

Women's Day! International Women's Day! International Women's Day!

The herstory of contraceptives:

for Canadian University Press
by W. Groenen from the *Sheaf*
and Teresa LeGrand from the *Arthur*

Opium, oiled paper and melted beeswax at one time all had something in common — their function as contraceptives. Before the late 1550's, medieval women had hundreds of methods for both contraception and abortion, all nature and many highly effective.

Japanese women used oiled paper to keep flowing semen away from their receptive ovaries. In Hungary, discs of melted beeswax were fashioned into diaphragms, and Easter Island women put algae and seaweed to use as a barrier contraceptive.

In Sumatra, women molded opium into smaller, snug-fitting cervical caps. Still other methods included sponges soaked in natural spermicides and abortifacients.

The fight of the women's movement for access to abortion, more information on birth control and a better understanding of

the female body, is actually a fight to regain what women once had — unchallenged control in determining how many children a woman could realistically bring into the world.

Today's emotion packed anti-abortion movement, the authors say, had its historical beginnings in a massive medieval social movement that successfully wrested control over birthing from women and putting it in the hands of men.

And that process had more to do with patriarchal state interests than morality, according to current historical analysis. In the late 1440's, Pope Innocence VIII declared war not only on birth control, but on the women who were wise in its uses. Midwives became "witches." Their sin was to "hinder men from begetting and women from conceiving."

In 250 years, at least one million women were murdered as witches, including many lesbians who didn't perform their proper role for society. Birth control knowledge was successfully wiped out, and

doctors didn't regain an understanding of the process until the nineteenth century.

Heinson and Steiger in their book *The Elimination of Medieval Birth Control and the Witch Trials of Modern Times* the motives behind the birth control purge as a question of state interests. Peasant women raised enough children to support their families, feudal lords and clergymen. But as the larger states developed, they had increased labor needs — for armies, bureaucracy and workers. The plagues and famines during 1300 to 1500 saw European population drop to three million from six million. The state needed more people, and for the first time, it took a keen interest in gaining control over human reproduction.

A more blatant example of state and church collusion in opposing birth control and abortion took place in the late nineteenth century, just after the development of the French "safe" in 1853.

French couples were relieved to use this man-made birth control method, and



within ten years the birth rate dropped by 50 per cent. But the Napoleonic state wasn't as pleased as population growth was essential to France's expansionary ambitions.

As outlined in the Napoleonic Code, the woman's reproductive role was important. The Code said women should be married off young, educated by their husbands to respect their "masters," and be prevented from talking to other women. Husbands were instructed to remarry immediately if their wives died in childbirth, and both husband and wife were warned that it was immoral to grow too fond of their children. Parents had to be willing to relinquish children upon request to serve in the army or to be sent as breeding couples to the colonies.

With both contraception and abortion ruled out by French law, and enforced by male doctors, women turned as a last resort to infanticide to limit family size. And from this sad development, the Church was led to create orphanages, collecting unwanted babies on their doorstep.

Wendell Waters writes in *Compulsory Parenthood* how political, patriarchal

Women loving women Points of

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Lesbianism is a taboo subject, distorted by misconceptions, stereotypes, and hatred. The fears arising from these distortions have prevented women from expressing their love for each other, or even admitting it to themselves. The taboo and myths must be challenged in order to understand lesbianism as a choice made by a woman to love women.

Like most stereotypes, those concerning women conceal and limit more than they reveal. Negative stereotypes are used to identify lesbians thus making it easy to scapegoat them and refuse to see them in everyday life or even in oneself. It would be more realistic to recognize that, just like "real" people, there is an enormous diversity in lifestyles, personalities, and relationships among women who love women.

Hatred and denial surround this subject; people do not actually think about it, they simply react. Justifications that have been given for the oppression of lesbianism ring hollow. "It's not normal" is a common one - ludicrous to anyone who has studied the diversity of relations found in nature.

"Sex is intended for reproduction" is yet another questionable dogmatism considering the number of people who use contraception or continue their sexual lives after menopause. "Women have no sexuality" is a leftover of the Victorian era and still finds expression in the view that women are allowed to be sexual exclusively in relation to men.

Watchout for Wen-Do

By Manuela Dias
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What would you do if . . .

You were grabbed from behind while walking to the bus stop after a late class? If you were in a room at a party using the phone and a strange man walked in and locked the door? If, if, if — it could never happen to you, right?

Wrong!

Every eight minutes a woman is assaulted in Canada. The chances of being attacked are high — one in 17 women are raped — and are increasing. Attacks happen in broad daylight and at night; they happen to elderly women and to infants; outdoors and in the home.

There is no "usual" attack situation, and there is no sure-fire method of protection.

Bette, a Winnipeg woman, was helping clean up after a dance. As she worked, she realized the room was deserted except for three rather drunk men and herself. Feeling uncomfortable, Bette asked them to leave, but they found her request amusing and walked towards her. She looked around for help, but there was none. Then two of the men held her arms, the third approaching her from the front.

Many women choose to ignore the reality of the danger around them, and how little protection they have. Most women say they would fight back if assaulted but

are not sure if they could do so effectively.

But now a highly effective method of women's self-defense is gaining in popularity — Wen-Do, or, literally, a "woman's way."

"There is a tremendous myth that women can't defend themselves," says Wen-Do instructor Marilyn Walsh, in Toronto. "We need to counter that myth."

Rather than depending on "anti-rape" devices, such as mace or small knives, which can be used by the attacker, or waiting helplessly for an escort to allow women to walk outside at night, Wen-Do develops the woman's ability to ward off an attack by herself, using her body.

Bette is trained in Wen-Do. Her fear of the three men turned to terror, but instead of being overwhelmed and immobilized, she used her adrenalin to increase her strength. Quickly, she wrested one arm free through a wrist release, and swung around to kick her second captor in the groin. In a few seconds, the three men were out the door.

Bette was shaken but reassured by her ability to fight back. She had always had that power, she realized, but now she was confident enough to use it.

Wen-Do is a woman's way. The techniques assume the attacker will be bigger and stronger than the woman, and they can be used by any woman regardless of her strength or degree of physical fitness.

A typical 16-hour Wen-Do course teaches hard and soft techniques, adapted and refined from the martial arts. Half the

time is spent in discussions, building and understanding of how assault situations develop, plus the psychological preparedness to take appropriate action against an attacker.

Being aware of potential danger does not mean avoiding all possible dangerous situations, nor does it mean walking around in combat boots 24 hours a day. But women should be aware of the limitations of high heel shoes, the course teaches.

Wen-Do teaches women to be assertive. Women learn appropriate responses to varying degrees of dangers, as well as useful techniques in daily situations, such as discouraging an over-affectionate dancing partner.

"In Wen-Do, we encourage women to respond actively when they are aggressed," says Montreal instructor Lisa Jonas. "Women have been socialized to believe they shouldn't make a scene and blame themselves when something happens. For example, men will touch women on the metro and feel secure in their belief that the women will stay quiet because of embarrassment."

Jonas told the story of an acquaintance who while on the metro grabbed a male hand pressing against her buttock, raised it and yelled "who's the pig at the end of this hand?"

"Everyone looked immediately and the guy fled. This is an example of Wen-Do in action," Jonas said.

At the end of the course, the women break an inch-thick wooden board, an exhilarating and empowering experience. They have now become proficient enough at kicks and punches to permanently maim or kill a man if necessary.

Women must overcome a lot of psychological barriers before they can see themselves as hurting someone, Walsh says, and men are also threatened by the concept of women having this power.

"When we women start taking care of ourselves, that's a definite challenge to society," Walsh says.

But if women are in a life or death situation, they need this power.

Just as Wen-Do breaks down the myth of the helpless woman, it demystifies the typical rapist as a stranger lurking in the dark. In one half of all rapes the victim knows the rapist, and 45 per cent of all rapes occur either in the victim's or the attacker's home. Rapists are ordinary men. Better street lighting or staying indoors is no protection against a boyfriend, acquaintance or family member.

Wen-Do has changed women's lives by providing them with an alternative to helplessness. Bette could have allowed herself to be raped that night, but it wasn't her only option.

When men attack women, they assume they are easy targets. But maybe one day, instead of being in danger as a woman alone, it may be dangerous to attack a woman alone.

