

Under the present system of childrearing, one adult, typically the child's mother, acts as the overseer of her or his life. The mother is given heavy re-enforcement by the public school system and the television set, but she is ultimately held responsible for the product. She has succeeded if her child fits without overt rebellion or malfunction into her or his allotted place within the existing social order, both while growing up and after becoming an adult.

From a feminist perspective, the child is damaged in three critical and interlinked ways by this method of upbringing. First, instead of learning how to work with others in equitable relationships, she or he learns how to submit to authority. Secondly, instead of learning that she or he, together with everyone else, is a participant in the larger human world, she or he is kept isolated and powerless at home and in school. Finally, instead of obtaining emotional security from her or his membership in a working community of caring peers, she or he obtains sustained emotional support from only one individual, or at best from the small number of individuals composing a stable and loving family.

Ugly old patterns of human interaction are established in the minds of a new generation. Children learn that the basic human relationship is one of dominance and submission, that some people ("successful" adult men) run the world, while the rest of us are dependent on their decisions, and that there is a rigid division between the cold competitive public domain, and the warm private enclave of the family.

A mother and her children (with or without a father) presently constitute a social unit which is inextricably enmeshed in the patriarchy. Because she is held totally responsible for her children's behaviour and well-being, a mother must forbid them their freedom. If they do not attend school on time and neatly dressed, if they fail to behave politely and respectfully to adults, if they break the law, if they offend anyone in any way, or damage themselves in any way, their mother is considered at fault.

If she fails in minor ways to make her children behave "appropriately", she will merely meet social disapproval, but if she fails drastically, her children will be removed to a foster home or a juvenile detention centre. Thus in self-defense, and in order to protect her children, a mother does her best to make them submit to her authority, which she uses to coerce them into conforming to society's expectations.

## EL SALVADOR: Courage out of terror

"How was El Salvador?" people asked me when I returned to Canada in early June. I initially had difficulty expressing what I had seen and heard, but two words soon stood out among the others. They are opposite in meaning, but intrinsically linked in my experience of El Salvador. Those words are terror and courage.

One feels the terror as the plane lands in San Salvador. The airport is full of armed men in various uniforms. The streets of the city feature National Police and Guardia on the corners, stationed every few blocks in the downtown area, with sub-machine guns and high-powered rifles. They look mean, their young minds warped and human warmth gone. The U.S. Embassy is a fortress, with 20-foot cement walls and machine-gun turrets at each corner.

The terror seems overwhelming, but gradually you adjust, as you see that life continues. As you adapt to the militarization and the fear, the incredible courage of a people under siege begins to emerge.

On May Day 80,000 people marched through the streets; city workers and campesinos, men, women and children. Risking murder and disappearance, they marched through the capital and gathered at the Plaza Libertad, calling for an end to the new economic measures, an end to the repression, and for dialogue to end the war. The General Association of University Students (AGEUS) spraypainted the walls passed by the march, including the walls of

the U.S. Embassy, with slogans like Reagan plus Duarte = Misery and Hunger.

Later we talked to the National Unity of Salvadorean Workers (UNTS) which organized the march. It includes over 150 trade unions, government and service workers, peasant co-operatives, the teachers association, ANDES, and the university students, organized in AGEUS. Many unions who formally supported the Duarte government have joined after realizing that Duarte was not going to fulfill his campaign promises of agrarian reform and an end to the human rights abuses. Small business associations are now also in an alliance with the UNTS and its demands.

UNTS formed on February 8th in response to the Duarte government's economic package which raised the prices of basic food items by 60% and the cost of medicine by 100%. With unemployment at 40% and underemployment at another 40%, people are starving in order to finance the war being waged against them.

The UNTS is calling for the abolition of the economic package, the reduction of food and gasoline prices, an end to the human rights violations, and the resumption of dialogue between the FMLN-FDR and the government. This large coalition reflects the growing strength of the labour movement, rebuilding since the repression of '82 and '83, and the willingness of the people to continue risking their lives to demand social change.

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# FREEING THE FAMILY

The pattern of dominance and submission is repeated in every major facet of a child's social experience. If a father is a part of the family unit, the child will almost certainly see his or her mother dominated in her turn. In public school, the hierarchy is more rigid, with a (usually male) principal supervising teachers who in turn control a mass of powerless children. Television, that distorting window on the world, hypnotically repeats endless variations on the dominant/submissive theme.

Because children are confined to home and school, they seldom associate with adults in situations in which the adults are not in authority over them. So pervasive are oppressive attitudes towards children that even when a situation allows an adult and a child to interact simply as two people, the adult more often than not will automatically assume that he or she has the right and duty to tell the child what to do. Only with young companions in powerlessness is there the possibility of developing equitable relationships. But of course children usually establish among themselves some form of the dreary power hierarchy that is the only model for human relationships that they have been given.

The second way in which we warp children's spirits as we care for them is by forbidding them meaningful work. I am not suggesting that the majority of adults are permitted meaningful work. In order to survive, many of us spend our days following others' orders and performing tasks that are useless or even destructive. But this fact does not justify turning our children into parasites. It does make comprehensible this aspect of our child-rearing practice: children

are being systematically deformed in a fashion that will later make them able to bear their adult burden of alienation, powerlessness, and boredom.

We often tell children that their work is going to school and getting an education. But 'regular work' and learning need not and should not be separated in this way. We know that in many past societies children and adults worked and learned together—there is nothing particularly 'natural' about segregating children in schools. Educating ourselves is a continuing process from childhood to old age, and working to create our human world should similarly be a process in which we all are involved at every stage of our lives. It is not possible to know what we need to learn if our learning is divorced from action.

Some say that we would be robbing children of their childhood—their heritage of play—if we expected them to work, or burdened them with our worries about the state of society. All of us are being robbed of our heritage of joyful creation when we are made to do work for others at meaningless or destructive tasks. The work children are made to do in public school is often just as alienating as the majority of the jobs we perform for pay. We patronize children when

we see them as inferior beings who are unable to face the harsh realities of the world, and our efforts to protect them are not even successful.

We are struggling to develop a non-authoritarian social system. Such a system can only work if most individuals feel responsible for the well-being of the group. A sense of social responsibility grows only as individuals learn that they have the power to affect the world in positive ways, and this is learned only through taking part in the task of running it. By the time our children, who have been looked after and kept out of the way all their lives, have grown up, they are usually apathetic, believing that only the men who are our political, military, and industrial leaders have the knowledge and power to make social decisions and see that they are carried out.

We damage our children in a third way by teaching them that they can count on physical and emotional nurture only from their immediate families, and in many cases only from their mothers. While they are very young, and relatively helpless, we leave them exclusively in their mothers' care. Then, when they are five or six years old, we send them to public school, which mimics the harsh, competitive adult society for which they are being prepared. In school and on the job, passionate emotion of any sort is anathema. Warm empathetic feeling for others is not fostered, and objectivity and personal ambition are considered positive qualities. The ability to follow instructions precisely and without question, to work at dull repetitive tasks for long periods, to conform in appearance and attitude to one's peers, to be respectful to one's superiors, to be neat and punctual, and to behave in a consistent predictable fashion are the virtues which are especially valued. The school experience helps children to make a sharp separation between the public and the private sphere of social reality, confining power and effectiveness in the world to the former, and love and emotion generally, to

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### ON THE ROAD:

Welcome to the first anarcho-feminist issue of O.R. in seven years. More than 20 women contributed to this insert (p. 3-13). Our backgrounds in political work are varied and most of us haven't worked on O.R. before.

We use the term 'anarcho-feminist' rather than 'anarchist' because while it is claimed that anarchist practice is inclusive of feminism, in reality it is not.

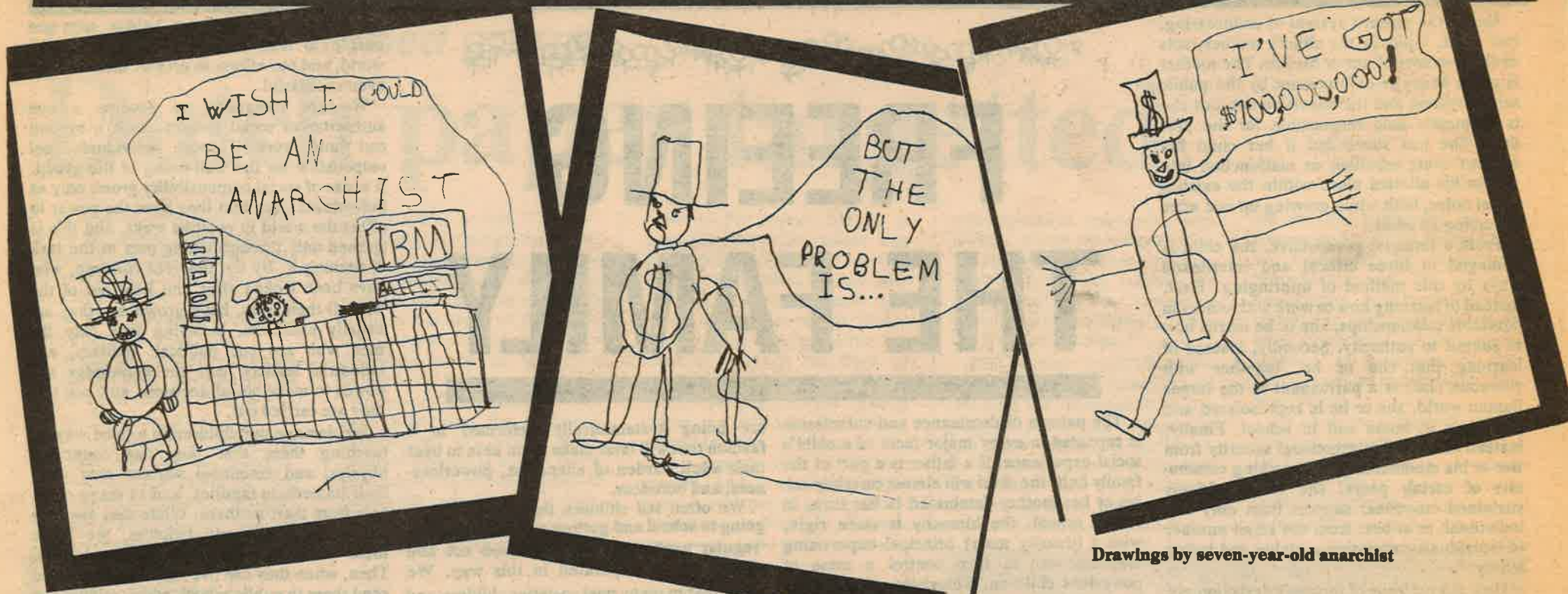
We've chosen to work separately from the men on the regular collective because we want to build from a common understanding of sexist oppression, clarify our criticisms of the anarchist movement, and strengthen the connections between us as anarchist women.

We're critical of the approach to politics which pretends anger is the only emotion that fuels our work—violent con-

frontation glorified as the only true revolutionary activity. This approach denies the humanity we're struggling for in the first place. We recognize the guerilla as a crucial element in the overall resistance, however we feel that the struggle to build a mass legal and a militant quasi-legal movement is just as important.

We've tried to show other facets of struggle and resistance. Our writing has emphasized political topics which affect us in a direct, personal way. Issues like pornography and childrearing demand that we put our revolutionary ideals into practice in the most personal areas of our lives. Our common goal is a balance between action and introspection and a reintroduction of the personal into the political.





Drawings by seven-year-old anarchist

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the latter.

Children need many forms of support until they have gained enough experience and skill to function with an adult's independence. Our society is organized in a fashion that makes it almost impossible for adults who are not biological or adoptive mothers, or 'professional childcare workers' to provide this support. Since we expect children to be in school or at home with their mothers, centres of adult activity are so arranged that it is seldom practical for adults to include children as they go about their daily work. We work more efficiently, of course, when we are not subject to childish distractions, and efficiency is a central concern of those for whom we work, and must please. We are too busy to look after 'other people's' children.

The belief that children are their mothers' responsibility is deeply ingrained in us all. After all, she chose to bring them into the world. Never mind that she was lied to about the difficulty of the task she was taking on, and taught that only by having children could she become a worthwhile person. Forget that safe and effective birth control was not available, and that she may have been raped. It is irrelevant that bearing and caring for children is not a private hobby, but a task as necessary to human survival as growing food or producing the commodities we need. As long as children 'really' belong to their mothers, to help with them is to do a mother a personal favour. To accept many such favours puts a mother too deeply in debt. The mother becomes uncomfortable, and both she and her 'helper' begin to resent a situation that seems inequitable.

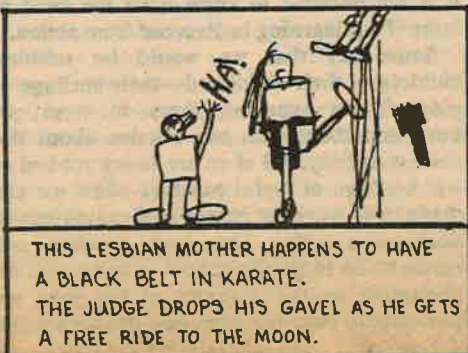
People having little experience with children almost always assume that caring for them is easier and pleasanter than it is. (If this were not the case, fewer of us would deliberately become pregnant.) Our assumptions are faulty because we have been taken in by patriarchal propaganda to the effect that mothering can be handled almost by instinct by any good woman. A task that is so insignificant that it is left to women cannot be very difficult. Thus it is reasonable to expect mothers to produce clean, polite, happy children with revolutionary attitudes, and also to work full time for the feminist movement.

When people with such expectations decide to assist the obviously inadequate feminist mother of a child who is not a clean, polite, happy revolutionary, they tend to think that they can solve the child's problems in an hour, or a day, or a couple of weeks. Mothers do not need patronage of this sort. We need long-term commitment to our children by people who have some sort of appreciation of the effort that has gone into raising them up to the present.

A mother should never have to feel that she has imposed on her group or her child because she brings her child to a meeting. She has a right to be at the meeting, and if it is scheduled for a time when she has no-one to care for her child, that is a problem that the group should willingly find a way to solve—and it is as important that the solution be as satisfactory to the child as that it be satisfactory to the mother and the rest of the

group.

It is all very well to say we do not want children to be raised in nuclear families, but they have to be raised somehow. How do we propose to take care of them on a day to day basis?



In her novel *Motherlines*, Suzy McKee Charnas coined the term sharemothers for a group that assumed special responsibility for seeing a person safely through childhood. I can conceive of no better alternative to the nuclear family than a sharemothering group. Sharemothers would be collectively responsible for their group's children. A sharemother who had given birth would have no special status—indeed it would be possible, though probably unusual, for a child to be nurtured in a sharemother group to which her or his birth mother did not belong.

Probably at first most groups would be formed around single mothers and their children, since few men have a feminist analysis, but as more men became our allies, mixed and all male groups would become more common.

We must not rush into sharemothering. If a child learns to love an adult, and trust her as her mother, and then the adult decides she cannot handle the commitment she has made, and so withdraws from the relationship, the painful sense of betrayal the child will feel may stop her or him from being able to form deep emotional ties with anyone else. When an adult gradually increases involvement with a child's care as the relationship between her and the child deepens, the adult avoids mechanically applying an abstract political analysis to the complexity of real human interactions.

One way of experimenting with shared childcare in a communal house is to arrange regular times when a child's birth mother is not responsible for her or his care. Mothering is diffuse: it involves continuous responsibility, although not continuous effort. A person who wishes to become a sharemother can experience this continuous responsibility by committing herself to a weekly twenty-four hour shift during which she assumes all of a mother's normal responsibilities: seeing that the child gets adequate food and rest, getting the child to school on time, working with the child to develop sensible limits of behavior, arranging childcare if she has to go to work or to a meeting, and staying home if the child is ill or otherwise troubled.

A woman who has been a mother for several years renews her nurturing energy as well as her ability to focus on tasks and pleasures other than mothering when she is

released, at regular intervals, from her care-taking role for a whole day and night. Children have a vivid awareness of who it is that is looking after them, and quickly learn to stop relying exclusively on their birth mothers when other adults regularly and dependably provide nurture.

The point at which we can say that genuine sharemothering has begun is the point at which it is no longer automatically assumed that a child will stay or leave with her or his birth mother. The good thing about sharemothering is that by the time this point has been reached, the idea of the child being left with someone who had not borne her or him will no longer be frightening. Each of the sharemothers will know that she or he will not be left permanently alone to deal with the responsibility of the child's care. The birth mother will know that she will not be cut off from a child she dearly loves just because she needs some time on her own. The child will know that she or he has a strong voice in the decision about which household she will be with, and that she or he will not be long out of contact with any of her or his sharemothers.

Before children can effectively support our struggles and organize around their own oppression, they need much greater political sophistication than they now possess. Their need for accurate information can hardly be overstressed. In our society, what is called 'the innocence of children' (which is actually ignorance compounded by lack of experience) is protected by dressing any ugly social realities they may come across in cute bunny suits. They are fed bland half-truths and lies by schools, by books, by the media, by their parents—by all adults and adult institutions.

At the same time that we hide unpleasant truths about our society—which is also our children's society—from children, we also hide harsh facts about our children's lives from ourselves. That is why we forget that there is almost no subject that is of concern to adult feminists that is not also of concern to children.

Children are as affected by the race and class structure as we are. When we are poor, our children are poor. Children's sexuality is repressed and they are all too often sexually exploited. Many children are raped. Birth control devices and even facts about birth control are often difficult for adolescents to obtain. Homophobia is not a problem for adults only—many of us remember beginning to be strongly attracted to members of our own sex when we were as young as seven, and queer-baiting is not less common in public school than it is in the adult world. Children of lesbian mothers or gay fathers share many aspects of their parents' oppression. Child battering occurs at least as frequently as wife beating.

Children are more trapped by marriage than are women, because divorce is now an option for women, but children often are not even consulted about whom they want to live with when their parents' marriages end. Like women, children are both idealized (as when it is assumed that they are more creative or have greater moral purity than

adults) and scorned (as when adults are insulted by being called girls or boys, or by being labelled childish).

Children have to live with the nuclear nightmare and other environmental terrors just as the rest of us do. They can be imprisoned in homes for juvenile delinquents and in many cases have fewer legal rights than adult criminals. They are placed in mental institutions without ever having the option of signing themselves in or out. Like depressed housewives, 'hyperactive' children are 'helped' to adjust by pharmaceutical industries with their profitable mood altering drugs. Exploring an anarchistic alternative to our present political structure is certainly as relevant to children, who do not even have the vote, as it is to women.

Once our children had achieved an analysis profound enough to be useful as a guide to action, they could educate other children more effectively than we can. They could work with us, or independently, to produce children's plays and children's newspapers. They could organize children's drop-ins and form children's consciousness raising groups. They could plan programmes and workshops for children at events. If they were attending public school, they could form action groups, and work to eliminate the sexist and ageist practices of their teachers.

We cannot build a society of equals if we are ourselves oppressing social groups. That is, we will not overcome sexism in society at large if we have not overcome racism, classism, homophobia, ageism and so forth within our own movement. This is obvious, but it bears repeating, because even though criticism improves our political health, it is often an unpalatable medicine, and children are not in a position to insist that we take it. We must accept the fact that one of the most useful functions that an autonomous children's movement could perform is to help adults revise our mistaken analysis and change our oppressive practices so that we can more effectively work for change throughout society.

These are excerpts from the essay *A Feminist Perspective on Children's Liberation* by Lee MacKay in the book *Children and Feminism* to be published in the fall. It will be available through Lesbian and Feminist Mothers' Political Action Groups (LAFMPAG), P.O. Box 65804, Station F. Vancouver, B.C. V5N 5L3.

