

# Angry Women Blast Porno Shops

In 1978-1984, feminists in England went on the offensive to fight violence against women. A group calling itself Angry Women took direct action against the peddlers of pornography. They attacked over 25 targets--sex shops and video shops that did a brisk business in violent and misogynist propaganda--causing half a million pounds worth of damage.

How did they organize? Why did they resort to direct action? Why did they stop? How do they assess their actions?

This interview is reprinted from Outwrite, December 1988.

*How did Angry Women first come together? And how did you get involved with them - did you find them or did they find you?*

A group had been in existence since 1978 and had attacked a couple of sex shops. In 1981, I was invited to speak with a group of women about my politics, violence against women, and direct action. At the time, I didn't know that they were Angry Women; I had agreed to meet them because the ideas and issues interested me, as did the idea of different kinds of direct action. It was only after I was approached by them a second time that I was told that they were involved in taking direct action against sex shops as well as individual men who violated women, and I decided to join them.

*Were you completely aware of what you were getting involved in at the time?*

Absolutely. I knew I was joining a group to take direct action, probably in the form of arson attacks, and that this inevitably involved the destruction of property - a criminal activity. It's not as if I didn't sweat about it! But the group spent a long time explaining what it involved, and how it made them feel and how it would probably make me feel. And that's important, simply because women don't often do that sort of thing, we're not used to it and so you really need to psyche yourself up in preparation.

*What form did this preparation take?*

Mainly talking. We would discuss our feelings and responses, the fear that we experienced, the guilt that we felt. Talking it through helped enormously, and we always maintained that any one of us could withdraw at any time and no judgments would be made, and that if one of us felt uneasy then she would never be forced to go ahead. So really it was about talking everything through, from beginning to end, listening to each other, paying attention to objections, discussing risks.

*Attacks like the one you carried out obviously took meticulous planning and organisation. Did you draw on others' experience, or did you experiment on a trial and error basis?*

It was mostly on a trial and error basis. We did try and read whatever we could lay our hands on from and about groups taking direct action, but didn't really learn very much as they didn't divulge details! Also, US groups like Preying Mantis used explosives, we only ever used petrol.

As far as organising our attacks went, we ensured that we knew what each of our roles was going to be, and we prepared ourselves with alibis. Our principal concern was that there should be nobody on the premises that were going to be attacked. We took great precautions to assure ourselves of this: we watched buildings, sometimes for as long as three months, often weekly, sometimes daily, to establish patterns of the comings and goings to see if the curtains had moved, and if there was anybody on the premises at night. We were also vigilant about policing patterns in the area. It's surprising, but there are an awful lot of people around at night, even in small towns....!

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For the attack itself, we would wear very dark clothing, cover our faces with balaclavas or hats, and take only what we needed. Depending on the location, we would either travel in one or two cars (some of which we hired or stole), and always in pairs. Once we had finished what we started out to do, it was home and a hot bath to get rid of the smell and any remnants that would point to our activity.

Obviously we kept our activities to ourselves, and that was very difficult. How do you explain to your lover where you've been and what you've been up to?!

*What feelings were you confronted with at the time of your first attack?*

I was totally terrified. The target was a sex shop in Skipton, it was a freezing cold night and there were only two of us - the senior-most member of the group and novice - me! A sort of trial run really. I remember sitting in the car for ages constantly wanting to go to the toilet. I was so terrified of getting caught. Anyway, we did it, successfully, and the whole place just went up! We couldn't get in the car quick enough to get out of there!

*Did everything always go off, or should I say 'up', without a hitch? Or did you have some frightening moments?*

Well, there was a really freaky incident. A particular shop in Leeds city centre had bragged openly about the sadistic pornography they stocked - they had posters displaying the most violent

abuses of women. It was very provocative, certainly very provocative to us, and we wanted to get in there. By this time, a lot of the video shops stocking porn had dispensed with letter boxes for obvious reasons - those had been our access points - and had installed security grilles, locks, bolts, the works. We used these massive bolt cutters to cut our way in; it took half an hour, and we knew that the place was alarmed and that we had 30 seconds to do what we had to. Just as I was about to light a match, my partner slipped and fell! That was frightening - I had to drag her out, throw the match, and in seconds the place just blew! You can always hear the sound of breaking glass, that's what goes first, and of course we never stayed very long to hear what follows!

*Did your attacks always follow a similar pattern?*

Yes, except we got a bit more sophisticated. We graduated from using petrol-soaked rags and started using tubing, funnels and tapers to gain access when there was no letter box available to communicate our message through. We did one shop where the grilles were only a quarter of an inch apart, and it took a long time, but it worked. It all sounds amateurish, and it was, but it had the desired effect!

*You had fairly consistent press coverage for your actions. Did you find the press sufficiently responsive?*

With a few exceptions, the Yorkshire Evening Post (YEP) published the statements that we would telephone through immediately after an attack. Sometimes we would send typed statements, typed on machines that we would buy and immediately sell. The reports themselves were fairly neutral, the YEP would also inform us about the extent of the damage we had caused, and no judgments were made. The local alternative paper, Leeds Other Paper, gave us sympathetic coverage, but derived their stories from the YEP - we only ever maintained direct contact with the YEP.

Disappointingly enough, the feminist press reported unevenly. Spare Rib stopped reporting our actions and of course we weren't in a position to ascertain why. Local feminist newsletters carried items about us, now and then. Outwrite was the only paper that gave us consistent and supportive coverage and placed our actions in a political context of the overall fight against male violence, which is what they were and which is what we wanted recognised.

*What was your most active period?*

Well, during 1979-85, in which period there were about seven of us involved, although not all at the same time, we must have attacked more than 25 porn and video shops. Some we attacked repeatedly, like the sex shop in Chapeltown which local people had complained about and which feminists

in Leeds had campaigned to have its license revoked. Also, we didn't confine ourselves to operating in Leeds but attacked sex shops in neighbouring areas - Halifax, Bradford, Huddersfield, Skipton.

*Why did Angry Women prioritize direct action and not, say, campaigning against violence against women?*

Firstly, we were united in our belief that pornography is a form of hatred towards women; it abuses women and children; it thrives on vile stereotypes. I remember SS Experiment Camp with particular horror. A sex shop that opened on one May Day in Leeds had its window plastered with posters depicting an SS officer with a naked woman, strung upside down, in front of him. I saw that film - it was an unending catalogue of humiliations and violations and was revolting. Women had tried to get rid of it legally by using the Indecent Displays Act, a miserable piece of legislation which relies entirely on the discretion of the constable in charge. Nothing happened. And so we attacked it.

We have to make demands that pernicious propaganda of this nature has to be stopped - how can we do this politely? We thought our actions would contribute to discussions, that publicity we gained would influence attitudes, that some pressure would be put on the industry itself. Of course, we weren't naive enough to think that we would smash pornography - we know that it is an international multi-million dollar industry that thrives on the support of big business, the law makers, the law enforcers... But we felt that our actions were a way of doing something to those men who frequented sex shops every day, who watched violent porn films every night, simply because we had choked off their supplies, temporary though it was. Angry Women ensured that the porn brokers knew that not all women are passive, that there was strong opposition to them.

Secondly, campaigning against violence against women was not a lesser activity - Leeds WAVAW (Women Against Violence Against Women) were strong at the time, and we needed them and their campaigns to provide the political context in which we operated. So they were crucial to our existence.

*How did you select your targets?*

We made it our business to know who the pornographers are, and that was easy because pornographers like to brag about their activity and you could read about them in the News of the World. We knew who owned what, their retail outlets, and so on, and we had done extensive surveys of Leeds and surrounding areas to map the locations of sex shops and video shops selling porn.

The targets themselves - pre-1982 there were only the sex shops and they could be attacked easily enough. Post-1982 we had the beginnings of video shops - these sold what then were referred to as video nasties, child porn,

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sm stuff, and mostly over the counter and visible to the punters. The video porn industry really took off, and although by 1982 sex shops needed licenses to do business, video shops provided lucrative outlets to pornographers, and many of them also offered a mail order service, not just in porn, but really horrific violent films that showed rape, murder, mutilation of women.

The mail-order business is particularly dangerous - its sheer volume and potential. There are also less controls that can be exercised to curb it - not that I believe that existing legislation, e.g. the Obscene Publications Act, are of much use. I am convinced that more business is being done through mail order than through the shops, but there has been no research, and therefore no way of proving that.

Anyway, our targets were quite clearly defined: there were the sex shops like the Private Shop chain owned by David Sullivan (who incidentally offered 1000 Pounds for knowledge of our identities) and those video shops that brazenly sold porn and violence over the counter.

We always made it our business to know what was on offer at the shops. That was very important. We spent hours in the shops and pouring over the mail order catalogues.

In recent years I haven't checked out what's in the shops in the way we used to. But I know that porn has increased, that thresholds have changed and what was once totally outrageous is today quite commonplace. Even in the period that we were active, there was a marked increase in child porn, racist porn, sadomasochism, bestiality.

Was any target ever doubted?

No. We trusted each others' judgements implicitly.

Did your actions have a noticeable effect?

Temporarily, yes. But many of them came back, and continued to deal. However, I think two shops did close down completely following our intervention! They did all take greater security precautions, though.

When you did a job successfully, what were your immediate feelings?

Jubilant! Absolute jubilation! We would do the job and then be off, often without knowing the extent of the damage we caused. We once tried to estimate the extent of the damage we did, in a sense a useless activity, but still...and we calculated that it was about half a million pounds' worth. That's quite a bit of porn up in smoke!

What kind of support did you get from the women's movement, and from outside it?

Although we did get support, there were objections too. The main one being that by our actions we were endangering the feminist community in Leeds because of police surveillance, interrogation, raids...all of which happened. After we had attacked twin sex shops, the police interviewed some feminist academics, and took their house to pieces. What killed us was

that they thought it was academics that had done it! It was apparent that they hadn't a clue as to who we were. Still, the academics responded very supportively, they wrote about it, they made public the fact that their rights had been infringed upon, and this in turn alerted the feminist community to be prepared in case of a visit from the police.

The Leeds W.L. Newsletter also carried articles about the importance of being aware of your rights, and this was very important for us, as we were in no position to protect anybody ourselves, and this preparation was exactly what we wanted.

Other objections included the fact that we were breaking the law, and that we were also censoring material. This last objection is one I don't have much patience with - why should films showing the systematic mutilation of women, murder, rape, humiliations and so on be available to men? The objection that was hardest to deal with was that we were endangering life...But on the whole, we did get support, not only from feminists but also some leftists, and liberals.

Did police interference and the fact that they obviously wanted to find you deter you in any way?

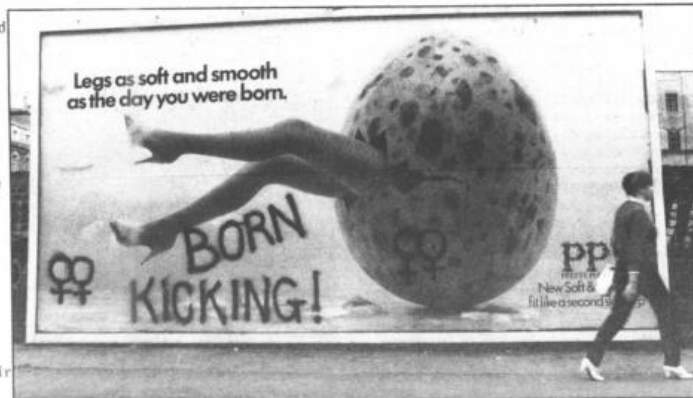
No. We knew we were breaking the law, in fact several laws - criminal damage, arson, conspiracy, endangering life - and we were well aware that the consequences could be ten years in prison. But we were resolved to continue.

By taking direct action, what level of politicisation amongst feminists did you hope to achieve?

We had hoped there would be other groups taking direct action, but there weren't. There were a few spin offs, e.g. when women in Leeds (not us) took direct action against an exhibition of pornographic sculptures and against individual men. But there was nothing concerted or consistent.

Why do you think your actions didn't have a snow-balling effect?

Perhaps it's because women are traditionally not used to taking that kind of action. Or because it all seems frightening and difficult.



London graffiti by Jill Posener from *Lower than Words*



Graffiti in Australia

Did Angry Women engage in political debates about the actions you were taking?

No, we didn't really have any political debates - we were clear about what pornography was, and what it did, and how we wanted to deal with it. Our discussions revolved around strategies, tactics, the whys, wheres and hows. If there were disagreements, they were more about the way we did something or planned to, rather than whether we should or not. All of us were white, lesbians and, unusually, mostly working class. As and when other issues related to our actions did surface, we would discuss them, e.g. the time when one of our targets was owned by an Asian man, which prompted discussions on racism, the possible treatment he would get from police, and so on.

How were new women recruited?

Primarily on the basis of their politics around violence against women, and their views on pornography. We also considered their general behaviour in the community - was she responsible? Could she be trusted? Could she keep her mouth shut - that was most important. Politics in other spheres also mattered, of course. But there was no recruitment of anybody already in an existing group, or anybody who had a high public profile.

After 1984, we didn't hear any more about Angry Women. Why was that?

By the end of 1984, we were down to three members. Others had either got burnt out and left, or were too frightened to sustain the level of activity. Out of the three of us, one was particularly vulnerable for other reasons, so we mutually decided to stop. Carrying on with just two was risky, and it was difficult to find new recruits. Also, WAVAW had more or less stopped being active - the defense trials had taken their toll. Without the support of a campaigning group constantly raising the political issues, we would have been a lone voice. So, the low membership, the difficulty in recruiting and the demise of WAVAW forced us to stop. That was a difficult decision, simply because we didn't want to.

In the five years that you were active, how close did the police come to finding you?

Not close at all. The Superintendent of West Yorkshire Police once told the press that he knew we had a lot of support and thought that we might be feminists! And that is as close as they got. When they picked up Connie O'Donovan, whose car had been stolen and driven through the window of a sex shop, they put immense pressure on her because they thought she would lead them to us. Which of course she couldn't. The Millgarth police station had a map on the wall on which all the sites of our attacks were marked, and despite quite a trail of women being questioned by them, they couldn't get their hands on this so-called bunch of lunatics, i.e., us! When Connie's case was thrown out at pre-trial stage, it was a great humiliation for them. I think they were really pissed off that they never found us.

Today, we have a booming pornography industry, an escalation of violence against women, and in recent years, the emergence of evidence of very widespread abuse of girls within the family. At the same time, we have witnessed the demise of WAVAW, there is no direct action against violence against women, and existing campaigns and networks are stagnant. Why do you think we have become so inactive?

Well, perhaps Thatcherism is one answer...although why our resistance should weaken in the face of increased repression is difficult to understand.

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I did see a lot of women burnt out from working at fever pitch, and there was nobody to replace them. A lot of middle-class women have gone off into careers—they have had the privilege to opt out. But all this certainly doesn't explain it, and it puzzles me that younger women have not joined in. Also, that some national networks still exist, like *Women's Aid*, for example, but we don't have any campaigns any more to raise an awareness about the issues. I'd like to see a national network, like WAVAW, but something that involves a wider spectrum of women.

*Was your involvement with Angry Women the most rewarding political activity you engaged in?*

No. It was satisfying in one way certainly, and that was that you could see the results instantaneously before your very eyes! And yes, we did make a dent in the porn industry in Leeds—they knew we could strike, and would strike, and we did. But it didn't

have a lasting effect. By the very nature of the activity, it couldn't. Not unless there is a strong nationwide feminist campaign that will campaign on every front.

*The target of your attacks—pornography—has also increasingly become a source of pleasure to lesbians who claim to be feminists and believe that engaging in practices like sm sex is about a liberation of sexuality. What is your response?*

It angers me intensely. It reminds me of politics about gay male sexuality and pornography, and I am mortified that lesbians are now adopting the same and that they are attempting to make me feel prudish etc., much as men tried to make women feel in the 60's.

I don't know how to tackle this—it's male defined politics as far as I can see, and I have no idea why it has mushroomed. But then, I also know the power that a small group, or even one individual, can wield. It



just saddens me that there is no greater resistance to it. But so far, I think it's peculiar to London—I cannot imagine a debate on sm taking

place in Leeds, because there is already such a climate of opinion against violence against women. I find it deeply ironic that today we are not fighting about taking action against male violence in all its manifestations, but debating the political validity—if there can be such a thing—of violent sexual practice between lesbians! And today we have magazines like *On Our Backs*, which I would happily take action against, increasing their circulation. I think there is an urgent need that we remind ourselves about how much men hate us. It is easy to put it out of your mind because it is so horrific and there is a deadly combination of widespread ignorance of porn as well as the refusal to acknowledge its violence that operates in making us retreat into a false self-contained safety. What we need to do is confront this violence, and confront our fears about it, and turn that fear into anger.