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The “F” Word

The Challenge of Feminism and the Practice of Counselling Twenty Years On

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Abstract

This article revisions feminist thinking from the point of view of seven practitioners/researchers currently working in New Zealand. It arises from embodied pain, passionate commitments, and a shared curiosity about purposeful feminism in our work. We explore the challenges for us as counsellors to express feminism in our practice in ways that will meet the needs of women and men. The article aims to challenge practice by performing a number of feminisms in response to particular contexts. It speaks our practices as women.

Seven women stand before a conference audience.¹ Sombre for the stories we will tell, we also warm with anticipation of the possibilities of feminist and performance research (see Burman, 2001; Denzin, 1997; Gergen, 2001).

The presentation has both a short and a long history. Coming to New Zealand, Jeannie had read Wendy Drewery’s (1986) foundational feminist article, written on the terms of second-wave feminism. Wondering what aspects of her international experience were relevant here, in 2007, to what she might teach counsellors, Jeannie put before us all the question of where we sit with feminism in our lives and our work in counselling. She asked us about the f(eminism) word: is it still relevant? Five of us met together, as we engaged with Jeannie’s question. Our conversation traversed the professional, political, and personal of a range of feminist concerns.

For this, our first research performance together, we reached down into stories of practice, into our own lived experience as counsellors and women. One by one, we now

speak our stories, offering unique expressions and shared resonance. But first we dance together, arms linked. Between each story, there is a further brief moment of music. It punctuates and connects the sombreness of the stories.



Jeannie Wright

Being a woman is, it could be said, a risky business.

(Nasser, Baistow, & Treasure, 2007, p. 4)

Counselling at a Women's Centre, 2007: A composite story

Karen is 44 and lives alone. She was sexually abused from the age of seven to nine, and the man responsible, a member of her family, was prosecuted and subsequently went to jail for two years.

I feel that nausea starting to rise up into my throat—how do I look to Karen?

Karen has not been to see a counsellor before. She sits stiffly, holding her cellphone on her lap. Her goal is to lose weight and, she says, to look at the underlying reasons for her out-of-control relationship with food. She says she does not like herself very much.

The poster on the wall behind us says:

"Can you pinch more than an inch? Do you give a shit?"

I feel very thin.

The appointment was motivated by Karen's lack of sexual feeling for, and lack of sexual intimacy with, her husband who has now left the marriage. Karen does not want to have sex any more, but wants to find out more about how the sexual abuse might have affected her family relationships. She came to the Women's Centre for counselling because a course she attended included a visit here.

She keeps smiling

I don't know what to do with my face but we start to work.

I choose to counsel in Women's Centres. There is a comfort, perhaps, in the explicit messages—from the posters, photographs and artwork—that meet us when we walk through the door. As a daughter of second-wave feminism, the images and slogans are familiar to me from Women's Centres in the UK, Fiji, and elsewhere. When I moved to live and work in New Zealand, I gravitated towards the Women's Centre as if towards "the known".

Working together now has been heartening, powerful, fun, mirroring some of the reasons why the women's movement managed to listen to individual stories and address political and social outrages—and that most-celebrated feminist challenge, “the personal is political”. There is some evidence that a new generation of women is coming together, both in the virtual and real worlds, to work on similar litanies of assault and injustice: the high incidence of rape and low conviction rates, violence against women inside the home and out, sexual abuse (see, for example, www.thefword.org.uk).

Feminist theory and activism have made their mark. But I am sick of witnessing women's pain. After thirty years of the same kind of face that Karen's story shows, I'm wondering what we can do that will make a difference. Karen and I are both of European heritage. The intersectionality (hooks, 2000), or complex play of race, class, age, sexual preference, and other oppressions that might inform our work together, is partly addressed by the very centrality of gender—men are not allowed to work at the Women's Centre. Indeed, more generally in our profession, women are in the majority. And whatever the theoretical approach to working with Karen's so-called eating disorder that might be used (for example, Lock, Epston, Maisel, & de Faria, 2005; Nasser, Baistow, & Treasure, 2007), it seems to me that back in the schools, health centres, converted houses, and under trees, in counselling and other caring roles, women's low-paid (or voluntary) labour tends to the casualties of a world where women are still disadvantaged economically.

In her poem “I was a feminist in the eighties”, Anne Kennedy (2003, pp. 81–82) uses the satirical rather than the polemical voice:

*To be a feminist you need to
Engage in mature dialogue with
Your spouse on matters of domestic
Equality, button your coat thoughtfully,
Do the childminding, washing, shopping, cooking and cleaning
While your mind is on higher matters ...
Then a lion came prowling out of the jungle
And ate the feminist all up.*

Eaten up? Regurgitated, feminism might have, or need, a different name. It might emerge in different places. Some of the changes we see in third-wave feminism (Enns, 2004) may lead to women not “doing it all” and not being eaten by the lion.



Sue Webb: *A starved heart*

Marilyn has bread but not roses. She cries quietly, trying to decide whether to leave Craig, thinking of her age and how lonely it will be when the children are gone. He shouts and criticises, but never hits. She worries about the effects of divorce on the children.

She tells, with a sudden lift, what a difference a job has made. She has money—to fund the children’s activities, school things, to buy them clothes, but nothing for herself. She reports Craig as saying that she spoils the kids. It is not just the money, but also a wider world, making a contribution, laughter and chat, a sense of competence and new skills—and new people to care for at work.

Behind Marilyn’s story, I catch a glimpse of Craig’s too, his mounting cholesterol levels and beer consumption in the safe company of mates. Bored with the sameness of his job and envious of Marilyn’s shiny new career, at home he sits alone, channel-surfing in the next room as he waits for his tea, fearful that his children, together with his wife, no longer respect him. Feeling bewildered, unimportant, and unloved, he’s no longer a hunter-gatherer like his dad, returning with warm banknotes for the family’s sustenance. His needs hide behind instructions, powerlessness behind control.

I talk to Marilyn of grief and care for others, set her to discover more about who she is and what she wants, help her express her anger. Without thinking of feminism, we address moral issues, boundaries, and independence.

But I would really like to work with this couple. Possession of the television remote and the ironing board need revisiting. Set roles around parenting could change. How might they sit in the same room? Can Craig make the link between influence and responsibility at home that women have always understood? Can Marilyn let go of the power she acquires through caring?

Sisters may be “doing it for themselves”, but isn’t it time for someone else to butter the bread and tend the roses, and for women to find ways to let them?

When first we discussed this research, I wondered if my feminism might have become contested in the last twenty years, along with its place in the academy (Patai & Koertge, 1994). What reassurance, then, to discover that feminist thinking seemed to underpin much of the work with Marilyn. With hindsight, I had Gilligan (1982) on women’s moral development, Lerner (1986) on boundaries, and even Woolf (1929) with

her room of one's own beside me, all of whom had impacted on my own life in time.

However, much of what both first- and second-wave feminism lobbied for still seems incomplete and problematic. I reflect on my own struggle to set limits on caring, my lone mastery of the new washing machine's digital cycles, despite a limited grasp of the TV remote's functioning. I found myself imagining Marilyn marching with Clark, Cartwright, and Gattung, banners broadcasting the right to work, equal pay, reclaiming the night; not arm-in-arm but trudging along behind, thinking of her daughters. Have I too abandoned some of my own desires in the hope that the next generation will do better? And do my daughters, and also my sons, understand that there is still a fight to be won (Aronson, 2003)?

However, in 2007 the pressing need seems not to be the unfinished battle for equality in the workplace and for financial independence. Instead, it is the postmodern dilemma of an overload of selves that women must now mediate (Williams, 2002), and the way that intimate relations have yet to change to match new roles in the world beyond home. This aspect, too, I discern in my own life, and its accompanying dilemmas of maintaining household control, taking responsibility for children, and acquiring caring roles in the workplace (Crawford, 2006). These parallels are likely both to hone my empathy, and to risk my being blind to some of my client's issues (Webb, 2002).

I have also considered my preoccupation with the unknown Craig. Was this a concern for what sounded like serious mental health issues; or a recognition that without addressing his part the relationship was doomed; or my historic tendency to be drawn to attend to the needs of men? I suspect all three. Heterosexual feminists often struggled in second-wave feminism to justify their commitment to relationships with men, but also articulated the need for men to change. Recent feminist family therapy (Norsworthy, 2000) has asserted that powerful social forces impact on family lives, and that families need to respond functionally to exterior changes. Reflection on practice in supervision enables me to challenge the unthinking inheritance I bring with me and the social context that supports it (Hawkins & Shoheit, 2000).

The battle for a better life for women, wherever in the world, continues. The family remains, however, the crucible of enduring change.

*Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes;
Hearts starve as well as bodies; give us bread, but give us roses!*

(Farina, 1976)



Nan Blanchard

As he comes into the room, Raj says, "You won't be able to help me, no one has." I immediately want to be the one who famously succeeds where no one else has.

Raj tells me he hasn't been able to sleep since he got here, which is over three months ago. He's from India, an international student at the college. His wife and three young children are back home, and it's uncertain at this stage just if or when they will be able to join him in New Zealand.

He's tried everything to get to sleep but nothing works. He needs his wife. He tells me he "uses" her to get to sleep.

My mind slips away to a woman in India. I imagine her through the eyes of Arundhati Roy, Bharati Mukherjee, Monica Ali, and Kiran Desai.² She is slim and fragile-looking. I imagine her at bedtime. Does she think of her husband far away? Or, after a long day mothering, preparing food and keeping house, does she experience relief at being able to just fall asleep?

I ask him if he's tried masturbating and he has, he says, but he can't, he feels guilty because it's against his religious beliefs. And nothing else works; he needs his wife.

I look at him and wonder what to say next. Clearly he is sad: lonely without his family, and lost and frightened in a foreign country.

He doesn't want to talk about his sadness. He wants to talk about not being able to sleep.

I can't convince him that masturbation is okay. Nor can I produce his wife. I am in the category of those who can't help—where I was before we started.

I am sick in my stomach. I feel shocked, miserable and inadequate. I worry that I have missed an opportunity to confront something that may be, at worst, rape, and at best, compliant sex. I worry that what I have decided is that rape or compliant sex (and I'm uneasy about the difference) is an interpretation of another woman's experience. I worry that my interpretation is culturally bound. And at the same time I hear the echoes of women's voices through the writing of Roy, Mukherjee, Ali and Desai. I know I am negotiating complexities of culture and gender. I am concerned about just how easily I lost sight of Raj and his struggle, and became preoccupied with his wife. I am disturbed by my pleasure at losing sight of him and at my fierce grip on this guilty pleasure. I am surprised to feel that a compassion for Raj lingers alongside my rage.

Segal (1999) asks, “Is the time for the renewal of feminism long past, given the remarkable shifts in gender relations?” (p. 2). This question can be extended to a reconsideration of the value of feminism in contemporary counselling practice in the light of Drewery’s (1986) article. In my view the answer is, yes, feminism is relevant in counselling practice today, even given the remarkable shifts in gender relations, which still cannot be assumed when the intersectionality of class, race, age, and sexual preference is considered (Ritzer, 2007).

How to practise feminism in counselling is another issue. If men and boys are now (arguably) victims of gender relations as much as women (see Lashlie, 2005), then working with men, and incorporating purposeful feminism into our work with men, is relevant too. And yet this response smacks of women’s traditional caring role and the assumption of responsibility for the wellbeing of others. At the same time it contradicts key dictions of feminism: for example, “the personal is political”, “women as sex class”, and “women-centred analysis and political concerns”, that arose out of consciousness-raising in the 1960s and 1970s (Eisenstein, 1984). However, it can be argued that if we don’t work purposefully with men, we ultimately disadvantage women. Also, I don’t know if I want to disadvantage men. After all, I have a son I love, and I live with a man I also love. I want to work with men towards a vision of a better future of intimate relationships.

There are “new” ways of understanding and negotiating these sorts of dilemmas. Feminist poststructuralism, for example, is concerned with disrupting and displacing dominant (oppressive) discourses (Gavey, 1989). It is also concerned with deconstructing “truth”; dismantling stable conceptions of meaning, subjectivity and identity; understanding existing power relations; and identifying areas for strategy and change (Weedon, 1987). How this translates into counselling practice is another matter. Narrative therapy is an obvious fit in terms of feminist poststructuralism, but I am surprised by my paralysis with Raj.

Perhaps my response is a product of a complex set of social, cultural, and historical circumstances that relate to the contradictions at the heart of feminism. These contradictions are difficult to negotiate but, as Joan Scott (1996) says, while feminism has only paradoxes to offer, it doesn’t make it any less relevant.



Elmarie Kotzé and Kathie Crocket

We three take our gender project³ to Norway.

A woman from South Africa and New Zealand,

A man from the United States,

And a woman from New Zealand.

Feminists all of us.

Our project a feminist project.

We show our DVD.

On the DVD Ireni speaks of the backlash.

Another man from North America watches the women's stories and tells us that he does not think the backlash is a useful concept.

On the DVD, Barney speaks of the pain that has contributed to the stories he tells of negotiating gender in his life.

Another woman from South Africa watches the men's stories and weeps for Africa, for men and for women.

We three, feminists all, notice that the men's stories are more hearable to our audiences:

the men's stories invoke compassion.

The f(eminism) word. Does it work any more?

In our hotel room in Kristiansand the Norwegian language magazine tells a story of Esben Ester Pirelli Benestad.⁴

Esben Ester—medical doctor, sexologist, family therapist, father, bi-gendered.

At the conference Esben Ester introduces to us mothers who love and support their little boys who want to be little girls.

We see the child's paintings as the little boy becomes the little girl he desires to be—paintings no longer black and bleak; now multi-coloured and hopeful.

The g(ender) word. Does it work any more?

In our seaside cottage in Langesund there is another Norwegian magazine.⁵

It tells a story
from Africa.

Women,

Beautiful glowing faces.

Beautiful glowing faces
that belie the breasts below,
skin dry and wrinkled,
ulcerated,
ironed flat,
a product of the p word.

The p(atriarchy) word. It still works.
Women in Africa with breasts ironed flat.
Women in New Zealand still working to make our stories hearable.

The g(ender) word. We still need it.
The f(eminist) word. We still need it, too.

On the DVD, *Telling and retelling gender stories*, Averill reminds us:
“There won’t be any change without the conversations to speak it
into being.”

“Spaces between” (Lather, 2006) echo in our presentation. There are spaces between certainties and uncertainties. We hold to the certainty of the importance of a political analysis of gender power relations. At the same time, we reach for new language and ways of thinking that might take us into uncertain spaces where new, different, and local responses might be shaped in response to lived experiences of gender. Other “spaces between” include the following:

Different feminisms: Our quest is for the feminism that is fitting for the context. Bronwyn Davies (1998, p. 136) explained how she calls on a discourse, perhaps liberal feminism, when it is most appropriate to her particular purposes. We want to keep finding our ways between feminisms.

Gender: In-between spaces make the queering/querying of gender possible (Benestad, 2007; Heath, 2007). Stories of transgender journeys (Okumura, 2007) remind us that negotiating gender is more than negotiating binaries: “I consider myself both straight and queer” (Benestad, p. 68).

Geographic spaces: Our presentation speaks of crossing geographical spaces. We speak our New Zealand gender project in Norway, and people from China, Africa, North America, and the UK cross spaces when they speak in response. We then speak our Norwegian experience in this New Zealand presentation. We notice that we are two white women speaking what we witnessed, as we read a magazine in Norway, of the lives of women in Cameroon.

Spaces between men: When a man at our Norway presentation speaks his criticism of the idea of the backlash because of its association with essentialism, another man speaks his commitment to listening other-wise (Levinas, 1981), so that he might hear the pain of women's speaking.

Our purpose here is to highlight stories in the spaces—spaces such as those which queering/querying produces; those in which African and New Zealand women live their lives; between genders; between performers.



Sue Cornforth

Where to start.

There's Jane—not her real name—the silent one.

So earnest, so intent, so voiceless.

So indescribably, but indelibly, Chinese.

Inclusion my goal.

Laryngitis her response.

We dance around each other. Touch by glance, by smile.

Little by little her story—a waterfall at the end—

Emerges.

Only child of hard-working parents, Jane is left alone from babyhood.

Here is the clock. Time to get up, time to get your meal, time for school,
time for homework, time for bed.

Jane ticks, not talks.

Silent at school, she is assessed deficient by psychology.

Now words wash over her.

What of those parents—working hard long hours—how could they not see
the effect of their abandonment?

Yet Jane has been loved—I sense the roots of her connection.

Equality in the workplace?

What pain do we inflict on our children and old people by working where
they are not welcome?

What work is worth this?

What pain did my abandoned mother feel alone, as dementia advanced
and I at work?

What pain my tearful firstborn daughter—"cuddles Mummy!"
And yet, the agony of my earlier under-employed self.
Harsh exclusion from affairs of state.

A divided house here—against itself.
Feminism cannot, alone, unpick this dualism.

Wendy Drewery's (1986) article invites us to reflect on three themes: the relationships of power between counsellors and those they work with; the value assumptions underlying the practice of counselling, and the usefulness of the psychological theories that inform counselling interventions. These challenges remain alive for me, although they have taken a different shape. In the following paragraphs, I chase my shape-shifters.

My encounters with Jane left me powerless and puzzled. In some way I felt imbricated, drawn in, implicated. While strongly tempted to blame parents who leave a child alone, I cannot absolve myself from participating, and desiring to participate, in practices that separate home from work. I have laughed at posters on the ECE Centre door, showing a gleeful mother leaving her child behind, with the caption, "And mother said I'd feel so guilty!" I have chosen not to give up my work in order to care for an increasingly confused mother at the end of her life. I have sought promotion and personalised rejection. All these decisions leave me troubled.

Duelling values. A feminist lens might identify a dualism—a double world of public and private enterprise, powered by the different valuing of justice and care. Gilligan and Wiggins (1987) suggested that the values of justice and care were "two moral perspectives that organise thinking in different ways" (p. 20). To some extent, later feminist theory has remained fraught on this dualism (e.g. Held, 1995), with many philosophers still seeking reconciliation (e.g., Sterba, 2001). I wonder if the relative silence of the feminist voice in counselling may be attributed to the irreconcilable task of living with opposites (Chaplin, 1999).

From psychology to intersectionality. I was further disturbed by the cultural difference between myself and my student. Who was I to pass judgement on a generation of Chinese who had survived gruelling experiences during the Cultural Revolution? In what way was I competent to intervene in such a foreign and complex situation? It is here that the concepts of intersectionality and minoritisation (Burman, Gowrisunkur, & Sangha, 1998; Chantler, 2005) prove useful for me, for they take me beyond dualisms. Intersectionality allows me to see that women hold multiple positions. Jane's mother

was not just a working woman; she was also Chinese, with access to other categories, with other values, beyond my comprehension.

Several of our stories feature women from other cultures. We appeared to find embodied connection across continents, to resonate with the pain of those suffering the tragic effects of minoritisation in "the process of being positioned as a minority group" (Chantler, 2005, p. 244). It is striking to me how the feminist lens has widened. Feminism is no longer, for me, a white middle-class practice. It has global implications and takes its responsibilities seriously. While the concept of intersectionality has allowed me to track my shape-shifters to the slippery interfaces of culture, gender, race, and difference, the concept of minoritisation invites exposure of the relationships of power that perpetuate discrimination. Together they allow me to view oppression as existing in multiple dimensions. This view challenges traditional psychological theories, founded on the self-reliant, bounded individual, and shifts focus from individual subject to the practices within which people are offered subject positions. Where, previously, I might have debated the use of challenging versus supportive interventions, I now agree with Chantler who argues for "active engagement to address structural inequalities" (p. 254).



Patricia Sullivan-Thompson: I will not die an unlive life

Now in their seventies and married for nearly fifty years, they came together for their first-ever counselling session. When I asked where they would like to begin, she spoke first, calmly and quietly stating she wanted a divorce.

It was obvious by his response that this was the first he'd heard of this. Clearly she wanted someone else—a mediator—present when she made this announcement.

Five children and nearly fifty years later, she said she couldn't bear the thought of being buried next to him. She said little else except that she'd been miserable for years.

He was angry. Very angry, and blamed it on her going to "that crazy women's centre". He asked her who was going to cook for him. He really did.

I wondered what finally gave her the courage to do what she said she had wanted to do for years.

I pondered on how his concern for his meals was the best he could come up with in the face of such an announcement.

I thought of her going to the women's centre and becoming aware,
discovering her sense of entitlement,
and how sad we have so few role models
on how to be assertive without being aggressive,
certain without being arrogant,
and angry without being violent.
I saw her about a year later at the supermarket, and hardly recognised her ...
she looked so well. She told me he was still angry.

Two people in such pain sitting there in front of me, and I'm reminded of Markova's (2000) book, *I Will Not Die an Unlived Life*. In their seventies now, and with equal intensity—his anger and her resoluteness—I'm taken aback that the best he could come up with in such a serious moment seems to me tragic, sad, shallow, and yet somehow completely understandable.

I sit there, part of me personally struggling with the temptation to take sides and applaud her for the courage to leave, while telling her I'm amazed she could last so long. I am acutely aware of how their situation triggers my need for supervision: I acknowledge my frustration towards him (and men like him) as I resist falling into the abyss of my own family-of-origin issues and cultural upbringing from Southwest Louisiana. And I wonder who I'm cheering on for the courage to state that she needs more. I struggle to stay impartial and professional.

I want to shout: "Is that the best you can do? Do you not realise the seriousness of this present moment? Is it so very difficult to be real and acknowledge what is happening right now even with this situation? Life is offering you an opportunity here. I know you must be hurting but I can't see it anywhere!" I refrain.

My own helplessness and anger shift from a rather judgemental stance to genuine empathy—for them, for myself, for us all. I wonder about his story, and how many years his practice of stonewalling has been necessary to stay afloat emotionally (Gottman & Silver, 1999), and how old his fear of abandonment is.

I wonder how his response (or lack of) fits with Freud's belief that much of our emotional life is unconscious, and feelings stirred within us do not always cross the threshold into awareness (Gilligan, 1997), or if, instead, his response fits with Beck, who believed our spoken conversation and our silent conversation could potentially poison a marriage (Goleman, 1995). Or was it her response (or lack of). I don't know. But what a cost.

If one of the keys to satisfying and authentic lives is for us to be able to hold many truths—which is a way of accepting not only our own experience of life but the experiences of others as well (Gilligan, 1997)—then those of us from dysfunctional homes may recognise the particularly challenging work with the denied and lost aspects of ourselves (Hendrix, 1992) that are manifested in intimate relationships.

Feminism? Or humanism? I listen and learn from my learned colleagues about feminist literature and the history and future of third-wave feminism; I sense broad global implications for what we're discussing on personal and cultural levels across generations. Equality, respect, and the concept of multiple truths will hopefully enable us to learn how to "show up" well before our seventies so as not to die an un-lived life.



Coda

The music fades. The triumphant conclusion, the final display of feminist solidarity we initially envisaged is at odds with the impact of what we have witnessed/re-presented. Tears flow and we are unsure of our ending. What now? There is silence. We have created a gap, a space, a fracture. Do we now resume our old lives, enriched and energised by developing connections, raising the gender issue at various local sites? Have we become third-wave feminists?

Our stories lead us to conclude that gender issues remain alive in our professional lives, and that third-wave feminism does not provide the answers we seek in addressing the pain we encounter. In this project, we have had to confront/work past other voices that might relegate the feminist cause to an historical event. In the wake of transformative theorising and political liberation, we (still) encounter women (now) struggling with overburdened selves.

Our vignettes expose the slippery surfaces that exist between (discourses of) race, gender, class, and age. We also note further differences within and between feminisms, gender, race, class, and age. Feminism alone cannot account for the struggles to which we bear witness. Instead, we note the spaces and gaps. In this performance, we have striven "to create and recreate spaces and places for the exercise of agency" (Jackson, 1995, p. 144).

We have worked to speak the unspeakable in the hope that new meanings might emerge and inform new actions.

Endnotes

1. This article was first presented as a paper at the 5th New Zealand Association of Counsellors' Research Conference, Hamilton, October, 2007. Our thanks to Steve Lang, who provided the background for the performers on that day.
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3. Kotzé, E., Crocket, K., & Gaddis, S. (2007). *Telling and re-telling gender stories*. DVD. Hamilton, New Zealand: University of Waikato.
4. See Benestad, E. E. P. (2005). Questioning sex and gender identity: Was it a girl or was it a boy? *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, 1, 59–61.
5. *Aftenposten*, 15 June, 2007.

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Interlude

The Editors

As these women were speaking, the stories they told called forth other perspectives from some who heard them. As the echoes of the voices fade, and silence falls, an antiphonal chorus of different voices now speaks into the space that has been opened up. Amid resonances with the first speakers, different notes and new tonalities can now be heard.