

CHAPTER 16 MASS INFLUENCE

Up until now, we have considered largely how various individuals' lives have been changed when they have received a specific ,major jolt to their way of thinking. It would obviously be more efficient if many people could all be jolted by the same agent, and we know that this is possible given comments we have considered about the effect of the book ***Uncle Tom's Cabin*** on the slavery question, for example. Here are a few more examples:

Another influential book was ***The Feminine Mystique*** by **Betty Friedan** whose production has already been discussed. When it was published in 1963 it was an immediate success, its message reaching perhaps five times the three million people who bought the book, through such things as magazine articles and television and radio interviews (Friedan, 1985, 19). Friedan received fewer angry letters from men than she had expected. Wrath came mostly from women who were threatened by the challenge of moving into society as individuals in their own right, who were content to be housewives subservient to their husbands, or who had become successful on their own and didn't want competition from other women. Relief came from millions of women though, relief that their discontent had a basis in reality and that they were not mad or evil because they wanted more for themselves than just being a wife, a mother, and a homemaker. It changed their lives, with millions of women joining the work force and no longer largely living through their husbands and children.

Fourteen years later, *The Feminine Mystique* was followed by the immensely popular ***The Women's Room*** (1977) which extended the consciousness raising of middle-class women (Gerrard, 1989, 137). It is a long novel about Mira Ward, a housewife of the 1950s, who eventually broke free from suburbia together with some of her friends. It changed many women's lives with its depiction of women first in middle-class society, and then in women's studies' university circles. **Marilyn French**, the author, considers it important because it "spelt the truth about how a lot of women felt. It wasn't a truth coming to them from the outside; it was a truth they had known, and felt, and never seen reflected in their culture. When they did see it they recognised it immediately and suddenly realised that they were not peculiar. The reason they were unhappy was not because they were neurotic or bad, but because these were cultural facts about what happens to women. It empowered them. The possession of truth is always empowering."

Elly Danica had great trouble writing her book ***Don't: A Woman's Word***. It is about the sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of her father as she was growing up in Saskatchewan, the oldest child of a large family. Her father, a photographer, took pornographic pictures of her in the basement of their house which he showed to his friends; one night when she was nine, a group of these men raped her. Her mother knew of the abuse but did nothing to stop it. The next many years of her life were torment as she struggled to live with her psychic pain. Her book about her tortured childhood was written in an attempt to wrest back her life from her nightmares.

Her book was a great success. She appeared on many radio and television shows to talk about it, but was disconcerted by readers' reactions. People cried when reading it which made her feel badly, thinking that she was burdening them with her story of horror. She writes in her second book, *Beyond Don't* (1996, 12, 80), "the book struck a chord with so many people that my childhood experience ruled my life in a new way." Now she found that she herself was looked upon only as a child survivor of abuse, and that others wanted her to listen to their stories and offer solace. She had little time for her own life outside of this one issue.

What is important in this section, though, is that many women came up to her while she was signing books in a bookstore, or after one of her talks, to tell her "the most profound of all things a writer can hope to hear: **Your book has changed my life!**" They also had been sexually abused as children, but before reading her book they had been too afraid to come out and tell this truth to anyone; until they did so, they could not begin the healing process that would restore them to themselves. One woman read the book, phoned family members to tell them to read it too, and then felt her own burden lighten as her family rallied to help her-- "where there had been silence for many years, her sisters and her mother were now talking honestly, supporting one another, and the future looked much brighter." *Don't* has drastically affected the lives of hundreds and perhaps thousands of women.

Television has even more potential to change the way people lead their lives because it reaches far more people than do books. Law professor **Anita Hill** made an impression on the world far beyond what she could have imagined when she appeared on television while graphically accusing Clarence Thomas before the United States' Senate judiciary committee of sexually harassing her when they had worked together years before (Hossie, 1992). She wanted this behavior to be considered before Thomas was appointed to the Supreme Court. Did America think a man who would act in such a way was worthy of such a high appointment?

Earlier, politicians had routinely felt it their right to harass young women working in Washington. Virginia Durr (1985, 130-1) describes being subjected "to passes from senators and congressmen. To be a senator or congressman you had to have a rather large ego, because it takes an awful lot of work and strength and vitality and vigor. Well, frequently they'd chase you around the desk, literally. You'd see this large mountain of a man rise up and come toward you, and you'd back toward the door... you were female and fair game.... Some of the young ladies we would send out to lobby would come back considerably dishevelled."

The Senate committee, composed of men, dismissed Anita Hill's complaint, but the matter did not die away. Millions of women were moved by what they'd seen on television. Virginia Sapiro, a professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin said, "It's very striking to hear how many people refer to that picture of Anita Hill standing before a bunch of white boys. It's searing. Something has crept into the mass consciousness of a lot of women, Republican and Democrat, that there was something wrong with that picture. For the first time maybe in the history of the modern women's movement, a lot of average people are thinking about women's power in the political system."

The long-term impact of Anita Hill's testimony is on women's issues on many fronts, not just sexual harassment. To many, women have come to symbolize change in a political system that badly needs it. In a poll taken **before Hill's national appearance, only 28 per cent of respondents felt that the country would be "governed better" if more women held political office. After her testimony, in the fall of 1992, 61 per cent of respondents felt this** (and 80 per cent of women under 30 did so). More women than ever before are now contesting and sometimes winning political positions in the United States.

One doesn't need mass technology to change a number of people's minds at once, though, as Gloria Steinem relates for a group of women in India (Steinem, 1992, 55-56). In 1972 lawyer **Ela Bhatt**, a Gandhian labor organizer, helped organize the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) for the desperately poor women in India who recycle garbage, sell vegetables on the street, carry building materials on their heads, and mend old pots. At first, these women were suspicious of Bhatt and of each other, which is not surprising considering the hard lives they led. Bhatt believes that the group began to function well because of a holiday the group took to celebrate SEWA's founding, the first holiday the women had ever taken apart from their families. Bhatt hired a rickety bus to drive the women to Hindu holy places in the area they had never before visited.

Gloria Steinem writes, "Everything was fine until they neared a temple that could be reached only by boat. Menstruating women were not allowed in temples, and inevitably, some of the women had their periods. They were sure that if they crossed the river, the boat would capsize to punish them for defying tradition, and since they couldn't swim, everyone would drown.

"By appealing to every emotion from curiosity to defiance, Ela finally convinced them to get in the boat and consign themselves to the wide river and fate.

"They crossed-- and nothing happened. After placing their offerings of fruit and flowers in the temple, they crossed back again-- and still nothing happened. For the first time in their lives, they had defied the rules that denigrated them-- and they had won.

"Somehow, everything was connected to that first defiance and victory. **If women's bodies were not so 'unclean' and inferior after all, perhaps their work was not so inferior either.**"

From that day on, SEWA flourished until it became the most powerful women's trade union in India, and one of the largest in the world.

Olayinka Koso-Thomas (1987, 16, 43ff) freaked out when she learned about female genital mutilation. She is confident that **a massive health education program of women can change their attitude toward the necessity of female circumcision and stop it.** This torture and crippling of millions of girls and women is one of the major catastrophes of our time. Educating religious leaders by lobbying may help them see that genital mutilation robs women of a basic human right to good health. Traditional practises in much of Africa insist that women be circumcised. Their circumcision takes three forms of increasing mutilation: **clitoridectomy** in which the prepuce of the clitoris

is cut off (corresponding to male circumcision); **excision** when the entire clitoris is removed along with all or part of the labia minora; and **infibulation** in which the prepuce and the labiae minora and majora are cut off and the two sides of the vulva stitched together leaving only a small opening for urine and menstrual flow.

These practices originated for the benefit of men-- when the clitoris has been damaged or removed, women will usually no longer enjoy sex. Men won't have to worry about their partner's pleasure when they take their own. Circumcised women are considered unlikely to cheat on their husbands and more likely to be content as housewives, even when several women share one husband. Over generations, female circumcision has become part of the religion and culture of many groups, defended and perpetrated often by women who guard tradition.

Culture and religion are all very well, but female circumcision is not a benign procedure. It brings pain and misery to girls and women that may partially disable them for the rest of their lives. When girls are circumcised, often under septic and primitive conditions, they suffer terror and great pain, with their wounds often becoming infected. Sometimes they die. In adolescence they may develop menstrual as well as urinary problems. Later, they find intercourse painful and child birth far worse. Some women are never able to produce a living child because of infected urine escaping into their uterus. Such urinary infections are so long-lasting and foul-smelling that a woman may take her own life. Many women with continuing pain and disability become mentally ill. A recent additional horror is the spread of AIDS from one girl to another because of infected instruments used during the circumcision operation.

Women's groups in Africa are now working to stop female circumcision so that women can lead normal lives free of pain and gynecological problems. To make headway, they have to change age-old attitudes that put tradition before the health of women. To understand how those involved feel about female circumcision, 300 women in Sierra Leone were questioned in 1985. The research showed that attitudes varied with education and with religious affiliation. **Most of those favouring female circumcision were uneducated or had only a primary education.** Those with secondary education also still favoured continuation, but by a smaller margin. **A vast majority of respondents with college or university education (79%) favoured stopping the practice.** Religious affiliation was likewise important: most Protestants favoured stopping the operation, while most Catholics and a large majority of Muslim wanted it continued.

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