

## THE EVOLUTION OF THE FEMALE CIGARETTE AND THE SILENCE OF THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Cigarette advertisements increasingly directed at women have escaped the notice of feminists campaigning to remove sexist stereotypes in advertising. Ironically, this is because cigarette advertisements rarely portray women in overtly dumb-blonde or passive roles. The National Advertising Review Board (NARB), part of whose job is to make recommendations on "matters of taste and social responsibility" in connection with US advertising, specified 14 negative and undesirable (or sexist) ways in which current advertising portrays women. Of these, I could find only three which cigarette ads breached. Furthermore, the ads actually fulfilled six of the nine proposals from the NARB on how women could be portrayed constructively. . . .

A peculiar silence — almost a resistance — surrounds the question of smoking among women's organizations. As far as the women's movement is concerned, smoking is someone else's problem. The now prolific literature on women's health and health care is remarkable for lack of attention to the issue. . . .

I contacted more than fifty women's organizations on both sides of the Atlantic, some feminist, some not, some national and some local, but most failed to reply. The National Organization of Women (NOW), for instance, which has taken a highly active role on many women's health issues in the USA, was not prepared to comment, and in its 40-page submission to the 1979 Kennedy hearings on women's health, NOW did not make a single reference to the problem. Indeed, had the American Cancer Society not referred to the rising lung-cancer rates in women in its own evidence to the hearings, the issue would not have been raised at all.

The National Women's Health Network, which represents over a thousand women's health organizations, has "no formal position on smoking."

It is the same story in Britain . . . The Birmingham Women's Health Group seemed to sum up the prevailing attitude among many British women's groups:

When we read your letter there was a great reluctance in the group to spend a whole meeting discussing smoking. Most members (despite being smokers themselves) felt there were more important issues to discuss.

—BOBBIE JACOBSON

*The Ladykillers—Why Smoking is a Feminist Issue*,  
London, Pluto Press, 1981, pp 60, 78–79.