

Incest : A feminist Core Issue that Needs Re-politicizing

The issue of incest in the U.S. is a political issue, one of violence toward women and children that belongs to feminism. It has been hijacked and defused. Women's language has been stolen and reshaped to suit others' agendas. My hope is that reviewing the history might galvanize the action so urgently needed to get our own back.

by Louise Armstrong



Court rules against mom who hid daughter” -- the associated press, 12/16/03

“A law passed by congress to aid a woman who went to jail rather than divulge the whereabouts of her daughter was declared unconstitutional Tuesday by a Federal Appeals court...

“Dr. Elizabeth Morgan spent two years in jail in the late 1980s for defying a court order to allow her ex-husband to visit the girl. She claimed the girl's father sexually abused the child [three-years-old at the time this all began] ...

“The ruling...is a victory for Dr. Eric Foretich, an oral surgeon who has maintained that he never hurt his daughter and that Congress wrongly took sides in a custody case.

“The girl in the middle of the fight is now 21 [!]...”

The story I want to tell is of the way the issue of incest, which was born of the women's movement in the U.S., which is a political issue, an issue of violence toward women and children, an issue that belongs to feminism -- was hijacked and defused. It is the story of the way women's language has been stolen ; of the way our stories have been abducted and reshaped to suit others' agendas ; of the backlash that has coopted this issue, remolded it to bring it under its control. (Consider: what other human behavior, forever labeled a “heinous crime,” has routinely been converted into no more than an interpersonal dispute ?) My hope is that reviewing the history might galvanize the action so urgently needed to get our own back.

This cooptation of the issue was apparent from the outset. The very first incest conference I ever attended – perhaps the first incest conference there ever was – was in 1978. Even in those times when the issue of incest was so newly raised, when its feminist origins, its content of licensed violence against women and children was clear, mine was the only voice at that conference naming men the offenders, calling for male accountability, calling for serious social change. Otherwise, it was various professionals who spoke there – all moving in on this issue and trying to bring it under the domain of their expertise. Social work professionals spoke about why incest should be de-criminalized and brought under their dominion; psychologists spoke about incest as

a symptom of family dysfunction – to be treated under their dominion. And then a Swedish professor spoke. There was, he said, no incest in Sweden. However, he said, he was there because social problems in the U.S. tended to turn up sooner or later in Sweden. And I smiled and raised my hand, then, to express awe at the idea that incest was an American export item. I thought, at the time, I was being funny. **No trace of feminist analysis** Over twenty years later, friends, incest is an American export item and what is being exported bears no trace of feminist analysis. It is professionals, experts, from the U.S. who travel the world putting forth the American model of response to the issue, the American interpretation of it, the American way of containing and managing it. They stage conferences, attend conferences, are invited in as consultants by governments.

What they are selling is not feminist. In the U.S. it has not been good for women or children. It is a model that depends on manipulation, diversion, and distraction – one that seeks problem management, rather than problem-elimination. In the U.S., the primary manipulation of this feminist issue involved coopting it and converting it from a political issue into one of pathology. This model says that incest is a disease form – it is an illness – and the illness lies in the victims. This model puts forth incest, not as male violence, but as entirely gender neutral. Not only are offenders not identified as male, but the idea of an offense does not enter the picture. This is a model of medical manipulation, and it is under the domain of professionals, of experts – who dismiss feminist analysis as biased, political, unprofessional. Where, in the feminist analysis, the women who as children were raped by fathers were the authorities on what had happened to them and what it had meant -- to the medicalizers, the victims are objects, not equals -- to be clinically evaluated in terms of symptoms and disorders, and labeled and treated. The medical model does not seek offender accountability or raise the vision of an end to this violence. It functionally supports the status quo.

Sharing the personal and identifying the political When I first went out in the mid 1970s looking for women to share in my forum – which would become the book, *Kiss Daddy Goodnight* – it was into a world of total silence on this issue. Women came, and they called. They wrote. From sharing the personal, we identified the political. From listening, we found the commonalities in our stories and – through listening to one another – we also were able to hear what the offenders said. It was quite clear then – that what we were talking about was a historically licensed abuse of power. It was crystal clear to us – men do not do this in spite of the fact that they know it is wrong. Those men who choose to do it do so because they believe it is their right, or at least justifiable. Over and over, fathers were reported to say, ‘it’s natural, it’s perfectly natural in nature.’ Indeed, this was what the offenders would later publicly say. One father on national TV said, ‘you have to understand. At the time I thought I was doing her a favor.’ We also knew from listening that for many, many offenders, the sexual assault of the child was really a way of harming the wife, the woman. One man said on TV, ‘I’d get mad at my wife. I’d say to hell with her. I can always turn to my daughter.’ and so you see – talking about incest as a form of male violence against women is not hyperbole.

When we first spoke out there was much mock horror – much outcry about dread taboos and last taboos – a most ridiculous amount of melodrama over the quote-unquote discovery of this routine, mindless, repetitive bully behavior, this presumed prerogative to child-rape, which had been going on for centuries and had affected billions of women. We tried to explain that this was

first cousin to battering – in its historical roots and in the fact that it had as much to do with punishing mothers by breaking that relationship with the child – as it had to do with children, or with sex with children. We are not talking about men sexually obsessed with children here, we said, although there are those. We are not talking about sexual deviants, although there are those as well. We are not even talking about social deviants. We are talking about so-called normal fathers in so-called traditional families.

We are – and we knew this would be the hard part – ‘only’ talking about ‘only’ men who ‘only’ sexually assault their own children. It is that ‘only’ we knew would be the hard part – the same ‘only’ that we faced with wife-battering : it is ‘only’ his wife. Because this bully-behavior – the turning of adult male sexual power against a 3-year-old, a 5-year-old – was so grotesque – we thought, we hoped, we believed, that in breaking the silence we could get a consensus that this stuff was seriously wrong ; that we could get society to seriously say no more. That we could, then, begin to reduce the incidence.

I must tell you I feel seriously dumb when I look back and remember that then – in the 1970s, early 1980s – I did not think this was such a very radical goal – beginning to reduce the incidence. **Silence replaced by ‘professionalized language’** We were not entirely naive. The women who first spoke with me had a visceral sense of the sheer force that had kept them silent – some for as many as forty or fifty years. We knew that force had been applied over centuries to secure the silence of women – mainly by means of threat and intimidation. It was intimidation that had long been the hardest tool of suppression, of silencing. We could look back to Freud, who first believed women, then changed his mind to say it was all women’s fantasy – so that women who spoke out appeared to be confessing their own childhood lust. Or we could look back on U.S. law, which contained an accomplice-witness component – so that the complaining child was viewed as complicit, as equally culpable. Intimidation was achieved by implicating any child or woman who identified as a victim.

But, we thought, we were not living in a time or a country where suppression, silencing, was so easily achieved. They cannot, we thought, directly threaten us. And they did not. Instead, they fed on us. They took ownership of our stories. They dismissed our politics. They ignored our goal. And they re-cast the entire issue in their professionalized language. For good measure, they also borrowed our language – words like empowerment, courage, change.

What happened was that virtually overnight – out of the vast pool of ignorance and darkness that had existed on the issue five minutes earlier – suddenly, amazingly, knowledge appeared. Suddenly – when we started talking about holding normal men who were normal fathers accountable -- there were experts. A million experts, a billion experts – it was a great miracle – an act of divine intervention. (or an infestation, depending on your view.)

We said it is fathers who do this. And they said it is mothers who make fathers do this. We said it is a crime and they said – no, we are an enlightened people : it should be de-criminalized; that it is no more than a symptom of a dysfunctional family. We said it should be stopped. And they said it should be treated and cured. Now when women spoke of the harm that had been done to them, experts labeled the harm that women had suffered as their pathology. But, perhaps out of ignorance – perhaps – they did something else that ensured there would be no change. What

these overnight experts did was to dismiss or overlook or ignore the fact that powerful forces had long existed in support of men's sexual rights over their own children. They lumped incest together with the child neglect and abuse everyone is against because it is looked for and found only among the poor, mainly poor single mothers. They presumed a uniform public agreement that incest would equally be deplored (thus, the ever-popular "heinous crime"), even though middle class white males were so often the offenders. They assumed the very consensus that we knew was not there and would have to be worked for. Building a social response on that fault line was building castles on sand.

The refusal to focus on male violence and sexual power Twenty years after women first spoke out in the U.S. on this issue, the issue has been so fragmented by different sets of experts as to be unrecognizable as an issue. Different populations of victimized girls and women have each been given into the purview of separate groups of authorities and professionals. Twenty years later, the public focus is exclusively on incest as women's illness, their disability ; on children's emotional disturbance, their disability. The medical model speaks not of social change, but of treatment toward personal change. The focus is not on the violence men do, but on the pathology of women and children. The issue has been turned into a public health issue, or a child welfare issue, a social work issue. For the mothers of child-victims, it has been turned into an occasion for public slaughter – but that issue has been separated and called yet a different issue ("custody dispute"). The issue of incest has even been turned into a topic for public entertainment.

Several years back a newspaper carried a story on television talk shows. A man who runs "the national talk show guest registry" in California – a sort of 'victims, incorporated' – was quoted as saying that recently a man had called him who said his adopted daughter claimed she had been molested by her real father. The daughter, the 12-year-old girl, now wanted to go on a talk show and tell how her father had molested her. That was this girl's perception of where you go when you have been raped by your father. Onto a talk show.

And do you know what this victim-provider then asked the adoptive father ? He asked – had the girl been to a psychiatrist. Not – had she been to the police -but had she been to a psychiatrist. The adoptive father's answer was no. And what the victim-provider then said was -- 'well, to me, that's not getting her the help she needs.' that was his perception of where a girl goes when she has been raped by her father. To a psychiatrist. **Incest is a crime** The analysis we put forth – that incest is a crime as it is a crime to rape the neighbor's child, and that it is an offense overwhelmingly committed by men, has been entirely erased from public consciousness in the U.S. The tools used have been manipulation, distraction, diversion.

But there remains one group with a profound understanding that this is a political issue – and that group is men. Despite all the appeasement provided by diverting attention from incest as an issue of male violence men have not been fooled. The issue of incest has bred some of the most virulent political backlash against women that we have seen. In organized groups they have for some time now been casting doubt on women's veracity, on children's veracity.

Treatment and cure are very persuasive words. Liberals find them cozy and reassuring. Reactionaries find them useful to maintaining paternal dominance in the family – particularly when the treatment proposed, the illness identified, focuses on women as the sick ones.

Treatment and cure meant that everyone could feel good. The words treatment and cure suggested that something was being done – while signaling that nothing need change – except the “sick” women and children themselves.

But even this sop did not entirely persuade men they were safe. Despite the de-politicization, despite the suppression of feminist analysis – despite the focus on the personal and the discouraging of victims from collective action – despite the sanitized language – individual women were nonetheless confronting individual fathers – one by one by one – sometimes with memories they had not had before treatment. One by one, they began suing the fathers for civil damages (thus adding a pocketbook reason for reprisal). An organization was formed to vigorously attack these as ‘false’ memories, and to attack – not the survivors – but the professionals who, it was claimed, were implanting these memories, and who, as an epithet, they called radical feminists – even though those professionals shared no political agenda whatsoever. The professionals, of course, mounted counter-attack. And so the issue of incest is now further buried beneath the debris from this crossfire that rages around some so-called science of memory. Manipulation, diversion, distraction.

There have been other diversions and distractions in the U.S. One much-publicized child-rape and murder, for example, generated a barrage of publicity and a sudden overwhelming passion for branding known child molesters – and a law has been passed in many states forcing them to make themselves known as such in any community they move into. Whatever one may think of such a law in response to child-rape, this intensive furor over “pedophiles” and stranger-rape serve to further divert concern about men already in those communities – who are already raping children, but safely, without consequence – because they are only their own children. **Political attacks on mothers** Underneath all the medical language, politics rages as well in the form of open warfare on women – abused children’s mothers – waged both by the system and by organized groups of men. Mothers whose children tell of rape by fathers are being systematically slaughtered – no matter what they do. In the U.S. a law was proposed in the state of Wisconsin that would make it a felony offense for a mother to fail to protect her child from sexual assault by the father – even where there were no criminal charges filed against the father. And there are very, very seldom criminal charges filed against the fathers. Indeed, “failure to protect” is already a common charge against mothers by child protective services. And it, not the father’s alleged sexual assault, is the charge of record on removal of the child from the home.

At the same time – over the past twenty-five years thousands and thousands of mothers have tried to act to protect their child – only to find themselves unable to do so. Labeled vindictive, vengeful, lying – many women have been forced to flee underground – both within the U.S. and abroad – or face losing custody of the child to the offender. Many mothers have been jailed for the contempt it is said they express by trying to protect the child. Others, apprehended, have been criminally charged with kidnapping. The majority have stayed to fight. Of those, the majority have lost custody. Many have even lost visitation or any contact with the child.

The explanation offered the public for these women’s strange child-protective behaviors is predictably also a medical explanation. The women are hysterical personalities, they suffer delusions, or Munchausen-syndrome-by-proxy, which means that the women want their children to suffer to get attention for themselves. No explanation is offered for the fact that if the mothers

did not act, they would be found guilty anyway – by the child protection system, which would have them on charges of failure to protect.

In fact, this trap set for mothers is unexplainable except as terrorism – these mothers are bearing the brunt of the rage that is out there at women who commit the sin of naming men the offenders. And so the subject of incest is now permitted speech. But the issue – the naming of who is doing what to whom and why – is not permitted speech. This is implicit in the model of social response – to speak of the “horrors of incest,” while adhering to a policy that sets greatest store in protecting nice middle class men’s reputations. I hope it is not too cynical to suggest also that endless “treatment” for an unending stream of survivors is quite capitalism-compatible.

The process of de-politicizing the issue of incest People today tend to speak of backlash on this issue to mean enraged fathers’ rights groups, and those crying about false memories and false allegations. I suggest the backlash began much earlier – with this suppression of the political view. It began with the suppression, not of the subject of incest, but of the naming of who is doing what to whom and why. With the silencing of women’s authentic speech, the conversion of women’s speaking out into the recitation of their stories ; the conversion of women’s genuine suffering into experts’ language that labeled the suffering emotional disability ; with the insistent march of medicalization.

When all the spotlights are turned on women’s frailty, on children’s emotional disturbance, when women’s and children’s suffering are turned into spectacle – survivors and mothers – adult women – are easily marginalized, easily dismissed as less than competent, their words requiring the interpretations and the labels of professionals. The issue of incest becomes the topic of incest – normalized, neutralized, trivialized.

Victims are treated as the social deviants For too many women, symptoms, not speech, have become the accepted form of public self-expression; a means of saying that what has happened to them had really been bad, really been wrong. This is a grotesque exploitation of women’s anguish. If you pull away the screen of therapeutic language, it is the women, now, the victims, who are treated as the social deviants ; their suffering is somehow being associated with redemption. Underlying the therapeutic argot – the ubiquitous call to recovery, healing – lies a message of purification. This was most brilliantly clear when, during the 1980s, the goal of treatment was said to be ‘forgiveness’ of the offender.

The therapeutic ideology has been devastating for children. They do, now, more often, speak up and tell. Sometimes, of course, they are not believed. But when they are, it is most often they, not the offender, who is punished. With the mother unsupported, presumed to be helpless and hopeless if not herself the culprit – the child’s reward for telling is often effectively orphan hood. The children removed by child welfare are automatically presumed to be emotionally disturbed. Because we have been told – incest is an illness. And these children are often then placed in a so-called therapeutic environment – where they are given labels to do with their presumed emotional illness. And if they do not like this place where they are made to tell their story over and over, where they are often given psychotropic drugs, then that too is a symptom of their illness. The language of treatment and cure, the medical language, is seductive. It has seduced many feminists as well. Because women are suffering. The devastation is real. Children are

harmed. Mothers are spending years of effort and agony as well as all their resources and often all their parents' resources in battle within a double-bind wonderland, where the red queens, playing croquet with ostriches, seem to have one response only: 'off with her head!' or, in this case, 'she's off of her head!'

But the price women and children have paid for this apparent solicitousness on the part of the tribal elders has been too high. For women it has come at the expense of our authenticity, our integrity as competent adults. The U.S. social response – is a program of manipulation, of pacification. It has provided a diversion from unified activism for change. And so each mother, so bitterly embroiled over years, so often forced to fight in two different court systems, so often losing first custody, then sometimes even visitation rights, has seemed to be fighting alone. Even winning, sometimes, does not hold – as fathers re-petition the courts for their rights. This has been an issue without a home base in the existing streams of socially acknowledged women's activism around, for example, domestic violence, or sexual harassment. There have been no "mothers' rights" groups to compete with the virulent fathers' rights base. Why not? All sides, all manner of political pundits claim to be speaking on behalf of children's rights – not only fathers, but those who claim children have a right to a two-parent, heterosexual family, or a right to learn creationism rather than evolution or... whatever.

I think the most important thing, the point that has never been driven home – to the courts, to the experts, to the public – is that as things stand, for mothers whose children disclose paternal abuse, there is no correct choice currently available. If they shut up, or disbelieve, they are culpable as collusive. If they speak out they are vindictive, hysterical, and infected by a so-called psychiatric syndrome, a disease that – curiously enough for a disease – is not an affliction for the person alleged to be suffering it. Not like depression or obsessive-compulsiveness. Rather, it translates as an epithet, a medicalized way of calling a woman a rotten, deliberate liar.

A great deal of money has been thrown at the socially approved idea of sexual abuse prevention. Programs that go into schools to tell children about good touch and bad touch; that encourage children to tell. And that say over and over that it is not the child's fault, but that, in reality, make the task of saying 'no' the child's, and that – in light of what the result of telling is – inevitably result in the child's feeling guilty. This is another game that has been played in the service of not shaking up the status quo, not addressing the idea of offense and offender.

Time to focus on the offenders In reality, prevention can only be achieved by an insistence on naming, by keeping the focus on who is doing what and to whom and why. Programs for prevention need to address offenders and potential offenders -- to tell them they may not do this; they must not be programs that tell children to tell the offenders themselves. Protection for child-victims can only be achieved by attacking the mother-blame which I believe is everywhere the first resort of status quo scoundrels – and that I believe mines a rich vein of diversion and distraction.

I have had many melancholy moments of brooding about what we could have known, should have known. What we could have done differently. How we could have kept control of what is most urgently our issue. I spend many moments now wondering how we can reclaim it. In this, I hope you will help me. At the very least, however, perhaps what we have learned can be of use

to other women, to women elsewhere.

Most certainly, from all that has happened, from the sheer weight of the force that has been directed – not toward suppression – but toward the new silencing of manipulation, diversion, distraction – we now know for sure that we were right. That we have cause to stake our claim again and loudly.

This is our issue. It is a political issue. It's time to get our own back.