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Gender and Women's Studies Newsletter for December 2005

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The Women's Studies Newsletter December 2005
Editor Bijitha Varghese



Inside this issue:

Director's column	p. 1
Calendar of Events	p. 2
Review of "Human Trafficking"	p. 4-5
PAGE information	p. 5
Editor's Column	

The Director's Column:

Pot luck December 8; Honor Society Jan. 25. A Circle of Women Feb 1

The WMS program invites interested students to help form a chapter of the WMS Honor Society, Iota Iota Iota. We will meet on Wednesday, January 25, 2006 at 3:30 in Roosevelt 311.

Known as Triota, the society is named for the goddesses Inanna, Ishtar and Isis. There are currently about 30 chapters nationally. Membership is open to students and alumnae/i with a 3.0 or above GPA and at least 6 credits of WMS courses. The mission of the society is "to encourage and support scholarship and excellence in women's studies."

We may become as active as we choose. Possibilities for activities include film viewings, service or action projects, book groups, potluck or pizza parties, trips to museums, theatres or other events, and whatever our members wish.

I welcome all of you who are interested to join us on January 25.

As the semester draws to a close please join the WMS Program for a celebratory end of semester potluck at the Women's Center from 4-7 on Thursday, December 8.

NEW PROGRAM: A Circle of Women Feb 1 at 4:00 in the Women's Center

The Women's Center and the WMS Program invite all interested students, faculty, and staff to join us for an informal conversation.

Students, I wish you all good luck on your papers and final exams. Please consider submitting your papers for the WMS Patricia Farnes Essay Prize. We'll keep them on file for the contest held in the spring.

Best wishes for the holiday season, the intersession and the New Year.

Karen Stein, wmsdir@etal.uri.edu

Please visit our webpage www.uri.edu/artsci/wms

Calendar:

December 8, 2005

What: WMS end of the semester pot luck
Who: The Women's Studies Department
When: 4-7:00 Where: The Women's Center

January 25, 2006

What: organizing meeting of the Women's Studies Honor Society, Triota
Who: The Women's Studies Department
When: 3:30 Where: Roosevelt 311

February 1, 2007

A Circle of Women, Women's Center 4:00 PM

February 9-11, 2006

What: URI's 4th Annual Vagina Monologues
How: Call 874-9293 for more information

Dana Shugar Colloquium Series –URI Women's Center

March 21, 2006 Colloquium

What: A Hymn for the Ladies: The Female Poet of the Homeric Hymn to Demeter
Who: Ann Suter When: 5-6:30
Where: The Women's Center

April 11, 2006 Colloquium

What: "Transracial Feminist Alliances: Connecting Through Difference"
Who: Julia Johnson, WMS Spring Colloquium
When: 5:00-6:30 Where: Women's Center

April 18, 2006 Colloquium

What: A Global Problem: Women and AIDS
Who: Kendall Moore When: 5-6:30
Where: Women's Center

All events are free and open to the public.

Review of "Human Trafficking" by Marissa Murphy

A. Summary

On Wednesday, November 2, I attended a showing of the film "Human Trafficking". Originally aired on the Lifetime Television network, the movie was hosted by URI's Violence Prevention and Advocacy Services.

Although the actual characters and individual stories were fictitious, the film accurately portrayed the worst abuses of the human sex trade. The film began by profiling the lives of several, seemingly unrelated women and how they

became involved in the sex trade. Helena, a single, working mother from Prague, is lured out of the country by her new boyfriend. Once in Vienna, he steals her passport and sells her to a brothel. Nadia, a sixteen year old Ukrainian schoolgirl, attends a modeling agency's recruitment session in a local town. When her father refuses to allow her to travel to America with the agency, she runs away. The "modeling agency" transports Nadia and other local girls to a nightclub in New Jersey. Here they are housed in the club's basement to be "housebroken", which entails being subjected to repeated violence and being raped by the brothel's guards. A third character, Annie is a thirteen-year-old American girl on vacation with her parents in the Philippines. While shopping in the marketplace, she is kidnapped and placed in a brothel with other local girls and boys. The brothel appears to be a motel and bar, but caters to foreign tourists who are interested in using the children as "entertainment".

Actress Mira Sorvino plays the role of an investigator for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security in New York City. Raised in Russia and plagued by memories of a sexually abusive childhood, "Kate" is convinced the recent headlining sex trade crimes are linked to a Russian businessman named Sergei. Determined to end his criminal activity, she begins an intensive investigation.

Helena, Nadia, Annie, and Kate cross paths during the film as they each prove to be a part of Sergei's human trafficking trade. The film is extremely graphic and violent, but nonetheless realistically portrays the women's struggles with rape, violence, poverty, and disease. For example, once Helena is brought to safety and the brothel is shut down, many of her peers refuse to help Kate with her investigation for fear of their lives and the safety of their families.

The movie also portrays how the human sex trade is a part of daily life for seemingly average, moral, American citizens. For example, doctors, lawyers, and businessmen routinely visit Sergei's brothels on lunch breaks and on vacation; wealthy men host parties where the women are "rented in bulk".

As Kate struggles to connect Sergei to the sex trade, she puts her life in danger several times to save the young women she encounters. It is through her interviews with the women that the most poignant moments in the film are revealed. When asked about her work in the brothels, Helena replies, "I don't even admit the details of my humiliation to myself." After being rescued from a brothel, another woman questions, "Do you think it's possible, once you lost your humanity, to ever find it again?"

Not wishing to spoil the film for the reader, I will not discuss its resolution. However, I will simply re-iterate the film's shocking accuracy and educational value; I highly recommend it.

B. Relevance to Women's Studies

The film greatly related to topics covered in class, such as the human sex trade and violence against women. By profiling various characters, it accurately portrayed the many ways in which women are lured and trapped into becoming prostitutes. It was enforced in class that many women do not willingly make the career choice; they are coerced and held prisoner of the system. It also highlighted the problem in Eastern Europe, an area so rampant with human trafficking that women are often labeled "Natashas" (Hughes 10).

The film illustrated how human trafficking is operative under criminal networks in countries where the economy is unstable. In fact, expert Donna Hughes writes, "In Ukraine...the only jobs available [are often] in the privatized criminal business (10). Women who were not involved in the sex trade were shown as impoverished, with few rights, little opportunity, and lack of power to stop the abuses around them. It addressed not only the issues of sex trafficking and violence against women, but the basic lack of women's rights around the world.

C. Personal Relevance

Until very recently, I never believed human trafficking would be an issue that affected me; I assumed prostitution was something that occurred in larger cities and urban areas. However, last week two massage parlors were shut down in Providence because the workers offered sex to an undercover officer. The news story also addressed the fact that the parlors were owned by wealthy businessmen and frequently rented out. However, despite the fact that the landlords most likely knew the type of activity that occurred in the parlors, under Rhode Island law they cannot be charged for facilitating human trafficking. This fact infuriated me; the already-wealthy businessmen were profiting from criminal activity but were free from the consequences of their actions. The news anchor also reported that Rhode Island has no laws against "indoor prostitution". I was not exactly sure what this term entailed. I was under the assumption that prostitution usually occurs indoors versus outside. However, the news anchor did report that the law made it more difficult to make arrests. I cannot comprehend why laws that enable human trafficking instead of aiming to end it would be on the books, especially after viewing the film.

PAGE People Advocating for Gender Equality

This semester has been great for PAGE. We have become a student-recognized organization through Student Senate and the SOARS committee. We have been very active with safe walks at abortion clinics. We are going to continue to speak in WMS classrooms throughout the rest of the semester. PAGE will be having two booths for the Global Gag Rule, one in November and another in December. We are also having a booth for Trans Remembrance Day in November. Next semester we will be having our reproductive rights talks as well as a reproductive rights panel. If anyone is interested in helping out with the panel, please contact me at IrishRose.Colleen@yahoo.com

Colleen Hayes - Costello

WMS announcement

Students who will enroll in WMS 300, the fieldwork experience, may start to think about projects that interest them. Possibilities include internships in service agencies such as the Domestic Violence Resource Center in Wakefield, Habitat for Humanity in Kingston or various service agencies in Providence. If you have a particular interest in a project, please e-mail Professor Stein wmsdir@etal.uri.edu

Editor's column by Bijitha Varghese

Perhaps the most hotly debated political issue at the moment is abortion. You cannot turn on a TV, or pick up a newspaper without hearing or reading something about the issue of abortion. Although I know where I stand on the issue of abortion, I realized that I knew very little about the history of abortion in the United States. This column is my attempt to educate myself about this issue.

Abortion is not a practice that finds its beginnings in the twentieth century in the West. It is a practice that has been around from the beginning, and has been proven to take place in every single culture to ever be studied. Obviously women in the past did not have clean, sterile hospital rooms with well-educated and trained doctors too much sure that they were safe during and after their abortion. The most common way to abort in ancient times was through the use of folklore potions, known as abortifacients. Some ingredients in abortifacients include majoram, the root of worm fern, mashed ants, foam from a camel's mouth, ammonia, opium and many more. Ancient women also used physical

methods, not just internal ones, to perform abortions; they would lift heavy objects, jump and exercise vigorously, or sit over a pot of steam.

In the United States, abortion was legal and accepted even by the Catholic and Protestant churches, prior to the early part of the 19th century until the fetus "quickened" (about 5 months into a pregnancy). It was not until the late 1800s that abortion began to become illegal in a variety of states. This caused a rise in back alley abortions because women no longer had legal access to this medical care. The push to make abortions illegal came mainly from the medical community. Male doctors sought to remove women from the health care field. Women participated in the health care field as midwives, homeopaths, and apothecaries. Doctors no longer wished to compete with these women for access to patients and their money, so there was a strong push by the American Medical Association to make abortion an ethical issue instead of a medical one. Abortions were illegal in all fifty states by 1965, except in cases where it would be necessary to save a mother's life, if the fetus was deformed, or if rape or incest had occurred. *Roe v. Wade*, one of the most famous court cases in American history, changed the face of abortion law. In 1973, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled in favor of Jane Roe, who overturning states' laws against abortion because they were unconstitutional. The Supreme Court decided that women have the right to decide whether they wish to have children or not, and that the state has no right to interfere in a decision made between a woman and her doctor. There was an extreme and lasting backlash to the Supreme Court's decision in *Roe v. Wade*. Just three years after the Supreme Court's decision, Congress passed a law, the Hyde Amendment, stating that funds from Medicaid, a federal program, could not be used to help pay for abortions for low income women. A year later, in 1977, a revised amendment was passed which allows for Medicaid funding to be given out for abortions in case of rape or incest, or severe danger to the mother's health. On Christmas day of 1984 an organization called Operation Rescue bombed three abortion clinics and claimed their actions as a birthday gift to Jesus. In 1988, a "gag rule" is passed making it illegal for doctors and clinics who receive federal funding to discuss or give out information about abortions. The "gag rule" was upheld as constitutional in a court case in 1991. In 1992, states were allowed to place restrictions on abortion rights as long as those restrictions do not cause "undo burden" on women who wished to have abortions. It took the murder of an abortion doctor, Dr. David Gunn, for the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances (FACE) Act to pass in Congress. The FACE Act stated that it is illegal to use force, the threat of force, or physical violence to prevent someone from seeking or providing reproductive services. In 2000, Congress passed, and President Bush signed, a ban against certain late-term abortion procedures (called "partial-birth"). Pro-choice groups succeed in blocking the enforcement of the ban through a challenge in court. The National Abortion Federation in 2004 was successful in its court case against the ban, and the Justice Department began to appeal the ruling. It is clear that the issue of abortion has a long and complicated history. It has never before in history been considered an ethical issue in the way it is today. Both Pro-choice and Pro-life individuals feel incredibly strongly about why they are right when it comes to the issue of abortion. This is not an issue that will be solved to everyone's liking, and it is not an issue that people will stop fight about, no matter what laws are passed.

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Questions, comments, or concerns?

Please contact the editor of the newsletter, Bijitha Varghese at
bvarghese@mail.uri.edu