

off our backs

a women's newsjournal

Roadwork Responds...

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Roadwork Responds...

An incident occurred at Sisterfire 1987 that involved some pushing and shoving between two black gay men and two white lesbian-separatist vendors. This incident was precipitated when the vendors denied these two men access to their booth. We regret that an exchange such as this occurred at Sisterfire, whose mission is to build bridges between oppressed groups. The purpose of this letter is to reiterate Roadwork's policy that Sisterfire is open to all women, men, and children who choose to attend. This policy was made clear to all marketplace vendors who were sent a copy of the Sisterfire Statement Of Purpose.

On Saturday afternoon of Sisterfire two black gay men, who are Sisterfire volunteers, were invited over to a booth by a woman-friend who wanted their advice about a sculpture she was considering purchasing. Upon entering the booth, the vendors informed the three that the woman could stay but that the men could not. Initially the men left. Then, they went back to explain to the women that in denying men access, this booth was operating against Sisterfire policy.

When the two men returned, the vendors tried to remove them from the booth, shouting sexually and racially abusive language. When the men refused to leave, the vendors called the Sisterfire security coordinator, who in turn called the marketplace coordinator. By the time they arrived, the confrontation had escalated further. The security coordinator put herself between the vendors and the men. The argument was heated and the vendors lunged at

the men. The security coordinator took a blow from one of the women which was intended for one of the men. One of the men reached out to defend against a punch and pushed one of the vendors. The vendors and some women in the area do not agree with this account, while others do.

Accounts of the exact sequence of events and dialogue varied considerably. Where Roadwork staff found clarity and consistency in the accounts, we made decisions based on our policies. Where there were inconsistencies, our decisions were based on what was fairest to all involved. Because of the discrepancies in the reports and because we were confident in our ability to keep the grounds secure and safe, no one involved in the incident was asked to leave.

In our conversations with the two vendors, they clearly stated that they were aware of the politics of Sisterfire and knew that the festival was open to women and men. They told us they had always stayed away from Sisterfire because they didn't agree with such politics. They said they came this year only because we accepted their application, on which they stated they show their work to women only. Subsequent review of their application revealed no mention of this fact.

We reiterated the Sisterfire policy that denying access to services on public grounds at an open event flies in the face of civil rights laws and festival philosophy. We informed them that their booth could remain open only if they agreed to allow men access. The



vendors agreed to abide by Sisterfire policy. Instead, on Sunday, they continued to deny access to men by constructing an "amazon guard" outside their booth.

The mindset of the craftswomen seemed to be that all men are the enemy. Since they verbally abuse all men, it absolves them of the racism involved when they hurl insults at black men. According to this kind of thinking, black men, when verbally abused by whites, in ways that directly relate to how they (and black women) have been controlled, oppressed, and annihilated, should act in ways that deny this history and hurt and further, should accept this abuse.

When the cruelest uses and

images of an oppressed group of people have to do with sexual objectification and their classification as less than human (remember that a black man was considered 3/5 a human being according to our Constitution), their use of language: "dick", "mutant", and "prick," was particularly hate-filled. Black men have been sexually objectified and accused of heinous crimes against white women as a central component of the racist mythology in this country. Black people, men and women, have given their lives to assure equal access in public places. Refusing access to black people at an open festival was reprehensible and will not be condoned at Sisterfire.

Sisterfire does not condone violence against women or people of color. We firmly believe that discrimination against men played a central role in initiating this incident and that racism played a role in escalating the exchange between the women and the men.

The most constructive use of our energy is to move forward with plans for Sisterfire '88. We will continue to promote the public nature and intent of Sisterfire. We will further clarify and screen marketplace vendor applications so that there will be no room for confusion concerning the goals of the festival.

We made the best decision we could, given the information that we had. We stand by our decisions, we are proud of our policies and plan to continue towards our goals. There are other festivals that create women-only space. We respect the unique contributions they make to furthering women's culture. We ask that the uniqueness of Sisterfire be similarly regarded.

"Sisterfire is a salutation to all women, working people, people of color and the poor who stand fast against dehumanizing political and economic systems. ...this is a women's festival near an urban area, making it more accessible to everyone who wishes to attend. We acknowledge the hard work all of us, women and men, have contributed to this festival. We are building bridges between the women's movement and other movements for progressive social change." Excerpts from the Sisterfire Statement Of Purpose

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CHERNOBYL: an everyday disaster

the women's movement and the political reasons for the current motherhood boom, which have less to do with Chernobyl than with the general trend toward conservatism in West Germany.

Yet it would be dangerous to underestimate the political impact of Chernobyl. It is obvious, I think, that Chernobyl has generated a lot of political energy among women not normally involved in politics, but it's frustrating to see that so much of this political energy and rage against men seems to be channelled not into the German women's movement but, in part, against it. The book presents a lot of evidence for how mothers have become active: they have vocalised their concern and anger on demonstrations and in speeches, and they have organised themselves in groups and initiatives such as Mutter gegen Atomkraft (Mothers against Nuclear Power), which provide them with a place to explore their fear and anger and use them in a politically constructive manner.

I am left wondering, however, whether women's politicization as mothers threatens to cut short their politicization as women, as feminists, because it is finally

easier and more acceptable for women to become political on behalf of their children, rather than on behalf of themselves. One way of dealing with the conflicting demands of children and political activism is, after all, to become political only in the name of motherhood, only for your child, never directly in the name of your own rights and needs as a woman.

by elisabeth daumer



(1) Tchernobyl hat unser Leben verandert: Vom Ausstieg der Frauen ed. Ingke Brodersen (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1986).

'Ausstieg' has no equivalent in English, but means a principled departure from or refusal to be involved any longer in something like a political party.

(2) The Trummerfrauen were women who cleared rubble from the streets at the end of the war, when much of Germany lay in ruins.

Note from Yugoslavia

"Here we were immediately informed about the Chernobyl catastrophe. The first instructions were related to pregnant women and small children, who were advised not to go outside, to keep windows closed, not to drink water, not to eat vegetables without washing them, etc. A neighbour of mine who was pregnant at the time took the problem optimistically; she said, "I believe in God," but she didn't go out.

Individual fears were soon turned into a wider alarm - what should women do about their pregnancies? There were fears of malformations.

The most distinguished gynecologist was trying to calm people down. He didn't consider radiation an argument in favor of abortion. A lot was said about the nuclear explosions in the 50s and 60s, and that they had had more serious effects than Chernobyl.

According to official reports, the numbers of abortions did not increase, but pregnant women were aware of the danger they were facing and the question of how to give birth without fear became highly relevant.

Some doctors said that the number of births in this year is 40% less than previous years. This shows that women tried to avoid becoming pregnant."

from the *Women's Global Network on Reproductive Rights* newsletter