

ELIZABETH WOODCRAFT

Extract 1: 15.14 – 22.15

DEALING WITH LESBIAN ISSUES AS A BARRISTER – GREENHAM WOMEN IN COURT

E: ... and I became a barrister and ... and of course, it ... it was a wonderful time to become a barrister because, when I ... qualified Thatcher had just got in and so, the world was waiting for human rights lawyers, as you might call them, to come in and change the world and we did, you know? There were two or three sets of chambers, there was Wellington Street Chambers which was my set, where I started with Tony Gifford, Lord Gifford, who was the head of Chambers, and then there was Garden Court Chambers er, which was another group of people. Helena Kennedy was in that, and there weren't very many radical sets. There were other people who had ... who were liberal or who, you know, wanted to do good works, but they were in other sets and so they couldn't sort of be as strong as we could be.

Erm ... and so we had ... and because we were known as the radical sets then the up and coming radical solicitors would instruct us, and so we would get these, you know, for me as a barrister, wonderful cases. So you ... so there was Greenham Common, there was, well, there was the miner's strike, there was all the anti-apartheid stuff, and then there was Clause 28. There was er, lesbian custody, um, as well as all the women's issues. I mean there was all the women's stuff of domestic violence, sex abuse of children and women, and we were ... those issues had not been dealt with by ... by the law. They hadn't properly been considered, er, and ... or at least people were saying "Oh this is outrageous" but actually no-one was doing anything about it, but we could come in as lawyers and we could ... well, I mean the Greenham Common cases were the most extraordinary cases.

The Greenham Common er, women's protest was about cruise missiles coming to Greenham Common in Berkshire, and a group of Welsh women began the demonstration in the early '80s by marching from Wales to the Greenham Common airbase, the American airbase, and setting up camp there, and they would, from time to time, break into the camp, and do various actions and they would be charged with ... or brought before the court for breach of the peace, and the ... the only sanction for that was being bound over to keep the peace and the women would say "No, we don't want to be bound over. We *are* keeping the peace." I mean sometimes people played with that a bit and said "Well, you can bind me over if you like but I'm keeping the peace anyway, you know?"

But most of them said no, and they would all be carted off to prison, to Holloway prison, and erm, one time the ... I think there was some work being done, some building work or something at Holloway prison and there was all this scaffolding around it, and so some women from Greenham had been taken to Holloway prison and the ... some other women had come and scaled the scaffolding and had a demonstration on top of the prison. So they were all arrested, and so we had a hearing at Highbury and Islington Magistrates Court, at Highbury Corner, and ... and it was wonderful because we ... I mean, the argument was they weren't breaching the peace, because that's why they were brought to court 'cos that was, you know ...

Nobody knew what to do with these women. They were just so un ... uncontrollable, uncontainable, erm ... and in many ways, I think ... I think everyone would agree that we the lawyers were the ... the sort of the thin between anarchy ... in terms of the court, between the anarchy of these women and the sort of upholding the rule of law, and so we were ... we were quite powerful, because we had to ... well, we had to be professional, we had to follow the rules, you always did, because you couldn't break any rules because then you wouldn't be useful, you know? You had to be as professional as ... as the next barrister, but you would also be able to see how the women could do what they wanted. I mean, one time they all wanted to sing – we didn't know this actually, and the courts wanted to have the women brought in groups of three and four and they said “No, no, no, we've all got to be dealt with together. We've got to be, you know, all our cases have got to be heard together.” So Isabella Forshaw, another barrister and I went in and argued “They've all got to be heard together. It's all, you know, you can't have three and four, you've got to have twenty-five at once.” And so these women came in and as soon as they ... they were asked a question by either the magistrate or the magistrate's clerk, they sang a response in the terms of Gilbert and Sullivan. So (*singing*) “Yes, your worships” and that kind of thing. So this was the kind of thing that was going on and we were ... we were the thin ... I mean sometimes Issy and I spent quite a lot of the hearing under the desk, laughing ... laughing our heads off 'cos it was just so wild and crazy! And they, you know, they did wonderful things, you know?

Anyway, back to Holloway prison, the Holloway prison protest, and what we did in that case was we called, as evidence for the defence, we called a Greenham woman who'd been in ... in the prison at the time, and who had actually had a horrible journey from ... from the ... Newbury magistrates court to Holloway in one of those police vans. She'd been bashed around, and she'd hurt her head, and she'd had a bit of concussion or something and er ... and her cell mate who was just an ordinary prisoner had, been banging on the door to get her some medical attention and I think when they finally came they took the ordinary prisoner and put her in solitary confinement for having banged on the door. So she came, and she gave evidence! So we talked about prison conditions and prison reform, and what was required and ... as well as these women who'd been erm, demonstrating on top of the prison, and that was, you know, what a wonderful thing to do, you know? And I mean it was made possible by the fabulous women who were our clients. But to be part of that, and to be, able to do that work was wonderful.

Extract 2: 28.42 – 31.10

LESBIAN CUSTODY CASES

So the other thing that was going on was yes, that women were leaving their often violent but sometimes just careless and just boring and just ... people they'd fallen out of love with, leaving their husbands and going to live with women, and the big issue became, should those women be able to keep their children? So we had to do a lot of cases and they were heart-breaking. I mean because it really did, in those days it depended on just which judge you got, and if you got, one judge who was pleasant and thoughtful then you might win

your case, and if you didn't, you would find you'd got ... well the father, or even the step-father in one case that I did, would get the children. But one ... one time I was doing a case like that and the judge called the barristers in before the case started and said to me "I don't even know what lesbians do" and I thought "Yeah, well I'm not going to tell you."

But, you know, just terrible, terrible ... I mean and there is this apocryphal story, and I can't remember whether it was apocryphal when I heard it or whether somebody ... this really did happen to somebody that erm ... somebody asked, a woman was asked "Do you ... do you use appliances?" In the courtroom, and there was the judge and the barrister for the father asked my client, the mum "Do you use appliances?" And she said "Yes, we have a Hoover and a washing machine ..." I mean! Well, 'cos I had a case a bit like that where my client was asked, "Do you ... do you erm, shut the ... shut the door at night of the bedroom? Do you shut the door?" Well ... what are they asking? And she said "Ooh, no! The children can come in anytime they like". I mean she was a mother, she was there for her kids. She wasn't going to shut them out because she was having rabid sex with her girlfriend, which she probably wasn't. But it ... those are the kinds of questions that were being asked.

Extract 3: 50.46 – 53.09

RADICAL FEMINISTS AND SOCIALIST FEMINISTS

E: ... a socialist feminist is someone who really believes in the ideas of ... of Socialism and Marxism, I mean depending on who it is, I suppose, and brings their feminism in to work alongside that. Radical ... So, I suppose what Socialist feminism means is that you are engaging in other Socialist campaigns. So, for example that suited me down to the ground because ... anti-apartheid, the miner's strike, anything to do with trade unions, all of that - lovely! That's just my cup of tea and then working, abortion campaigns, campaigns against domestic violence. All of that, that was a lovely, you know, home for me to find myself in.

Radical feminists er, were much clearer about, I think, about where they wanted to work which was specifically with women, where they ... well of course there was radical feminism, revolutionary feminists, two separate groups, and revolutionary are even more radical than the radical feminists and I think, within radical feminism and, you know, I don't want this to be taken as gospel, because it may not be right ... There was the notion of a political lesbian, which wasn't that you were sleeping with women, but that you ... you didn't want to sleep with men.

I mean there was quite a big discussion about sex and erotica and pornography and all of that and whether ... whether any of us should be having any sex at all until we ... stopped men penetrating women. I ... I went to some debates where those meetings were being held, until we ... I think the ... the idea was until we stopped seeing sexual pleasure as being only possible through some form of penetration based on the penile method, I suppose, and because that would be ... would have arisen as a result of male intervention, then we had to stop thinking about sex like that, and sexual pleasure like that, so we had to start thinking

about it in other ways and we probably couldn't do that quite yet 'cos we were all imbued with the other stuff.