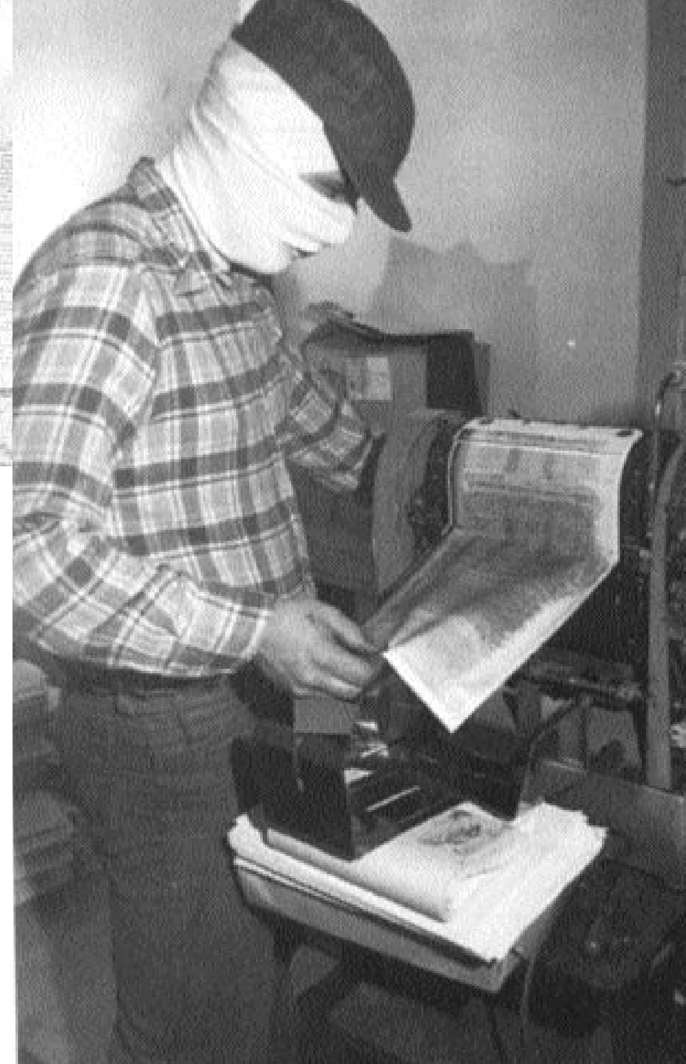
Solidarity's Disappearing Women

Solidarity's Secret: The Women Who Defeated Communism in Poland

By Shana Penn

Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005, 372 pp., $34.95, hardcover

Reviewed by Jean C. Robinson



Unidentified underground press operator. Warsaw, mid-1980s.

Women comprised half of the membership of Solidarity, the first free trade union in Poland since before World War II. Under communist rule, women appeared to be partners with men in the Polish workforce, just as they appeared to be partners with men in the resistance to the communist state throughout the 1980s. However, in the workplace, they never really achieved parity with men. And in the opposition, although women contributed mightily to the creation of a Polish democracy, they receive scant recognition or reward for their efforts.

The activist women leaders whom Shana Penn interviewed in the 1990s, who had helped keep the resistance alive during martial law (1981-1984), did not become part of the new Polish leadership after 1990. Much to the dismay of feminists inside and outside of Poland, neither the Solidarity experience nor the neoliberal democracy that took communism's place produced a vibrant feminist movement. Perhaps even more surprisingly, neither produced new opportunities for women in public life. Shana Penn asks why. Why didn't Solidarity embrace more feminist values? Why weren't the women who kept Solidarity alive during the dark years of martial rule recognized afterward? And why didn't these women themselves, who had devoted their lives to resisting communist authority, continue that resistance to patriarchal authority, whether in the form of the Catholic Church or in the overarching myths that sustain the Polish nation?

Shana Penn's experience as a feminist interested in Poland's women struck a chord with me, since in 1979 I too encountered chuckles, if not outright laughter, when Poles learned that I did research on women. I returned in 1984 and 1986, and each time, except for a smattering of scholars studying the plight of women under communism, most people I met thought it charmingly silly that anyone would be seriously interested in women as political actors. Men and women would tell me, as they told Shana Penn, that it wasn't yet time to consider the problems of women—not when the problem of freedom hadn't yet been solved. Or they claimed that women in Poland were already equal, and that they hated it. And besides, that the feminist obsession with gender equality was a peculiarly American problem. The problem in Poland wasn't that there weren't enough women in Parliament or in the top leadership; it wasn't that women had to scrounge for tampons and contraceptives; it wasn't that women's activism was recognized only on International Women's Day. Rather the problem was that there were soldiers with submachine guns on the corner, and long lines in front of stores that had nothing to sell. Or, as women activists told Penn, that women's so-called equality under Polish communism had robbed men of their masculinity, so now it was important for men to be returned to their rightful place as leaders. "It appeared," reports Penn, "that women had gained power while men had lost power. This distorted view was sometimes turned against women to allege that they benefited from communism while watching, unsympathetically, as their men became emasculated under a system that espoused women's liberation rhetoric."

The distortion Penn describes has its roots in the iconic *Matka Polka*, or Polish Mother, first portrayed by the nineteenth-century poet Adam Mickiewicz. She is "the heroic mother who raises her sons to martyr themselves for the nation"—so special that any discussion of inequality is out of place. This model for women has its parallel in the romantic narrative of Polish men as the knights who will save the nation in its unceasing struggles for independence. Poland has indeed been struggling for centuries for independence and autonomy—invaded from the West and the East and suffering ever-changing borders and occupiers as rulers. Women were expected to take over men's fights when the men were imprisoned or exiled and to relinquish their places when the men returned. This, according to Penn, is exactly what happened with Solidarity.

Penn says this Polish "benign patriarchy" explains, at least in part, the absence of women from the public life when the Polish nation feels secure. "Benign patriarchy" also explains the courtly behavior of Polish men—who kiss one's hand charmingly, yet are ultimately dismissive of women—and the absence of any strong women's movement in Poland. This explanation resonates with my own experience, when in 1989 I taught the first women's studies course at Warsaw University—an obscure course in the Institute of History entitled the History of Women in the US. In class we came back again and again to the roles Polish women might have played in the numerous instances of resistance in Poland's tortured history. But other than Marie Sklowdowska Curie, my Polish students could not name one significant Polish woman in pre-World War II history. They could name only one active in Solidarity—Anna Walentynowicz, the crane operator in the Gdansk shipyards who became the emblem for the free trade union. When Penn interviewed her, she expressed her bitterness at being left behind by her Solidarity brothers. Her plight as a leader who was quickly pushed aside was replicated in the fates of the many other women leaders who made the Solidarity resistance successful. We have Shana Penn to thank for bringing the contributions of these courageous women to light.

Penn's interviews are primarily with the group of women responsible for producing and distributing underground newspapers from the martial law period until 1989. However, her book is more than the stories of these editors who kept people's hopes alive during the dark years of the 1980s. Penn explains aspects of Polish culture and politics that have long puzzled observers. In Poland today, women are thirteen percent of elected representatives to the Senate, the upper legislative house, and barely one-fifth of the lower house. In the last Parliament under communist rule, women had even fewer seats in the legislature. Since 2001, when democracy was new and the government more moderate than the current arch-conservative, arch-Catholic government, women have lost nine seats in Parliament. They have also lost most of their access to abortion, without gaining any increased access to contraceptives. Rather than contraception, the Polish Catholic Church touts Single Mothers' Homes (although there are only ten for the whole country). Instead of

encouraging responsible choices for women, the Church tells them: "Expecting a child? It is God's more than yours." ("Women's Eyes," *The Warsaw Voice On-Line*, May 29, 2003 www.warsawvoice.pl/view/2413) Shana Penn points out that women have lost in the economic realm as well: women's unemployment accounts for most of Poland's high national unemployment rate—at eighteen percent, the highest in the European Union. In 1999, they were sixty percent of the unemployed. Given all this, plus Poland's history of recurring resistance to imposed authority, we might anticipate that women would use their Solidarity and underground experiences to build a women's movement to address these new burdens. Penn helps us understand why such a movement hasn't materialized.

Penn began interviews for this book in the early days of the transition in Poland. Arriving in Warsaw in summer 1990, she started looking for the women the Western journalists covering the decades-long resistance movement in Poland had not seen—"Poland's national secret." And although she found some of them, it turns out that looking for them as *women* revealed the enormous distance between Polish reality and American feminist expectations about a progressive partnership between dissident working-class men and women. Many of the women at the heart of the underground movement that kept the ideas of Solidarity alive in the dark days did not identify themselves as *women* who were working to save their nation. Rather they identified as Poles, or as helpmates to the male leaders. Still, whatever their identification, they played central roles. Penn argues that "without women, the underground would simply not have existed. No deputies, no *Tygodnik Mazowsze* [*Regional Weekly*, Solidarity's underground newspaper], no couriers, no typists, no housing networks. "

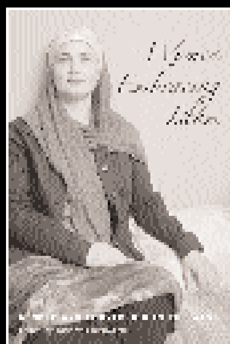
The fact that women were in charge when the male leadership was either imprisoned or in hiding continued an irresolvable Polish dilemma. As Ewa Kulik, who lived in hiding between the start of martial law in December 1981 to May 1986 and who coordinated the operations of the Warsaw underground, remarked: "In Polish society, especially in the workers' circles, it is the worst humiliation to say that a man is in a woman's hands. It means he has no will of his own." Yet especially between 1981 and 1986, the male leaders *were* in the hands of women, if they were not in the hands of Polish dictator General Jaruzelski's soldiers. It was women who formed the leadership network that ran the underground presses in Warsaw. It was women who oversaw the protection of Solidarity movement leaders in hiding. It was women who led the distribution of the underground news. It was women who could most easily smuggle papers and supplies through the patrolled streets. And it was a small group of women who organized many of the mechanisms that enabled the opposition to stay alive and the population to stay informed and engaged.

Yet when democracy surprisingly came to Poland, few of these women were welcomed into leadership positions in Solidarity or any other political party. Poland's tiny feminist movement, organized first around preventing the overturn of liberal abortion laws, was swallowed up by the rush to reinstall the Polish Church as the arbiter of social policy. Only in retrospect did a few of these brave women see that "women were rejected by Solidarity." Penn argues that this rejection was in the cards from the very beginning—that indeed the gendered myths prevalent in Polish culture and shaped by Polish Catholic values could only imagine a place for women that was a version of *Matka Polka* in the flesh. And as long as these myths prevail, Poland's women will remain hidden in the shadows.

Jean C. Robinson is professor of political science and gender studies at Indiana University. She has made five research trips to Poland starting in 1979. She is the co-author with Janet E. Johnson of ***Living Gender after Communism*** (forthcoming fall 2006).

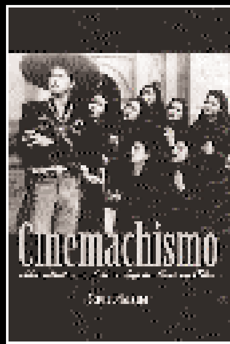
WOMEN'S AND GENDER STUDIES FROM TEXAS

AMAZIGH ARTS IN MOROCCO
Women Shaping Berber Identity
By Cynthia J. Becker
Like other Amazigh groups but in contrast to the Arab societies of North Africa, the Ait Khabbash entrust the artistic responsibilities to women—not men. Their clothing, tattoos, and jewelry are public identity statements, imbued with visual expressions of womanhood and fertility. In this unprecedented examination of the relationships of art, gender, and identity among the Amazigh people of Morocco, Becker demonstrates how the control of the visual symbols of Amazigh identity gives these women power and prestige.



WOMEN EMBRACING ISLAM
Gender and Conversion in the West
Edited by Karin van Nieuwkerk
In this vanguard study of gender and conversion to Islam, leading historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and theologians investigate why non-Muslim women in the United States, several European countries, and South Africa are converting to Islam.

ALIEN CONSTRUCTIONS
Science Fiction and Feminist Thought
By Patricia Melzer
Through close readings of science fiction literature by Octavia E. Butler, Richard Calder, and Melissa Scott and the movies *The Matrix* and the *Alien* series, Patricia Melzer analyzes how these authors and films present feminist debates about identity and difference, globalization, and technoscience.



CINEMACHISMO
Masculinities and Sexuality in Mexican Film
By Sergio de la Mora
In this book, Sergio de la Mora offers the first in-depth analysis of how Mexican cinema has both supported and subverted the construction of a gendered and sexualized national identity.

THE POTBELLIED VIRGIN
By Alicia Yánez Cossío
Translated by Amalia Gladhart
Written by one of Ecuador's foremost contemporary writers, this funny, focused portrait of Ecuadorian life in the twentieth century illuminates the complexity of Andean society by placing disenfranchised players such as women and Amerindians onstage with traditional powers such as the military and the church.

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS PRESS
800.252.3206 www.utexaspress.com

Copyright of Women's Review of Books is the property of Old City Publishing, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.