

'SIT DOWN GIRLIE'

Legal issues from a feminist perspective

GIRL WITH GUTS AWARD

Girlie wants to start the year with a tribute to one girl with loads of courage, Catherine Knox. Catherine, a 26-year-old art student from Melbourne, was raped last year in Egypt. As Vanessa Taylor and Pamela Bone noted in their feature story, 'The Courage of Catherine' (*Age*, 27 Jan. 1997), Catherine wants her full name used because she is not the guilty party in this story.

Catherine was drugged, bashed and repeatedly raped by three men in a papyrus shop in downtown Luxor after accepting a glass of Fanta from one of them. The fizzy stuff was doped and left her conscious but unable to move throughout the attack. At one stage one of the men put his hands around her neck and attempted to strangle her. Catherine's ordeals did not end there for she then turned to the legal system for some assistance.

Police apprehended three men. In the days leading up to the court proceeding, the police detective taking evidence said it was a pity Catherine wasn't Egyptian or she could have married Fahim and saved her honour, and Fahim's family attempted to stop the case by trying to drag her inside a car. At the first court proceeding Catherine was not assisted by a lawyer and had an interpreter who did not have time to tell her what was happening. At one stage, the *Age* article notes, the courtroom full of men started laughing. When Catherine asked why, she was told it was because one of the accused men said he had not ejaculated.

Two days later Catherine went through another hearing, with the same sorts of questions being asked of her: 'Why didn't you scream?' 'Were you a virgin?' etc.

Catherine then returned to Australia and discovered that the court proceeding was just a committal proceeding and that the local attorney-general would decide whether or not to send the men to trial. She has since learned that the men will be sent to trial for rape but not for attempted murder. Catherine has decided to attend the trial in Egypt, which starts on 17 February.

Another tragic part of Catherine's story is that she received little assistance from the Australian embassy in Egypt.

Her telephone calls for help were met with some sympathy but details of the Egyptian legal system and names of local lawyers could not be supplied. Once home, Catherine tried the Department of Foreign Affairs [Cocktail Parties?] and Trade to ask for help with the trial. She was told, among other things, that the rape of Australian tourists happens all the time and is in part due to the fact that tourists in foreign cities do not know which parts are safe. Paul Molloy from DFAT told the *Age* that Catherine was extremely brave to go back and face the trial.

Girlie could not agree more and wishes Catherine a swift and sure verdict. Girlie also wishes that DFAT staff in embassies would provide information about foreign legal systems and friendly local lawyers to Australians in strife. A few brochures in each embassy wouldn't be too much to ask for, would it?

PRIME MINISTERIAL PROGRESS

Girlie was recently informed that the Office of Parliamentary Counsel (the hardy souls who are responsible for drafting federal legislation) have been issued a directive from the Man himself. Draftspeople are now to use the term 'chairman' rather than 'chairperson' in future Acts of Parliament, when referring to the person chosen to preside over meetings, committees or boards etc. Hasn't the value of using non-gender specific language been well established for some time? Hasn't the PM kept up with the lively feminist discourse on the subject?

Girlie feels compelled to ask the unfortunately oft-uttered question: what *could* be the reasoning behind this retrograde step? One can only conclude that the seemingly offensive 'chairperson' was causing big problems — after all, this is a conservative government, 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it', sorry, 'if it does not appear to be broken there is no requirement for repairs'. Maybe some blokes in suits were jacking up, disrupting meetings, 'Sorry, I am not a person, I'm a man'.

Girlie understands that the term 'chairman' evolved from 'chairmanager', a nice, inoffensive moniker. If the 'person(al)' problems are insurmountable, why not get technical and go back to 'chairmanager'? Girlie will seek a response to this from the Primeman.



SPARE A THOUGHT

Girlie was reminded that getting worked up about words is an absolute luxury when she read about the obstacles faced by Pakistani women in the Peshawar region attempting to exercise their right to vote in general elections. In December 1996 *The Hindu* newspaper reported that tribesmen in the rugged tribal regions of Pakistan voted to burn down the houses of women who voted in the February elections. A new law had just given every tribesman and woman over 20 the right to vote for the first time in Pakistan's history. However, what the government sees fit to give, the tribesmen will take away.

Tribal traditions in the remote region bordering Afghanistan already keep women indoors or forced to cover themselves from head to toe when they venture outside. A spokesperson for an alliance of clerics heading the arson squad said, 'We can't allow women to vote because it will create certain disorders and allow unwanted evils to enter our areas'. The political authorities in the region say they will give women protection at the polling station on election day. Girlie wonders what protection or support is offered to the tribal women on the other 364 days of the year?

NEWS FLASH

From the December 1996 issue of the *British Airways Flight Magazine* Girlie ripped out an advertisement for Soybean Oil Breast Implants (with Trilucent) available at the London Centre for Aesthetic Surgery. Is this the answer to all those litigious silicone sacks previously used? Can you dip Italian bread in these breasts at trendy restaurants?

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