

MYTH OR MYTHOGYNY?

by Tania Mace and Rachel Cooper

Why feminism needs a men's movement and why neither need Warren Farrell.

There's a joke that periodically does the rounds among women - "Men. Can't live with them, can't kill them." It's a silly one-liner but it says something about the problems we have with men. Feminists have done a lot of work over the last thirty or forty years looking at the way men's behaviour, both as individuals and in groups, impacts on women, but in general the majority of men don't seem to have changed that much themselves.

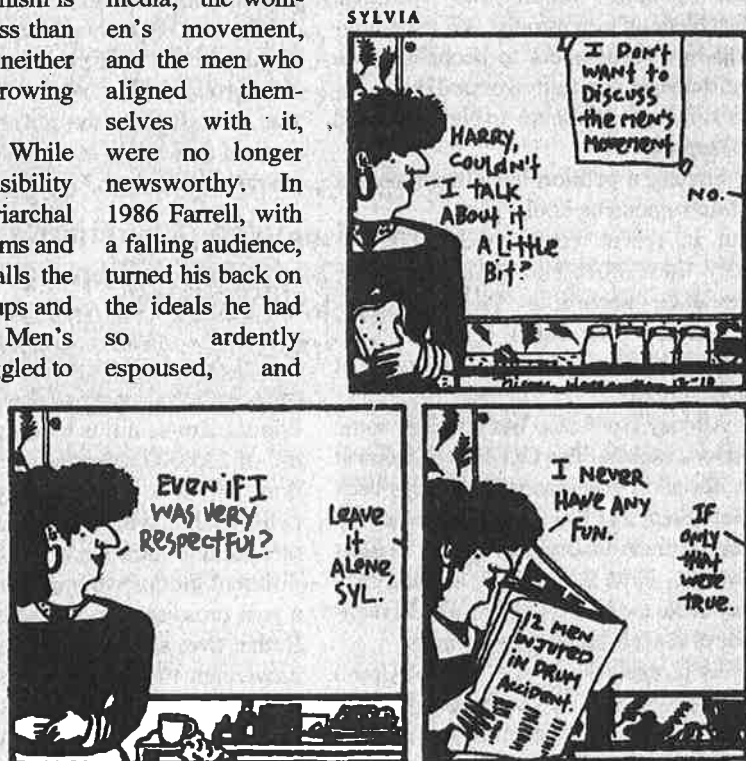
The story that ran in the New Zealand Herald on June 4 this year sounded like an even worse joke than the one above. Warren Farrell, an American who had been elected to a regional board of the National Organization of Women three times, was coming to New Zealand to promote a book called *The Myth of Male Power* in which he argues that feminism is deeply flawed and that men are in fact more powerless than women. The article unfortunately was not a joke, and neither is Warren Farrell. Rather he is a star in the rapidly growing American 'men's movement'.

The men's movement is problematic for feminists. While most of us see an urgent need for men to take responsibility for their actions and for their role in perpetuating patriarchal systems, we need to be extremely sceptical about the aims and motivations of men like Farrell. What the media calls the 'men's movement' embraces a broad spectrum of groups and beliefs. At one end are organizations like the Oakland Men's Project in California, which for over a decade has struggled to end men's violence under the banner of "Men's Work". Closer to home are organizations like 'Men For Non-Violence', who are doing similar work. At the other end of the scale is the 'mythopoetic' men's movement, exemplified by Robert Bly, who claims that feminism has made men 'soft' and that men need to rediscover the wild or warrior sides of their natures. Farrell, for all his protestations that he is pro-women makes it quite clear where he falls on this spectrum - he is a firm believer in Bly's philosophy.

So who is Warren Farrell, and why are his ideas so dangerous both to feminism and to the legitimate men's movement?

Farrell used to be a friend to feminism. In the seventies he was attracted to the fledgling women's movement, mainly because he had seen the terrible effects that the system could have on women; in particular, his mother, who suffered from severe depression and was constantly on medication. Farrell's post-graduate dissertation was an examination of sex roles from a feminist perspective. In 1974 he wrote the best-selling book, *The Liberated Man*, and began organizing men's groups to complement women's consciousness-raising sessions. He became a board member of the National Organization of Women's New York chapter, and was a media star - appearing on *Donahue* eight times. But by the eighties feminism had lost its appeal for the mainstream

media; the women's movement, and the men who aligned themselves with it, were no longer newsworthy. In 1986 Farrell, with a falling audience, turned his back on the ideals he had so ardently espoused, and



Cartoon by Nicole Hollander, from 'Women Respond to The Men's Movement', Pandora 1992

wrote another bestseller, *Why Men Are The Way They Are*, claiming that women were just too angry with men, the new 'downtrodden'. He has followed this up with *The Myth Of Male Power*, which takes his arguments further, and in the process ensures both that he stays in the limelight, and that his bank balance stays healthy. Reading Farrell's work it is hard to believe that his commitment to feminism ever went further than an opportunistic leap onto a popular bandwagon. His current arguments certainly show a complete lack of understanding of feminist aims and theories.

Farrell is not afraid to extend his argument beyond the current situation between women and men. He has an interesting view of history too. According to Farrell, the current problems between the sexes can be traced to what he calls the shift from 'Stage I' society, which is survival focused, to 'Stage II' society, which has a 'self-fulfillment' focus. 'Stage I' life was simpler according to Farrell; Susan Faludi quotes him as saying, "it helped survival for thousands of years. The women were getting the men who were the protectors and hunters, and the men competed for the most beautiful women." Farrell cheerfully ignores

the vast body of research that shows that in hunter/gatherer societies the bulk of the food (between 60% and 80%) is provided by women. Men's hunting is not, and has never been, essential for survival. As for the 'men as protectors' model, Farrell's response to the point that men protected women from other men, and that in many cases it was not so much a matter of 'protection' as control, is to say, "that would be a perjorative interpretation."

Turning to more recent history, Farrell believes that the women's movement only arose because men were doing

such a great job of providing for women that women had the leisure to get bored, and thus begin questioning their roles. Now come on, that's why we all became feminists, isn't it?

Revising history for political means is not a phenomenon invented by Farrell of course. It has a long and ignoble history, whose most recent manifestation is the large number of revisionist historians who claimed that the Holocaust never occurred.

History is easy to play with; we have to rely predominantly on secondary sources or sketchy data, particularly for pre-literate societies. The sources and data do exist however, and to

ignore them in favour of a politically-motivated interpretation is foolish. But Farrell doesn't rest there; when he's talking about contemporary issues he displays what is at best an appalling ignorance of the facts, or at worst a deliberate distortion of statistics and data. *The Myth Of Male Power* is so full of examples that a dedicated scholar could write several volumes simply disproving his claims. We have neither the time nor space (nor, to be honest, the inclination) to contest every point, but we have looked at some of the worst examples.

Farrell defines 'power' as having control over one's life and he uses the following example to show that women have this power and that men don't: If a woman says that she is using birth control but is not and falls pregnant as a result, she has several choices available to her. She can choose to have an abortion, adopt the child out, or keep the child. If she keeps the child she is under no legal obligation to tell the man that he has a child, yet if she chooses she can sue him for child support. The father is then forced to take a higher paying, and therefore more risky job, which leads to an early grave so that he can support the child he never knew he had. However, Farrell is only

presenting half of the story here. He fails to mention that the man in the story chose to trust that the woman was using contraception and that the method of birth control which she claimed to be using would work. Everyone knows that no method of birth control is 100% effective. If men are serious about avoiding fatherhood then they should use methods of contraception over which they have control to minimise the risk, or they should not engage in sexual intercourse. The

point here is that men do have choices in this area, it is simply not the case that "male technologies and male laws freed women

from female biology as female destiny and created *female* biology as *male* destiny."

It is not just cases of accidental pregnancy which raise Farrell's hackles. Child support payments, and their effects on men, feature throughout the book. They are one of the five 'hidden costs' which he claims divorced men face, and divorced women don't. These 'hidden costs' cause men an intensified pressure to earn, and thus prevent them from changing, and again, lead to an early grave. The other costs which have such a terrible effect on men are "mortgage payments on a home no longer lived in, apartment rental, alimo-



Farrell believes that the women's movement only arose because men were doing such a great job of providing for women that women had the leisure to get bored, and thus begin questioning their roles. Now come on, that's why we all became feminists, isn't it?

ny," and the big one, "dating." Ignoring, if we can, the assumptions that all divorced couples with children are wealthy enough to have had a family home, that all divorced men are required to pay alimony, and that men have to pay for 'dates', Farrell has ignored a major fact. In the United States, in contested custody cases, men are awarded custody of the children in a staggering 70% of cases.

Farrell uses statistics throughout his book to show that men's power is a 'myth'. He often interprets these statistics in an overly simplistic way. Farrell argues that society cares more about women than men and that this is borne out in differences in health spending and death rates for each sex.

National Institutes of Health in the U.S.A. spend 85% of their budget on non-gender specific health issues, 10% on women's health, and 5% on men's health. Farrell sees this as evidence that men are getting a raw deal. However, he fails to consider that women's bodies are more complex than men's and consequently there is more to know about the female body and its problems than that of the male. In addition to this, historically little has been known about specifically female health problems so it is not a mark of male powerlessness that today more research money is spent on women's health than men's.

Farrell does not only analyse statistics poorly; he frequently fails to back up his assertions at all. At his talk in Auckland, and again when he was interviewed by Anita

McNaught on *Prime Time*, he claimed that there were several studies in existence which

proved that men were as likely to be abused in domestic situations as women. According to Farrell all feminists know about these studies but deliberately hush them up. As feminists who have never heard of these studies we were interested to learn more. It proved difficult. *The Myth Of Male Power* states that there are "a dozen studies pointing to equal numbers of battered men." Unfortunately the footnote for this statement merely says that two of these studies were cited in an article which Farrell had quoted from earlier. There are no names or dates, or anything in fact, to back this assertion up.

Farrell makes much of the argument that men are the 'disposable sex' in our society and uses men's role in warfare as an example. War is always an emotive issue. No-one likes the thought of forcing young men onto battlefields. Which is why women have been at the forefront of the peace movement throughout this century. Western women are banned from combat roles in most armies but they do enter war zones in roles which are considered more compatible with their traditional gender roles. Women doctors and nurses help to reduce the deaths and suffering which are an inevitable part of war. And women have been campaigning for a long time to be

allowed to serve in combat roles. Farrell also ignores the issue of exactly who is waging wars and drafting soldiers.

The argument that war proves men's 'disposability' also collapses under comparison with the ways in which women and children are 'disposable'. Almost 50,000 American children were killed by firearms between 1979 and 1991 - a total equal to the number of American battle casualties in the

Vietnam war. And more people have died of gunshot wounds at home since 1933, than in all the battles America has fought before or since. It isn't women who account for the vast majority of murderers.

Farrell argues that the women's movement improved women's lot but that no-one significantly improved the situation of men in our society. He feels that a 'gender transition' movement would be the best means of changing our traditional gender roles but that the women's movement is its major stumbling block. It is hardly surprising that feminists do not react positively to Farrell and his followers when they claim that fem-

inist theory rests on the fallacy of male power. However this does not mean that feminists can find no common ground with the men's movement as a whole. Fortunately the men's movement does not unanimously agree with Farrell's analyses and feminists agree with the men's movement when they say that gender roles are not good for either sex. At best, Farrell's book aims at the nail but doesn't manage to hit it on the head. But

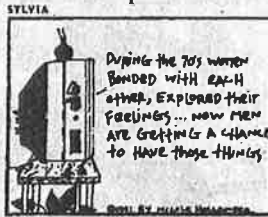
his explanations and analyses of the causes and effects of gender division are way off the mark. In its worst moments

his book is a one-eyed look at a complex issue using weak arguments which are seductive in their simplicity.

This is what is dangerous about Farrell. His arguments, if taken at face value and not analysed, are designed to appeal to men who are not certain about their changing roles. And he is reaching this audience. At his lecture in Auckland he attracted a crowd of more than 300, predominantly white men, - not bad considering the steep cover charge. His books have become bestsellers in the States, and his workshops attract steady numbers.

Ms Magazine in America has chosen to ignore Farrell, not wanting to give him any more space in the media than he already attracts. While we understand this reasoning, we think it's probably more dangerous to hope he'll just fade away. Farrell is not just attacking feminism; he is damaging the legitimate men's movement, and in the process, adding years onto our joint task of achieving an equitable future.

Tania Mace is a historian with a particular interest in social movements and trends. Rachel Cooper is a Collective member.



Nicole Hollander

Farrell used to be a friend to feminism. But by the eighties feminism had lost its appeal for the mainstream media; the women's movement, and the men who aligned themselves with it, were no longer newsworthy.