



Women Make Movies

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Women Make Movies Responds to Hate

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Like many non-profit organizations located in Lower Manhattan, the tragic events of September 11th have had a profound impact on the staff and community of Women Make Movies. In the nearly 30 years that we have distributed and supported films by and about women, we have never had to respond to a single event with such broad political, social and cultural implications on our daily lives. As a New York-based arts institution, the destruction of the World Trade Center also signaled the entry into a new era of uncertainty for our organization and has prompted us to reflect on our mission as a feminist, multicultural distributor of films and videos.

Since 1972, Women Make Movies has encouraged progressive thought and creative freedom among women filmmakers from a wide variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Many of today's most acclaimed women directors – including Jane Campion, Julie Dash, Kim Longinotto and Trinh T. Minh-ha – began their film careers with us, only to later inspire other women to create films that explore themes related to art, identity and politics. In the same vein, Women Make Movies was among the first to foster a feminist friendly work environment for women entering the business of film distribution and promotion. This unique history, coupled with the organization's dedication to supporting the arts and education through alternative media, has not only made Women Make Movies a long-standing advocate for quality films by women, but also an organization dedicated to advancing social change.

Prior to 9/11, this precedent was the motivation for many of our current staff members to join the Women Make Movies team. However, in the wake of the World Trade Center disaster, returning to our offices presented numerous challenges to our ideals on work and activism. Many of our staff members questioned whether our aims were still

relevant in the aftermath and felt conflicted about proceeding with our normal workday. Our purpose momentarily seemed inconsequential in the scheme of world events.

After we regrouped as an organization, we realized that like many other non-profits in New York City, we held a collective feeling of disempowerment, coupled with an overwhelming need to respond to the tragedy in some form. Through numerous discussions we found that our immediate social and political concerns post September 11th were quite similar: we saw a lack of representation of women in the mainstream media and felt deeply concerned about the effects of racial profiling on the Arab and Muslim communities. We were especially disturbed by representations of the Middle East on television, which presented this region as a territory inhabited only by men. Women were almost completely barred from view, with the exception of footage featuring veiled women running down war-torn streets, and seldom given an opportunity to speak authoritatively on political or foreign policy. As the distributor of a highly respected collection of award-winning films and videos about women in Islam and the Arab world, we knew quite well that there existed an alternative perspective to the mainstream. It was our Director of Distribution and Marketing, Vanessa Domico, who pointed out that our organization was capable of filling-in the information gap about Arab and Muslim women missing on the nightly news.

When we first began to discuss our organization's reaction to September 11th, many other educational distributors also began seizing the opportunity to announce the availability of films and videos related to the Arab and Muslim community. This posed a profound ethical dilemma for Women Make Movies. Was it appropriate to promote our films as a result of this event? Could we provide our educational resources without cost? It was generally agreed that informing people about educational resources – especially those that related to current events – was not compromising any organization's moral principals. However, as a non-profit distributor, we felt compelled to find a way of providing our films and videos to the educational market free of charge. We were seeking a communal gesture that would allow our organization to give back after personally experiencing such a devastating event. The result was the creation of our special campaign, "Response to Hate."

The concept of “Response to Hate” was simple: provide free rentals on a selected group of Middle East titles to universities and non-profit organizations for the purpose of educating the community-at-large about the Arab and Muslim experience. We would supply the tools for groups to organize “teach-ins” or screenings to foster communication, challenge cultural stereotypes and, perhaps, prompt new forms of grassroots activism.

In a matter of days, each staff member at Women Make Movies pulled their talents and professional skills in solidarity to prepare our “Response to Hate” campaign and make this offer available to as many institutions and individuals as possible. Notwithstanding, our most ardent supporters were our filmmakers, as well as The National Film Board of Canada (*Four Women of Egypt* and *My Heart is My Witness*) and NOS Sales (*In My Father's House*), who generously donated their films and videos without concern of monetary reward. Those that took part in “Response to Hate” included: Jeanne C. Finley, Mine Y. Ternar, Gokcen Hava Art and Pelin Esmer (*Conversations Across the Bosphorous*); Tania Kamal-Eldin (*Covered*); Sabiha Sumar (*Don't Ask Why*); Tahani Rached (*Four Women of Egypt*); Claire Hunt and Kim Longinotto (*Hidden Faces*); Fatima Jebli Ouazzani (*In My Father's House*); Maysoon Pachachi (*Iraqi Women: Voices From Exile*); Olga Nakkas (*Lebanon: Bits and Pieces*); Louise Carré (*My Heart is My Witness*); Erica Marcus and Susana Blaustein Muñoz (*My Home, My Prison*); Kay Rasool (*My Journey, My Islam*); Persheng Sadegh-Vaziri (*A Place Called Home*); Haim Bresheeth and Jenny Morgan (*A State of Danger*); Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa (*A Tajik Woman*); and Norma Marcos (*The Veiled Hope*).

In addition to these films on the Middle East, we also included two films on the Japanese internment camps of World War II: *History and Memory* by Rea Tajiri and *Who's Going to Pay for These Donuts, Anyway?* by Janice Tanaka. We added these seemingly unrelated documentaries because they highlight an unfortunate period in American history when fear and prejudice prompted the removal of civil liberties on a targeted ethnic group. We believed it was important to provide these films in order to allow our viewers to discuss and reference the effects that racial profiling has had on public and cultural policy in the United States.

With the support of our filmmakers, staff and Board of Directors, we posted the following statement announcing "Response to Hate":

Dear Friends,

The staff and Board of Directors at Women Make Movies would like to express our deepest sympathies to the families, friends and victims of the September 11th tragedy. Although our office is located just a few blocks away from the site, we were fortunate not to have lost any of our immediate family of co-workers and loved ones.

As the nation collectively responds to this horrific event, we have become increasingly concerned with the violence against Arab-Americans and Muslims, as well as the alarming trend toward racial profiling. We believe it is of utmost importance to sensitize people about the culture and traditions of the Arab and Muslim community, both abroad and in the United States, in order to avoid further prejudicial attacks and denunciations of any one ethnic group. To accomplish this feat, we believe it is vital to share educational resources that teach tolerance and an appreciation for cultural diversity.

At Women Make Movies we have chosen to contribute to this effort by providing FREE rentals on a selected group of titles on the Middle East and Arab culture through December 31, 2001. Also included in this offer are two documentaries on the US Japanese internment camps of WWII, entitled *Who's Going to Pay for These Donuts, Anyway?* and *History and Memory*. We've added these titles in order to provide a historical reference to an episode in US history when prejudice and fear dictated behavior and policy in this country.

It is our sincere hope that this gesture will assist to humanize the Arab-American and Muslim community and demonstrate the vast sources of alternative educational media available to the viewing public.

The reaction was overwhelming and immediate to "Response to Hate." Not only did non-profit organizations and universities answer our call, they forwarded our message to their constituents through email campaigns and listserv postings. Rather than being limited to our community base, we were able to reach out to thousands more and screen our films at hundreds of universities, museums, festivals and community organizations around the country. Many individuals, including our filmmakers who were not directly involved in the campaign, responded immediately simply to thank us for the gesture. Perhaps the most inspiring outcome from "Response to Hate" was hearing from a cross-section of the nation about how September 11th has affected their lives. There was an overriding sense of community and collective drive to foster tolerance, dialogue and understanding. School teachers, arts administrators, local activists all replied with simple messages such as, "I am going to try and initiate a screening and discussion for our students, most of whom come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and know very little about the Middle East/Arabs/Islam," or, "I just got the message here in Istanbul...such a wonderful, thoughtful, generous response... just the idea lifts the spirits."

In the New York area, we had several opportunities to see first hand how the viewing public received “Response to Hate”. In one example, we presented films in collaboration with two local feminist groups, the Third Wave Foundation and W.E.R.I.S.E (Women Empowered through Revolutionary Ideas Supporting Enterprise), entitled “Women for Peace and Empowerment: Movies Move Views.” The attendance at this event was overwhelming, even standing room was occupied for the length of the two-hour program. After our films were shown, the screening room was alive with debate, as viewers one by one shared what they learned and how it fit into their understanding of the contemporary Arab and Muslim world. It proved without question the need for information sharing and creating open forums for discussion and debate about the current event. More importantly, it demonstrated to all of us at Women Make Movies that our mission, educational aims and overall support of independent media is now more important than ever.

The experience with “Response to Hate” allowed us at Women Make Movies to reaffirm our long-standing support of films and videos that present the alternative perspectives and creative achievements of women from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. As we approach our 30th Anniversary, we will continue to promote the voices of women filmmakers who help us interpret the complexity, conflict and beauty of the world we continue to inhabit.