



# WOMEN'S FIGHTBACK

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**Z**OHREH and Azar Kabiri are sisters and mothers. They were arrested on 5 February, 2007 following allegations of adultery by Zohreh's husband. A month later they were prosecuted and sentenced to 99 lashes. After the sentence was executed, both were returned to prison for unknown reasons; and six months later they were tried again for the same crime but this time sentenced to death by stoning.

At the first trial, which was conducted without a defence lawyer, the judge interrogated Zohreh and Azar and unlawfully obtained a highly dubious confession. The women say that the questions were manipulative and ambiguous and that they had no idea what the consequences of their responses would be.

Zohreh's husband accused her of inviting men into their home and, along with her sister, having (in the court's words) "improper relations". A video tape he sent to the police as evidence apparently showed nothing of the sort, yet on his say so and despite the lack of any "complaint" from Azar's husband, the two women were arrested and tried.

Zohreh explains the circumstances behind her arrest, showing how easy it is for many women in Iran to become victims of barbaric laws, at the mercy of their male relatives and husbands. "I have been a student for many years and I have earned my bachelor's degree in history. I was even teaching classes and I enjoyed my job. However, after a while, my husband decided that I should not work, and my insistence to continue my career led nowhere. My husband's actions damaged our relationship. He was always suspicious of me; in his mind, the reason for our problems was that I was having relations with someone else, even though the problems between me and my husband were based in his mistreatment of me."

The women now have a lawyer who is able and willing to properly represent them. It is to be hoped that this and international pressure will stop this barbaric state murder.

Women Living Under Muslim Laws and the Global Campaign to Stop Killing and Stoning Women have launched a campaign to stop the executions, supported by Women Against Fundamentalisms in Britain. They are urging activists to contact Iranian officials, and Iranian embassies, with messages of protest — and to spread this information as widely as possible.

For more information and a model letter of protest, see

- Women Living Under Muslim Laws [www.wluml.org](http://www.wluml.org)
- Stop Stoning: [www.stop-stoning.org](http://www.stop-stoning.org)

# Stop stoning women to death!

*A stoning in Iran*

# Against the Swedish model

BY LAURA SCHWARTZ

THE government is calling for new legislation based on that implemented in Sweden in 1999, which criminalises the men who buy sex rather than the women who sell it. The government has also introduced a Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill which further criminalises prostitution and requires that street workers be subject to forced "rehabilitation" or face imprisonment.

At the moment, the buying and selling of sex is not illegal in the UK, only certain forms in which it is carried out, such as street soliciting and brothel keeping. The Swedish Model would change this, outlawing the buying of sex under any conditions.

The International Union of Sex Workers, the English Collective of Prostitutes, the Safety First Coalition (set up in 2006 after the Ipswich murders) and the International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe all oppose the Swedish Model. They claim that women working with clients who are worried about arrest will have less time to carry out basic safety precautions. Street workers will be deterred from working in more public and better lit areas and will have less time to assess the client beforehand.

Those working indoors will find it harder to work from rented premises and will be put off working with other girls for fear of attracting too much attention. The laws effectively make the sex workers responsible for protecting their clients from arrest, or otherwise risk losing custom and their means of survival.

Anti-trafficking organisations such as the Poppy Project and many leading feminist campaigners against violence against women also support the

proposals for this new legislation. Yet, in Sweden those worst affected by the Swedish model have been illegal migrant workers in the Swedish sex industry. Those without papers are unable to access government initiatives to provide women with an alternative to the, now illegal, job of prostitution.

With no choice but to keep working in an illegal industry they have no recourse to the law should they be subject to violence and, under the pressures of criminalisation, they are increasingly hidden away and isolated from other sex workers with whom they might act collectively to improve their conditions.

"Trafficking" is a term that is rarely defined in any precise manner. But it conjures up images of women kidnapped, forcibly transported to another country where they are imprisoned and forced to have sex with men.

All prostitution has increasingly come to be equated with trafficking, while all trafficking and migration within the sex industry is viewed as a synonym for slavery and sexual abuse.

The government's statistics on trafficking have been criticised for lumping together all illegal migrants working in the sex industry, whether they came to the UK of their own volition, paid someone to bring them here, or were kidnapped off the street, held hostage and forced into slavery. Sex worker rights organisation have also criticised the fact that even when such women have been "rescued" in police raids their most likely fate is deportation. Creating panic about "trafficked women" thus provides a moral justification for the government's draconian immigration policies, and a useful guise under which to step up the policing of migrant workers.

The IUSW and the ECP argue that the government should seek to prevent slavery, sexual abuse

and rape, but it is counter-productive to associate these issues especially with the sex industry, and that further criminalisation of prostitution will not solve these problems and might make them worse. Moreover, the trafficking debate centres on the idea all sex workers as victims — consenting sex work is "violence against women".

## Briefing: sex trafficking

TRAFFICKING, in contrast to "voluntary" migration, is defined as non-consensual migration geared towards exploitation of migrants' labour whether in sex or other industries. NGOs' and states' interventions on this issue have taken place along two lines: establishing protective schemes for victims of trafficking and the tightening of borders and visa regimes.

Victim protection schemes offer temporary residence permits to migrants. On the other hand because women are labelled as "victim", they downplay women's struggle to transform their lives. Victim protection schemes also lead to anti-prostitution laws.

More restrictive immigration regulations aimed at preventing trafficking do not protect women from abuse but, on the contrary, increase migrant women's vulnerability to violence during their travel. They increase the level of control third parties have over migrants, during the journey and upon arrival. Current migration controls help to produce "irregular" migration, channel women into trafficking and consequently into prostitution.

## Policies

The Victim of Trafficking Directive — intro-

duces a residence permit for victims of trafficking. Yet, contrary to what it might seem, the Directive's primary aim is not victims' protection but the prosecution of traffickers. Residence permits are only issued to those victims of trafficking who cooperate with the police.

• [europa.eu/scadplus/leg/en/lvb/l33187.htm](http://europa.eu/scadplus/leg/en/lvb/l33187.htm)

**The Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings** — a treaty focusing on the protection of victims and also covering the prosecution of traffickers, preventive measures and establishment of independent monitoring mechanisms. EU countries are slow to ratify the Convention, due to the perception that it undermines immigration policies, due to its emphasis on protecting victims. • [www.coe.int/t/DG2/TRAFFICKING/campaign/default\\_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/DG2/TRAFFICKING/campaign/default_en.asp)

## Ongoing Struggles

**Los Angeles:** In Los Angeles, the Garment Worker Centre (GWC) is organising migrant workers to fight exploitation and unsafe working conditions. The majority of workers are women and the GWC focuses on developing them as organisers with training and offers political education. Workers fight against sexual harassment in the home and workplace. GWC are also organising Chinese and Latino workers together across racial divisions that exist in the factories.

• [www.garmentworkercenter.org](http://www.garmentworkercenter.org)

**Holland:** The campaign "Cleaners for a better future" aims to improve the working conditions of 150,000 cleaners in the Netherlands, of whom 80% are women. They are struggling for lasting changes in the industry, respect and the right to organise without repression, creating community alliances and taking the street to demand a better life. Workers are considering strike action and request international solidarity against Dutch multinational corporations like Fortis, ABN Amro and ING. • [www.beteretoeekomst.org/](http://www.beteretoeekomst.org/)

**The International Committee for the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe** brings sex workers and their allies together on an European and international level.

• [www.sexworkerurope.org](http://www.sexworkerurope.org)

## Great Britain

An increasing number of combative women in London, working with trade unions, self-organised migrant communities and Kalayaan — a charity that works with migrant domestic workers — continue to campaign against the government law. The legislation forces women into illegality, making them dependent on one employer to renew their visa and increasing the power of the employers who can take advantage of their irregular status. Kalayaan is creating a network of support among migrants and migrant domestic workers to share women's experience at work, to access public services and exit their status of invisibility.

• [kalayaan.org.uk/](http://kalayaan.org.uk/)

**NextGENERation** is a transnational European network of students, researchers and activists with an interest in feminist theory and politics, and their intersections with anti-racist, migrant, lesbian, queer and anti-capitalist struggles. • [nextgeneration.net/](http://nextgeneration.net/)

**The Agencia Precaria** (Agency of Precarious Affairs) is a space of self-organisation of precarious women, born from "precarias a la deriva", an initiative of militant investigation. We are now, among other things, working hand in hands with a group of migrant women who earn their living as domestic workers, in order to include domestic work in the statute of workers and to fight all the forms of exploitation, racism and violence which are to be found inside the homes. We also establish connections between migrant women and other women working as care workers, whether paid or not.

• [www.sindominio.net/karakola/precarias.htm](http://www.sindominio.net/karakola/precarias.htm)

**The International Union of Sex Workers** is a branch of the GMB, one of the UK's biggest trade unions. The IUSW campaign for sex workers' rights at a local, national and international level — to decrease stigma and violence against sex workers, improve working conditions and create a clear and fair sex industry.

• [www.iusw.org/](http://www.iusw.org/)

## ACTIONS

# Campaigns and activism

## Southall Black Sisters face closure

SOUTHALL Black Sisters, for many years the only militant women's organisation fighting for ethnic minority women is facing the threat of closure as a result of Ealing Council's decision to withdraw vital funding in April 2008.

The money from the council has helped the group provide advice, advocacy, counselling and support services to black and minority women in the borough who experience violence and abuse.

The council say there is no need for specialist services for black and minority women, and that services to abused women in the borough need to be streamlined. When the group point out that it is more difficult, if not impossible, for black and minority women to access outside help or seek information about their rights, the council has not been persuaded. The council want the group to either extend the service to cover the needs of all women in the borough, or set up a consortium of groups to provide such a service for the same sum of money.

While the group have never denied services to any woman who contacts them, they feel that a focus on the needs of black and minority women is vital and indeed life-saving.

The suicide rates of Asian women for example, are three times the national average and homicides — where abusive men and families kill their wives, daughters or daughters-in-law — are also high within some black and minority communities.

Moreover campaigns in such critical areas of work as forced marriage, honour killings, suicides and self harm, religious fundamentalism and immigration difficulties, especially the

'no recourse to public funds' issue, will have to be drastically cut back.

• If you think you can help contact southall-blackisters@btconnect.com

## Iranian women's magazine shutdown

Last week, Iranian authorities shut down Zanan, the country's premier women's magazine. President Ahmadinejad said that Zanan showed Iranian women in a "black light" and was a threat to the psychological well being of Iranian society.

Please join Human Rights First in calling on the the Iranian judiciary to reverse the closure order:

• [action.humanrightsfirst.org/campaign/Zanan?rk=1dsPVzFIZG7nW](http://action.humanrightsfirst.org/campaign/Zanan?rk=1dsPVzFIZG7nW)

## Iraqi LGBT benefit

Middle Eastern Dance Night extravaganza! Thursday 28th February, 9 pm — 2 am, The Golden Lion Britannia Street, London, WC1X 9JE. £5

This evening is a benefit set up on behalf of IRAQI LGBT by Camden LGBT Forum to help fund safe houses for LGBT people who have become victims of hate crime in Iraq. Come and hear the founder of IRAQI LGBT, Ali Hilli, explain what is happening and then dance to DJs Rockit, Nikki Lucas (and Ali Hilli) or boggle at the amazing belly dance of Snake Boy!

• [www.camdenlgbtforum.org.uk](http://www.camdenlgbtforum.org.uk)  
• [iraqilgbtuk.blogspot.com/](http://iraqilgbtuk.blogspot.com/)

## X-talk update

X-Talk, the sex-worker run project which offers free English classes to migrant sex workers, is about to start teaching its second set of course. Supported by the International Union of Sex Workers, the *Feminist Review*, Feminist Fightback and NUS Women's Campaign (at the instigation of Feminist Fightback activists!), X-Talk ran a pilot course last May, attracting students who wanted English skills in order to be better able to protect themselves and demand their rights at work. As a result of this initial success, X-Talk have now secured more funding and are able to offer beginner and intermediate classes and a male class — all taught by sex workers, in a safe and non-judgemental environment.

Since we are the only people offering this kind of service to sex workers we want to get the word out as much as possible, and have been dropping leaflets in brothels and advertising in a variety of foreign language and migrant community newspapers.

Unfortunately, one of these publications, Thai Smile, has just returned our advertisement — they will not advertise for "women who want sex". Given that a significant proportion of sex workers in London are Thai — including a number of those who came to the last X-Talk classes — it appears that the self-appointed community leaders at Thai Smile deliberately want to ignore and cover-up this important issue. This little incident is a useful indication of a broader culture in which the taboo around sex work means that, despite lip-service paid to the need to help trafficked women, obstacles are still being placed in the way of serious projects to empower sex workers.

By a X-Talk teaching assistant.

# Our Women's Day

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the relatively-young capitalist system had thrown millions of women into factories, domestic service and other work. "Women's work" — such as textiles — was often in the most appalling sweatshops, with low pay, terrible safety standards, and long hours. Women workers, both unionised and ununionised, organised industrial disputes to win better conditions.

Although women had become part of public life as workers, they still did not have the vote.

Women's suffrage movements grew across the world. It was from this storm of protest and action that International Women's Day was born.

**1907** On March 8th, women demonstrated in New York, demanding votes for women and an end to child labour and sweatshops. It was the 50th anniversary of a major protest by women working in clothing and textiles, protesting against poor working conditions and low wages. They set up their first trade union in the same month two years later.

**1908** On the same day a year later, 15,000 women marched through New York demanding shorter hours, better pay, union rights and the vote. Most were garment workers, sick of the conditions in the needle trade factories. The employers made the women pay for their needles, thread and even chairs!

**1909** Women shirtwaist makers staged a 13-week strike in 1909, known as the "Rising of the 20,000". They won better conditions, and gave confidence to American workers for generations.

The Socialist Party of America declared 28th February 1909 the first National Woman's Day (NWD), and socialist women held marches and meetings across the country to demand political rights for working women.

**1910** Clara Zetkin proposed to the International Congress of Socialist Women that "women the world over set aside a particular day each year to remember women and their struggles." Over 100 women from 17 countries unanimously agreed, deciding that on this day, socialists should hold big events demanding improvements for working women.

**1911** International Women's Day (IWD) was held on 19 March, with more than a million women and men attending IWD rallies in Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland, demanding women's rights to work, vote, and to hold office.

Russian revolutionary and feminist, Alexandra Kollontai, was in Germany at the time, and helped to organise the day. She wrote that it: "...was one seething trembling sea of women... halls were packed so full they had to ask (male) workers to give up their places for the women ... Men stayed home with their children for a change and their wives, the captive housewives, went to meetings."

**25 March 1911 — The Triangle Fire** Less than a week after that first International Women's Day, over 140 workers died in the Triangle Fire in New York. Mostly young Jewish and Italian immigrant women, they burned to death when the Triangle Shirtwaist Company factory where they worked caught fire. They died because working conditions were terrible and safety measures lacking, because capitalists pocketed the profit they made from women's labour rather than spending it on civilised working conditions. Subsequent IWDs demanded workers' legal rights and improved safety standards to avert further disasters.

**1913-1914** As war loomed, Russian women observed their first International Women's Day on the last Sunday in February 1913. Women across Europe held peace rallies on 8 March 1913 and again in 1914.

**1917** On February 23 (March 8 by our calendar), Russian women began a strike for "bread and peace", until four days later the Tsar was forced to abdicate. The Provisional Government granted votes to women. After workers were locked out of an armaments plant on March 7, the women of Petrograd took part in food riots, political strikes and demonstrations.

In the West, International Women's Day continued during the 1910s and 1920s, but then died away, only reviving with the new wave of feminism in the 1960s. The first Australian IWD rally took place in the Sydney Domain on March 25, 1928. It was organised by the Militant Women's Movement and called for equal pay for equal



*Ladies Waist and Dressmakers Union commemorates the Triangle fire deaths*

work; an 8-hour day for shop girls; no piece work; the basic wage for the unemployed; and annual holidays on full pay.

**1960** was the 50th anniversary of International Women's Day, and 729 delegates from 73 countries met in a conference in Copenhagen. It agreed a declaration of support for the political, economic and social rights of women.

**1971** As feminism grew in the early 1970s, IWD saw a demonstration of 5,000 women in London demanding childcare, equal opportunities and easier access to safe abortion.

**1982** Women in Iran discarded their veils on IWD, protesting against the rise of clerical rule after the overthrow of the Shah.

## IWD loses its roots

In 1977 the United Nations passed Resolution 32/142 inviting each country to proclaim any day of the year as United Nations Day for Women's Rights and International Peace. It has steered IWD away from its radical past, co-opting it into the political mainstream.

Even corporations now sponsor International Women's Day, although there's no evidence that they do so by increasing the wages of their lowest-paid women workers! They prefer celebrations such as the "corporate citizenship events".

There is now a vast array of non-political IWD events promoting women's health, leisure and achievement. Although these may have given International Women's Day a profile, and some may be quite enjoyable, they have taken focus away from working-class women's grievances.

They are a world away from the protests that began the Day.

## Back To The Future

Millions of women still work in sweatshops and other jobs with low pay and poor conditions — as well as unpaid in the home. The majority of the world's 1.3 billion absolute poor are women; three-quarters of the world's 960 million illiterates are women. On average, women workers are paid between 30 and 40% less than men.

The rise of religious fundamentalism has seen women lose freedoms and rights, from the USA to the Middle East, and there is not a country in the world where women have full equality with men.

IWD is now more likely to be marked by an aromatherapy open day than by a march for women's rights. We should return to the original purpose of the Day: to mobilise support for working-class women's demands, and to celebrate the contribution that women make to the struggle for human liberation.

The 2005 Congress of the Trades Union Congress passed a resolution calling for IWD to be designated a public holiday in the United Kingdom. In 2006, RMT successfully proposed to TUC Women's Conference not just a holiday but a demonstration for women's rights every year on or around 8th March. In future years, we hope to see thousands march through a major city demanding equality on March 8th each year.

## Sofie Buckland for NUS Women's Officer!

It's time to challenge Labour Students for control of the NUS women's campaign. For Sofie's manifesto, supporters' list and more on the campaign, see the ENS Women website — [socialistfeminist.org.uk](http://socialistfeminist.org.uk).

Since the takeover of the NUS Women's Campaign by Labour Students four years ago, the potential for student women's organising to lead an active, political regeneration of the women's movement has been squandered.

The campaign has the potential to reach out to thousands, as well as having plentiful resources (staff support, a budget and a fully-paid officer) with which to build actions. However, the Labour women's officers have been content to put the NUS Women's Campaign logo on a few initiatives by others, and do precious little themselves.

The priorities of the campaign have looked good on paper — women at work, childcare and abortion rights — but in practice these have led to little other than meetings with NGOs or TUC bureaucrats, and motions calling on the government to do something. The campaign committee actively voted against direct action on abortion rights, with Women's Officer Kat Stark claiming the time "isn't right" as a justification for her casting vote.

ENS Women have consistently opposed this inaction, and the political lethargy of the campaign, leading the way with events like Feminist Fightback and the torchlit march for abortion rights when our student leaders have refused to organise. With elections coming up, it's time to challenge Labour Students for control of the campaign — ENS Women member and NUS Executive Officer Sofie Buckland is standing for National Women's Officer as a socialist feminist candidate.

### ENS Women stand for:

- A serious campaign to rebuild campaigning, political women's groups on every campus
- Organising a national demo for women's liberation with trade union women's sections.
- Active campaigns, including direct action, on abortion rights and a living, equal wage
- International solidarity — with grassroots women's, workers' and student movements, not with NGOs and 'progressive' governments
- A Women's Campaign that fights the Blairite leadership of NUS, and stands with workers and students fighting the Brown government.

If you want to see a Women's Campaign that does all these things, whilst reinvigorating debate and democracy within the women's movement, support Sofie! Get involved — [volunga@gmail.com](mailto:volunga@gmail.com) or 07815 490 837

# What is Women's Fightback?

Women's Fightback is a new paper produced by women in the Alliance for Workers' Liberty. We hope it stimulates debate, but whether you agree or disagree please get in touch, and contribute articles, reviews and letters to this paper. Here is a brief explanation of who we are and what we stand for.

## WHO WE ARE

We need to revive the women's movement in the UK, Europe and world wide. That movement needs to be able to inspire the many young people who want to fight sexism, but who may not call themselves "feminist".

What kind of feminists are we? We stand for socialist feminism. We believe women's oppression is part of class society in general and capitalism in particular. It is an integral part of the system of profit and exploitation. We need to replace capitalism with something better — a classless, socialist society.

But the fight against women's oppression is

not something to be put off until the socialist future.

We believe that there can be no revitalised working-class movement without women organising and asserting their rights. We also believe there can be no effective women's movement without connections into and leverage in the labour movement.

There have many inspiring examples of working-class women organising to change conditions for themselves, to change the shape of the labour movement and to change the world — from the German socialist women's movement of the 19th century and the working class women's suffrage movement led by Sylvia Pankhurst, to Women Against Pit Closures, the Gate Gourmet workers and the Organisation for Women's Freedom in Iraq.

## WHAT WE STAND FOR

- Tax the rich! Rebuild the welfare state — cuts, closures and privatisations often affect women most acutely.
- Against sexism in the labour movement — the

demands of women workers should be central to trade union struggles.

- For free, good quality childcare.
- For legal safe abortion on request. Against any winding back of abortion rights.
- Against religious fundamentalisms. No repression and persecution of women in the name of religion!
- For free movement of workers and refugees world wide — no borders!
- For sexual freedom and liberation for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.
- Against sexism in our schools, colleges and workplaces.
- Against all forms of violence against women: sexual harassment, rape, domestic violence. Increase public funds to provide adequate support services for women.
- For solidarity with women workers world wide; against sweatshop labour.
- Against sexist images, against censorship.

Women's Fightback, PO Box 823, London, SE15 4NA



# Simone de Beauvoir

## ★ SOCIALIST FEMINISTS ★

BY BELINDA WEAVER

“One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the female figure plays in society; it is civilisation as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.”

So begins Book 2 of Simone de Beauvoir's famous treatise on women, *The Second Sex*. The book was to cause a storm of indignation, and controversy. It was denounced as obscene and pornographic by Catholics and right wingers.

Yet women read it, and some claimed it saved their lives. It was an important book for the emerging women's liberation movement of the 1960s. It is still widely read today, and regarded as a “classic”.

Simone de Beauvoir, who born one hundred years ago this year, was born into a respectable Parisian middle class family. She studied philosophy at the Sorbonne, where she was placed second to Jean Paul Sartre in their final exam.

Her lifelong friendship with the philosopher, described by de Beauvoir as the “one undoubted success in my life” began then; so did her revolt against her confining middle class origins. She was not to live the conventional life. She did not marry or have children, she worked as a teacher in Rouen, and later Paris. She wrote philosophy, novels: autobiography and a play.

As an established writer, de Beauvoir as largely treated as an equal by the men of her circle, Sartre, Giacometti, and others. However, she scorned any idea of having “honorary male” status. She saw such a thing as a betrayal of women.

De Beauvoir did not intend *The Second Sex* to be a demand for rights, but rather an attempt to examine, clarify and understand women's condition. She had no illusions that the book would fundamentally alter this condition: “...it depends on the future of labour in the world; it will change significantly only at the price of a revolution in production.”

De Beauvoir began the book to express certain of her own feelings about being a woman. To do so, she realised she would have to write of women in general to understand the myths concerning women existing in society, in religions, literature, superstitions and ideologies, to understand what lay behind those myths, and what realities they served to mask.

Her concept of the book began to widen to take in physiology, history, sociology, psychology and psychoanalysis.

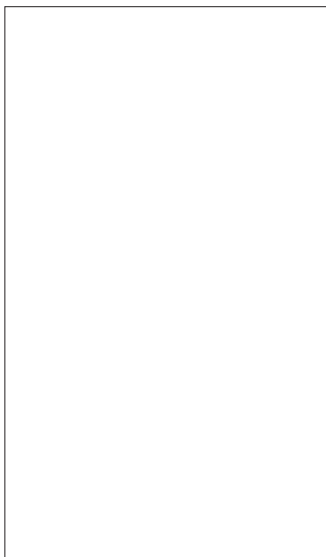
The book does not claim that there are no differences between men and women, but rather that the differences that exist are of a cultural rather than a natural order. The book tried to show how these differences are constructed by society, by studying women's development from babyhood to old age.

*The Second Sex* was the book that brought de Beauvoir the greatest satisfaction. She thought it possible it could be improved, cut down, refined. “But at the time I was discovering my ideas as I was explaining them, and that was the best I could do. As for the content, I should take a more materialist [i.e. Marxist] position in the first volume.”

Published in 1949, *The Second Sex* has been translated into many languages, and has become essential reading for men and women in the socialist and women's liberation movements. It was originally published in two volumes.

Part 1, “Facts and Myths”, was very favourably received, selling 22,000 copies in the first week. The second part, “Women's life today” caused a public outcry.

The writer Albert Camus accused de



Simone de Beauvoir

Beauvoir of making the French male look ridiculous, while other critics, rather than debate the issues raised by the book, preferred to slander de Beauvoir.

Men were angry, men felt sorry for her “humiliation” (of being female). She herself believed that they were appalled at her objectivity as much as her social and moral beliefs. They would have preferred a cry of rage, rather than a reasoned analysis.

To put her in her “place”, the whole range of sexual vocabulary was used to reduce her to her “true” function that of sexual object. Men said she was a frigid woman who had never been made love to properly.

De Beauvoir also explored the possibilities life offers or denies to women in her fictional works. *The Woman Destroyed* and the character of Paule in *The Mandarins* are acute, if painful, insights into the lives of women whose identity is defined solely by their relationship to the men in their lives. These fragile identities crack under the breakup of these relationships. In losing their men, they lose themselves. Her writing is sensitive without pulling any punches.

Her best known fictional work is undoubtedly *The Mandarins*. As an examination of post World War Two intellectuals, it created a stir as readers identified the characters in the novel with real life figures like Camus, Sartre and de Beauvoir herself. But the attempts by an educated intellectual elite to abandon their aloofness and to try to engage seriously in political activism are the core of the novel and form its chief interest.

De Beauvoir herself was ambivalent about activism. While she took strong public stands at times on particular issues, she was wary of parties, and believed that being an intellectual was enough.

*The Second Sex* did have an influence on the women's movement of the sixties. Other writers used her work as the basis to develop ideas further.

The book established the historical peculiarity of women's oppression compared to other types of oppression. Unlike the proletariat, women are not concentrated in groups. They do not experience the solidarity born of shared work and interests that workers can develop.

Since women are everywhere, they do not develop the community feeling which can develop in groups forced into ghettos, such as Jews or black people.

Women are also of different classes and races. Bourgeois women tend to identify with bourgeois men, rather than with working class women. Most white women would identify

first with white men, rather than black women.

Women's oppression has always (or almost always) existed. The oppression of the working class has not always existed, since the proletariat has only come into being since the Industrial Revolution and the establishment of bourgeois capitalist property relations. It is a fairly recent phenomenon, based on historical events.

Oppressed nations can remember the epoch before their subjugation; the working class has a powerful collective identity, organisations, traditions of struggle. “The oppressed retained at least a memory of former days; they possessed in common a past, a tradition, sometimes a religion and a culture” Not so for women.

Since de Beauvoir wrote, women have begun to unearth something of a feminist tradition and generate some feminist culture. Yet women's oppression still remains deeper, more obscure, more like an eternal fact of nature confronting individual women.

Can it be overthrown? “A world where men and women would be equal is easy to visualise, for that precisely is what the Soviet Revolution promised.” De Beauvoir rejected both the idea of passively waiting for the revolution, and the illusion of liberation without revolution. Her book aimed to help women in the psychological selfdefinition and self-liberation which would be necessary to give substance to the revolution.

De Beauvoir has been a controversial figure. *The Second Sex* made her famous, notorious even. Her friendship with Sartre and their involvement in left wing causes earned the hatred of the French bourgeoisie. Both were banned from state radio and television in 1960 for supporting soldiers who wanted to refuse to serve in Algeria, which was fighting for independence from France at the time.

De Beauvoir formed part of an international “tribunal” in the 60s condemning US involvement in Vietnam. With 340 other women, she signed a declaration attacking France's draconian anti-abortion laws. She was a leading figure in the French League of Women's Rights.

She visited China and wrote *The Long March* about her experiences; she criticised America in *America Day by Day*.

Her autobiographical works, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, *The Prime of Life*, *Force of Circumstance* and *All Said And Done* describe her life, her friendships, her politics.

Inevitably, de Beauvoir's memory will be inextricably linked with that of Sartre because of their long companionship, their shared philosophy of existentialism, and the novels which illuminate aspects of their relationship. Virtually all de Beauvoir's obituaries and tributes mention Sartre.

Yet writers on Sartre do not accord de Beauvoir equal prominence. She did have an identity separate to Sartre she was a novelist, philosopher, writer of autobiography, feminist, and *The Second Sex* is a more important work than any of Sartre's.

Yet like the women in her books she too is defined by her relation to a man. Perhaps this is an attempt by society to “feminise” de Beauvoir to say that underneath all the opinions, the feminism, the intellectual effort, she was just like other women after all.

De Beauvoir's philosophy was that man and woman make what they can out of their existences. Her aim in writing *The Second Sex* was partly to free women from the images and myths which oppressed and crushed them, to help make women aware that their difficulties were part of women's general condition, not a personal disgrace. She was gratified that psychoanalysts gave the book to women patients to read not just to middle class women, but to working class women as well.

While self-knowledge and understanding are not the key to finding happiness or fulfillment, they do free people to make choices, rather than have choices made for them by society's pressures.

## FEMINISTS, FIGHT BACK!

Feminist Fightback is an activist network that developed out of the two Feminist Fightback conferences — 2006 with over 200 in attendance and 2007 with over 300.

We're inspired by the politics of socialist feminism — the idea that women's liberation and the establishment of a democratic, classless society are necessarily interlinked — but we seek to involve socialists and feminists of different viewpoints in discussing ideas and building an activist movement. We aim to link feminists in the student movement with trade union women's activists.

We hold regular, open steering committees in London to decide activity, and our activists are also involved in socialist feminist discussion groups in a number of cities.

For more information about Feminist Fightback, or to get involved, visit [www.feministfightback.org.uk](http://www.feministfightback.org.uk) or email us at [volsunga@gmail.com](mailto:volsunga@gmail.com)

Upcoming Feminist Fightback events;

- Contingent on the 8 March International Women's Day “Million Women Rise March” alongside x-talk, the International Union of Sex Workers and others. Assemble Hyde Park, London, 12pm (Speaker's Corner End). Call Sofie on 07815 490 837 to get involved!

- Picket of Serco, the company that runs Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre where up to 405 women and children asylum-seekers are detained at any time, in appalling conditions. Join us at 4:30 pm on 8 March 2008 outside the Serco Research Institute at 22 Hand Court, London, WC1V 6JF

- Reproductive Rights Teach-in, 12 April, 12-5pm, Clement House Building, London School of Economics, London WC2A (Holborn tube). Including workshops on how to campaign, the law as it stands, history of abortion rights, abortion rights internationally and planning for a national day of action. Call Rebecca on 07971 719 797 or [rebecca.galbraith@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:rebecca.galbraith@yahoo.co.uk)

## London Socialist Feminist Reading Group

Monthly meetings to read and discuss history + ideas — all welcome.

Next meeting: The Family  
Friday 14 March, Lucas Arms, 245a Grays Inn Road, London WC1

More:  
[volsunga@gmail.com](mailto:volsunga@gmail.com) or  
phone 07815 490 837