

Press Release

11/12/97 Women's Studies Program Contact: Susan Lehrer (914) 257-2978

The 21st Women's Studies Conference held at the State University of New York at New Paltz November 1, was an educational event in which participants learned about a variety of topics and engaged in discussion and debate about the political and cultural context in which women make sexual choices in the 1990s. Recognizing that the idea of women as sexual actors has been threatening to some people, the Women's Studies Program, in a play on words, entitled our conference, "Revolting Behavior: The Challenges of Women's Sexual Freedom."

Keynote Panel

The keynote program of our conference addressed the topic through international, historical, and personal perspectives. All three panelists are respected in their fields - described the obstacles women have encountered as they have tried to live self determined sexual lives and examined feminist efforts to articulate the concept of sexual rights in the international arena.

Workshops

The 21 workshops were generated by a call for proposals that was sent out to area women's organizations, colleges and universities and were chosen by a program committee consisting of faculty, students and community members.

The workshop on s/m has attracted considerable attention from the press. The planning committee engaged in many hours of discussion about this workshop and finally decided that, since women are engaging in this practice, it was appropriate to offer an educational workshop in which the presenters were committed to safety and consensuality. A discussion took place immediately after the workshop which addressed the implications of s/m and included critical perspectives of the practice.

Our conference always attract a diverse audience, including students, faculty and community members, so we plan a program that combines academic presentations with workshops that address practical concerns. While some panels included academic papers on public policy, literature and the discourse of reform movements, others explained safer sex practice. Still others featured women discussing their own experiences, such as "Reproductive Rights and Sexual Freedom" and "Challenging Compulsory Heterosexuality from the 60s to the 90s" -- two workshops that looked at the effect of changing political and social conditions on women's consciousness. The session on marriage and sexuality in Africa, according to one woman who

attended, "Opened new horizons to me about different women's experiences." "Sex joys for women," another controversial workshop, also occasioned press attention. one participant described it as "a very sensitive subject treated respectfully and thoroughly."

The Academic Freedom Issue.

Educators recognize that open discussion, including discussion about sexuality, is essential in order for people to make informed choices about their lives. Educational institutions, SUNY/New Paltz, have an obligation to support this process, and we are proud that our conferences contribute to it.

We are pleased that our colleagues in the New Paltz chapter of the United University Professions, the Academic Senate and a meeting of the faculty and staff on November 12 have joined us in supporting Roger Bowen's principled stand in the defense of academic freedom.