

Redstocking Rap

Everywoman's Abortions: 'The Oppressor Is Man'

by Susan Brownmiller

Twelve young women faced an audience of more than 300 men and women last Friday evening, and with simplicity and calm and occasional emotion and even humor, told of incidents in their personal lives which they formerly had consigned to the very private. They rapped about their own abortions.

The evening was put together by the Redstockings, an action group linked to the women's liberation movement. The meeting began with a playlet that was more diatribe than dialogue, and ended with a rambling speech by America's most loquacious abortionist, Dr. Nathan H. Rappaport. The real drama and unprecedented honesty occurred in between. For three hours, in the borrowed sanctuary of Reverend Finley Schaeff's Washington Square Methodist Church, the group of women "testified" from their own experience with unwanted pregnancy and illegal abortion.

Last month, the Redstockings had stormed a hearing of a New York State legislative committee studying abortion law reform, and predictably, they had been rebuffed. The committee, they were told, was interested in the testimony of "experts." The "experts" had been 14 men and one woman, a nun. The radical women had fashioned this evening as their own public hearing. As one of the younger girls said, "We are the true experts, the only experts, we who've had abortions."

There were no legislators in the audience at the Washington Square church on Friday evening. There were, surprisingly, a large number of men. Some were curiosity seekers (the meeting had been advertised) who paid their \$2 contributions for an evening that promised who knows what? More significant was the number of women who had brought along

their husbands or boy friends, and some of these women also stood up to share their private experience with a roomful of strangers.

It was the politics of confrontation and catharsis, and as such it was successful beyond the expectations of the organizers. It was, some of the women agreed, their most successful endeavor in a year and a half of intensive self-analysis and sporadic "actions" (their term for hit-and-run demonstrations like the assault on the legislative hearing, and last spring's infiltration of the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City).

The "testifying" method was an outgrowth of the confessional style of the weekly meetings of the women's liberation groups, leaderless introspective sessions of free-form discussion where each woman is encouraged to "speak from your own experience, sister." The panelists prepared no speeches for the Friday night open meeting. They set up an unobtrusive tape recorder, kept the lights comfortably dim to encourage conversation, and protected their anonymity by using first names only. The result, which could have been exhibitionistic or melodramatic, was neither—it was an honest rap. And it worked.

There was talk of "the oppressor," and this evening, at least, the oppressor was contained. Make no mistake, the oppressor was Man, who on Friday night played the passive role of auditor, or at most, respectful questioner. It was the women's night. Not a "Ladies' Night," or an evening for "the girls," but a night when Woman spoke and was listened to, seriously. The very oddness of such an evening, where women-as-experts spoke to women and men, was too much, it seemed, for at least two women in

the audience. They rose to damn their sisters for displaying unbridled hostility to men. They in turn were roundly jeered, and later one left in tears (but that may have been unrelated).

"Yes, the more I talk here, the more I realize that I am hostile to men," said one small fragile girl on the panel. She had been telling her story of getting therapeutic (legal) abortion in New York. She had applied to 11 hospitals before she had accomplished her mission. "The tenth," she said in a quavering little voice, "offered me a deal. The deal was, they'd give me an abortion if I'd agree to get sterilized. I was 20 years old."

Each bit of testimony from the panel was met with a knowing response from the floor. The nameless Redstocking in this church this evening was Everywoman:

"I finally found a doctor in West New York, New Jersey. The doctor was very sweet. He had pictures of crucifixes on the walls. It only cost \$900. I went to a bank and got a vacation loan. I'm still paying it off."

"I found two psychiatrists who said that for \$60 each they'd write a report which said I was mentally unstable and ought to have the abortion. I had to prove I was crazy to get a legal abortion—and the abortion was the sanest thing I had ever done in my life."

"When you tell the man you're pregnant, he says, 'How do I know it was me? I'm not the only guy you ever slept with, am I?'"

"The first time I got pregnant, I was a young little thing. The man didn't use any contraceptive. He told me something like, 'Don't worry, when I come the second time, it washes away the sperm.'"

"I was just living with this middle-class guy, and my life was just like his. We were just going along, together. I didn't do anything strange or unusual. I didn't make any decisions. But one day I was pregnant. Then there was a difference."

From the audience: "I've had three abortions, and let me tell you, without anesthetic it's the most scary thing in the world. You're on the table and you feel the scraping and scraping. You get hit when you're young and

inexperienced. All I wanted was love, and there I was, pregnant."

"It's only when you fulfill your so-called biological role as a woman that you get a lot of attention. Women in this society are defined by their service, nurturing, and maintenance roles. When I got pregnant, relatives I hadn't seen in 10 years said, 'I'll take the baby. I guess may. Because I was helpless. When I said I was going to have an abortion, they lost interest. They didn't care any more. Just like they never had any interest when I told them I wanted to be a painter.'"

At one point in the evening, a young man in the audience arose to ask a question. "You keep talking about a woman's right to have a legal abortion," he said. "What about the man's rights, in or out of wedlock? You didn't make yourselves pregnant."

"He was told off, politely and firmly. 'Women have the ultimate control over their own bodies,' a Redstocking told him with the patience a weary teacher uses for a dear but exceptionally slow child. Neither he nor any other male in the hall felt like challenging that simple yet not so obvious statement."