt bent out of shape. I could not participate in any aspect of life unless I pretended to be another person. I became more and more distant."<sup>27</sup>

Women writers like Fadwa Tuqan make a breach in the wall of silence. They say things no one has ever said before and say them in print, where anyone can read and repeat them. This is a vital step in the creation of modern civil societies, for civil societies are based on discussion, the public use of free expression. Social differences can only be bridged when they are discussed openly and all sides are given room to express their own reality. Any democracy worthy of the name must have room for women's voices as well as men's. But governments that censor women say, "Our country isn't ready for this writer. She makes the conservatives too angry. Our democracy is still too weak to tolerate such extreme views." How is their democracy to become stronger? Censorship does not strengthen the democratic forces in any society.

Women writers symbolize, in their work and life, the free speech of women. That is why they become targets and that is why the global women's movement and all democrats must defend them even when what they say or the way they live is controversial. Women have a right to be controversial: you don't have to agree with someone to defend her right to speak. They have a right to be celibate or childless, to get divorced, to be lesbians, or to have many lovers. You don't have to live the way they do to defend their rights. A democracy is defined by its ability to tolerate differences. The problem here is not the strength of conservatives but the lack of commitment of liberals when it comes to

defending the free speech of women. When their own rights are threatened, it's a different story.

The progressive response to an imposed monoculture is not censorship, but the development of democratic, diverse, lively cultures with room for all our voices. Cultural development—women's development as full human beings, ready to speak out and take their place in running society—is an essential part of remaking a world in which the dreadful imbalance between rich and poor, strong and weak, men and women, humans and other species, is becoming a death sentence not only for millions of people, but for the earth itself.

1. A term coined by Filipina writer Ninotchka Rosca in 1993
2. This is the term in current international usage for what was formerly called the Third World or the "developing world."
- 3 Keynote speech at "Cultural Dynamics and Development Processes and Africa at the Century's End," UNESCO Conference, Utrecht, June 9, 1994.
- 4 Letter to the author, 3/16/95.
- 5 Speech at Women's WORLD forum, "Write Against Silence," New York, March 15, 1995.
- 6 Carolina Maria de Jesus, *Child of the Dark*, translated by David St. Clair (NAL, New York: 1962), p. 53. The original edition, *Quarto das Despejo*, was published in Brazil in 1960.
- 7 Aidoo, op. cit.
- 8 Cristina da Fonseca, letter to author, 5/6/95.
- 9 Adrienne Rich, *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), pp. 30-31
- 10 Siobhan Dowd, "Women and the Word: the Silencing of the Feminine," in Julie Peters and Andrea Wolper, eds., *Women's Rights, Human Rights; International Feminist Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 319-20.
- 11 Rada Ivekovic, letter to the author, 6/3/95.
- 12 Manuscript essay, 1995, in the author's collection.
- 13 "Culture and Censorship from the Russian Side", 6/11/95, manuscript in author's collection.
- 14 Manuscript notes, 1995, in author's collection.
- 15 "Women at PEN Caucus Demand a Greater Role," New York Times, Jan. 17, 1986. The protest was organized by Grace Paley and Meredith Tax, who followed it up by organizing a Women's Committee in PEN American Center. In 1989, Tax began to try to form a similar committee in International PEN, which was done in 1991. By 1994, a number of leading women in the International PEN Women Writers' Committee had become convinced that the problem of gender-based censorship was so serious and extensive that it necessitated an independent organization. They organized Women's WORLD, of which Paley is Chair and Tax President.
- 16 Nadezhda Azhgikhina, op. cit.
- 17 Ibid. This criticism has been made of the young women writers Marina Paley, Svetlana Vasilenko, and Yelena Tarasova, and particularly of the eminent Ludmila Petrushevskaya.
- 18 Nadezhda Azhgikhina, op. cit.

- 19** Tsitsi Dangarembga, "This Year, Next Year," *Women's Review of Books* (Wellesley, MA.), July 1991.
- 20** Manuscript, 1995 in the author's possession.
- 21** "Some Personal Stories about Gender-Based Censorship," 1995, mss. in author's possession.
- 22** Ama Ata Aidoo, "To Be a Woman," in Robin Morgan, ed., *Sisterhood is Global* (New York: Anchor Books), 1984.
- 23** Letter to the author, 6/5/95
- 24** Letter to the author, 6/16/95.
- 25** Cristina da Fonseca, letter to author, 6/5/95
- 26** The Women Writers' Committee of International PEN was heavily involved in her defense. The difficulties in this case helped convinced many of us to form Women's WORLD.
- 27** Fadwa Tuqan, "Difficult Journey—Mountainous Journey" (1984), in *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing*, ed. Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke, eds. (Virago, London:1992), pp. 27-9.