The Women's Liberation Movement in Britain, 1968-1984: Locality and Organisation in Feminist Politics

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Abstract

This thesis offers new insights and understandings of the complexity and development of the operational and organisational forms of the Women's Liberation Movement over the course of the 1970s and 1980s. Through focusing on the local groups of Aberdeen, Brighton and Hove, Edinburgh and Bolton as case studies of the broader movement, this research argues that there were complex processes of development at the grassroots in which women conceived of, implemented and continued to develop new feminist methods of political organisation and structure, and continued to debate issues of organisation, structure and political practice throughout the period. Furthermore, this thesis demonstrates that the development of new, alternative feminist organisational and political practices were central to the ways in which the WLM attempted to represent and manage the diverse opinions, positions, interests and socio-economic divisions within its membership from the very beginnings of the WLM. This study also explores the impact of local factors on each group and the extent to which these shaped and developed the organisation, structure and practices of local groups over the course of the 1970s and into the 1980s. In doing so, this thesis challenges a historiography that depicts the WLM as a 'structureless' movement and therefore as disorganised, and which outlines a simplistic 'rise and fall' chronology of the movement, from unity in the early 1970s to crippling division at the end of the decade. Rather, through the use of documentary evidence and oral history interviews with feminist activists, this thesis argues that attempts to solve and mange debate and disagreements between women were a significant part and purpose of feminist organisation and its subsequent development well beyond the supposed 'end' of the WLM in 1978.

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In order to uncover the stories of the women's liberation groups focused upon here, I had to travel the length and breadth of Britain, from Aberdeen to Brighton and Hove. In this regard, I am grateful to all the archivists at the Glasgow Women's Library, the Feminist Archive North in Leeds and the Women's Library in the London School of Economics. I was given kind advice and guidance on working with uncatalogued collections and contact information for interviewees. I was also fortunate enough to have received funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council to undertake and complete this research, and was granted ethical approval from the University of Glasgow.

I am also indebted to those women who agreed to be interviewed. Every interview revealed just how vibrant, diverse and dynamic the feminist movement was in the 1970s – such a picture would not have emerged without your memories and input. In particular, I would like to thank Penny Summerfield, Esther Breitenbach and Elaine Glover for providing me with source material and contact information for other feminist activists – it is very much appreciated.

I would also like to acknowledge my family, in particular my mother and husband. They have experienced all the ups and downs of this research. Without their unwavering love and support this thesis would never have been written. I am also very grateful to Ann Turner for her proof reading and kind words in the final stages of writing this thesis.

Finally, I want to acknowledge my debt to all the women involved in the Women's Liberation Movement across Britain, for all they fought for, continue to fight for and defend. Thank you.

Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this thesis is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Emily Flaherty

Abbreviations

Abortion Law Reform Association	ALRA
Bolton Evening News	*BEN*
Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament	CND
Consciousness Raising	CR
Edinburgh Radical Feminist Theory Group	ERFTG
Family Planning Association	FPA
London Women's Liberation Workshop	LWLW
National Abortion Campaign	NAC
National Health Service	NHS
Reclaim the Night	RTN
Scottish National Abortion Campaign	SNAC
Scottish Women's Liberation Journal	*SWLJ*
Society for Protection of the Unborn Child	SPUC
Women's Centre	WC
Women's Information and Referral Service	*WIRES*
Women's Liberation Movement	WLM
Women's National Coordinating Committee	WNCC
Women's Rural Institute	WRI
Workers Educational Association	WEA

Note on Text

For extracts from oral history interviews and transcripts used throughout the following text: a hyphen (-) indicates where an interviewee has hesitated and it has been deleted for clarity; an ellipsis (…) indicates where a section of the transcript has been deleted because it did not add to the quotation.

Introduction

This thesis explores the operational and organisational forms of the Women's Liberation Movement in Britain (WLM) from 1968 to 1984. Using documentary evidence and oral history interviews, this study reveals the development of feminist organisational methods and internal political practices of four local women's liberation groups: Aberdeen, Brighton and Hove, Edinburgh, and Bolton. The aims are threefold. Firstly, through attention to questions of feminist political organisation, this study aims to shift the focus of debate towards the development of new methods of political organisation, internal political practices and mechanisms of representation within the WLM. This research uncovers the variety and complexity of feminist methods of organisation in local women's liberation groups, and how the WLM attempted to represent the diverse opinions, positions, interests and socio-economic divisions within its membership. As Sheila Rowbotham has commented:

> Movements present contradictory ideas, especially when they are as distrustful of leaders and conscious direction as the movement was in the early 1970s… every new beginning has assumed differing shapes. It is as if thousands and thousands of women were busy making a gigantic garment, borrowing and creating their own patterns. Despite varying emphases there have been common themes and common problems and over time, several attempts to unravel the knitting and make fresh starts.[1]

Organisational structures and political practices were then under constant question and debate within the context of the local women's liberation group. Group structures and practices were theorized, tested and refined throughout the period precisely because they were central to women's daily involvement and interaction with women's liberation. The WLM presented a radical departure from more established methods of political organisation and campaigning in terms of its of action and ways of working. Women's liberation activists sought new ways of *being* political, organising their movement along

[1] Sheila Rowbotham, *Women in Movement: Feminism and Social A*ction (Routledge, 1992), p. 271.

feminist principles and ideologies of anti-elitism and anti-hierarchy, and incorporating problems and divisions between women as an integral part of group structure and practice. This thesis aims to uncover how these organisational activities and structures facilitated the growth of feminist networks and communities on an everyday basis, and to assess the discussions, debates, tensions and confrontations that arose as women debated the organisation and structure of their local groups.

Secondly, this thesis considers the ways in which the operational and organisational forms of the WLM developed and changed. It is argued here that feminist organisational methods and political practices were constantly under scrutiny and development as local women's liberation groups grew and diversified, in order to facilitate and contain a spectrum of various, and at times, competing identities, personal experiences and campaign interests. This study will also explore and compare the impact of local and national factors on each group and the extent to which these shaped and developed the organisation, structure and practices of the local groups over the period.

Thirdly, the characterisation of the WLM, both in histories and public memory, as unstructured and disorganised due to a distrust and rejection of formal political structures and organisation, is challenged.[2] Such characterisation has been used, in part, as evidence of the movement's inability to overcome differences between women in order to coordinate and harness its revolutionary potential. The notion that the British WLM was 'structureless' due to its rejection of traditional political structures is to overlook the important processes in which women conceived of, implemented and continued to develop new feminist methods of political organisation, and the wide range of debates about organisation, structure and political practice ongoing in local women's liberation groups

[2] For examples, see David Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge: The Movement for Women's Liberation in Britain and the USA* (Macmillan, 1984), p. 94; Elizabeth Meehan, 'British Feminism from the 1960s to the 1980s' in Harold Smith (ed), *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* (Aldershot, 1990), p. 194; Barbara Caine, *English Feminism, 1780-1980* (Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 265; Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet Freedom: The Struggle for Women's Liberation* (Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 26; Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland c.1968-c.1979* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 8.

throughout the period. The WLM was committed to anti-hierarchical and collective organisation and therefore had to reformulate accepted modes of political organisation, representation and the relationship of the women's movement with outside individuals, groups and organisations, however sympathetic. As Jo Freeman argued in her influential article 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness', the outright rejection of structure cannot eradicate informal methods of decision-making or leadership.[3] The WLM then, did not simply attempt to eradicate methods of internal organisation and structure in search of an anti-elitist movement, but rather a distrust of traditional, formal and hierarchical political organisation demanded innovation of alternative ways of organisation and political practice, which would expose and challenge dominant hierarchies and leadership based on class, nationality or race privileges.[4] This thesis therefore explicitly challenges the notion that the WLM was unstructured and therefore disorganised, and argues instead that the practical challenges presented in organising local groups and campaign activities were central to the experiences of 1970s feminism. Indeed, the organisational structure of a local group influenced and characterised how women joined their preferred action groups and campaigns, how they developed friendships and managed tensions with other women's liberation activists, and shaped their attempts at achieving real concrete changes and improvements for women in their local communities. This thesis argues that to ignore organisational questions of feminism elides how feminism as a collective movement proposed to challenge and change the exploitation and oppression of women, how feminist activists rethought power and representation in their own lives, and how they reflected on the complex and varied organisational processes ongoing in the ideas and discussions of local women's liberation groups throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

[3] Jo Freeman, 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness', http://www.jofreeman.com/joreen/tyranny.htm. Accessed April 17, 2017.

[4] Elizabeth Armstrong, *The Retreat from Organization: U.S. Feminism Reconceptualised* (State University of New York Press, 2002), p. 5.

The emphasis here on the organisation and structure of local women's liberation groups functions also as a contribution to a more representative historiography that is geographically diverse and includes the personal accounts of activists from the length and breadth of Britain, not only from larger cities like Edinburgh, but also from smaller and more peripheral towns such as Bolton. As such, most importantly, this thesis is rooted in the perspectives of grassroots members. Such a perspective ultimately reveals new insights on why and how local groups emerged when and where they did, how the organisation and structures of local groups were shaped by personal experiences, individual political trajectories and different social and cultural contexts, and the impact of dynamics, relationships and differences between women on the organisational activities and structural workings produced in the British WLM at local and national level. Not only does a local group approach reveal complex processes and debates in the development of feminist organisational structures and internal practices, but also demonstrates the widespread attraction of and variation in women's liberation politics. This approach then will change our understanding of the growth and development of women's liberation organisation amongst a range of local groups and the ways in which identities, ideas and ways of working differed upon location. Therefore, in turn, this research also reshapes the dominant chronological narrative of the movement on a national basis.

Each of the four local women's liberation groups explored in this thesis is used as a lens on to a different method of feminist organisation, internal political practice and strategy of mobilisation. Key themes have emerged within each case study. Firstly, a major theme of this research is the variety and complexity of feminist organisational methods and internal political practices in each of the local women's liberation groups focused upon here. Secondly, a central notion and theme that I use is *sites of exchange*, which runs throughout this research. Sites of exchange are referred to here as spaces, places and forums in which women created a way of talking about a particular issue, such as abortion, and discussed and debated how to take it forward. I find this a useful concept because it is

flexible, nodular and is an alternative to more simplistic and rigid definitions of who belonged to the movement and who did not. The focus is on how these sites emerged and were developed as organisational methods and practices of feminist politics. For example, a site of exchange can be a feminist conference, a newsletter, journal or publication, a consciousness raising group, a women's liberation meeting or active campaign. Feminist activists developed sites of exchange then as spaces to organise and structure their local groups, communicate with one another and engage with individuals and organisations out with the WLM. These sites also contributed to the operational and organisational forms of the WLM through a process of scrutiny, debate and confrontation, as women debated the shape and direction of their groups and campaigns in these spaces throughout the period. Thirdly, a major theme of this research then is the operational and organisational development of local groups and the changes they went through over the course of the 1970s and early 1980s. The thesis is structured both thematically and chronologically with each case study offering up a specific strategy and process of feminist organisational development, and is approached through the group's specific chronology to demonstrate feminist political organisation as an on-going process throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

Chapter One offers an assessment of the current historiographical landscape of the British WLM and situates this study's contribution to the key debates and its challenge to a number of hereto prevailing arguments of assumptions surrounding the movement and its organisational and operational forms. It also offers a discussion of the methodology and source material on which this research is based, a discussion of the periodisation used and the major themes and issues of this research. Chapter Two begins the story in northern Scotland in the city of Aberdeen. The focus here is on the personal motivations of the university students who formed and joined the Aberdeen Women's Liberation Group, their commonalities and differences as a basis for friendship and 'sisterhood', and ways in which personal networks were an important organisational and structural tool in connecting and expanding the local feminist community in the context of the small,

geographically isolated city throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s. Chapter Three is focused on the south coast of England with an assessment of the organisational development of the Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group. The vibrant and sizeable Brighton and Hove group acted as an umbrella which functioned as a structure connecting and facilitating communication between the diverse wealth of feminist actions, debates, campaigns and broad socio-economic backgrounds of feminist activists found across East Sussex. Chapter Four offers a detailed analysis of WLM conferences through the experiences of feminist activists from the Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group, who both organised and attended feminist events in the Scottish capital and across Britain. This chapter reveals the ways in which feminist conferences functioned as an organisational tool for the WLM nationally and the experiences of the local groups responsible for the planning and implemental of such massive events. Through the examination of personal testimony, conference papers and reports, this chapter reveals the organisation of women's liberation conferences as a complex pattern of growth and development and as key sites of exchange for feminist activists beyond their local groups and personal networks – challenging the notion that the national conferences were the epicentre of the movement's dysfunction and inability to represent its diverse membership as is epitomised in dominant historical narratives of the 'disastrous' conference of 1978. Chapter Five offers the final case study of this thesis, exploring the WLM in the northern English former textile town of Bolton. This case study challenges the notion that single-issue campaigns were a symptom of the broader movement's fragmentation in the later 1970s, and instead traces the Bolton Women's Liberation Group's contraception and abortion campaigns to assess how women conceived of, organised, mobilised around and then developed feminist campaigning strategies from the very beginnings of the 1970s and into the 1980s.

By providing the first account that uses oral histories and considers a geographical spread of local groups outside of the major metropolitan centres, i.e. London, to assess the operational and organisational forms of the WLM, this thesis argues that there was a

continuous process of self-reflexion and change in how the WLM operated, and reveals a process of development that stemmed from and reflected the personal experiences and the needs of the women involved. This research then uses oral history to relate personal experience and individual political trajectories to the development of feminist organisation and internal political practices precisely because the operational form of local groups was developed from the bottom up to suit activists' needs and changing priorities for action. This study thus challenges anti-organisational theories of feminism that continue to connect the movement's decentralised and non-hierarchical vision for future politics to a complete rejection of formal political organisation.[5] Instead, it proposes new insights and understandings of the WLM in which questions of feminist operational form and political organisation were present in the daily activities of feminist activists as they rethought power, representation and inclusivity, and which reveal 1970s feminist activism through both the new theories and practices of political organisation produced at the grassroots and the future political transformation and social relations women's liberation proposed.

[5] Elizabeth Armstrong, *The Retreat from Organization* (State University of New York Press, 2002), p. 5.

Chapter One
Narratives of the Women's Liberation Movement

The Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) was one of the most influential social and political movements of the twentieth century.[1] As an international movement, active women's liberation groups could be found throughout North and South America, Western Europe and beyond from 1969 to the 1980s. The WLM had a strong presence in Britain with hundreds of groups stretching from Shetland in the far north of Scotland to the south coast of England and from East Anglia to the West of Wales.[2] Many of the women who became feminist activists did so due to their frustration at the limited opportunities open to them and the collective disillusionment felt towards the male domination of political, economic and social life. Women's liberation groups set out to challenge these limitations and such domination whilst also attempting to transform and politicise women's personal lives. They focused on raising individual and collective consciousness among women and embarked on a diverse number of actions to place the challenges women faced at home and at work on to the political agenda. The actions and discussions of local women's liberation groups were focused on the seven demands as they were adopted over the course of the 1970s, in order to hear and represent the diverse membership and changing priorities of the women involved. The first four were equal pay, equal education and opportunity, twenty-four hour nurseries, and free contraception and abortion on demand, which were adopted in 1970. The fifth demand for financial and legal independence was adopted in 1974, and the sixth demand, for an end to all discrimination against lesbians and freedom from intimidation by threat or use of violence, was adopted in 1975 and later split in to two in

[1] Drude Dahlerup, *The New Women's Movement: Feminism and Political Power in Europe and the USA* (Sage, 1986), p. 1.

[2] Due to issues of space this study has not been able to include a study of Northern Ireland. See Evelyn Mahon, 'Women's Rights and Catholicism in Ireland' in Monica Threlfall (ed), *Mapping the Women's Movement: Feminist Politics and Social Transformation in the North* (Verso Books, 1996), p. 196.

1978.[3] In politicising what was considered personal and private, the WLM was influential in raising public awareness and interest in issues such as domestic violence, rape, and abortion and contraception. There was little to no focus on the menopause, retirement or age discrimination as the women involved in the first groups of women's liberation in the late 1960s and early 1970s tended to be in their twenties to mid-thirties.[4] Dominant historical interpretations of the WLM have also tended to focus on the experiences of young, middle-class, university educated women in their twenties and thirties. However, as demonstrated by the case studies in this research, the WLM was successful in attracting women from a broad socio-economic and age demographic into its ranks. While the movement did tend to gravitate around a young generation of women who were politically 'shaped' by the global events of '1968', this research reveals a more complex picture in terms of generation and life-stage with stories of non-university educated, working-class women and women of a variety of ages, born between 1941 and 1960, participating in local women's liberation groups and actively involved in the innovation of new methods of political organisation and internal political practices.

The WLM was not a single organisation but rather a loose movement made up of numerous local groups engaged in diverse forms of action, in a variety of campaigns and undertaking their own processes of developing methods of political organisation, group structures and internal political practices. What linked these groups and the women involved together were the common causes of opposing male domination in all spheres of public and private life and fighting for women's rights.[5] The WLM first emerged as a national network of women's groups in 1970, with a Women's Liberation Movement

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[3] Michelene Wandor, *The Body Politic: Women's Liberation in Britain, 1969-1972* (Stage 1, 1982), p. 2; Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet Freedom* (Basil Blackwell, 1987), pp. 26-7; Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 1.

[4] Anna Gurun, *Second-Wave Feminist Approaches to Sexuality in Britain and France, c. 1970-c.1983* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2015), p. 31.

[5] Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 2.

Conference held at Ruskin College, Oxford, which over three hundred local groups attended.[6] This thesis will draw out the organisational and structural variations of some of these groups, the continuities and differences in the processes of operational and organisational development, and the problems and debates that arose over such ways of working.

The history of the women's movement has tended to be divided up into particular periods of time and labelled as 'waves' of feminist activism. The 'first wave' is defined as the struggle for suffrage and the campaigns for women's rights in the fields of property, law, work and education, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The 'second wave' usually refers to the activities and campaigns of the WLM from the late 1960s to 1978 when, allegedly, the movement could no longer unite under the broad banner of 'sisterhood' and the 'structureless' movement failed to find a way to represent and contain the various identities of its membership.[7] However, challenges to the 'wave' concept have occurred in many recent studies of women's political activism, particularly in the British and American contexts.[8] As Barbara Caine has observed, the 'wave' model leads the historian to only focus attention on those time periods that witnessed intense moments in women's movement politics, and privileges certain actors, themes and campaigns over others. Furthermore, it results in the neglect of quieter, more traditional struggles of women's organisation in the intervening periods, for example the work of the Abortion Law Reform Association (ALRA) established in 1936.[9] As Penny Summerfield has argued,

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[6] Michelene Wandor, *Once A Feminist: Stories of a Generation* (Virago, 1990), p. 2.

[7] See Barbara Caine, *English Feminism* (Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 222; Penny Summerfield, 'The Women's Movement in Britain from the 1860s to the 1980s' in Tess Cosslett, Alison Easton and Penny Summerfield, Women, *Power and Resistance: An Introduction to Women's Studies* (Open University Press, 1996), p. 228.

[8] For instance, Kathleen Laughlin and Jacqueline Castledine (eds), *Breaking the Wave: Women, Their Organisations, and Feminism, 1845-1985* (Routledge, 2001), Introduction; Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 3; Anna Gurun, *Second-Wave Feminist Approaches to Sexuality* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2015), p. 2.

[9] Drude Dahlerup, 'Three Waves of Feminism in Denmark' in Gabriele Griffin and Rosi Braidotti (eds), *Thinking Differently: A Reader in European Women's Studies* (Zed Books, 2002), pp. 341-51.

'the idea of two distinct waves creates the impression that there was no women's movement between 1918 and 1968'.[10] Nancy Hewitt has also challenged the idea of 'waves' in feminist history and presented a more nuanced, less white dominated and less suffrage based history of the 'first wave' in the US from the 1840s to the 1920s.[11] Catriona Beaumont's research resonates with this critique, as her analysis of voluntary women's organisations such as the Townswomen's Guild and Women's Institute from the 1920s to the 1960s, questioned the 'wave' metaphor by focusing on the 'in-between' waves.[12] Valerie Wright has also argued that the Scottish Women's Co-operative Guild was influential throughout the inter-war period in challenging the inequalities working-class women faced and therefore can be defined as championing feminist concerns.[13] Jane Lewis, furthermore, has observed that there are many links between the WLM and the campaigns of earlier social reform groups of the 1960s, which were the immediate antecedents of the WLM and did much work to publicise and politicise issues surrounding the family, women's health and abortion, and which would be built on by the feminists of the 1970s.[14] This is ironic given that many feminist activists of the WLM were unaware of the work of previous feminist campaigns and women's groups, and were even suspicious of more 'traditional' women's groups active outside of the WLM. As Sarah Browne has noted, this was mainly due to a lack of knowledge about women's role in history and has led many feminist activists to reflect on their involvement with the feminist movement as 'reinventing the wheel', in that they believed they set the agenda for campaigns on

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[10] Penny Summerfield, 'The Women's Movement in Britain' in Tess Cosslett, Alison Easton and Penny Summerfield, *Women, Power and Resistance* (Open University Press, 1996), p. 228.

[11] Nancy Hewitt, *No Permanent Waves: Recasting histories of US Feminism* (Rutgers University Press, 2010), pp. 1-7.

[12] Catriona Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens: Domesticity and the Women's Movement in England, 1928-64* (Manchester University Press, 2013), Introduction.

[13] Valerie Wright, *Women's Organisations and Feminism in Interwar Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow, 2008), p. 258.

[14] Jane Lewis, 'From Equality to Liberation: Contextualising the Emergence of the WLM' in Bart Moor-Gilbert and John Seed (eds), *Cultural Revolution? The Challenge of the Arts in the 1960s* (Routledge, 1992), pp. 74-90.

women's issues and inequalities in Britain.[15] The evidence presented here from the local groups of Aberdeen, Brighton and Hove, Edinburgh, and Bolton, demonstrate that the 'wave' theory has not only ignored the work of women in the intervening periods, but has also contributed to an overly simplistic understanding of feminist activism at the grassroots, as women who operated at the local level continued and developed their activism and political organisation well after the supposed 'end' of the 'second wave' in 1978. It is argued here then that while feminist activists across the country may have been a part of a national movement and surge of feminist activism that could be conceptualised as a 'wave', women at the grassroots created, developed and sustained their own methods, structures and practices of political organisation within their own local communities, as they reacted to and challenged the political and social contexts of their locale and the issues relevant to their personal lives and the lives of women in their communities.

Where the WLM differed from the earlier feminist movement was the approaches and tactics used in the struggle for women's rights, its strong emphasis on personal experience as feminists attempted to broaden what was included on the political agenda, its theoretical contribution on the reasons for women's oppression and the systems of patriarchy, and the development of non-hierarchical and representative organisational structures and internal political practices. The late 1960s, particularly '1968', have been especially noted as a turning point in the formation of the feminist movement, as a new generation of women, who were to become the first feminist activists of the WLM, had been politicised in this context. The 1970s feminist movement's opposition to traditional political organisation such as national spokespersons and elected committees, also demonstrate that the women of the first women's liberation groups were a part of the '1968 generation', and the WLM more broadly arose from, was a part of and inherited, a number of methods and discourses from the 'new social movements' of the late 1960s. A number

[15] Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 6.

of scholars have challenged the generation paradigm as a concept for understanding the global rise of social revolt in recent histories of the 'new social movements'. They have argued that the '1968 generation' was partly imagined after the events, or have noted connections between different generations in political activism.[16] As mentioned, this research reveals a more complex picture in terms of generation with women from a of variety ages involved and active in local women's liberation groups throughout the period. Yet, as Maud Bracke has argued of the influence of late 1960s radicalism on Italian feminists, 'a generation of young radicals was shaped by a mix of political ideas'.[17] During the late-1960s, young activists challenged established relations of political representation and delegation, particularly through the campaigns to end the threat of nuclear war (CND), anti-apartheid protests, anti-imperialist discourse through opposition to US involvement in the Vietnam War and the discourses of the civil rights and black power movements.[18] For many women who went on to form the first groups of women's liberation in Britain, there was then an awareness of being part of a particular generation in movement for progressive change, and with it a reinvention of political action, practices and campaigning methods such as sit-ins, protests, marches and politicising personal experiences of oppression.[19] Such movements and groups influenced radical-left groups in the UK and introduced new styles of campaigning, methods and discourses of political collectivism and under-

[16] See Maud Bracke, *Women and the Reinvention of the Political: Feminism in Italy, 1968-1983* (Routledge, 2014), p. 45; Kirstin Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago University Press, 2002), Introduction; Holger Nehring, 'Generation, Modernity and the Making of Contemporary History: Responses in West European Protest Movements around 1968' in Anna von der Goltz (ed), *Talking 'bout my Generation: Conflicts of Generation Building and Europe's '1968* (Wallstein, 2011), p. 71-94; Maud Bracke, 'One Dimensional Conflict? Recent Scholarship on 1968 and the Limits of the Generation Concept', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 47. No. 3 (2012), pp. 638-44.

[17] Maud Bracke, *Women and the Reinvention of the Political* (Routledge, 2014), p. 45.

[18] For more information on activist practices and the New Left see Maurice Cranston, *The New Left: Six Critical Essays* (Bodley Head, 1970); Holger Nehring, '"Out of Apathy": Genealogies and Meanings of the British "New Left" in a Transnational Context' in Martin Klimke, Jacco Pekelder and Joachim Scarloth (eds), *Between Prague Spring and French May: Opposition and Revolt in Europe, 1960-1980* (Berghan Books, 2011), p. 15-31; Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright, *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of socialism* (Merlin Press, 1979), Introduction; David Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge* (Macmillan Press, 1984), p. 48.

[19] Ibid, p. 4.

representation, in which activists questioned the specific roots of their oppression and campaigned for greater democracy and political representation.[20] Sara Davidson emphasised the influence of late-60s radicalism on the global spread of the WLM:

> …Student uprisings all over the world: Columbia; the Sorbonne; the University of Mexico. ROTC buildings were burned to the ground. Yippies rained dollar bills on the New York Stock Exchange. Jackie Kennedy married Aristotle Onassis. Russia invaded Czechoslovakia. Civil fighting broke out in Northern Ireland and Biafra, and everywhere we heard the sound of marching charging feet.[21]

Yet many women were excluded and subjugated in the male-led 'new social movements' and realised their contributions would remain marginal as long as men dominated public and political spaces and agendas.[22] As Anna Gurun has noted:

> For numerous women in Britain and France…an underlying sexism remained, and the fear of being seen as frigid, prudish or old fashioned underpinned many women's relationships with men…many women realised sexual freedom and a new political consciousness did not erase male judgment of women's politics and sexual behaviour.[23]

Similarly, Voichita Nachescu noted the struggle many women encountered when attempting to carve out and justify a separate identity and political vision:

> Young women, many of whom had participated in other contemporary student movements, in the Free Speech Movement, the anti-war movements, the New Left or civil rights, attempted to defend the need for a separate women's movement…Young radical women worked hard to identify their own needs, aspiration and organising strategies.[24]

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[20] See Barbara Caine, *English Feminism* (Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 253; Sheila Rowbotham, *Promise of a Dream: Remembering the Sixties* (Penguin, 2001), p. 179; Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet Freedom* (Basil Blackwell, 1987), pp. 13-4.

[21] Sara Davidson, *Loose Change: Three Women of the Sixties* (Doubleday, 1977), p. 165.

[22] Debora Cohen, 'Talking Back to '68: Gendered Narratives, Participatory Spaces, and Political Cultures' in Lessie Frazier and Deborah Cohen (eds), *Gender and Sexuality in 1968: Transformative Politics in the Cultural Imagination* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 145. Also see Maud Bracke, *The Reinvention of the Political* (Routledge, 2014), Chapter 3.

[23] Anna Gurun, *Second-Wave Feminist Approaches to Sexuality* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee 2015), p. 4.

[24] Voichita Nachescu, 'Radical Feminism and the Nation: History and Space in the Political Imagination of Second-Wave Feminism', *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2009), p. 32.

Sheila Rowbotham also identified the misogyny many women encountered in New Left groups:

> It was assumed that women were semi-permeable membranes who absorbed men's ideas through the semen. 'You've been fucking with a Stalinist', hissed a man in Hornsey International Socialists, pinning me against the wall at a party. This attitude was a mix of male sexual control and a religious feeling that the group should be your whole life, with sex only permissible within the boundaries.[25]

The WLM inherited then a number of the cultures and practices of '1968'. Feminist activists were direct and angry, determined to confront and campaign on any issue relating to male domination and women's place and representation in society. Yet, the male domination and blatant sexism of the 'new social movements' inspiredf the feminist activists of the WLM to withdraw, critique and move beyond late 1960s radicalism and develop a new portfolio of feminist methods of political organisation and campaigning strategies. Developing new feminist methods of political organisation opened up possibilities of revolutionary change that could include thousands of women and could be based on the feelings and experiences of individual women, which proved to be far more effective in the promotion of their cause. The WLM in Britain developed as women working for different causes, within this context of new, radical social movements and agitation, began to meet and discuss the roots of their own inequality and oppression as women. The search for non-hierarchical, representative and inclusive political methods and practices distinguished women's liberation from earlier feminist movements and the social revolts of the late 1960s; thus, the WLM must be approached as a historically specific manifestation of feminist organisation and activism.[26]

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[25] Sheila Rowbotham, *Promise of a Dream* (Penguin, 2001), p. 227.

[26] Barbara Caine, *English Feminism* (Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 253. See also Amanda Sebestyen (ed), *'68, '78, '88: From Women's Liberation to Feminism* (Prism Press, 1988), Introduction; Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee 2010), p. 7.

The WLM was a vibrant upsurge of feminist activity, with a diverse agenda, lasting over two decades. Yet historical research on the WLM in Britain is relatively sparse and has been slow to emerge. One of the dominant historical discourses of the WLM has emerged largely from autobiographical accounts originating from participants of the movement, which provide important detail on the political lives, feelings and reactions of feminist activists, yet tend to be London focused and written mainly by socialist feminists. Broad chronological historical assessments of the women's movement over the course of the twentieth century also provide important analysis of the changing social, economic and political position of women. Yet more recent and ground-breaking work conducted by historians, some of whom were themselves participants or on the fringes of the movement, has begun to question many of the assumptions and generalisations of 1970s feminism. Many of the recent histories of the WLM question the chronology of the 'rise and fall' of the movement, the categorisation of feminist theory into clear-cut ideological strands and the impact the movement had on British society. These histories put forward important hypotheses on a number of aspects such as the regional diversity of the movement as shown by Sarah Browne's work on Scotland, Bridget Lockyer's work on Bradford and Jeska Rees' work on West Yorkshire, and the importance of division and debate to the movement's ability to flourish and disseminate its message, as shown by Eve Setch in her assessment of the London Women's Liberation Workshop (LWLW). The history of the feminist movement in the 1970s is then a 'dynamic and contested terrain', and is currently being undertaken to include a wider range of female agency and a broader range of political groups and individual activists who campaigned to improve the position of women in society in the latter half of the twentieth century.[27] These histories therefore reveal important detail and themes of the movement's origins and beginnings, its ideas and theories and therefore, are an important place to begin this study of the WLM in Britain.

[27] Sue Bruley and Laurel Foster, 'Historicising the Women's Liberation Movement', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 25, No. 5 (2016), p. 698.

1.1 Writings on the Women's Liberation Movement in Britain

Though historical research into the British WLM continues to gather pace and has made progress in uncovering the variation in campaigns and discussions found across local women's liberation groups, personal assessments and autobiographies remain invaluable to the historian in gaining an understanding of how the movement was formed and how the campaign interests of individual women developed over the course of the 1970s. Autobiographical accounts such as Michelle Roberts' *Paper Houses*, remind us of the sense of revelation, exhilaration and feelings of salvation many women experienced as they first came into contact with other politically conscious and active women.[28] One possible reason why there are a plethora of personal accounts available was the self-reflexive nature of the women's movement in the 1970s. As Eve Setch has observed, 'as soon as the WLM came into existence its history was being recorded by those who were at the very centre of its activities'.[29] For example, Sheila Rowbotham has been a prolific commentator on the WLM in a British and international context. Her seminal works include analyses of many of the successes and failures of the movement and trace major themes and issues in the campaigns around family, relationships and housework, which the WLM confronted throughout the 1970s. Her memoir, *Promise of a Dream*, also offered important contextualisation of the movement's beginnings against her own personal experiences of sexism and misogyny in the 1960s and subsequent development as a socialist feminist.[30] Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, Alice Simpson and Lynne Harne, have also documented their experiences and memories of how the movement was formed and operated in the early 1970s.[31] These works offer a diverse picture of the motivations of

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[28] Michelle Roberts, *Paper Houses: A Memoir of the 70s and Beyond* (Virago, 2008).

[29] Eve Setch, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Britain, 1969-1979: Organisation, Creativity and Debate* (PhD Thesis, University Royal Holloway, 2000), p. 1.

[30] Sheila Rowbotham, *Promise of a Dream* (Penguin, 2001).

[31] Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet Freedom* (Basil Blackwell, 1987); Amanda Sebestyen (ed),*'68, '78, '88* (Prism Press, 1988).

women in joining the struggle for women's liberation and the processes of developing and publicising the movement's message in its early stages. As well as personal accounts from individual activists, a number of anthologies were produced in order to assess the ideas and theories emanating from different arms of the movement during the period. These included Michelene Wandor's edited collection, *The Body Politic: Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement in Britain 1968-1972, No Turning Back: Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement, 1975-1980* and *Sweeping Statements: Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement, 1981-83*.[32] These collections brought together seminal articles on feminist theory and campaign development, and were thus a continuum of the self-reflexivity the WLM espoused as political action.

However, having been published in the 1980s, when much of the WLM was still active, few of these works offer a historical perspective of the movement's development and broader significance.[33] Fewer still make reference to events or groups outside of large national conferences or periods of instability. Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell made this explicit in stating, 'we hope this book will be read alongside other books about the WLM, some already published, many still to be written. This is our account of what happened: it is just one side of the story'.[34] Sheila Rowbotham also acknowledged her work, *The Past is Before Us,* to be an account of ideas rather than a history of women's liberation.[35] The autobiographical elements of these works obviously elevate certain events and people in the movement's history, and have therefore, overlooked the variety and complexity of campaigns and debates at the grassroots. These key historiographical studies have then led to a hierarchical view of the movement, with the experiences of grassroots members left

[32] Michelene Wandor, *The Body Politic* (Stage 1, 1982); Feminist Anthology Collective, *No Turning Back: Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement, 1975-1980* (Women's Press, 1981); Hannah Kanter (ed*), Sweeping Statements: Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement, 1981-83* (Women's Press, 1984).

[33] Sue Bruley, 'Women's Liberation at the Grass Roots: A View from Some English Towns c.1968-c.1990', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 25, No. 5 (2016), p. 724.

[34] Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet Freedom* (Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 8.

[35] Sheila Rowbotham, *The Past is Before US: Feminism in Action since 1960* (Pandora, 1989), p. 1.

out. As will be shown throughout this thesis, this is ironic given that one of the major principles of WLM ideology, which drove the development of new political organisational methods and practices, was an opposition to hierarchy and leadership within the movement. Such accounts limit the inclusion of less prominent women or those younger, older or simply involved in different geographical places than the authors of these studies, with many ignored and their contributions and experiences overlooked. A major aim of this research therefore was to collect the personal testimony of rank-and-file women's liberation activists who were committed to fighting for women's rights at the grassroots, and who actively helped to develop the organisational structures, internal political practices and the campaign agendas of their local groups throughout the period.

Alongside self-reflexivity, a key characteristic of the WLM was an awareness of the historical significance and contribution of the women involved – an understanding that they were actively making history.[36] The movement's central ideology of the 'personal is political' has resulted in a strong sense of ownership surrounding personal involvement and the production of its histories. Many feminists were suspicious of researchers using women's lives and experiences to further their own academic careers. Sarah Browne noted David Bouchier's struggles to write his book, *The Feminist Challenge: The Movement for Women's Liberation in Britain and the United States*, as he met intense resistance from women's liberation activists when attempting to gain access to sources and materials.[37] After receiving a letter from Bouchier outlining his book proposal in 1981, the 'A Woman's Place Collective' were outraged a man was writing an 'outsiders' perspective' of the women's movement and that he had been commissioned by Macmillan press to undertake the research. They notified the broader WLM through the *Women's Information and Referral Service* (*WIRES*) and encouraged feminist activists to write to Bouchier at his base in the Department of Sociology at the University of Essex in order to press their anger

[36] Maud Bracke, *The Reinvention of the Political* (Routledge, 2014), p. 27.

[37] Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 12.

and opposition. The dominance of personal accounts may be explained then as many women guarded the movement's history during the 1980s from the academy and felt that those who were at the very centre of the activity should be the ones to record and interpret it.[38] When undertaking oral history interviews with activists from the four local groups included in this study, I found that not all activists shared this view, with many pleased to share their memories for scholarly research and keen for their involvement, experiences and communities to be included in the historical record.

Yet, this goes someway to explain why many histories of the movement have relied upon feminist publications of the 1960s and 1970s as the basis for their analysis of women's liberation.[39] Major theoretical texts are cited as the spark of the WLM both in the USA and Britain, and are used to illustrate what the authors take to be the principles of 1970s feminist thought. In light of the hostile response David Bouchier received from the WLM, he concluded:

> Betty Friedan is tired of being saddled with the responsibility for the whole Women's Liberation Movement, but her best-selling polemic, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), turned the question of woman's place into a popular public issue for the time since the 1920s.[40]

Bouchier is not alone in using these publications as the bedrock of his source material. Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, Barbara Caine, and Martin Pugh, all make reference to *The Feminine Mystique*, as well as Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* and Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex.*[41] As this research will demonstrate, the reading of feminist texts was central to the process of becoming a feminist and raising consciousness for many women, but was by no means the spark for

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[38] Eve Setch, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Britain* (PhD Thesis, University Royal of Holloway, 2000), p. 8.

[39] See David Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge* (Macmillan, 1984) p. 60.

[40] Ibid, p. 43.

[41] Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (Norton Press, 1963); Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Doubleday and Co, 1970); Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (Paladin, 1970); Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (William Morrow, 1970).

many women to join or get involved with WLM, or the most memorable or impactful experience of 1970s feminism from the perspective of the grassroots. Jane Lewis has argued that 'even after joining the WLM, the majority of women did not read the work of the established spokeswoman'.[42] To root an historical assessment of the development of feminist theory and ideas in these texts is misleading, as they do not reflect the debates and actions of the thousands of women involved in local women's liberation groups across Britain. A major theme of this research therefore, is to use personal testimony and grassroots writings to draw attention to the lesser-well known works, in an exercise in critically questioning the canon, often repeated and rehearsed without further questions, to uncover the experiences of women at the grassroots and the complexity of the operational and organisational forms of local women's liberation groups.

The first scholarly analyses of the WLM were published in the 1980s and 1990s, when national feminist campaigns had waned and the movement caught the attention of the academy. Already mentioned is David Bouchier's work, *The Feminist Challenge*, which as a comparative overview of the origins and campaigns of the movements in Britain and the USA, is central to any understanding of the development of 1970s feminism and the spread of ideas. Other assessments of the WLM emerged in general histories of British feminism in the twentieth century, in which some dedicated a chapter to the feminist movement of the 1970s. Good examples are Martin Pugh's *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1999* and Barbara Caine's *English Feminism 1780-1980*.[43] These histories are chronological accounts of women's fight to achieve equality over the last century and broadly trace the changing relationships between women, politics and society. The prominent campaigns of the movement, such as contraception and abortion and violence against women, are highlighted in order to place the WLM within a longer historical

[42] Jane Lewis, 'From Equality to Liberation' in Bart Moor-Gilbert and John Seed (eds), *Cultural Revolution?* (Routledge, 1992), p. 112.

[43] Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1999* (Palgrave Maclillan, 2002); Barbara Caine, *English Feminism* (Oxford University Press, 1997); Sue Bruley, *Women in Britain since 1900* (Macmillan, 1999).

context and connect the movement to previous 'waves' of feminist activism. However, as Jill Radford noted:

> Attempting to over-view the history of the Women's Liberation Movement in Britain is in one sense an attempt at the impossible. Women's liberation was and is a huge, amorphous and diverse movement involving many thousands of women, and there can be no one definitive history.[44]

Such histories are then useful in contextualising the WLM in a longer chronology of women's struggles for equality. Yet, such a broad perspective leaves detailed analysis limited, overlooks the vibrancy and diversity of the WLM at the grassroots in favour of a national perspective, and has created narratives of the movement's 'end' which require correction and questioning.[45] This is also evident in general histories of the 1970s such as Howard Sounes' *Seventies: The Sights, Sounds and Ideas of a Brilliant Decade* and Andy Beckett's *When the Lights Went Out*.[46] Though helpful in piecing together the broader context of the 1970s and, particularly in the case of Beckett's research, shifting the perspective away from established politics towards social and political movements, such books include only a chapter on women's liberation and trace the influence and chronology of feminism through the production and circulation of the national magazine, *Spare Rib*.[47]

Moreover, many early scholarly assessments split the women's movement sharply along liberal, socialist and radical ideological lines, with the latter two taken as constituting the more narrowly defined WLM. In such histories, socialist feminism is defined as a combined analysis of a Marxist viewpoint of economic exploitation and women's oppression, and radical feminism defined as an analysis focused on the deconstruction of

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[44] Jill Radford, 'A History of Women's Liberation Movements in Britain: A Reflective Personal History' in Gabrielle Griffin, Marianne Hester, Shirin Rai and Sasha Roseneil (eds), *Stirring It: Challenges for Feminism* (Taylor & Francis, 2003), p. 40.

[45] Anna Gurun, *Second-Wave Feminist Approaches to Sexuality* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2015), p. 7.

[46] Howard Sounes, *Seventies: The Sights, Sounds and Ideas of a Brilliant Decade* (Simon and Schuster, 2007); Andy Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out: Britain in the Seventies* (Faber and Faber, 2009).

[47] Andy Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out* (Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 17.

patriarchy through its assumed focus on political separatism, sexuality and lifestyle politics.[48] An analysis of socialist and radical feminism as distinct and opposing ideological currents within the movement obscures the fluidity of political identities and fails to acknowledge that women did not subscribe to theories in such absolute terms. As many historians of the WLM have structured their history of the movement using categories of feminist theory, they have struggled to define who should be put into which category and why; resulting in these categories becoming caricatures of two 'opposing' sides of feminism in which the most 'extreme' become representative of the whole.[49] For example, both David Bouchier and Barbara Caine define radical feminism with aspects such as working in small, leaderless groups, partaking in consciousness raising and developing women-only political structures and practices.[50] Yet this research will argue instead that these practices were not limited to the actions of radical feminists, but were central to the processes of developing new feminist organisational practices and structures in the context of the local group.

A number of historians have made inroads in challenging the division of the movement along sharp ideological lines. For example, Mary Maynard has focused on the problems of splitting the WLM into the three categorises of liberal, socialist and radical feminism. She argued that such a perspective of the movement 'is derived from white, Western and, largely English speaking, Anglo-American perspectives', as those feminists

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[48] See David Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge* (Macmillan, 1984), p. 74; Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet Freedom* (Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 27; Maggie Humm, *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory* (Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p. 232; Barbara Caine, *English Feminism* (Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 256-61

[49] Eve Setch, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Britain* (PhD Thesis, University Royal Holloway, 2000), p. 9. For example, see David Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge* (Macmillan, 1984), pp. 62-89.

[50] David Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge* (Macmillan, 1984), p. 61; Barbara Caine, *English Feminism* (Oxford University Press, 1997). p. 265. See also Sheila Rowbotham, *The Past is Before Us* (Pandora, 1989), p. 103; Susan Bassnett, *Feminist Experiences: The Women Movement in Four Cultures* (Routledge, 2014), p. 160. Eve Setch would also agree with this view. See Eve Setch, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Britain* (PhD Thesis, University Royal Holloway, 2000), p. 11.

who do not fit into one of the three categorises are overlooked and excluded.[51] For example, revolutionary feminism, which theorised political lesbianism as the adamant rejection of men and male systems in all forms, has been used to epitomise the extremist stance with which radical feminism is often equated in contrast to socialist feminism, despite being a distinct sub-group and identity found within the WLM.[52] Even in histories that acknowledge that revolutionary feminism was a distinct and separate group, definitions are conflated and radical and revolutionary feminisms are defined by the same precepts and practices.[53] Thus, the existence of different shades of opinions, organisational methods, structures and practices within the WLM are overlooked in favour of a dichotomous and over simplistic classification and categorisation. Sue Bruley has also observed that 'there has been a tendency to over-intellectualise and over-categorise the movement rather than seeing it as 'lived experience'.[54] Similarly, in Stephanie Gilmore's history of grassroots feminism in American cities, she argued against the use of rigid categorisations of feminist theory to analyse the women's movement of the 1970s:

> Most women did not have the luxuries of time or geography to decide if they were liberal or radical; instead, they were feminists in identification and/or through their own activism. While they debated and tangled over what that meant in ideology and practice, this dichotomy was not salient, and most feminists embraced a variety of strategies and pursued a number of outcomes at the same time. Boxing them into a label ignores and undoes the multiplicity and dynamism of feminist activism in the heyday of this movement for equality and liberation.[55]

Through approaching the movement through the development of the operational and organisational forms of local groups, it is argued that ideological differences were often not

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[51] Mary Maynard, 'Beyond the "Big Three": The Development of Feminist Theory into the 1990s', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (1995), pp. 262-7.

[52] Lisa Tuttle, *Encyclopedia of Feminism* (Facts on File, 1987), p. 275; Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet Freedom* (Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 22.

[53] David Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge* (Macmillan, 1984), p. 75.

[54] Sue Bruley, 'Women's Liberation at the Grass Roots', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 25, No. 5 (2016), p. 735.

[55] Stephanie Gilmore, *Groundswell: Grassroots Feminist Activism in Postwar America* (Routledge, 2013), p. 13.

very significant to women working with other activists in the same local group, who simply wanted to 'challenge 'traditional' sexist attitudes, behaviours and structures in their own communities and thereby improve the lives of women'.[56] Individual feminist activists did not necessary subscribe to one feminist theory or the other, and many felt uncomfortable with identifying as either a socialist or radical feminist during oral history interview. Rather they took a stance issue-by-issue depending on the local circumstances and organisation and practices of the local group they were involved with, and saw these categories as issues pertaining to broader debates about how best to bring about a women's revolution which were debated at national events and forums. The feminist ideas, discussions, practices and identities women developed in local groups were more fluid and complex than sticking to rigid ideological standpoints and theories. Furthermore, this research shows that these sharp definitions fail to address the spectrum of views within each political viewpoint, as not all socialist feminists were united behind a set agenda on every issue, and not all radical feminists agreed on a set theory and strategy to dismantle patriarchy. Rather, this research argues that far from division and difference being a drawback and failure of 1970s feminism, the processes of acknowledging, managing and attempting to resolve debate and disagreements between women actually helped the organisational structures, practices, strategies and targets of women's liberation groups to grow and diversify in a variety of ways, and which differed from group to group and from issue to issue in different geographical contexts across Britain.

Divisions between socialist and radical feminists have also been used, in part, to depict the movement as defunct by 1978. The explosive events of the 1978 national conference in Birmingham, in which disagreements between *some* socialist and revolutionary feminists erupted, have been cited as the culmination of a take-over of the movement by extremist radical separatist feminists. These events present a simplistic

[56] Sue Bruley, 'Women's Liberation at the Grass Roots', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 25, No. 5 (2016), p. 736.

chronology of the movement in which there was an explosion of feminist activity in the late 1960s as women were naïvely united under the broad banner of 'sisterhood', followed by an equally dramatic decline as ideological and material differences between women were too great to overcome and consequently ripped the movement apart.[57] For example, Barbara Caine argued that the term 'feminisms' came back into usage at the end of the 1970s when 'the euphoria and the sense of universal sisterhood, which many had felt during 1969, began to disappear as differences in political outlook and sexual orientation became sources of tension and conflict'.[58] The notion that radical and revolutionary feminists brought an end to the movement is accompanied by the more implicit notion that black, lesbian and working-class women also contributed to the demise of the British WLM, as once differences of race, sexuality and class were aired it 'destroyed any notion of women's cosy unity'.[59] However, this study will argue that women's liberation activists were aware of differences and divisions from the inception of their local groups, and the processes of developing the operational form and organisational practices and structures of their local groups were attempts to acknowledge, confront and manage the divisions and tensions between women throughout the period. New ideas of organisational practices, structures and sites of exchange were developed, refined, tested and debated in the context of the local group so that women with different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds and political ideologies could meet, work together, sustain group connections and communication and create alliances in order to change women's lives without always referring to rigid and opposing divisions of feminist theory and identity. The organisations, structures, practices and sites of exchange constructed were then designed to include and represent women with different views, life experiences and identities without intentionally

[57] For example, see Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet Freedom* (Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 27; David Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge* (Macmillan, 1984), p. 74; Barbara Caine, *English Feminism* (Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 256-61.

[58] Barbara Caine, *English Feminism* (Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 264.

[59] Lynne Segal, 'Jam Today: Feminist Impacts and Transformation in the 1970s' in Lawrence Black, Hugh Pemberton, Pat Thane (eds), *Reassessing 1970s Britain* (Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 160.

excluding any. This thesis will argue that local group structures, internal methods of communication and networking, the processes of organising workshop-based conferences and the organisational development of feminist campaigns, were all central to feminist methods, practices and problems of non-hierarchical and representative political organisation, and which uncovers complex processes of development and ways of working across the movement more broadly.

This chronology of 'rise and fall 'is perpetuated further by the presumption that because the women's movement generally rejected traditional political structures such as elected committees, membership lists and minute taking, it was 'structureless'. There is then an insinuation found within some of the historiography that the WLM was disorganised, unstructured and unequipped to deal with differences and debate amongst women in a practical way and so fated to falter and disband.[60] David Bouchier, for example, claimed that the WLM developed in a completely amorphous way:

> A remarkable feature of the women's movement in these early years was the way it grew and expanded without formal structures… Women simply heard about the idea and organised themselves in small groups, with the most tenuous links to the movement as a whole, no rules, no procedures and no membership lists.[61]

Similarly, Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell claimed that 'most women were confident that the movement would hang together without a coordinating committee…linked chiefly by a sense of involvement and a common cause'.[62] Their discussion of the movement's 'structurelessness' is focused on the dissolution of the Women's National Co-ordinating Committee (WNCC) in 1971. The WNCC was established at the first WLM conference and had the responsibility of communicating information between feminist groups active across Britain. The WNCC became a frontline for feminist factions in the struggle for

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[60] David Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge* (Macmillan, 1984), p. 95, See also Elizabeth Meehan 'British Feminism' in Harold Smith (ed), *British Feminism* (Aldershot, 1990), p. 194; Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet Freedom* (Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 26.

[61] David Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge* (Macmillan Press, 1984), p. 95.

[62] Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet Freedom* (Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 27.

domination of the movement and so was ultimately disbanded.[63] Although Coote and Campbell suggest that this lack of structure was a positive feature of the anti-hierarchical movement, it also suggests that there were no other organisational methods in place that allowed women to connect with each other outside of smaller, issue specific action groups. These accounts depict a movement that lacked any structural organisation due to a fear of bureaucracy, domination, 'stars', institutionalisation and the alienation of women who were not confident in challenging such hierarchies. This supposed lack of structure is thus linked to the movement's decline towards the end of the 1970s and used to evidence its failure to organise into a united movement that would attract masses of women into its ranks.

Eve Setch was the first of a younger generation of researchers to challenge these notions through reassessment of the movement's internal writings from the perspective of historian, born after the end of the WLM. Setch argued against the generic chronologies of the movement produced by scholars such as David Bouchier, Sheila Rowbotham and Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, through demonstrating that debate and difference had been a central characteristic of the LWLW from its very beginnings and which had helped the London groups to flourish and disseminate the message of the WLM. Many of the women interviewed for this research experienced periods of tension with others from their local groups, yet such differences were not insurmountable. The research presented here will demonstrate that the development of new organisational activities and political practices were central to the feminist experience precisely because structural methods were key to allowing a local group to connect, diversify and facilitate action from across the spectrum of feminist ideologies, issues and campaigns, and central to addressing and overcoming division, debate and barriers between women. In examining the organisational development of women's liberation groups between 1969 and 1984, this study then demonstrates that the movement did not simply decline due to its structural inability to

[63] David Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge* (Macmillan Press, 1984), p. 94.

contain various and competing identities and political viewpoints, but rather that the movement was never united. Local groups grew and developed their organisational practices and structures to ensure their continued influence in their local communities well beyond the time frame of this research and, while there were, of course, problems and conflicts over organisation, attempts to overcome divisions and reformulate organisational methods and practices were central to the processes of developing new and alternative feminist structures and ways of working.

As the academy's engagement with the WLM continues to gain pace, more research has emerged that challenges the stereotypes and mythologies of the feminist movement of the 1970s. Historians are beginning to engage with grassroots materials produced by local women's liberation groups. Their aim is, very broadly speaking, to uncover the experiences of the movement from the perspective of those women involved at the local level and the 'day to day' operation of women's liberation groups. As Sue Bruley has argued, 'we need to be very wary of applying any kind of national chronology as local groups often had very individual trajectories'.[64] The WLM was characterised by its diversity and variety – how one local group operated was not necessarily found elsewhere. This thesis very much aims to contribute to this more representative historiography as it uncovers the varied and diverse experiences of women involved in the practicalities of local political organisation and mobilisation, in order to reveal new insights into how feminists in different communities conceived of dynamic ways to transform future political organisation and representation and effect change in the lives of women.

Jeska Rees' work set out this agenda for a more representative history of the movement with a more balanced view of different strands of feminist theory, specifically revolutionary feminism. She argued that the notion that revolutionary feminists caused the breakdown of the WLM in Britain tends to silence and disparage feminists who were not

[64] Sue Bruley, 'Women's Liberation at the Grass Roots', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 25, No. 5 (2016), p. 735.

explicitly socialist feminists.[65] Socialist feminism has indeed been a major focus of publications on the WLM in Britain, with historians focusing on the development of socialist feminism to emphasise the differences between the British and American movements, where it is presumed race was a more prevalent issue than class. For example, Sheila Rowbotham and Lynn Segal emphasise the impact of the labour movement on the formation of the British WLM, particularly the formative influence of women workers' industrial disputes such as strike action at Ford Dagenham in 1968.[66] In order to uncover the 'voices' of revolutionary feminism then, Jeska Rees conducted oral history interviews alongside archival research. This resonates with other work conducted on the WLM that sought to represent the experiences of women who did not leave a rich body of writings or detail their involvement in memoirs.[67] For example, Sarah Browne has argued that many histories and accounts of the WLM have overlooked the work of feminist activists from Scotland, with what happened in women's liberation groups in England taken as representative for the rest of the British Isles.[68] Browne challenged the assumption that the WLM had passed Scotland by, and where it had taken hold was weak compared to the English movement. Personal testimony uncovered the fierce commitment Scottish feminists had to the movement, and how their work had influenced Scottish society, especially on the issues of abortion and violence against women. George Stevenson also sought to foreground the activities of working-class women connected to the WLM through a history of women's industrial strikes in Britain. He revealed a complex

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[65] Jeska Rees, *All the Rage: Revolutionary Feminism in England, 1977-1983* (PhD Thesis, University of Western Australia, 2007), p. 1; Jeska Rees, 'A Look Back at Anger: The Women's Liberation Movement in 1978', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 19. No. 3 (2010), p. 337.

[66] Lynne Segal, 'Jam Today' in Lawrence Black, Hugh Pemberton, Pat Thane (eds), *Reassessing 1970s Britain* (Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 154; Sheila Rowbotham, *Women in Movement* (Routledge, 1992), p. 263.

[67] For example, see Sue Bruley, 'Consciousness Raising in Clapham; Women's Liberation as "Lived Experience" in South London in the 1970s', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 22, No. 5 (2013), p. 719.

[68] Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 9. Recently published as a book, Sarah Browne, *The Women's Movement in Scotland*, (Manchester University Press, 2014).

relationship between trade union women and women's liberation activists and the intersections between class, race and gender and, in doing so, began to move the historical discourse of the WLM away from assumptions that it was simply a white and middle-class women's movement.[69] Similarly, Laurel Foster also observed the diversity of feminist voices and perspectives within the WLM through tracing the varied ways that feminists became involved with and committed to publishing, print cultures and the feminist press.[70] Activists, whose ideas and practices are often dismissed, have then become the attention of historians currently researching the WLM in Britain.

As a consequence of this more recent research agenda, the use of oral history has become central to uncovering that the WLM was relevant to many women the length and breadth of Britain.[71] Many of the 'generic' histories of the British WLM focus predominately on the London groups, national conferences and nationally organised campaigns, which have, understandably, been documented and archived.[72] Shifting the focus from national feminist politics to the experiences of grassroots feminist activists and local women's liberation groups uncovers the importance of the local context as it shaped and influenced the struggles of women's liberation groups, but also reveals the mechanisms of communication and transfer between local groups, to establish a more complex picture at the national and transnational level. This research argues that while some local groups resented the London-centric nature of the WLM, feminist activists relished the decentralised nature of the movement and the processes of reinventing methods, structures and practices of political organisation on their own terms. They concentrated on their own ways of working and the local circumstances and issues that

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[69] George Stevenson, 'The Women's Movement and "Class Struggle": Gender, Class Formation and Political Identity in Women's Strikes, 1968-1978', *Women's History Review*, Vo. 25, No. 5 (2016), p. 724.

[70] Laurel Foster, 'Spreading the Word: Feminist Print Cultures and the Women's Liberation Movement', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 25, No. 5 (2016), p. 812.

[71] Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 1.

[72] For example, see Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet Freedom* (Basil Blackwell, 1987); David Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge* (Macmillan, 1984).

impacted their daily involvement with women's liberation and on the lives of women in their communities. However, such a local perspective also presents challenges to the researcher in terms of accessing the primary sources of local groups, which are not necessarily preserved or archived.

This geographically representative history of 1970s feminism has continued to grow in studies of the WLM in the British and international contexts. As a result, a more complex historical narrative has begun to emerge. For example, Bridget Lockyer situated the activities of the Bradford Women's Liberation Group in the specific social, economic and political context of the town. She argued:

> The 1970s and early 1980s appear to be an unusually distinct time for Bradford. The radical ethos of the University in this period had perhaps attracted a certain kind of student and fostered an environment where politicisation could thrive. Similarly, Bradford's 'otherness', its status in the national imagination as the ultimate victim of industrial decline, high immigration and deprivation, may have caught the attention of those who were more politically and culturally adventurous. Once here, they collided with the city's working-class, northern and migrant cultures, and the strong women that it had produced…. They felt part of a collective political struggle and this was ultimately a very bonding experience, forged and reinforced by the social environment in Bradford and the pervasive pub and club scene.[73]

The local circumstances of this particular area of Britain meant that the women involved had distinct concerns and priorities that did not necessarily reflect the national agenda of the WLM. Sue Bruley's short comparative history of women's liberation groups in England, which focused on Bristol, Brighton, Norwich, Bolton, and Leeds/Bradford, demonstrated the 'importance of local studies to appreciate the diversity of the English Women's Liberation Movement', and sought to encourage further research into local groups.[74] Rooting historical studies of the movement in the local group perspective ultimately leads to a fuller and more complex understanding of how the WLM operated

[73] Bridget Lockyer, 'An Irregular Period? Participation in the Bradford Women's Liberation Movement', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (2013), p. 654.

[74] Sue Bruley, 'Women's Liberation at the Grass Roots', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 25, No. 5 (2016), p.723.

'day-to-day', the experiences of feminists instrumental in the organisation of groups and campaigns, and how the development of the movement played out in different local contexts. International histories of the WLM have also moved beyond the concept of national movements and have begun to analyse instead grassroots activism of rank-and-file feminists in distinct local communities.[75] For example, Constance Backhouse and David Flaherty noted that in Quebec, women's liberation activists saw their feminism as integral to their French Canadian identity.[76] Already mentioned is Stephanie Gilmore's study of American grassroots feminism. She focused on the localised agendas, issues and goals of local branches of the American National Organisation of Women in the cities of Memphis, Tennessee, Columbus, Ohio and San Francisco, California. She argued:

> Although it is easy – and important – to follow social movement change through the success and/or failure of leaders…NOW, the largest organisation during the heyday of activism in the 1970s, derived its strength in terms of numbers and financial support from women…who did the work of feminism in their hometowns around the country.[77]

Gilmore explored the contexts in which American feminists created political and cultural change in different 'fields of action', in which activists focused not on building a large power base but on providing local services for women. Jocelyn Olcott's history of revolutionary women in post-revolutionary Mexico similarly uncovered more nuances than a national story would allow:

> Research beyond Mexico City reveals the jerky, stuttering, uneven progress of provincial women's organising, and the standard periodisation falls apart in places where major events in the centre…mattered little in local politics. Moreover, women's activism responded to shifts in the local political climate.[78]

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[75] Elizabeth Armstrong, *The Retreat from Organisation* (State University of New York Press, 2002); Maud Bracke, *Women and the Reinvention of the Political* (Routledge, 2014), Introduction.

[76] Constance Backhouse and David Flaherty (eds), *Challenging Times: The Women's Movement in Canada and the U.S* (McGill, 1992), p. 5.

[77] Stephanie Gilmore, *Groundswell* (Routledge, 2013), p. 2.

[78] Jocelyn Olcott, *Revolutionary Women in Post-revolutionary Mexico* (Duke University Press, 2005), p. 24.

Sociologist Raka Ray similarly traced the political and social contexts of Bombay and Calcutta, India, to uncover how 'groups of women organise to create and sustain movements to fight for their rights and their worth'.[79] As Ray observers, Bombay and Calcutta 'are two cities in the same country, yet the ways in which activists engage women's issues, the nature of the issues, and indeed the activists' understandings of what constitutes a legitimate women's movement are fundamentally different'.[80]

The Aberdeen, Brighton and Hove, Edinburgh, and Bolton groups constitute a range of political, economic and social contexts. Furthermore, analysis of these groups demonstrate that women's activism responded to the local political and social climate; women seized local opportunities and addressed obstacles in order to ensure they challenged local causes of disempowerment in their own lives as well as the lives of the women around them. This study then will very much complement the work of historians in emphasising the importance of local women's liberation groups to the movement's narrative and our historical understanding of its complexity. However, this study, alongside offering geographical diversity and comparative analysis of local women's liberation groups, complicates and disrupts national narratives of 'structurelessness', disorganisation and division. It offers instead an alternative narrative of the complex development of new feminist organisational practices at the grassroots, how and where feminists came together to network, discuss and debate the shape, purpose and representativeness of their groups and broader movement, and how feminist attempted to overcome barriers and divisions between women through the development of feminist methods of organisation and political practices as the movement itself diversified.

Arguments around the wider political and social significance of the WLM, its historical legacies and reverberations, are only starting to be put forward in the historical literature. Recent histories of the movement focus on legacies, achievements and political

[79] Raka Ray, *Fields of Protest: Women's Movement in India* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 6.

[80] Ibid.

collaboration between the WLM and other socially progressive movements such as the Gay Liberation Movement and Trade Union Movement. For example, Elizabeth Homans evaluates the impact of the women's movement throughout the 1970s by tracing various pressures for legislative reform such as equal pay and abortion.[81] Already mentioned is George Stevenson's work on the relationship between the WLM and women workers engaged in strike action.[82] He notes that 'the direction of travel is towards inward-looking histories of the WLM that consider the interactions between women within the movement, or at the least, between those identifying as feminists if not women's liberationists'.[83] The implication here is that even recent research into the movement is too internally focused and has failed to explore the movement's wider significance and how it impacted on social, cultural and political change more broadly in British society.

Furthermore, the notion that the WLM was 'structureless' has prevailed in recent historical assessments of the WLM. For example, Sarah Browne noted that 'attempts to avoid structure and hierarchy represented a radical departure from the earlier women's movement… it has been widely recognised that wherever the WLM flourished it was generally inchoate in nature, preferring to give every woman a chance to influence the direction of the movement'.[84] Similarly, Anna Gurun, in her comparison of the British and French movements, argued, 'in comparison to first-wave feminism, there was a lack of widespread international structures…within women's liberation. It also arguably contributed to the limited direct contact between the British and French movement, as there were few opportunities to meet feminists from other countries'.[85] Sue Bruley has also

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[81] Elizabeth Homans, *Visions of Equality: Women's Rights and Political Change in 1970s Britain* (PhD Thesis, Prifysgol Bangor University, 2015).

[82] Also see Jonathan Moss, *Women, Workplace Militancy and Political Subjectivity in Britain, 1968-1985* (PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow, 2015).

[83] George Stevenson, 'The Women's Movement and 'Class Struggle', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 25, No. 5 (2016), p. 724.

[84] Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 8.

[85] Anna Gurun, *Second-Wave Feminist Approaches to Sexuality* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2015), p. 34.

commented, 'there was no central organisation and few national structures… local WLM groups had an informal communication network…local groups very much 'did their own thing'…. women's liberation [was] a collective activity which firmly rejected any concept of leaders…'[86] As a result, the complex and varied processes and experiences of developing new feminist methods of organisation and political practices, the problems and tensions which arose over such forms and debates, and the impact of feminist political organisation on the lives of the women involved and British society more broadly, remain overlooked in historical understandings of the British WLM. Nicholas Owen's examination of the relationship between the WLM and male supporters in the Men Against Sexism Movement is an exception. He hints of the feminist movement's reinvention of political organisation, structure and practice:

> In common with many of the 'new social movements' of the period, the Women's Liberation Movement was strongly committed to organisational autonomy and self-reliance, in the belief that the demands of oppressed groups should be formulated and presented directly by the oppressed themselves rather than made on their behalf by others.[87]

However, Owen stops short of an examination of such feminist methods of political organisation and structure, internal political practices and cross-movement alliances. This thesis will argue that the organisational structures and methods of local women's liberation groups should never be assumed. For example, women-only political organisation and the exclusion of men was not necessarily a given in every local group. Feminist activists questioned and reappraised their organisational policies on the inclusion of men in specific circumstances and situations such as the presence of male children in Women's Centres, whether to allow men to show support on mass marches and demonstrations and feminist

[86] Sue Bruley, 'Women's Liberation at the Grass Roots', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 25, No. 5 (2016), p. 740.

[87] Nicholas Owen, 'Men and the 1970s British Women's Liberation Movement', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 56. No. 3 (2013), pp. 801-26.

involvement and cooperation with mixed sex organisation such as the National Abortion Campaign (NAC).

As Stephanie Gilmore has written, 'if we are to have a feminist future we need a feminist past upon which to stand and build'.[88] This thesis aims to reveal the complexity of the operational and organisational forms of the women's movement as a useable past – how it was shaped and directed by local groups and individual women from the grassroots, how it developed and changed structurally over the course of the period, and how the movement was able to mobilise on numerous issues to better the lives of women, whilst transforming the personal lives of the women involved. Historical assessment of the WLM's legacy and achievement does indeed remain work for the future and will require much more research to explore the numerous and diverse arms of the movement, and ways in which it impacted British society. Yet, this thesis argues that internal assessments of the movement are still incomplete as the workings of the movement and the experiences of activists are not yet fully uncovered. The focus here then, is on the detail of local women's liberation groups as the basis for re-considering wider themes and theses of the operation and organisation of the British WLM.

1.2 Themes and Issues

The first and most significant theme of this research then is to demonstrate that WLM offered a range of organisational methods and political practices. In doing so, it challenges historical understandings of the WLM in Britain, which suggest that because the movement rejected traditional modes of political organisation and representation, it was 'structureless'. Throughout this thesis, the WLM is shown to have gone through varied organisational and structural changes as the movement and its membership itself developed. Across the WLM there were processes of operational and organisational development, which were more accommodating of the diverse opinions, ideological

[88] Stephanie Gilmore, *Groundswell* (Routledge, 2013), p. 19.

positions and socio-economic divisions found within the local groups, than many histories acknowledge in painting a simplified picture of a 'structureless' national feminist movement. The innovation of new feminist non-hierarchical methods of political organisation, internal political practices and campaigning strategies were central in the creation and expression of feminist politics and ideology, and reveal how activists envisioned political transformations would occur and how new social relations would work in practice. The problems that arose over the practical implementation of these structures, practices and cross-movement alliances, and the attempts to solve and mange debate and disagreements, are also shown to have been a significant part and purpose of feminist organisation and its subsequent development. To understand how women came together in their local communities to create a sense of group belonging, confront and manage divisions and differences between women, and how local groups approached alliances and cooperation with outside groups, organisations and sympathisers, is at the heart of this study. I explore how each group theorised and implemented its own organisational methods and internal political practices, how local groups developed their own sites of exchange as central meetings spaces and opportunities for group working, practice and development, such as the Women's Centre, Women's Studies classroom or Women's Health Clinic, and how feminists conceived of and developed campaign organisation and mobilisation strategies to create feminist change at the grassroots throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

The second major theme of this research then is to re-position the broader chronology of the WLM. As mentioned, the WLM has tended to be depicted as a sudden rise of feminist activism and referred to as the 'second wave'. It will be argued here that not only did the movement have its roots, foundations and much in common with the campaigning agendas of earlier women's groups,[89] but when approached from the

[89] Jane Lewis, 'From Equality to Liberation' in Bart Moor-Gilbert and John Seed (eds), *Cultural Revolution?* (Routledge, 1992), p. 97; Barbara Caine, *English Feminism* (Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 222.

perspective of feminist political organisation and internal political practices, the WLM arose as part of a longer historical context and in reaction to the political organisation, methods and cultures of 1960s radicalism, and women's experiences of marginalisation and sexism within those groups. The WLM arose in the late 1960s and spread across Britain in the early 1970s then as politically consciousness women craved alternative, non-hierarchical and collective political organisation, which was centred on personal experience and feelings of oppression. Researchers in the USA and Western Europe have also focused on the 'end' of the WLM in 1978. The late seventies is often depicted as the moment when the movement fragmented due to the apparent emergence of 'difference' between women and sub-groups who emphasised different ideological standpoints, socio-economic backgrounds, race and sexualities to undermine universal 'sisterhood'. This, intensified by the movement's supposed inability to contain and hear these diverse standpoints due to a lack of organisation and structure, led to the decline of the movement, with feminist activists moving to a focus on single-issue campaigns with no broader movement to refer back to. For example, Sheila Rowbotham commented that by the late 1970s the WLM had become 'acrimonious and divided'.[90] Many historians, such as Lynne Segal and Martin Pugh, have focused on the year 1978 and argued that the 'abandonment' of the national conferences after fierce arguments and confrontations between feminists signalled that differences and division were insurmountable and irreparable.[91] This research offers new insights into the nature of the WLM. It is argued throughout that difference between women was acknowledged, discussed and confronted from the inception of grassroots groups across Britain, in an attempt to manage and overcome ideological and material barriers between women. The organisation, structures, practices and sites of exchange of local women's liberation groups were then invented and

[90] Sheila Rowbotham, *Women in Movement* (Routledge, 1992), p. 283.

[91] Lynne Segal, *Is the Future Female?: Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism* (Virago, 1987), p. 59; Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 331.

developed precisely because of the diversity and difference of group membership from the very beginnings of the WLM in Britain. Moreover, this thesis challenges the notion that because there were no further annual conferences after 1978, the movement declined thereafter. Rather, it is argued throughout, that local groups developed their organisational and operational forms and strategies in a variety of ways and fields of active campaigning. Far from fragmentation and single-issue campaigns being a negative development of the feminist movement and reason for general decline, this research argues that fragmentation was a constructive development linked to the organisational and operational development of local groups in representing, linking and communicating between feminist activists, in which feminist activism proliferated and women's liberation ideas and ways of working were introduced to larger audiences in local communities.

The third major theme is the widespread appeal of the WLM across 1970s Britain and the complexity of and variation in how local groups operated and developed. Many histories have approached 1970s feminism as a national movement with a focus on feminist campaigns and events, in order to trace what are considered as the major ideas and targets of the WLM.[92] By approaching the WLM from the perspective of local groups, this research reveals how activists at the grassroots theorized and actualised solutions to issues they faced on a daily basis and how the social, cultural and political contexts of their locations shaped the ideas, theories and practical implementation of feminist political organisation and practices. This thesis argues that the broad approach and ideas of each group to political organisation were often similar, in that they strived to create open, non-hierarchical and collective structures, but that there were frequently differences in the implementation of ideas and how the internal political practices of the WLM, such as

[92] Jeska Rees, Sarah Browne, Bridget Lockyer and Sue Bruley would agree with the view that the WLM is best approached from the local perspective. See, Jeska Rees, *All the Rage* (PhD Thesis, University of Western Australia, 2007), Introduction; Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), Introduction; Bridget Lockyer, 'An Irregular Period?', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (2013), p. 654; Sue Bruley, 'Women's Liberation at the Grass Roots', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 25, No. 5 (2016), p. 735.

consciousness raising, were used to bring activists together to share personal experiences, ideas and debate. This study on feminist organisation in Aberdeen, Brighton and Hove, Edinburgh, and Bolton explores what women were doing and thinking and how they practically fought for women's liberation in different kinds of communities: a small, geographical isolated city in the north of Scotland, a seaside town known for its progressivism and radicalism on the south coast of England, the Scottish capital, and a de-industrialised former mill town in northern England. The organisational development of these groups was also tied as much to personal experience and individual political trajectories as to the local contexts in which activists operated. Oral history interviews illustrate that the changing ideas, needs and priorities of the women involved drove the development of the operational form and organisational structures of these groups over the course of the period, and ground this research on the organisational development of the movement from the viewpoint of grassroots members.

1.3 Sources and Methods

1.3.1 Time Frame and Local Group Approach

The time frame of 1968 to 1984 was chosen, as it was the most intense, provocative and consequential period of women's liberation campaigning in Britain. As mentioned, '1968' is important in any understanding of the movement as it is widely recognised as a turning point in the articulation of radical politics with the 'new social movements' providing many women with vital political awareness and experience. To fully understand how groups formed, it is crucial to trace the political trajectories of women and the moments that encouraged them to join the WLM. All of the groups, campaigns and conferences explored in what follows, were formed and organised throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The chronology of this thesis was also chosen to further challenge the standard periodisation of women's political activity and in particular, that of the women's movement in Britain. Even in recent accounts of the movement that challenge the notion of 'waves', 1979 is

emphasised as the 'end' of the movement in some way. For example, Eve Setch, Sarah Browne and Jeska Rees limited their analysis of the movement to 1979 when the movement allegedly moved into a more 'divisive' phase with single-issue campaigns taking precedence in the activities of feminist activists. However, historians are beginning to identify feminist activity beyond 1980. For example, Maud Bracke argued of the Italian WLM, '1978 did not constitute the end of this phase of feminist politics. Although as a movement it was reduced in size and suddenly found itself in a hostile, repressive environment, campaigning was continued, and debate flourished for another couple of years'.[93] This thesis will also chart the WLM beyond 1980. No longer labelled as the WLM as it was known in the 1970s, feminist activists did not abandon their politics. Instead they continued to organise and support women in their local communities. By 1984, the peak of feminist campaigns had passed, with many local groups no longer meeting with any regularity and a cooling period of feminist conferences and events. As shown throughout, many feminist activists moved into different life stages in the early 1980s and had to balance activism with family and work responsibilities. Local activism subsequently developed into more sporadic instances of action rather than a dedicated feminist group or movement. Consequently, this date is an appropriate end point for this study on feminist operational and organisational activity.

The WLM was not a monolith organisation with a set agenda, but rather a network of groups loosely connected by the seven demands. Local activism embedded in local conditions was a characteristic of the 1970s-feminist experience. A case study approach was used to structure and conduct this research in order to further complicate and explicate a new historical understanding of the organisational development and structure of the movement throughout this period. Jill Radford drew attention to the national focus of WLM history, arguing that 'local, autonomous women's liberation groups, great in number

[93] Maud Bracke, *Women and the Reinvention of the Political* (Routledge, 2014), p, 14.

and diversity, have almost been written out of women's liberation histories'.[94] Yet, the local approach adopted here does not ignore the national or international context of the WLM. Rather, each local group acts as a lens on to the methods of 1970s feminist organisation and the development of alternative political practices that were characteristics of the movement more broadly. Therefore, each case study illuminates different forms of feminist organisation, from small feminist networks to national conferences, and thus, demonstrates the varied development and vibrant energy of the movement. Moreover, a major consideration of this research is how and when local groups interacted and collaborated nationally or were influenced internationally.

The emphasis here remains on the internal workings of women's liberation groups to assess feminist organisational activities, and the local political and cultural contexts that shaped the specific workings and structures of individual groups. The chosen groups were identified through national publications, such as *Spare Rib* and *WIRES*, which reported on local group activity. These particular groups were also chosen because of their geographical spread covering the length and breadth of Britain and the intensity of their activities. Moreover, the groups were chosen because they were distinct and different from each other in important ways – not only in terms of forms of organisation, but also in terms of the socio-cultural background of activists, their priorities and interests in specific issues and campaigns, and the individual political trajectories of the groups over the course of the period. Importantly, a contributing factor in the final selection of groups was also the availability and accessibility of written sources in private and public hands, and the willingness of potential interviewees to discuss their personal life stories and experiences of local group development and campaign activity throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

[94] Jill Radford, 'A History of Women's Liberation Movements' in Gabriele Griffin, Marianne Hester, Shirin Rai and Sasha Roseneil (eds), *Stirring It* (Taylor and Francis, 2003), pp. 43-4.

1.3.2 Documentary Evidence

Documentary evidence from the dozens of national, regional and local WLM publications was an excellent source of information regarding the genesis of feminist ideas, groups and campaigns. These included journals, pamphlets, leaflets and letters, published and unpublished. Integral to this thesis are the internal newsletters of WLM groups: *The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Newsletter, The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* and *The Bolton Women's Liberation Newsletter.* Unfortunately, there were no available copies of *The Aberdeen Women's Liberation Newsletter* in archives or in the personal collections of interviewees from the Aberdeen Women's Liberation Group. These internal writings provide important dates, information on events and detail the discussions and disagreements ongoing in local groups during the period. As many women's liberation groups were small, with women well aware of who was involved and with personal connections and networks of central importance to group connectedness, it is no surprise that much of the material included in the newsletters is undated, written under a pseudonym or has an anonymous author or only a first name attached. Where possible dates and authorship have been included. There is obviously more material gathered from larger groups such as the Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group, than smaller groups such as Aberdeen. The material used has been sourced from a number of archives and local repositories, as well as from the personal collections of some of the women interviewed. However, the bulk of material consulted is located at the women's libraries: The Women's Library London, The Glasgow Women's Library, The Feminist Archive North in Leeds and The Feminist Archive South in Bristol, all have large collections on the women's movement, much remaining uncatalogued. Conference papers from throughout the 1970s and early 1980s also provide fascinating insight into movement discussions, and offer detail on how operational and organisational form was approached and conceptualised.

Due to the emphasis of the WLM on the 'personal is political', in that personal experience was the foundation of political consciousness, analysis and action, it is no surprise that these written records also contain highly personal accounts of women's experiences, feelings, relationships and opinions on issues that faced the movement. As Jeska Rees argued, it is therefore imperative that researchers treat the written records with respect and sensitivity 'by acknowledging the personal investment contained in the documents and political imperatives that gave rise to their existence in the first place'.[95] Some of these writings were defined as women-only, in that the authors specified only women were to read their personal opinions, reflections and experiences shared in the pages of movement journals and group newsletters. Therefore, I have chosen to paraphrase rather than quote directly from such material in efforts to respect and uphold the political ideologies of the authors and ensure their words are not directly read by men.[96] Moreover, Maud Bracke argues for careful reading of, and consideration of the fact, that such sources were produced in an atmosphere of self-narration in which women were aware of the movement's historical significance and publication was part of a 'conscious work of creating history'.[97] Though this may not be the case with grassroots writings intended for internal circulation amongst the members of the local group, this is the case with nationally circulated journals and conference papers which were written purposely for broad impact and influence. This thesis thus combines the use of archival material with oral history to ensure that space is given to the individual and personal, whilst tracing local group organisation and development.

[95] Jeska Rees, '"Are you a lesbian?"': Challenges in Recording and Analysing the Women's Liberation Movement in England', *Historical Workshop Journal*, Issue. 69 (2010), p. 177.

[96] Ibid, p. 185.

[97] Maud Bracke, *Women and the Reinvention of the Political* (Routledge 2014), p. 28.

1.3.3 Oral History Interviews

Seeking on the one hand to explore how local women's liberation groups operated, and on the other to recover and give space to the feelings and experiences of women that are often omitted from the written record, oral history testimonies offer privileged insight into both.[98] Julie Stephens argued:

> While the written record tends to skirt around the emotional dimensions of feminist activism, oral accounts frequently focus on feelings and emotions and provide a significant alternative, affective history of the women's movement… listening to oral accounts, where the emotional intensity of feminist recollection is so palpable, a very complex history of the Women's Liberation Movement emerges.[99]

Recent research projects have begun the ambitious task of creating a library of oral histories from and of the movement – notably the Leverhulme Trust funded project 'Sisterhood and After', conducted by the University of Sussex and the Women's Library, and curated by the British Library, whose aim was to create an extensive oral history archive of the lives of feminists of the 1970s. The project interviewed 50 women from the movement who were influential in their field of activism.[100] There have also been a number of academic studies conducted on the basis of oral history testimonies, as researchers continue to strive to collate a more representative body of personal accounts of the movement.[101] The oral testimonies conducted for this research are a contribution to this more inclusive historical narrative, which includes the voices of women from outside major metropolitan centres of feminist activity and from a variety of ages and socio-economic backgrounds. All the interviews conducted for this project were in-depth covering all aspects of the interviewee's life, from childhood to the discovery of feminism,

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[98] David Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge* (Macmillan, 1984), p. 60.

[99] Julie Stephens, 'Our Remembered Selves: Oral History and Feminist Memory', *Oral History*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (2010), pp. 89-90.

[100] https://www.bl.uk/sisterhood. Accessed April 17, 2017.

[101] Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009); Bridget Lockyer, 'An Irregular Period?', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (2013); Jeska Rees, *All the Rage* (PhD Thesis, University of Western Australia, 2007).

from what activities they were involved with to the impact of feminism on their personal lives.[102] Therefore, it is imperative that these highly personal and emotive accounts are handled with care and preserved for future researchers in appropriate archives. I will be depositing interviews and transcripts with the Glasgow Women's Library and the Feminist Archive North.

A number of methodological and theoretical issues were raised by the use of oral history throughout this research. Firstly, what form the interviews would take was an early consideration of the research process. To encourage a degree of spontaneity and naturalness in how women recalled their memories and experiences, and allow them space to tell their stories, a loose and flexible approach was adopted to conduct the interviews. Stephen Caunce argued that the use of a formal structure and rigid set of questions could stifle how interviewees recall their own memories and experiences.[103] Alessandro Portelli also noted that '…rigidly structured interviews may exclude elements whose experience or relevance were previously unknown to the interviewer and not contemplated in the question schedule'.[104] To avoid this, a loose structure was used in all interviews in which broad themes for discussion were identified rather than a questionnaire. Moreover, by adopting a loose structure much of what was discussed during interview was directed by what was important to the women who had been involved, and did not simply confirm my previous frame of reference or 'what [I the] researcher wanted to hear', an approach that would yield a conversation not just a response to questions.[105]

While oral history can validate the experiences of women through listening to and recording their personal stories, the oral history process is not a collaboration of equal partners. Penny Summerfield argued that 'the researcher nurtures, assists and validates the

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[102] Margaretta Jolly, 'Sisterhood and After: Individualism, Ethics and an Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement', *Social Movement Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2012), pp. 211-26.

[103] Stephen Caunce, *Oral History and the Local Historian* (Harlow, 1994), p. 148.

[104] Alessandro Portelli, 'What makes Oral History Different' in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (ed), *The Oral History Reader* (Third Edition, Routledge, 2015), p. 55.

[105] Ibid.

narrator's interpretative role, but ultimately the work of interpretation and analysis, and the time and skills necessary to do it, are her own'.[106] Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai also raise similar ethical problems as they acknowledge that 'the scholar/interviewer typically returns to her life and her scholarly enterprise, having transformed women's words into various written forms, but having also walked away – usually for good – from the situation that brought her to her subject in the first place'.[107] Ultimately, it was my interpretation that assumed precedence in my writing. However, every attempt was made to maintain open and collaborative relationships with the women interviewed and treat their personal testimonies with respect. Any desire on behalf of the women interviewed to edit the transcripts was resisted to ensure as full account of their testimony as possible – though interviewees were invited to reflect on what was discussed and contact me should they have any hesitation about how their memories would be used. Moreover, interviewees could place restrictions on interviews with some expressing a desire to be consulted before their testimonies are included in publications.

The transcription process also posed ethical issues over who had power and control over this research. Jeska Rees observed that 'the process of transcribing is one in which the researcher inevitably employs techniques of interpretation that leave an indelible imprint on the transcript, a product not of the person speaking but of the person transcribing'.[108] To minimise my impact on the transcript and to ensure the documents produced were as true a reflection as possible of what was actually said during the interviews, every effort was made to include the idiosyncrasies of speech with hesitations, repetitions, laughter and pauses included. The transcripts will also be available to read alongside copies of the recordings to ensure the spoken elements of the participants' narratives remain central to any future interpretation.

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[106] Penny Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives: Discourse and Subjectivity in Oral Histories of the Second World War* (Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 25.

[107] Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (eds), *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (Routledge, 1991), pp. 2-3.

[108] Jeska Rees, '"Are you a lesbian?"', *Historical Workshop Journal*, Issue. 69 (2010), p. 184.

My control over the historical discourse was also evident from the very beginnings of the research process through the initial selection of interviewees. My primary aim was to record the testimony of those involved in the groups analysed as case studies, rather than a 'representative' sample of feminist activists from different socio-economic backgrounds, age or race demographics. Margaretta Jolly argued for the selection of interviewees along campaign or group lines as 'for one thing many campaigns and organisations are under-researched, particularly as they played out across the four UK countries and regions…we also believe that selection by [group] involvement reflects a more material concept of history'.[109] Interviewees were identified initially through names and addresses included in WLM publications and some through affiliation with the feminist archives – from there a snowball effect often occurred in which interviewees provided contact details for other women who had been active in their particular group and so on. In total, twenty oral history testimonies of feminists were collected: four from the Aberdeen Women's Liberation Group, five from the Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group, five from the Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group and six from the Bolton Women's Liberation Group. The interviewees were mainly between 50 and 65 years old and had been active in groups and campaigns for at least some part of the 1970s and 1980s. The biographical notes in the appendix provide detailed information on their lives before, during and after women's liberation and the campaigns and activities they were involved with.

Furthermore, priority was given to women whose testimonies have not yet been included in the historical narrative in order to present a more varied picture of the WLM. However, a minority of women had been previously interviewed for other academic and commemorative projects. As a result, some interviewees had already constructed a narrative around what they considered to be important and significant about their involvement and, moreover, what I as a researcher would find interesting. However, even

[109] Margaretta Jolly, 'Sisterhood and After', *Social Movement Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2012), p. 215.

for women who had not previously participated in oral histories, it was evident that parts of their stories were not being told for the first time. Penny Summerfield observed that:

> …Women have everyday experience of a variety of public/private interviews. They see interviews on television, hear them on the radio, experience medical interviews, they are interviewed when claiming benefits, applying for further or higher education, for jobs, at confession if they are Catholics, and may have participated in a number of different types of therapeutic interview. The nature and extent of self-exposure in the different interview modes listed above varies, but they all offer models for autobiographical telling… women come to oral history interviews with experience of a range of confessional occasions from which they are likely to select a model that seems most appropriate and with which they are most comfortable in the circumstances.[110]

The memories of the movement shared during interview were deeply personal moments in which consciousness was shifted and identities formed. It stands to reason then that some of these experiences will have been previously shared with friends and family and retold time and again over the course of their lives, though some were shared for the first time during interview. The interviewees were also made aware of the broad themes of my research, that of operational and organisational activities and development, and their experiences of such within local groups. Therefore, all had an idea of the scope of topics I wanted to cover during interview and thus had time to prepare.

Interviewing an individual to recover aspects of the 'collective' also posed theoretical issues to consider during the interpretation process. Women presented differing accounts of what happened and when, therefore, where possible, personal testimony has been corroborated with documentary evidence. However, as Margaretta Jolly argued, 'the first and broadest justification [for interviewing the individual] is that the individual's story is not necessarily individualist…. What had seemed to be the individual housewife or tomboy's problem with no name, through the accumulation of personal stories, became the grounds for a new conception of power relations'.[111] Interviewing individual women to

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[110] Penny Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives* (Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 30.

[111] Margaretta Jolly, 'Sisterhood and After', *Social Movement Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2012), p. 219.

record experiences and memories of the movement more broadly can be seen as a continuation of the 'personal is political' ideology – the individual feelings and experiences of the women involved were inextricably linked to the collective consciousness of the broader WLM and, therefore, when individual personal testimony cannot be corroborated it is not any less significant.

This significance of individual testimony is the *meaning* of remembered events.[112] Central to understanding the meaning of personal testimony then is the influence of subjectivity. Alessandro Portelli noted that a close reading of subjectivity 'tells us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing and what they now think they did'.[113] It is important to uncover how and why women construct their historical memory and public selves in relation to dominant public discourses and narratives – taking care to consider 'not only the voice that speaks for itself, but also the voices that speak to it'.[114] The concept of composure is a useful way of understanding this process. Firstly, an interviewee composes their past experiences and memories of feeling into a narrative with which they feel comfortable. Secondly, composure occurs when participants attempt to fit their life-story into broader public discourses and understandings of historical events.[115]

There were a number of 'voices' evident in my oral history interviews indicative of the range of ways in which feminists had tried to fit or 'compose' their individual experiences and feelings into dominant understandings of the movement more generally. Many of the interviewees' narratives were impacted by collective memories of the 'euphoric' beginnings of the movement, specifically the discovery of 'sisterhood' and excitement of establishing feminist networks and cultures in the early 1970s. Interestingly,

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[112] Alessandro Portelli, 'What makes Oral History Different' in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (ed), *The Oral History Reader* (Third Edition, Routledge, 2015), p. 67.

[113] Ibid.

[114] Penny Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives* (Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 15.

[115] Penny Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure: Creating Narratives of the Self in Oral History Interviews, *The Journal of the Social History Society*, Vol. 1, Issue. 1 (2004), p. 19.

other interviewees constructed their historical self as naïve, unorganised and questioned the achievements of the WLM more broadly. These women tended to have established professional careers and were clearly influenced by public discourses surrounding the legacy of 1970s feminism and the campaigns still being pushed forward by feminist groups and campaigns. As Maud Bracke has observed, 'oral historians are aware that people remember in and through the present, one's understanding of her current position in the world informs the narrative of the past in crucial ways'.[116] All the interviewees at various points during interview drew connections between their past activism to their current situations, whether professionally or personally, in order to stress how they understood and valued their past experiences. It is important to note that some of the women interviewed are also professional academics working within the field of oral history. Penny Summerfield, Esther Breitenbach and Sally Munt were well versed in the theory, practice and potential uses of personal testimony, and so may have been more aware or more guarded than others in what they chose to discuss during recording.

Many of the women interviewed displayed uneasiness and, at times, an unwillingness to discuss experiences that did not fit with dominant understandings of the movement within feminist networks or public discourses. What women chose not to discuss and therefore the 'silences' evident in my oral history interviews reveal tensions around differences between women, especially class, family background and life experience. Some women found discussing class difference to be a painful experience, whilst others were suspicious of my agenda and redirected the interview on to a topic they thought most reflective of their experience of the movement. Some women were also adamant of the movement's independence as a social and political force and so were dismissive of topics that focused on the movement's collaboration with other groups as integral to the development of feminist organisation and methods of political activism.

[116] Maud Bracke, *Women and the Reinvention of the Political* (Routledge, 2014), p. 24.

Rather than press these issues and potentially create conflict, I allowed the interviewee the space to discuss their perspective on such issues.

It is also important to consider the impact of intersubjectivity on the interviews conducted for this research – how the relationship established between myself as a researcher and the women interviewed as the researched, shaped the narratives collected.[117] As Lynn Abrams has noted, feminist historians want to create an interview environment in which women can speak for themselves and permit the expression of 'honest voices'.[118] Oral history testimony then is 'created in relationships, between the interviewer and interviewee, and between memory sources and history makers'.[119] Katherine Fobear observed that 'questioning is never one-sided, as much as oral historians may be assessing and questioning the narrator, the narrator is also questioning and assessing the interviewer'.[120] Without doubt my own culture, socio-economic background and political ideologies and standpoint, and the interviewees' perception of such, determined the degree of trust and confidence they had in me to collect their testimony.

Firstly, it is inevitable that my being a woman facilitated a sense of shared empathy and understanding of the personal and, at times, painful experiences of womanhood interviewees reflected upon. In most cases, this helped to establish rapport and encouraged interviewees to be open and willing to reflect upon intimate details of their lives. Moreover, all of the women interviewed for this project assumed I was a feminist, with many going further to assume I was an activist in the current women's movement without any declaration from myself of my political viewpoint or involvement. This often led to questions about my activism and what younger feminists were interested in. Again, this

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[117] This issue has been examined by many oral history theorists. For example, see Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (Routledge, 2010), pp. 54-78; Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (Third Edition, Routledge, 2015), pp. 7-9.

[118] Lynn Abrams, *Oral History* (Routledge, 2010), p. 72.

[119] Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (Third Edition, Routledge, 2015), p. 7.

[120] Katherine Fobear, '"Do You Understand?" Unsettling Interpretative Authority in Feminist Oral History', *Journal of Feminist Scholarship*, Issue. 10, No. 6 (2016), p. 68.

sense of affinity contributed to gaining trust and conducting fruitful interviews. However, as Margaretta Jolly has noted, such a strong sense of commonality could have potentially led to a situation in which women revealed more personal information than they retrospectively felt comfortable with.[121] To minimise this, I have handled personal testimony with the upmost care and respect; for example, names of third persons discussed during interview have been changed or redacted.

Furthermore, intersubjectivity impacted the interview process through my perceived connections to academic feminism. My position as a researcher of feminist history affiliated with the University of Glasgow, coupled with the involvement of my supervisors Professor Lynn Abrams and Dr Maud Bracke, gave a degree of authority to the project. Many women were also pleased that this project had been given funding by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, which instilled a sense of pride and validation of involvement with the movement. However, for a minority of women, the academic nature of this research was a concern. As Joan Sangster observed of her work, and is true of this research, 'I gained access to women's memories not as a friend, but as a professional historian'.[122] Some women were suspicious of my intentions and motivations in using their memories to further my own career, a clear link to the politicisation and ownership of women's history emanating from the WLM.

Another major factor was found in the generational difference between the interviewees and myself. As I was significantly younger than the participants and less politically experienced than them, many women went into great detail and explanation of feminist organisation, political practices and events. Some women explicitly asked my age, I was between twenty-three and twenty-five during the collection of testimony, which acted to confirm my non-involvement and distance from the WLM and subsequently led to fuller interviews. Sarah Browne noted that as a young woman interviewer, there was on

[121] Margaretta Jolly, 'Sisterhood and After', *Social Movement Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2012), p. 217.

[122] Joan Sangster, 'Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1994), p. 11.

occasion, a mother/daughter dimension to recordings.[123] Such a dimension can be beneficial to creating trusting relationships in which women are passing down knowledge and information to the next generation of feminists rather than simply participating to simply record their stories.

The final impact of intersubjectivity on the oral history interviews conducted for this research was that of my regional identity. It is fairly obvious from my accent and dialect that I am from the North West of England, specifically Manchester. This had a particular impact on the interviews with women involved with the Bolton Women's Liberation Group. Elizabeth Perry, for example, was delighted when she realised '[I] was from round here' on the day of the interview, as prior communication had been conducted via my Glasgow University email address, and clearly made her feel more relaxed and at ease. Throughout the interview, she also referred frequently to my assumed understanding and knowledge of the social and religious conservatism of the area and gave open and raw reflection on the personal difficulties of operating in the political atmosphere of northern England. My regional identity also clearly impacted on interviews beyond that of women from the North West of England. Many of the Scottish based feminists went to extra lengths than perhaps they would have to a Scottish interviewer in order to give detail on the unique legal contexts in which they operated, and Brighton-based feminists stressed the importance of the liberal and radical culture of the town to their feminist experience – something which they presumed to be juxtaposed to the social and cultural climate of the north of England and revealed their presumptions about my worldview.

Ultimately, in all interviews, I carried the identity of a stranger in which the narrative delivered was a 'performance'. Though most interviews were conducted in the participants' homes in order to promote a relaxed and organic conversational style of

[123] Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 36.

interview, it was evident that women were aware of the public dimension of the recordings. Interestingly, Penny Summerfield observed of her interviews for *Women's Wartime Lives*:

> Our interviewees' assumption that they were delivering their stories into the public domain was indicated in part by the preparations they had made, and in part by the way they spoke. There was evidence that respondents had tidied and cleaned parts of the house used for the interview, that they had dressed smartly as if for a relatively formal occasion and most of them had prepared refreshments.[124]

Despite Penny Summerfield's extensive experience of oral history and expertise in the theory and practice, during the interview on her involvement with the Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group, and my subsequent visit to work with her personal archive collection, she reflected that she too had tidied and prepared the house, offered refreshments and was very hospitable during my visits as part of a 'performance'. Although the women of the WLM interviewed for this project and myself shared numerous commonalities, it must be assumed that there was some hesitation around very intimate details and experiences that would not be shared with a stranger and, therefore, such boundaries and private memories were respected.

Despite such methodological and theoretical issues, this thesis ultimately aims to connect women's liberation activists' personal memories and feelings of women's liberation groups, to the operational and organisational activities and development of the WLM more broadly. In doing so, this research offers new insights on how feminist activists of the 1970s theorised and envisioned political change, the problems and tensions which subsequently arose and the impact on their personal lives more broadly. To demonstrate this, we must now turn to the first case study on the operational form and organisational activities of the WLM in Britain: The Aberdeen Women's Liberation Group.

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[124] Penny Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives* (Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 22.

Chapter Two
The Aberdeen Women's Liberation Group: Feminist Networks and Personal Connections

The Aberdeen Women's Liberation Group was formed in 1971 as female university students strived to establish a local network of feminist activists committed to the demands and principles of the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM).[1] The Aberdeen group was a small amorphous network of around thirty women with few defined or formal organisational structures and as such epitomised the decentralised philosophy of the WLM, which has come to characterise the movement as largely 'structureless' in historical accounts.[2] Yet in Aberdeen, the rejection of defined political organisation and structures was a process in which women sought out new methods of coordination for the small local group, and new methods for debate and wider impact. Feminist activists pursued an informal, non-hierarchical group cohesion in which coordination and organisation would occur through personal contacts, friendships and a wider network of 'sisterhood'. Personal networks were the central sites of exchange in which feminist activists came together to share experiences of sexism, formulate new ways to challenge the power relationships between men and women in all aspects of private and public life, and importantly where feminists developed personal connections with other politically like-minded women. As such, histories of the British WLM have depicted the small local group as an intimate collective space in which women discovered new supportive friendships as feelings of frustration and isolation were broken down and the social relationships between women

[1] Interview with Fiona Forsyth (FF), 22 August 2014, p. 1.

[2] For historical accounts that suggest that because the WLM rejected traditional political organisation and structures, it was 'structureless', see David Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge* (Macmillan Press, 1984), p. 95; Elizabeth Meehan, 'British Feminism' in Harold Smith (ed), *British Feminism* (Aldershot, 1990), p. 194; Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet Freedom* (Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 26; Barbara Caine, *English Feminism* (Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 265.

were examined.[3] For many women their commitment to women's liberation was cemented through this emotional discovery of female friendship and supportive 'sisterhood'.[4] Yet the emphasis of Aberdeen feminists on personal connections as a method of coordination for the small local group, also raised tensions as differences in cultural background, life experience and personality conflicts surfaced. The research presented here then explores the informal, non-hierarchical organisation of the small local group more critically. The feminist networks of the Aberdeen group were established and primarily made up of students and graduates. However, this method of organisation restricted the development of clear ways for non-university educated women to join the group, and the reach of women's liberation, the participation of new women and the diversity of the group was thus limited. This study of the Aberdeen Women's Liberation Group demonstrates why and how feminist activists developed personal networks as an operational and organisational form of women's liberation, which were intended to connect and hold the local feminist community together, how feminist activists dealt with instances of personal incompatibility and difference between individuals within the context of the small local group, and how they sustained and attempted to expand their personal connections and contacts beyond that of students after graduation.

Through an assessment of the local environment of the city of Aberdeen and the university campus, this case study will demonstrate why feminist activists developed alternative women-only political networks in which to develop their ideas and activities. The geographical position of Aberdeen in the North East of Scotland contributed to feelings of political isolation for many young activists, resulting in a lively, energetic student political scene on the university campus. For many women, their involvement in the student movement provided formative experiences as political activists. Yet many

[3] For example, see Sue Bruley, 'Consciousness Raising in Clapham', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 22, No. 5 (2013), p. 720.

[4] Margaretta Jolly, *In Love and Struggle: Letters in Contemporary Feminism* (Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 9.

women faced reluctance from New-Left groups to take seriously the oppression of women and despite increased numbers of women students, found sexist attitudes rife in the structure of the university.

This case study will also map out the *process* of developing emotional and personal relationships that were central to the development of a feminist network in Aberdeen. The practice of consciousness raising (CR) in which feminists identified shared experiences of childhood, education and the family, rooted their connections in deeply emotional and personal terms. It is argued here that close attention to the commonalities and differences of personal histories shared between women in the small local group, provide the key to understanding why women were drawn together and how they solidified their networks as spaces of support and mutual understanding. Moreover, a focus on shared personal histories and life experiences also explains where questions of identity and distinct political trajectories presented themselves as obstacles to cooperation between feminist activists in the small local group. The broader theme of relating personal histories of feminist activists to their political motivations for joining women's liberation has been included in some studies of the movement, notably in Britain and the USA.[5] Liz Heron's *Truth Dare or Promise – Girls Growing Up In The Fifties,* explored the experiences of girlhood of those who reached adulthood in Britain during the 1960s, arguing women were 'influenced not only by what was to come, but also by what had been'.[6] Michelene Wandor's *Once a Feminist: Stories of a Generation* attempted to assess the motivations 'of a feminist generation of women' for attending the first British WLM conference at Ruskin College, Oxford, in 1970.[7] More recently Sarah Browne challenged the tendencies of some histories to contextualise the emergence of the WLM chiefly in the sexual revolution and the availability of the contraceptive Pill, arguing instead that the roots of women's liberation

[5] For example, see Jean McCrindle and Sheila Rowbotham, *Dutiful Daughters: Women Talk About Their Lives* (Pelican, 1983), p. 1; Barbara Caine, 'Feminist Biography and Feminist History', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1994), p. 258.

[6] Liz Heron, *Truth, Dare or Promise – Girls Growing Up In The Fifties* (Virago, 1985), p. 4.

[7] Michelene Wandor, *Once A Feminist* (Virago, 1990), p. 9.

lay in the diversity of participants' life stories.[8] Celia Hughes also sought to assess the childhood memories of activists to enhance understandings of why young men and women were attracted to Left groups, including feminism, throughout the 1960s.[9] This case study of the Aberdeen Women's Liberation Group will not only demonstrate that the origins of the WLM are best examined in a longer historical context, that of the participants' life stories and experiences of childhood and girlhood, but will argue that shared personal experiences of early life provided a foundation of commonality, and also enabled feminists to identify and integrate differences between women into the feminist networks they developed and sustained throughout the period. Furthermore, an assessment of feminist activity across the city in the 1970s, reveals that action was as exhilarating and fun an experience as it was formative and profound. For many women, shared involvement of feminist actions, and the challenges and tensions of campaigning, further strengthened friendships and personal connections between individuals and smalls groups organising around specific issues and campaigns.

The networks of the Aberdeen Women's Liberation Group are then traced beyond university groups to assess how feminists sustained and attempted to expand their personal networks and contacts after graduation. This case study will argue that personal connections were essential in sustaining a sense of group cohesion and organisation when women moved into working-life. Women did not want to abandon or compromise their feminist principles and identities in the work place; instead they sought out employment opportunities which would enable them to promote the message of the WLM or at least accommodate their feminist insights and principles. Through designing Women's Studies courses for the Workers' Educational Association and involvement in a number of

[8] Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 42. For historians and commentators who place the emergence of the WLM in a short historical context see, Lynne Segal, *Is the Future Female?* (Virago, 1987), p. 75; Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet Freedom* (Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 12; David Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge* (Macmillan Press, 1984), pp. 21-40.

[9] Celia Hughes, *Young Lives on the Left: Sixties Activism and the Liberation of the Self* (Manchester Scholarship Online, 2016), p. 22.

community education projects in working-class communities of Aberdeen, women were able to recruit and involve their feminist contacts, place feminist ideologies of collectivism and consciousness raising at the core of their working practice, and attempted to strengthen and expand their networks of feminist women beyond that of students and graduates.

The focus here is on personal relationships between feminist activists as an organisational method of women's liberation. Oral history testimony has been crucial to eliciting details about early personal experiences, the development of friendships and the impact of commonalities and differences between women in the small local group. Unfortunately, there are no internal writings from the Aberdeen group in archives or in personal collections. However, a number of published writings were available including *The Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts: A Report from Scotland*, written by Aberdeen feminists Chris Aldred and Margaret Marshall. These writings reveal the shared mind-set, priorities and influence of specific women within the networks of the Aberdeen Women's Liberation Group. The University of Aberdeen student newspaper, *The Gaudie*, also offers detail on early meetings, discussions and wider student body reaction to the activities of the Aberdeen Women's Liberation Group.

2.1 Creating Feminist Networks

2.1.1 The University of Aberdeen

The concentration of students in the Aberdeen Women's Liberation Group meant the university was an important site in the creation and development of feminist networks, as women entered new intellectual spaces and began to engage with issues of equality and discrimination. Women had entered universities, art colleges and teacher training institutions across Britain in increasing numbers as the 1963 Robins Report had highlighted the prevalence of class and gender bias in university entry, and warned of the missed pool of talent from young working-class men and women leaving school after the

implementation of post-war secondary school education reforms.[10] Universities were urged to widen access through offering poorer students support grants and to actively encourage women to enrol on degree programmes.[11] By 1980, women made up over 40% of UK students.[12] This increase in student population also occurred at the University of Aberdeen with the number of matriculated undergraduates rising from under one thousand at the end of the Second World War to over six thousand by 1980. Moreover, the university had changed from an institution with a predominantly Scottish born student intake from the North East to a growing and more diversified population of students from across the UK.[13] The university's expansion also incorporated a growth in the number of courses offered and grew physically with the building of new campuses and halls of residence.[14] This expansion and diversification attracted women to Aberdeen who would later go on to become feminist activists. For example, Sandie Wyles recalled she had heard the university 'had a good Students' Union, and it had looked like quite a good night life so I thought "oh I'll go there" so that was why I chose Aberdeen'.[15] The growing and diversified campus presented women with the potential to become involved with a new and energetic student cohort and discover burgeoning social and political spaces. Yet the environment of the university and the wider city of Aberdeen also fostered common feelings and experiences of isolation, frustration, political marginalisation and sexism, which created a sense of necessity and urgency for a women's liberation group on-campus, and motivated women

[10] Sue Sharpe, *Just Like a Girl: How Girls Learn to be Women – from the Seventies to the Nineties* (Penguin, 1994), p. 11.

[11] Eric Hobsbawn, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1994* (Abacus, 1994), pp. 444-46.

[12] Sue Bruley, 'Consciousness Raising in Clapham', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 22, No. 5 (2013), p. 720.

[13] John Hargreaves, 'Academic Strategies of Expansion' in John Hargreaves and Angela Forbes (eds), *Aberdeen University 1945-1981: Regional Roles and National Needs* (Aberdeen University Press, 1989), p. 10.

[14] Ibid, pp. 9-12.

[15] Interview with Sandie Wyles (SW), 10 October 2014, p. 4.

students to establish alternative women-only networks as sources of support, camaraderie and political survival.

The geographical remoteness of Aberdeen in the North East of Scotland and the city's distance from other large population centres provided the impetus for women to create new social and political networks on-campus. Chris Aldred recalled her arrival in Aberdeen as a postgraduate student moving from London in the mid-1970s:

> There was a critical mass of people, and people who were more involved in student society than would have been the case in traditional Aberdeen…There were lots of people who were living far away from home, who a trip back to the south was not feasible, it's a long way, if you go on a bus it's hours, something like 13 hours to get to London, so if you're a Londoner marooned in Aberdeen… you want to have a student society to take the edge off the isolation… it was certainly a very lively campus.[16]

Fiona Forsyth also echoed this as she said, 'being in Aberdeen it was a long way from anywhere…all the demos happened further south…it was an awful long way if you can imagine it…'[17] Feelings of isolation were to be a continued feature of the feminist experience in Aberdeen and contributed to the group's emphasis on personal connections as a method of organisation, cohesion and source of support throughout the 1970s. Activists went on to critique the southern domination and London-centric outlook of the broader WLM and challenge the Scottish WLM on why such few feminist events were held in or near Aberdeen.[18]

Feelings of political isolation were further compounded by what many women viewed as the conservative, out-dated and stifling social attitudes of the non-student population. Sandie Wyles recalled her arrival in Aberdeen from her home city of Stirling:

> …Going up to Aberdeen it was like 'what is this place', it was so backward, so old fashioned, so cold, everything was so old fashioned, everyone seemed to go around with wellie boots and parkas on, that kind of real 1950s, and everything

[16] Interview with Chris Aldred (CA), 6 June 2014, p. 11.

[17] Interview with FF, p. 11.

[18] Chris Aldred and Margaret Marshall, *The Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts: A Report from Scotland* (Aberdeen People's Press, 1977), National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, p. 1.

> was awful kind of slow and everybody spoke awful kind of slow and I thought 'oh god this is absolutely terrible'.[19]

As women arrived at the university in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Aberdeen economy relied heavily on university employment and the traditional industries of granite quarrying and fishing. This was the case until the discovery of North Sea oil in 1970, and subsequent attraction of American oil producers to the city.[20] As Sandie's testimony reveals, the geographical isolation of Aberdeen and the seemingly unchanged character of the city contrasted sharply to students' hometowns and cities across Scotland and rest of the UK. These local characteristics of Aberdeen created a need for a feminist network not just for developing political identities, ideas and activities, but also to foster a sense of belonging amongst young female activists who found the city to be small, restrictive and conservative. While the environment of the city fostered a sense of camaraderie among students, the personal bonds and friendships created on-campus had a direct impact on who was involved with women's liberation and the accessibility of the group once it was established. Sandie Wyles went on to say: 'I came from the sophisticated south, but that's why we gravitated towards people like ourselves'.[21] Chris Aldred also echoed this as she said, 'most of the people involved in the group were at university or one step away from university, like they had a partner at the university or they had connections'.[22] The development of friendships and personal networks amongst students in the early 1970s meant women outside of the university were not incorporated into or made aware of the networks and activities of the Aberdeen Women's Liberation Group.

The rise of radical student movements across North America and Europe in the late 1960s, also profoundly influenced the women who would later become feminist activists to

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[19] Interview with SW, p. 6.

[20] Alex Kemp and Sandra Galbraith, 'Contributions to the Regional Economy: Expenditure and Employment' in John Hargreaves and Angela Forbes, eds, *Aberdeen University* (Aberdeen University Press, 1989), p. 19. Also see Interview with CB, p. 2; Interview with SW, p. 7.

[21] Interview with SW, p. 6.

[22] Interview with CA, p. 7.

create their own political networks and groups. International media had quickly spread news of student rebellions, and universities and colleges had become important sites in which young activists challenged university authority, demanded increased participation in policy-making and fervently opposed perceived injustices such as the Vietnam War.[23] The influence of '1968' on the politicisation of young men and women has been the focus of historians and commentators in assessing the global spread of student protests and social movements. Nick Thomas observed that 'many students around the world, of differing political outlooks, believed that they were a part of international youth movements that would change the world'.[24] Similarly, Celia Hughes has commented that students did not just witness events unfolding on university campuses across the globe as spectators, but that demonstrations, sit-ins and calls for greater democracy resonated with the expectations of the youth of the post-war world who came to see themselves as 'dynamic social actors, contributing to a rapidly changing outer world… [For whom] university marked the start of genuine belief in imminent revolution and all the political and personal possibilities they imagined such transformations might entail'.[25]

The geographical isolation and conservatism of Aberdeen instilled a sense of determination in the student population that the events of '1968' would not simply pass them by, but rather they would have an active role to play in the organisation of similar political events and protests. Sandie Wyles reflected on the influence of the international student movement on her politicisation: 'it was really important, people wanted to do something, to be having an impression, to make a mark'.[26] Fiona Forsyth arrived in Aberdeen in 1969 and was relieved to find that 'Aberdeen had been a year behind

[23] Sylvia Ellis, 'A Demonstration of Good British Sense: British Student Protest During the Vietnam War' in Gerald Degroot (ed), *Student Protest: The Sixties and After* (Longman, 1998), p. 56; Elizabeth Bird, 'The Academic Arm of the Women's Liberation Movement: Women's Studies 1969-1999 in North America and the United Kingdom', *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2002), p. 142; Nick Thomas, 'Challenging the Myths of the 1960s: The Case of Student Protest in Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (2002), p. 284.

[24] Ibid, p. 295.

[25] Celia Hughes, *Young Lives on the Left* (Manchester Scholarship Online, 2016), p. 102.

[26] Interview with SW, p. 4.

everyone else and 1969 was when we had the student kind of revolution…that had happened the year before in Paris but we'd got there the year later in Aberdeen, so I got there just at the right time'.[27] The recollections of Aberdeen feminists resonate with other testimonies of student activists of the 1960s and 1970s, which have been noted as drawing on an 'epic narrative' constructed from contemporary cultural discourses of the tumultuous and rebellious spirit of the global events of '1968'.[28]

Involvement in student protests also broadened the political consciousness of many women who went on to form the Aberdeen Women's Liberation Group. Their involvement provided formative experience and a sense of collective identity as they began to formulate ideas and put forward the demands of the student movement for greater freedom and fairer representation. Sarah Browne noted that international student demands for greater representation influenced students across Scotland to focus on the ways in which universities were governed. In 1968, the 'Muggeridge affair' at the University of Edinburgh had witnessed the rise of student challenges to the journalist and commentator Malcolm Muggeridge, who had been elected student representative in the role of Rector in 1966. Students claimed Muggeridge did not take his role of student representative seriously enough as he did not regularly attend meetings and had voiced opposing opinions to that of the Student Council on the availability of the contraceptive Pill in the Students' Union. As a result of student opposition, Muggeridge was forced to resign in January 1968.[29] This event ultimately sparked a movement of discontent with the role of rector at the University of Aberdeen, with calls for more representative and democratically elected spokespersons emerging from across the student population. Fiona Forsyth remembered: 'we thought let's get this going in Aberdeen, proper democracy, students to chair the court,

[27] Interview with FF, p. 1.

[28] For example, see Alessandro Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different' in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (Third Edition, Routledge, 2015), p. 69; Luisa Passerini, *Autobiography of a Generation: Italy, 1968* (Wesleyan University Press, 1996), p. 60; Celia Hughes, *Young Lives on the Left* (Manchester Scholarship Online, 2016), pp. 102-6.

[29] Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 62.

so of course I was campaigning'.[30] Another major challenge to university authority in Scotland were the protests at the University of Stirling to the costs of security for the Queen's official visit in 1972.[31] Sandie Wyles had witnessed the events before she arrived as a student in Aberdeen, yet the event was central to her realisation of the power of collective action, and the importance of supportive political spaces and networks in the face of widespread public opposition and hostility.[32]

The women students involved in the campaigns to challenge the running of the university had become well versed on the values of fairness, freedom and greater recognition of student demands. Involvement in protests beyond that of the university's structure was then a logical extension of their role as political actors. For example, the issue of apartheid in South Africa became an important cause in the development of a collective identity for the women who would later become feminist activists in Aberdeen. In 1969 student protests were organised against plans to allow the South African rugby team to visit the university campus. Fiona Forsyth remembered:

> The anti-apartheid demo was amazing because that was my very first term in Aberdeen and I was living in halls of residence and I was aware there was going to be a demonstration but I wasn't in enough with the political crowd to know they were going to occupy the pitch and I was really pissed off when I discovered they'd all been plotting to do that and I didn't know anything about it and I was on the boring main demonstration (laughter), it was terrible, anyway and then a couple of hundred people were arrested and John Lennon paid all their fines, it was amazing so I think '69 was quite a good time…[33]

The anti-apartheid protest had a profound effect on Fiona's politicisation, not just as an experience that focused on collectively achieving the isolation and weakening of the apartheid state, but also as a missed opportunity to become further involved with what she saw as exciting new political actions and tactics. Her involvement with the anti-apartheid

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[30] Interview with FF, p. 9.

[31] Interview with SW, p. 14. See also Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009) p. 65.

[32] Interview with SW, p. 14.

[33] Interview with FF, p. 1.

protests subsequently encouraged her to further pursue her role as activist and seek out other politically conscious and engaged groups and individuals on-campus. Chris Aldred also echoed the impact of the anti-apartheid demonstrations on the formation of the Aberdeen Women's Liberation Group, as she remembered encountering women who had been involved with the demonstrations at early feminist gatherings:

> …There'd been a huge protest here, here at the rugby tour…lots of women had been involved in anti-apartheid protests, there were several women who had been in confrontations with the police who went on to the women's group, it gave them a lot of kudos, they were real activists'.[34]

Women's involvement in the anti-apartheid demonstrations had captured the imagination of those who would later form the Aberdeen Women's Liberation Group, and offered an exciting example of the potential of women's role and approach to political protests and agitations. However, Chris's testimony also reveals that the group's formation around and collective memory of student protests elevated individuals to the position of 'real' political actors, a symptom of the organisational system of Aberdeen based on personal contacts and connections which, though designed to be inclusive, non-hierarchical and accessible, could be dominated by individual personalities and women with more political experience and confidence.

The politicisation of the student population through attempts to radicalise aspects of the university's structure subsequently gave rise to the formation of numerous political groups on the Aberdeen campus. New-Left groups had become a fixture of most British universities in the 1960s and 1970s, and although these groups espoused a general support for women's equality, believing the oppression of women must be grounded in the inequalities of capitalism, women who would later become the feminist activists of the Aberdeen group noted that they were seldom given opportunity to discuss their own

[34] Interview with CA, p. 2.

feelings and experiences of oppression. Although it is difficult to identify the dozens of student groups formed in Aberdeen during the period, Chris Aldred remembered:

> There was a kind of ecological movement…there were the International Socialists, and there was the International Marxist groups, there was a group called Solidarity who were libertarian socialists, there were several anarchist groups, anarcho eco stuff that was a bit of a boundary, people located in both of those… that was the landscape we were in.[35]

The anarchic style of New-Left group meetings, though designed to promote participatory democracy, has been noted to have excluded and discouraged many women from speaking in the presence of men and powerful male leaders, with many women finding themselves relegated to the roles of tea-maker and typist.[36] Historical assessments of the international impact of '1968' have also noted how male charismatic leadership and behaviours of 'heroic masculinity' impacted on women's roles and involvement in social and political movements. For example, in an analysis of the gendered experiences of student activists in Mexico's '1968', Lessie Fraser and Deborah Cohen conceptualised the identities of male leaders in terms of a 'heroic masculinity', associated with rebellion and sacrifice for the greater good and experienced in tension with victimhood, with the state as aggressor.[37] Heroic masculinity implied leadership and created forms of exclusion, hierarchy and perpetuated male centred political analysis in the student movements, and has dominated participatory narratives of the events *post factum*.

Deborah Cohen argues:

> Although university students attempted to mobilise diverse sectors of society, the movement's core was still composed of privileged youth destined to

[35] Interview with CA, p. 11.

[36] Ibid, pp. 1-2. Also see Jo Freeman, *The Politics of Women's Liberation: A Case Study of an Emerging Social Movement and Its Relation to the Policy Process* (Longman, Inc., 1975), p. 57; Sue Bruley, 'Consciousness Raising in Clapham', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 22, No. 5 (2013), p. 718; Sheila Rowbotham, *Women in Movement* (Routledge, 1992), pp. 221-222.

[37] Maud Bracke, *The Reinvention of the Political* (Routledge, 2014), p. 51.

> assume key positions within the social and political elite. Not surprising then, public narratives of '68 have been predominately male and elite.[38]

Sara Evans has also noted that within 'each nation's movement, there was an immense amount of masculine display – verbal combat, sexual conquest and militaristic fantasies associated with battles in the streets'.[39] As such, international narratives of student revolts revolve around male actors, notions of 'heroic masculinity' and 'youthful male martyrs', who challenged imperialistic world orderings, whilst women remain in the background. Historians such as Alice Echols have noted how the sexism of student and anti-war movements led to the formation of a politically separatist movement for women's liberation in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as women sought out new spaces, practices and languages of politics.[40] The failure of socialist and radical-left men to take seriously women's oppression was to be a continuing struggle for Aberdeen feminists even after the women's liberation group was established. In 1971, Aberdeen's student newspaper, *The Gaudie,* reported on a student debate on women's roles in society:

> The socialists present, not unnaturally, insisted on seeing the liberation cause in its ultimate revolutionary perspective and the presence of two gentlemen who declared that men were better hunters than women and that everything followed on from there meant that the meeting degenerated remorselessly into aimless argument.[41]

As will be shown in the subsequent case studies, the exclusion of men and adoption of women-only political separatism and organisation was not always straightforward in the context of the local women's liberation group. Yet in Aberdeen, the continued dismissive attitudes of Left men towards women's liberation and the political marginalisation women had experienced in attempting participation in student politics, encouraged and committed

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[38] Debora Cohen, 'Talking Back to '68', in Lessie Frazier and Deborah Cohen (eds), *Gender and Sexuality in 1968* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 145. Also see Maud Bracke, *The Reinvention of the Political* (Routledge, 2014), Chapter 3.

[39] Sara Evans, 'Sons, Daughters, and the Patriarchy: Gender and the 1968 Generation', *American History Review*, Vol. 114, No. 2 (2009), pp. 331-347.

[40] Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (University of Minnesota Press, 1989), pp. 103-37.

[41] 'Women's Debate', *The Gaudie* (10/11/1971), The National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, p. 3.

Aberdeen feminists to formulate a woman-centred approach to political discussions in their own groups and networks on-campus. In Aberdeen then, the idea of women's autonomy and women-only political organisation was intended to produce supportive political and personal networks, which were defined, focused and unified by shared struggles and common experiences of the rampant sexism of some Left men organising at the university and their experience of the wider culture and structures of male power in British society.

Women also found sexist attitudes embedded within the 'traditions' of the university. For example, Sarah Browne has noted 'throughout the late sixties and seventies every student newspaper in Scotland printed pictures of female students thought to be particularly attractive'.[42] Despite the rise in numbers of female students many women found that views about their role on-campus were unchanged, and had gone unchallenged by the wider student political movement. At the University of Aberdeen, some women were enraged by charity beauty contests run by the Students' Union. Sandie Wyles recalled:

> We had a beauty contest that ran every year and we were outraged by that of course…so [we] decided to enter together as a group rather than as individuals because we didn't want to be judged on our looks and individuality but as a collective, and they were all up in arms, trying not to let us up the stairs in our dungarees but we just barged our way through, we just walked into this room and there was this judge who used to be Inspector Barlow from Zed Cars, he was the judge, an older man and two other people who I don't think were anything spectacular and [we] were very outspoken and articulate and…just laid it out for them, 'we are here as women and we don't want to be judged as individuals and the fact you're running this beauty contest is against women' and they just basically laughed at us and we got hustled out of the door.[43]

The response of the Students' Union to the feminist challenge was evidence of blatant sexism and encapsulated the uncomfortable feelings many women experienced as they entered university in the radical atmosphere of the late 1960s and early 1970s, only to be met with sexual objectification and prevailing views that women's role was primarily

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[42] Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 57.

[43] Interview with SW, p. 5.

decorative. The macho culture of student spaces on-campus thus provided more commonality of experience between women studying at the university and more cause for politically engaged women to organise themselves separately, develop alternative feminist networks as sources of support and solidarity and to place their oppression at the centre of political analysis.

2.1.2 Consciousness Raising in Social Groups

From 1970, feminists in Aberdeen had grown tired of the political marginalisation and everyday sexism they encountered on-campus so began to develop alternative political networks and ties.[44] The development of a feminist network became the principal site of consciousness raising (CR) for Aberdeen feminists throughout the 1970s. The practice of CR had at its centre the most fundamental principle of the WLM, the idea of 'the personal is political'. The practice rested on the theory that if women were to share their own experiences of subordination and oppression, political conclusions could be drawn from the reasons for those personal experiences.[45] Though CR was not a new political method and had its roots in the Civil Rights Movement in the USA, it was also an international feature of the WLM. Its popularity stemmed from the emphasis on individual experience and the politicisation of everyday-life experience. It was theorised that CR would help to make every woman feel she had something to contribute to discussions and have the opportunity to shape the local group.[46] CR has been depicted as a cornerstone of the 'early stages' of the WLM and as such has also been remembered as a practice of the first collectives of women's liberation, with the suggestion that most women eventually 'moved on' from the practice preferring instead to prioritise more campaign-orientated action from

[44] 'Women's Lib', *The Gaudie* (27/01/1971), The National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, p. 8.

[45] Redstockings, 'Manifesto' in Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon (eds), *Dear Sisters: Dispatches from the Women's Liberation Movement* (Basic Books, 2001), p. 91.

[46] See Maud Bracke, *The Reinvention of the Political* (Routledge, 2014), p. 65; David Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge* (Macmillan Press, 1984), p. 86; Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 85.

the mid-1970s. For example, David Bouchier suggested that 'small group consciousness raising offer[ed] no way of moving from the shared experiences of individuals to political action; it [was] educational, an end in itself' and 'the intense, personal nature of the group experience absorbed nearly all the energies of the people in it, leaving little time for political activities'.[47] The practice of CR is thus depicted and misunderstood as an example of the individualism and 'navel-gazing' of small groups of feminists concerned only with self-identification in which political significance was attributed to every personal action.[48] Rather, for most women involved with the WLM, CR was a deeply political practice and could lead to political organisation and action more conventionally defined.

Moreover, the Aberdeen and Brighton and Hove case studies reveal that CR was not a coherent set of core political practices that every local group followed rigidly. Instead, the practice served multiple political purposes and played out rather differently from group-to-group in response to the personalities and needs of the women involved, and the nature of the local feminist community in which they operated. How CR was used to construct a collective feminist consciousness and identity and the ways in which it was used to organise and structure a local group also varied from place-to-place.[49] For example, Elisabeth Armstrong has noted a variety of goals, strategies and membership of CR groups across the US during the 1970s.[50] Sue Bruley has written the most recent account of CR in the British context in her double role as both historical actor and narrator with her account of CR in Clapham from 1972 to 1979. She observed of her own CR group that 'it was through CR that women sought to reinvent themselves as well as their world. Women

[47] David Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge* (Macmillan Press, 1984), p. 219.

[48] For example, see Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (Routledge, 1990), p. 101.

[49] For example, see Voichita Nachescu, *The Feminist Subject: Consciousness Raising Groups in Second Wave Feminism* (PhD Thesis, University of Buffalo, 2006), Introduction.

[50] Elisabeth Armstrong, *The Retreat from Organization* (State University of New York Press, 2002), p. 64.

developed a new identity, new friends and a supportive sisterhood'.[51] It is argued here that the organisational system of the Aberdeen group saw women practice CR as a means to collectively share and reflect upon their individual personal histories, and that the process of CR made it clear that existing political/ideological frameworks and language were inadequate to give voice to their sense of oppression and inequality on a daily basis. In this context then, CR was not just a practice for women to draw out political conclusions from shared experiences of sexism, but an emotional experience in which women broke down the divides of their private and public selves to share intimate details of their lives, and establish personal relationships based on mutual understanding, trust and personal compatibility. Margaretta Jolly has explored the importance and meaning of female friendship to women's liberation by drawing on correspondence between feminists during the 1970s. She observed:

> What was it like to think you were discovering – or rediscovering – a world where women could be passionate about other women, not just in adolescence but forever? In which those relationships could regain cultural prominence and organising power? This was a moment when a female-centred world was being deliberately reconstructed.[52]

CR discussions provided feminists with personal insight into each other's lives which helped women to establish personal bonds that were fulfilling emotionally as well as politically. The process of sharing personal details also made Aberdeen feminists aware of the socio-economic and educational differences between each other, as well as the incompatibility of certain personalities and lifestyles, and different approaches to CR.[53] Yet the emphasis of the Aberdeen group on the importance of personal connections and friendships, and the necessity of a supportive network of wider 'sisterhood' in the context of the small, geographically isolated city, allowed feminists the flexibility to form their

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[51] Sue Bruley, 'Consciousness Raising in Clapham', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 22, No. 5 (2013), p. 719.

[52] Margaretta Jolly*, In Love and Struggle* (Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 9.

[53] Interview with CR, p. 24.

own immediate social groups to engage in the practice, whilst maintaining broad connections with other feminist activists operating in the local environment.

In the early 1970s, there were some advertisements for dedicated CR meetings placed in *The Gaudie*, by feminists eager to make contact with other politically like-minded women.[54] In this sense CR was used as an organisational tool to attract and introduce new women to women's liberation. Yet the cycle of new women arriving and others leaving the university after graduation meant that Aberdeen women's liberation had an amorphous system of groups of feminist women around the university campus, which saw feminists practice CR more regularly in informal social gatherings rather than dedicated CR groups or 'official' women's liberation group meetings. In Aberdeen, CR was not always practiced in specific CR groups and weekly meetings but occurred in the social interactions between feminists in each other's homes, pubs and the socialist bookshop Boomtown Books. The CR discussions of Aberdeen feminists were not always necessarily profound, women would watch films together and chat as a way to get to know one another and sustain a sense of group connectedness.[55] Sandie Wyles reflected:

> It was as much social, we spent a lot of time socially together and we had parties and we talked into the small hours and it was about how do we want to live our lives, communally, collectively and people were looking at monogamy, non-monogamy, having children, not having children…those were the kind of issues that were talked about.[56]

The social settings in which CR discussions took place did not undermine their effect, but rather, the practice was a conscious political decision. It was theorised that a relaxed informal approach would encourage women to talk and to avoid the monopolisation of topics by individuals that could occur at organised meetings. As will be shown in the Brighton and Hove case study, the organisation of women into allocated CR groups meant

[54] For example, see 'Women's Lib', *The Gaudie* (27/01/1971), The National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, p. 8; 'Women's Lib', *The Gaudie* (0702/1973), The National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, p. 3.

[55] See Interview with CA, p. 15; Interview with SW, p. 10.

[56] Interview with SW, p. 8.

a 'closed group' policy operated due to fears that new women joining could disrupt the flow of discussion, as conversations would have had to be repeated for new women. In Aberdeen, the social and informal dimension of CR was developed to foster an open local network inclusive of women students and graduates, and of those new to and already familiar with women's liberation. However, the informality of CR and the emphasis of the group on personal contacts and networks as a method of coordination and organisation, could have intimidated potential newcomers as they found the close personal friendships between women intimidating.[57]

The CR discussions of Aberdeen feminists were an exercise designed to link the self to others in emotional as well as political terms.[58] These intimate conversations helped women to connect, recognise common experiences of subordination and oppression as wider symptoms of institutional power structures and, importantly, helped to contextualise commonalities and differences between women coming from varied socio-economic backgrounds and geographical areas of Britain.[59] All aspects of the personal were discussed during CR from experiences of girlhood to familial relationships. Women thus placed emotional investment into these personal and political discussions by exposing at times painful and humiliating private memories. As women recognised that their own experiences were a consequence of the larger system of patriarchy, they did not retreat to the purely personal, instead they sought to connect and organise with other women.

An important topic of discussion and source of commonality between feminists in Aberdeen was the mother/daughter relationship.[60] This relationship was central to women's existence and had thus become a prolific theme and interest throughout the wider WLM, culminating in the publication of Nancy Friday's seminal text, *My Mother/My Self – The*

[57] Sue Bruley, 'Consciousness Raising in Clapham', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 22, No. 5 (2013), pp. 728-9.

[58] Sheila Rowbotham, *Women in Movement* (Routledge, 1992), p. 272.

[59] Interview with FF, p. 2. See also Esther Breitenbach, 'Sisters Are Doing It for Themselves: The Women's Movement in Scotland' in Alice Brown and Richard McCrone, *The Scottish Government Yearbook 1990* (Edinburgh University Press, 1990), p. 209.

[60] Interview with SW, p. 7.

Daughter's Search for Identity.[61] Sandie Wyles reflected: 'there was this thread running through it…wanting to talk about mothers'.[62] Feminist activists wished to understand reasons for generational conflict, the sources of their mothers' resentments and frustrations, to come to terms with sharp contrasts between their mothers' lives and their own, and to reject the traditional domestic roles their mothers had performed. Chris Aldred reflected on this process of analysis as she remembered:

> One of the memories was hearing her talk about her teaching and how she'd loved teaching and how she'd had to give it up, you know looking at her wedding pictures and the things that the children had given her and the children at school who'd gone to the wedding and stuff like that. In a very very country environment, you know a woman who had wanted to do something and had never been able to do it…my mum had that kind of unfulfilled, exciting things that she might of done, she wanted to go to university, she wanted to study botany…she'd become a teacher through a pupil teacher scheme at the time, you did a couple of days at school and some days teaching…But that's what she could manage as the eldest child of four and her with three brothers who were clearly the ones who were really going to get the attention...[63]

Chris's testimony reveals how feminists sought to understand and challenge the role of woman beyond wife and mother by examining the experiences of the generation of women who had gone before them, and the opportunities they had been denied. Penny Summerfield has explored the generation of women coming of age in the 1940s, important here as the generation of women who would become the mothers of 1970s feminist activists. In *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives*, Summerfield noted the impact of having to return to domestic life after experiencing more freedoms during World War Two, which left many women feeling unfulfilled and unsatisfied in marriage and motherhood, and frustrated that they could not continue with the exciting job opportunities the war had presented.[64] Her account also showed instances of generational conflict between young women of the 1940s and their parents who opposed the opportunities the war had opened

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[61] Nancy Friday, *My Mother/My Self – The Daughter's Search for Identity* (Delacorte Press, 1977).

[62] Interview with SW, p. 7.

[63] Interview with CA, p. 1.

[64] Penny Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives* (Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 279.

up. In the case of mothers, Summerfield noted instances in which mothers used the war 'to make their own bids for freedom, while still blocking those of their daughters'.[65] In this account, Summerfield depicted a generation of women frustrated as the freedoms of the war, won in the face of resistant parents, were ultimately withdrawn in the 1950s. Lynn Abrams also noted distinction between the generation of women born in the war years and immediately afterwards, the 'daughters', and the generation of women born before, 'whose lives had been shaped by religious discourses on respectable womanhood and whose opportunities had been constrained by the war – the 'mothers'.[66] Aberdeen feminist activists shared an interest and alertness to these generational differences and frustrations in their mother's experiences of womanhood.

The mother/daughter dynamic continued to provide common ground between women within the Aberdeen feminist network as new women with differing socio-economic and educational backgrounds joined the group in the later 1970s. For example, Chrissy Bruce had been introduced to Aberdeen women's liberation through her community work with Chris Aldred in the working-class neighbourhood of Torry. Though she had joined the group later in the 1970s, she did not have the same university education as many other feminist activists in the network and was a native Aberdonian. However, Chrissy did share some common experiences of the mother/daughter relationship with other feminist activists, and an interest in exploring the imprint of their mother's lives on their own. Chrissy went on to lead a mother/daughter workshop at the Scottish Women's Liberation Conference held in Aberdeen in 1977.[67] The discussion of the mother/daughter relationship saw women not only establish personal bonds between each other as they revealed emotional details and memories of their family histories, but also helped to shape

[65] Ibid, pp. 54-5.

[66] Lynn Abrams, 'Mothers and Daughters: Negotiating the Discourse on the "Good Woman" in 1950s and 1960s Britain' in Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, *The Sixties and Beyond: Dechristianisation in North America and Western Europe, 1945-2000* (University of Toronto Press, 2013), p. 61.

[67] Interview with CB, p. 4.

and focus their collective demands for greater choices for women beyond that of the social roles open to their mothers' generation of women.

CR discussion also revealed that Aberdeen feminists shared common experiences of childhood education and girlhood, and offered women new ways of expressing such experiences. The 1944 Education Act had introduced a system of examination which would determine the educational path children would follow either into secondary modern high schools or into grammar school education. The Qualifying Exam in Scotland or its English equivalent the 11 Plus examination, introduced a system in which children were academically streamed by intellectual capability. Phillida Bunkle has argued that the division of children on the basis of a competitive written examination 'was the anvil on which much of the class and gender culture of the welfare state was forged'.[68] Across the UK there were 2% fewer grammar places for girls, who also had to attain a much higher pass mark to gain a place at a grammar school than their male counterparts. There were also far more middle-class children attending grammar schools than working-class children due to advantages of private tuition and coaching leading up to the examinations.[69] As Aberdeen feminists shared their personal experiences of childhood education, they began to draw out reoccurring experiences of the inequalities and discriminations that they had faced as girls throughout school education. Feminists identified the inequalities contained within the streaming system about what kind of education was deemed suitable for girls, which they concluded seemed to rest on the assumption that motherhood was still the primary occupation for women.[70] Sandie Wyles reflected on the process of politicising her educational experiences as she said:

> A typical example was fourth year, a group of us could just not get maths, just couldn't understand it, three girls, so one of us said, it wasn't me but one of us

[68] Phillida Bunkle, 'The 1944 Education Act and Second Wave Feminism', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 25, No. 5 (2016), p. 793.

[69] Liz Heron, *Truth, Dare or Promise* (Virago, 1985), p. 7.

[70] Interview with CB, p. 1.

> said 'I think we should just go to the head master and say we want to stop taking maths' and I thought that sounds good so we marched down, knock knock, deputation at the door, 'yes?', 'we'd like to stop taking maths', 'oh well I think that's a splendid idea' said the Headmaster, it was actually Deputy Headmaster, 'because girls don't really need maths, no I think you're quite right', so we got to just give it up just like that…it was absolutely incredible, so I do not have a maths O grade…..then when I left school, Careers Advisor, you were lucky if you got a 15 minute interview in 5th year, 4th year…he says 'I tell you what, primary teaching is a really good career for a lassie so I think you should think about primary teaching, right, OK?, next'.[71]

Most women involved in the Aberdeen Women's Liberation Group had followed an academic route to university and most of the feminist activists involved shared the belief that education would open up more professional employment opportunities and economic independence for women.[72] Yet the common experiences of school education in which women had been discouraged, overlooked and excluded from certain subjects, activities and future occupations, highlighted the inequalities they had faced as girls and the prevailing assumptions about what was deemed suitable employment for women. As this case study will go on to demonstrate, the process of drawing out political conclusions from their individual encounters of sexism embedded throughout their education helped to set their political agenda and resolve to expand the educational and professional choices available to girls and women. Moreover, the common experiences of restrictive expectations of girlhood and womanhood running throughout their stories of childhood education strengthened the mutual understanding and sense of commonality between feminist activists in Aberdeen throughout the 1970s.

While Aberdeen feminists did identify commonalities, shared experiences and developed personal connections during CR through discussion of family relationships and life stages, the process also led to the discovery of personal differences between women. It has been claimed in some histories of the WLM that the movement moved into a new stage at the end of the 1970s, which was characterised by its inability to contain and support the

[71] Interview with SW, p. 2

[72] See Interview with CA, p. 7; Interview with FF, p. 9.

multiple identities and standpoints of the women involved.[73] For example, Barbara Caine argued:

> Although there were already divisions evident within the women's movement in the United States that had emerged in the late 1960s, in England many activists in 1970 still believed that there could be one 'women's liberation'. When that belief proved illusory and it became necessary to recognise the many divisions and tensions amongst different groups concerned with women's liberation, the term 'feminist' came back into use.[74]

Caine suggested that differences between women in personal and political outlook became sources of tension and conflict too painful to overcome. Bouchier also provides a useful example:

> In a country the size of the USA the various sectors of feminism are large enough to stand by themselves and to pursue their own separate visions of change; Betty Friedan has argued that the differences are so deep that it is better so. The case is otherwise in Britain, where the smallness and fragility of the movement suggests that unity is the only possible source of strength.[75]

These accounts underestimate the extent to which difference was a fundamental tenet of the WLM from its inception.[76]

The informality and flexibility of the Aberdeen group's organisational system is an indication to the extent to which feminists were aware of and acknowledged differences between women that made up its membership from the very beginnings of women's liberation in the early 1970s. For example, Chris Aldred recalled feeling conscious of her 'Englishness' during discussion of her rural childhood upbringing in comparison to the

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[73] For example, see Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet Freedom* (Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 256; Lynne Segal, *Is the Future Female?* (Virago, 1987), pp. 61-5; Sheila Rowbotham, *The Past is Before Us* (Pandora, 1989), pp. 264-5, p. 292; Sheila Rowbotham, *Women in Movement* (Routledge, 1992), p. 283; Angela Weir and Elizabeth Wilson, 'The British Women's Movement' in Elizabeth Wilson (ed), *Hidden Agendas: Theory, Politics and Experience in the Women's Movement* (Routledge, 1986), p.78.

[74] Barbara Caine, *English Feminism* (Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 264.

[75] David Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge* (Macmillan Press, 1984), p. 209, p. 217.

[76] Jill Radford, 'A History of Women's Liberation Movements' in Gabriele Griffin, Marianne Hester, Shirin Rai, Sasha Roseneil (eds), *Stirring It* (Taylor and Francis, 2003), p. 40; Nathalie Thomlinson, 'The Colour of Feminism: White Feminists and Race in the Women's Liberation' Movement', *History*, Issue. 97, No. 327 (2012), pp. 453-75.

experiences of Scottish feminists in her personal network: 'you know…being English in Scotland meant that people, you know, all the, I carried the baggage of hundreds of years of oppression on my shoulders (laughter)'.[77] As Sarah Browne has noted, the emergence of a Scottish critique against the London domination of the wider WLM, also saw a small number of Scottish women develop concerns that English women dominated local group discussions.[78] For example, Aberdeen feminist Maggie Havergal claimed that middle-class English women dominated the movement and that such domination silenced the participation of Scottish women as an extension of women's wider subordination and oppression.[79] Despite the commonality of studying in Aberdeen, the women involved came from across the UK and, thus, had different and, at times, conflicting life experiences and cultural backgrounds. This was a reoccurring source of tension for the broader WLM as it sought to incorporate women from all socio-economic and cultural backgrounds and is further explored in the context of national conferences in the case study on the Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group. In the case of Aberdeen, Chris Aldred also reflected: 'I was studying at the university, a lot of them were undergraduate students, but I was a postgraduate student so there was a slight status difference'.[80] Chris's testimony reveals that the practice of CR made women aware of power relations within feminist social interactions as differences in age, nationality and culture were surfaced as women shared personal details about their lives.[81] Feelings of difference were emphasised in the intimate context of CR in Aberdeen and the organisation of the group through personal contacts, connections and friendships.

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[77] Interview with CA, p. 5.

[78] Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009) p. 170.

[79] Maggie Havergal, 'A Scottish Movement?', *The Scottish Women's Liberation Journal*, No. 4 (Spring 1978), National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, p. 3.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Interview with FF, p. 2.

The practice of CR also raised issues of personal incompatibility. For example, Fiona Forsyth remembered feeling she had 'little in common' and 'didn't identify enormously' with married women as she herself was still an undergraduate student, and Chris Aldred remembered women organised themselves based on 'who you liked'.[82] The informality of the Aberdeen group and the prevalence of personal connections and friendships as the principle method of organisation meant that women could form groups based on personal compatibility, an important political practice and system of organisation as women pursued and developed relationships of their own choosing as a way to live out their feminist politics.[83] This encouraged feminists to engage with women's liberation on their own terms and in their own ways without leading to irreparable splits or confrontations over how a more 'official' women's liberation group and dedicated CR session should operate.[84] However, the informality of this organisation ultimately undermined the sense of a wider network of 'sisterhood', which feminist activists had strived to achieve in the context of the sexist environment of the university, as personal networks and friendships groups could appear as cliques to potential newcomers. The intensive discussions that occurred between Aberdeen feminists and the importance of personal networks to the organisation of the group could also lead to the alienation and exclusion of less experienced, less known and less charismatic women within the feminist network.

2.1.3 Collective Action

The process of establishing friendships with other like-minded women through CR discussions enabled women to identify shared interests and priorities for organisation and action. For example, the Aberdeen interviewees included here were involved in efforts to improve nursery provision at the university, the lobbying of local MPs on the inadequacies

[82] Interview with CA, p. 5; Interview with FF, p. 2.

[83] Interview with SW, p. 10.

[84] Ibid, p. 5.

of the 1970 Equal Pay Act and, from 1974, some were involved with the Scottish National Abortion Campaign.[85] However, there were multiple collective actions organised around the general demands of the WLM in Aberdeen throughout the 1970s, which purposely aimed to bring women from across the feminist networks together in public displays of solidarity and strength. This collective action was organised to foster a sense of group identity, cement friendships and allowed women the opportunity to expand their personal connections through meeting other women in the context, thrill and exhilaration of political action.

Reclaim the Night (RTN) marches had become an international feature of women's liberation by the late 1970s due to their effectiveness at bringing publicity to the issues of violence against women.[86] RTN also provided an opportunity for women who were not involved in specific violence against women campaigns or groups to become involved and actively contribute their support and energy. The idea of RTN first emerged at a radical feminist conference held in Edinburgh in 1977 as a direct challenge to the suggestion that women should not walk alone at night in order to avoid sexual assault.[87] The potential influence and relative ease of organising the marches caught the imagination of the Aberdeen feminist activists. The major logistics of organising an RTN march were advertising the date a proposed march would take place and practically planning a route through the city. Sandie Wyles recalled: 'we did reclaim the night marches, we did a few of those in Aberdeen, up along the Castle Gate and along the main routes into the city, we did that at night…it was really good, lots of whistles and lanterns and chanting, that was really good'.[88] The flaming torches, banners and chants of 'however we dress, and

[85] See Interview with FF, p. 2; Interview with CA, p. 4; Interview with SW p. 8.

[86] Jeska Rees, *All the Rage* (PhD Thesis, University of Western Australia, 2007), p. 180.

[87] Sheila Rowbotham, *A Century of Women: The History of Women in Britain and the United States* (Viking, 1999), p. 407; Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009). p. 284.

[88] Interview with SW, p. 9.

wherever we go, yes means yes and no means no' bolstered the fun, energy and sense of group cohesion as women marched through the streets of Aberdeen.[89]

International Women's Day also provided opportunities for Aberdeen women to organise collective action that could incorporate participation from the wider feminist network. For example, in 1975, feminist activists organised a protest of an International Women's Day fair held in the Music Hall, which had failed to include Aberdeen Women's Liberation Group in the schedule of events.[90] The event was held to bring together women's groups such as the Housewives Register and the Women's Rural Institute (WRI). Chris Aldred remembered:

> International Women's Day 1975, there was…us being Miss Laid, Miss Conceived, Miss Used, Miss Taken…Miss Understood and we were dressed up in various roles, I was Miss Laid dressed with a skirt up here and some high heeled shoes I'd borrowed, and there was a bride who was Miss Taken, and there was a house-wife that was Miss Used, a pillow stuffed up her jumper was Miss Conceived, a woman who was studying at the time but went on to the electricians union, she became an electrician, was Miss Taken and a graduate was Miss Understood. That was because there was an International Women's Day celebration that had been organised by the Soroptimists which included some of the figures that had been active…in Aberdeen for years, but they hadn't asked the women's liberation group but we were assailed on the steps by all kinds of apologetic elderly ladies as I saw them then, they were probably my age, who kind of said 'oh do come inside dear, you can have a stall, you can distribute your literature', and we said 'NO, we're having a protest', and we actually got much more newspaper coverage because we were being outrageous, but it was quite a nice moment.[91]

Sandie Wyles also recalled this event as an exciting experience of feminist direct action but emphasised her feelings of anger over the inclusion of the anti-abortion group, the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child (SPUC):

> It was mainly the WRI and people showing off their cushion covers and that kind of domestic stuff and we were thinking this is ridiculous, there is nothing about the positives that women have done in the world so we asked to see a list

[89] 'RTN', *MsPrint* (No. 3, 1979), National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, p. 11. Also see The Soho Sixteen Support Sisterhood, 'The Soho Sixteen and Reclaim the Night' in Feminist Anthology Collective, *No Turning Back* (Women's Press, 1981), p. 223.

[90] Interview with SW, p. 9.

[91] Interview with CA, pp. 3-4.

> of stalls…a list of who was going to be on the stalls and we discovered much to our horror that the SPUC had got a stall so that was it, we said 'right, we want a stall', but they wouldn't give us a stall because it was political, so what we did was decided to do a different type of protest but that just shows you the level of politics in Aberdeen where they let the SPUC in and all the folk with their tea cosies…[92]

Though Chris and Sandie's testimony suggest different perspectives on how the group had been treated by the organisers of the fair, their testimonies also reveal that the initial exclusion of women's liberation and the inclusion of the SPUC helped Aberdeen feminists to define their common political identity and agenda as a network of feminist activists ready to challenge the traditional conservatism of the city and protect the rights of women.

The International Women's Day protest encouraged wider participation in collective direct action towards the sexist attitudes found within the city, as it allowed feminist activists the opportunity to become involved in short, focused and exciting events without distracting from or conflicting with small group commitments. Aberdeen feminists went on to protest the exclusion of women from a number of public houses and challenge the cultural assumptions of what spaces were deemed suitable for women. The Market Bar, The Grill and The Northern Bar in Aberdeen city centre were the focus of feminist anger.[93] Although these protests were a serious challenge to the exclusion of women from public spaces, the methods women employed were primarily fun and tongue-in-cheek in spirit. Sandie Wyles recalled the protests as she said:

> We walked out with these buckets and walked into the bar, it was like sawdust affair, you wouldn't want to go there anyway, and it was like 'hello there, can we have a pint of lager, pint of tops, pint of heavy', 'oh no sorry girls, sorry, sorry, sorry, this is man only, canny serve you, haven't got the facilities to serve women' and we said 'oh don't worry we've brought our own!' (Laughter).[94]

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[92] Interview with SW, p. 9.

[93] Interview with CA, p. 9.

[94] Interview with SW, p. 9.

The collective actions of the Aberdeen group saw women dress up, perform and make jokes, a perspective of the 1970s-feminist experience that challenges the stereotype of feminism as humourless. These instances of direct action were events in which feminists could organise as the Aberdeen Women's Liberation Group, but also an opportunity to be creative and have fun. They contributed to the formation of a collective identity and consciousness, and helped to establish personal bonds rooted in common experiences of the joy and excitement of feminist action.

2.2 Sustaining and Expanding Feminist Networks

Personal networks were also an important method of coordination for sustaining a sense of political momentum and group cohesion once feminist activists had graduated and entered full-time employment. Chris Aldred reflected on the challenges of balancing her time for political activism with work and raising a family: 'it was a very demanding environment…you got roped into things practically every day of the week that kept you going…it was just unrealistic'.[95] The challenges of being involved with women's liberation beyond student life were also echoed by Sandie Wyles as she reflected on her thinking that 'going to a…meeting at 7 o'clock on a Monday night, it didn't fit so well with the working world…'[96] Furthermore, Sandie revealed the personal difficulties she faced as she encountered people with opposing views to that of her own once she entered the workplace:

> I was thrown into the workplace…I suppose I had been closeted and protected from those attitudes from the people I'd hung out with, suddenly I was thrown up against people that spoke about…'oh you're just a wee lassie, what would you ken about having children, you've not got children, what do you ken about kids?' or 'that's a man's job, come on hen, don't you be lifting that', all this kind of stuff suddenly coming out and I thought 'oh jeez here we go', right back to what has changed because having been a student you felt lots of things changed but out there in the world it was still very much this kind of

[95] Interview with CA, p. 7.

[96] Interview with SW, p. 15.

> feeling…that's when I decided I'm not going to change who I am, I'm going to keep with my principles and get support outside my work.[97]

The personal networks of Aberdeen feminists had created a supportive space for women to develop women's liberation politics. Yet as Sandie's testimony demonstrates, personal networks had also sheltered feminists from engaging beyond their immediate friendship groups and networks of wider 'sisterhood'. Chris and Sandie's testimonies also reveal that women were determined to sustain their personal ties and emotional connections to women's liberation, as they attempted to reconcile the demands of working-life and, for some, the demands of motherhood, with their identity as feminist activists. Dominic Sandbrook has suggested that most of the young student activists of the 1970s discarded their political causes as graduation loomed and energies became focused on 'getting a decent job'.[98] Naomi Wolf focused specifically on the 'decline' of the WLM in an American context. She commented:

> Barely out of the starting gate, a woman's relationship to feminism was damaged by the fact that if she avowed feminism she stood a good chance of losing her job. Conversely, she soon learned that she could trade in her feminist identification for career advancement.[99]

This depiction suggests that feminist activists of the 1970s matured beyond their political ideologies and principles, and abandoned their collective identities as they entered the workplace. Yet the personal ties feminist activists had developed to the Aberdeen group had impacted on the ways in which feminists lived, with their politics at the centre of their daily realities, social interactions, relationships, and life choices. Such experiences and ties has caused a veritable personal transformation, which was not easily undone. The personal contacts and friendships women had established meant some were determined to maintain their connection to women's liberation and rather than 'hide' their feminist identity and

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[97] Ibid, p. 6.

[98] Dominic Sandbrook, *Seasons in the Sun* (Penguin, 2013), p. 293

[99] Naomi Wolf, *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How It Will Change the 21st Century* (Chatto and Windus, 1993), p. 79.

compromise their principles of equality, sought out employment which would allow feminists to work together and continue to develop feminist methods and practices. Moreover, as feminists graduated from university and entered the workplace, they recognised the importance of diversifying and expanding their networks to ensure the continuance of women's liberation and attempted to use their employment as opportunities to extend their reach beyond that of students and graduates. As an illustration of this I now turn to an assessment of Aberdeen feminist involvement with the Workers Educational Association (WEA) and pioneering development of Women's Studies courses, and feminist involvement in community projects in working-class suburban areas of Aberdeen.

2.2.1 The Worker's Educational Association

In 1974, Aberdeen feminists Chris Aldred and Margaret Marshall established Women's Studies courses with the Extra Mural Department at the University of Aberdeen and the WEA.[100] Since 1945, the purpose of the WEA was to create courses where 'workers would be taught to think for themselves about the society in which they lived and worked'.[101] In this case, the courses were designed as a space and opportunity for women interested in exploring aspects of women's history and portrayals of women in society, and were open to local community women as well students and graduates.[102] Feminist activists from the Aberdeen Women's Liberation Group were particularly drawn to the courses as two well-known and influential women within the wider feminist network had established the classes and raised women's education as an area for participation and development, an indication of the influence of key individual women within an organisational system of

[100] For detailed information on the development of the WEA see Roger Fieldhouse, 'The Workers Educational Association' in Roger Fieldhouse (ed), *The History of Modern British Adult Education* (National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education, 1996), pp. 168-69; Robert Turner, 'Worker's Educational Association: Tutorial Classes and Citizenship in Scotland, 1907-1938', *History of Education*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (2009), pp. 367-74.

[101] Mathew Hilton, Nick Crowson, Jean Francois Mouhot, James McKay (eds), *A Historical Guide to NGOS in Britain: Charities, Civil Society and the Voluntary Sector since 1945* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 258.

[102] Interview with CA, p. 7.

feminist networks and personal contacts. The courses also presented feminists with the opportunity to maintain a strong link to women's liberation and the wider feminist community in Aberdeen through their contribution to short focused classes, whilst balancing other personal responsibilities and work commitments.[103] Women's Studies courses also allowed feminists to collaborate with friends and personal contacts as the contents and structures of the courses were designed collectively. Chris Aldred reflected on her role in the initial establishment of the courses:

> I'd been instrumental in the design of the women and society course…but there were a group of us who'd planned the course and we came from different social sciencey and education backgrounds but we had somebody that was prepared to do something about schools and education who was a teacher, we had a sociologist or two, we had people who had been involved in the abortion campaign who were prepared to talk about that and we had stuff about women and work…. I brought the women's liberation group with me. [104]

This approach to women's education saw feminists share the responsibility for teaching collectively. Women took turns to offer insights and personal experiences on particular aspects and topics of women's role in society. Aberdeen feminists drew on their networks of feminist contacts to invite other women to speak, demonstrate and share their particular knowledge and specialisms.[105] The early Women's Studies courses thus enabled women to share and develop their teaching skills, approaches and ideas collectively.

The collective responsibility and collaborative nature of the project emphasised the value and potential of women's adult education as a feminist occupation. As a result, the classes were developed into a ten-week programme. Chris Aldred had been the first feminist from the Aberdeen group appointed as a WEA course leader and reflected on the process of involving her feminist connections to grow and expand Women's Studies in Aberdeen:

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[103] Interview with SW, p. 10.

[104] Interview with CA, p. 7.

[105] Interview with SW, p. 10.

> Lots of us had come to women's education through activism and so had contacts and we would involve our contacts into the WEA, the democratic structure was particularly useful for that…lots of women became really quite involved, the ideas were getting in there that there was something to be done, I think through the education stuff we realised we wanted to appeal to a constituency of working-class women'.[106]

The extension of the courses led to the establishment of a Women's Studies branch within the WEA in which feminist tutors developed courses for working-class women focused on the issues of women's rights at work, women and trade unions and women and the family.[107] The involvement of Aberdeen feminists in the WEA was part of a larger European trend of women's liberation as feminists turned their attention to the education of adult, mainly working-class, women.[108] Lesley Caldwell examined women's courses run by Italian feminists on the 150 hours scheme in Turin and Milan. This was a government-funded scheme by which employees were allowed educational leave in order to enrol into a range of courses offered by the trade-unions. Feminists soon started organising women-only courses under this scheme. Caldwell noted that the courses were designed 'to offer basic education opportunities within an atmosphere of political commitment and awareness'.[109] The courses developed by women's groups varied in form and content, however, the shared central aim of women's courses across Europe was to explore issues relevant to the lives of women workers from a feminist perspective.[110]

Aberdeen feminists attempted to provide working-class women with information about working rights and the Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts of 1975.[111] Yet Aberdeen feminists were also determined to make the WEA women's courses a space in

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[106] Interview with CA, p. 10.

[107] Interview with FF, p. 3.

[108] For example, see Sheila Rowbotham, *Women in Movement* (Routledge, 1992), p. 280; Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 280; Robert Lumley*, States of Emergency: Cultures of Revolt in Italy from 1968 to 1978* (Verso, 1990), p. Introduction.

[109] See Lesley Caldwell, 'Courses for Women: The Example of the 150 Hours in Italy', *Feminist Review*, No. 14 (Summer, 1983), p. 72; Maud Bracke, *The Reinvention of the Political* (Routledge, 2014), Chapter 5.

[110] Liz Heron, *Truth, Dare or Promise* (Virago, 1985), p. 8.

[111] Interview with CA, p. 8.

which working-class women could engage with the principles, ideologies and practices of women's liberation. At the centre of the courses then was the opportunity for women to learn new skills, grow in confidence and make personal connections through the practice of CR. Chris Aldred reflected on feminist teaching methods as she said:

> We tried to reflect back the experience and say 'right, now you've got the experience, what do you make of it?', it was that same thing, if you take people's experience into the group analysis, if you get people to talk about what their lives are like and ask them political questions, they think political thoughts, you know when you say 'where is the power here?' and 'who is running this?' and 'should they have the say?', the questions are not sophisticated but they go deep to the understanding of their own lives.[112]

Chris's testimony reveals the powerful influence CR had on her politicisation and personal life as she championed its practice as a way in which working-class women could also politicise their own situations, develop their opinions and insights and begin to piece together a collective consciousness. Fiona Forsyth also echoed the importance of feminist methods in women's education:

> I developed this view as a consequence of being involved that education really is a route…out of the trap that women are in…. So many women are stuck at home or stuck in low paid jobs…I've seen it many times, women who are stuck…if you could just spend a couple of years for yourself on education then you will work out what to do…[113]

The use of women's liberation practices such as CR were utilised to give women who had not been previously aware, attracted to or welcomed to feminist groups and networks at the university, the opportunity to become familiar with the philosophy of WLM and develop a feminist perspective.[114]

However, the development of women's courses as a space in which working-class women could have the opportunity to politicise their own experiences also confronted Aberdeen feminists with issues of power dynamics between women tutors and students,

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[112] Interview with CA, p. 7.

[113] Interview with FF, p. 9.

[114] Liz Heron, *Truth, Dare or Promise* (Virago, 1985), p. 8.

and the inaccessibility of the feminist networks developed around the university campus.[115] Chris Aldred reflected on this as she said:

> I used to go home quite uncomfortable sometimes, you know and if I'm saying that the real driver is it's not fair that people have, I'd go home thinking it is not fair that people have so much less chance in the world than me, I have so much more chance than other people, you know I would go home and I would of talked to really intelligent, really capable women, that were somehow managing to be able to rear three children and hold down a full time job, be trade union activists, cope with a husband who was irascible and difficult and you know and I would tooter out in my car and do my bit of teaching and tooter back again and just made me feel sometimes that the value of what they did was so much more than what the value of what I did and that's not a comfortable thought…[116]

Lucy Caldwell also noted similar problems of hierarchy within the 150 hours courses as she commented, 'it seems to be well-nigh impossible to break with the idea of the coordinator as a different kind of woman, one who has already begun the process of emancipation, who knows and who has done certain things'.[117] Aberdeen feminists wanted to avoid setting the schedule of topics and were conscious not to steer or dominate discussions to ensure that the students had the opportunity to place their personal experiences at the centre of analysis. In this context, Aberdeen feminists saw their role as facilitator rather than teacher in order to promote the personal involvement of the attendees and, importantly, in an attempt to encourage the development of connections and relationships between women regardless of class and educational background.[118] How successful this approach was remains unclear, as there is little evidence emanating from the women who attended the courses. However, the aims of Aberdeen feminists to create a space in which working-class women could partake in CR may have led to frustration and disappointment on the part of students who wanted more structured taught content, for

[115] Interview with FF, p. 4.

[116] Interview with CA, pp. 7-8.

[117] Lucy Caldwell, 'Courses for Women', *Feminist Review*, No. 14 (Summer, 1983), p. 77.

[118] For example, see Interview with SW p. 12; Interview with CA, p. 8; Interview with FF, p. 8.

those uncomfortable with sharing intimate details of their lives in the classroom and for those not interested in partaking in women's liberation politics.[119]

However, the WEA had enabled Aberdeen feminists the opportunity to work and connect with working-class women, presented the opportunity to combine their politics with paid employment, and enabled women to maintain their connections to women's liberation and the personal contacts they had cultivated over the course of the 1970s. As such, feminists in Aberdeen attempted to influence and direct the broader Scottish WLM to a similar focus. In 1977, Chris Aldred and Margaret Marshall published a report on the failings of the 1975 Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts to rectify any of the problems women workers faced in Scotland. As a result of the authors involvement with women's courses, the report aimed firstly to act as an inexpensive and practical guide for women to actually use the anti-discrimination legislation and, secondly, to highlight the specific situation of Scottish women workers facing a reluctant system of industrial tribunals and apathetic trade unions.[120] Through personal contact with working-class women on the WEA courses, Aberdeen feminists had realised how commonly women came up against the misapprehension of 'you've got equal pay now' and therefore a 'fair deal' in regard to employment and opportunities. The report highlighted that between 1975 and 1977 only thirty-nine equal pay cases and seven sex discrimination cases had been taken as far as tribunal hearings in Scotland, and that 55% of women manual workers earned less than £40 per week compared to only 6.1% of male manual workers. Chris and Margaret also called attention to the problem that the majority of women workers were confined to 'female' industries and as such could not use the legislation to claim equal pay through a job evaluation scheme, as they could not find a man doing work of comparable value.[121]

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[119] Lucy Caldwell, 'Courses for Women', *Feminist Review*, No. 14 (Summer, 1983), p.75.

[120] Chris Aldred and Margaret Marshall, *The Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts*, (Aberdeen People's Press, 1977), National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, p. 2.

[121] Ibid.

Aberdeen feminists also encouraged women across the wider Scottish WLM to realise their potential to run women's courses as a means to gaining a fuller understanding of women's economic exploitation and expanding the networks of women's liberation. Marion Keogh and Fiona Forsyth argued in the *Scottish Women's Liberation Journal* in 1977: 'only then can we move our struggle outside of the existing movement and involve working women'.[122] Chris Aldred also highlighted the potential of women's courses to expand, strengthen and diversify the networks of women's liberation:

> We can discover, as I did, that there is no need at all to 'water down' our ideas of women's oppression for working-class audiences, but that women workers are as aware of their double oppression as workers and as women as are intellectual feminists; and we can build real dynamic links with women we may meet later on the picket lines, or when they could do with our help in negotiations.[123]

How successful Aberdeen feminists were in encouraging the broader Scottish movement to become involved in Women's Studies is unclear, though Sarah Browne has noted that the Glasgow and Edinburgh women's liberation groups did have some emphasis on women's adult education.[124] However, the work of the Aberdeen feminists running women's courses and their suggestions for ways in which feminists across Scotland could become involved were acknowledged and discussed by the broader Scottish movement. For example, Frances Bowyer wrote of the Aberdeen group's research into the impact of the Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts, 'the government and trade unions are still telling us what a great step forward these acts have been, a tolerant concession to women, whereas, as the book points out, in reality this is just not true and until we follow some of their suggestions

[122] Marion Keogh and Fiona Forsyth, 'Thirty Years Hard Labour: Patterns of Women's Work since the Second World War', *The Scottish Women's Liberation Journal*, No. 2 (1977), The National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, p. 12.

[123] Chris Aldred, 'Feminism Versus Trade Unionism', *The Scottish Women's Liberation Journal* No. 1 (1977), The National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, p. 13.

[124] Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 136.

and bring pressure to bear – it never will be!'[125] For Aberdeen feminists, women's courses presented an invaluable opportunity to continue the struggle for women's liberation in a context where feminists could potentially expand the membership of the WLM.[126]

2.2.2 Community Education Projects

The WEA had opened up the possibility of employment that allowed feminists to combine the politics of women's liberation with opportunities to connect with and support women beyond already established feminist networks. Some Aberdeen feminists were determined to continue working within adult education to further broaden the influence of WLM and maintain their feminist identity in the workplace. Local authority funded community education programmes saw Aberdeen feminists establish youth clubs, community newspapers and develop workshops for young girls and women focused on manual trades and music production.[127] Sandie Wyles reflected on this as she said:

> Community education did attract a lot of people who did think like me so I think in terms of picking the right profession for me it was the right move, I think I would of struggled in a bank or a stock broker industry or even librarianship…I just knew that was not for me, I just knew I would have to compromise myself too much and I wasn't able to be that chameleon and compartmentalise who you are [inside] of work with who you are outside work.[128]

As students, feminist activists in Aberdeen had developed personal connections and relationships in which feminists reformulated their lives through day-to-day interaction and emotional connection with women's liberation. Community education also presented an opportunity for Aberdeen feminists to continue to work alongside and collaborate with

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[125] Frances Bowyer, 'The Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts – A Report from Scotland – A Review', *The Scottish Women's Liberation Journal*, No. 2 (1977), The National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, p. 19.

[126] Chris Aldred, 'Feminism Versus Trade Unionism', *The Scottish Women's Liberation Journal*, No. 1 (1977), The National Library Scotland, Edinburgh, p. 12.

[127] See Interview with SW, p. 13; Interview with CB, p. 3.

[128] Interview with SW, p. 11.

other women from the feminist network and develop projects with local residents, which would encourage personal and collective politicisation.

Community projects also led to confrontation, contact and relationships with new women working in the interests of local community women. For example, Chrissy Bruce had been an activist in her community of Torry, a working-class residential area south east of the city, since the early 1970s.[129] Chrissy was born in 1941 and was therefore older than most of the feminist activists involved in women's liberation who were mainly in their late-twenties at the end of the 1970s. Chrissy also differed in that she had not been to university and therefore had not been involved with women's liberation activity on-campus. Chrissy reflected on how she was introduced to the wider network of Aberdeen feminists:

> I got to know them through working in the community, not that I'd have got to know them in my local pub or restaurant or anything…as they got to know me better I felt more comfortable because I stood my ground and played to my strengths which was local knowledge and a right to be there.[130]

Chrissy's testimony reveals how she perceived feminist groups and networks established at the university, as 'middle-class' and 'over intellectualised' spaces in which she did not feel comfortable or encouraged to join.[131] Aberdeen feminists were confronted with such perspectives of women's liberation and forced to assess that for some women, identities of social class prevented participation and interaction with women's liberation regardless of the commonality of gender, and emphasised further the insular nature of the feminist networks and system of organisation developed and rooted in the context of the university.[132] In Aberdeen, the community education projects thus provided an alternative space away from the university, which saw women collaborate, connect and establish

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[129] Interview with CB, pp. 1-2.

[130] Ibid, p. 11.

[131] Ibid.

[132] Celia Hughes, *Young Lives on the Left* (Manchester Scholarship Online, 2016), p. 123.

relationships as feminist activists with shared aims and visions for the local projects. Chrissy reflected on this shared feminist approach and perspective: 'my role, my aim, was to try to get women to see they could make the changes for themselves'.[133]

The involvement of feminists in community education also ensured that projects were organised from a feminist perspective to facilitate the attendance, participation and contribution of local women. Fiona Forsyth began working within community education through a job creation scheme in 1977 and was determined to embed feminist principles of organisation in how the projects were designed. She reflected:

> The first year was in Torry working with community groups in Torry…I got into a lot of clashes with guys…because they were saying 'why do we need a crèche? The grandmothers can have the children', and I'm going 'no, what if the grandmothers want to come', and it sounds so evident now but at the time they were quite bare facedly arguing that 'we can't afford a crèche', 'well sorry you're going to have to afford a crèche'…I was probably every day kind of arguing this stuff really, and in the reality of it seeing the difference if you did provide a crèche women could participate in it.[134]

The community education projects were local authority funded and as such were not organised as women-only events. However, Aberdeen feminists had an understanding and alertness to the specific needs of women such as child-care, so used their knowledge and perspective to influence and direct community projects to reflect feminist principles and facilitate the involvement of local women.

The influence of Aberdeen feminists can also be seen in some of the content of community projects. For example, a women's health day was organised in the Great Northern Hotel in which women could access information on issues such as contraception, menopause and cystitis.[135] This was part of the local authority community projects and was not advertised as a women's liberation event. However, the imprint of the Aberdeen Women's Liberation Group on the event is obvious, as feminists had undertaken self-

[133] Interview with CB, p. 5.

[134] Interview with FF, p. 4.

[135] Ibid, p. 9.

examination as part of establishing a self-help practice to women's health.[136] Self-help was at the centre of an international feminist challenge to 'the patriarchal medical profession' in which feminists aimed to combat the power of doctors by learning more about how their bodies worked.[137] As elsewhere in the USA and Europe, Aberdeen feminists used speculums and mirrors to inspect their genitalia as a practice of self-education, whereby women were empowered as they became familiar and knowledgeable about their own bodies.[138] Yet the practice of self-examination was not purely for individual empowerment, as Aberdeen feminists undertook the practice as a collective in which groups of women discussed issues ranging from the menstrual cycle to comparing vaginal colouring in order to establish a deeper understanding of the female body, what was healthy and ways to identity infection.[139] Women's health had also become a topic of interest for the WLM internationally, as it epitomised the 'personal is political' ethos of the movement and seminal feminist publications, such as *Our Bodies, Ourselves* and *The New Women's Health Handbook,* had pioneered accessible information on women's health.[140] The women's health event was organised by Aberdeen feminists in order to bring women from the local community together and allow women to share knowledge and personal experiences in a supportive and collective context. The emphasis on individual experience did include elements of the practice of CR as women began to break down the taboos surrounding reproductive health through making the issue of women's health public and developing a shared knowledge based on common experience. From the perspective of the Aberdeen feminists who organised the women's health day 'it was an enormous group of

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[136] Interview with SW, p. 10.

[137] Dinny, 'Feeling Sick with Doctors' in Feminist Anthology Collective (eds), *No Turning Back*, (Women's Press, 1981), p. 144.

[138] Sheila Rowbotham, *The Past is Before Us* (Pandora, 1989), p. 75; Lynne Segal, *Is the Future Female?* (Virago, 1987), p. 82.

[139] Interview with SW, p. 10. Feminists based in Rome also undertook self-examination in collectives. For example, see Maud Bracke, *The Reinvention of the Political* (Routledge, 2014), p. 106.

[140] Angela Phillips and Jill Rakusen, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (Penguin, 1978); Nancy MacKeith (ed), *The New Women's Health Handbook* (Virago, 1978).

women…it was a fantastic success', though there is little known about the women who attended the event or how many.[141] In this case, the community projects allowed Aberdeen feminists to organise events and projects that encompassed the central tenets of women's liberation for local women, and in the process open their local networks to potential supportive contacts, personal ties and friendships beyond the context of the university.

Conclusions

The Aberdeen Women's Liberation Group was a small amorphous group, which epitomised the de-centralised nature of the British WLM. However, within the small local group, they rejected traditional methods of political organisation and theorised and developed an organisational system based on personal contacts and a wider network of 'sisterhood' to connect and hold local women together. The local environment of Aberdeen had a profound effect on why women developed and emphasised personal and political ties as an organisational form of women's liberation. The university was an important space in which feminists met and shared common experiences as political activists. Yet the university and wider city of Aberdeen also provided shared experiences of political isolation and sexism, which motivated politically conscious women to develop alternative, supportive and politically separatist networks around the university campus. However, such an emphasis on personal connections between feminists operating in the environment of the university and the unfamiliarity of the city, ultimately meant the group was almost exclusively comprised of students and, as such, the openness and accessibility of feminist networks for non-educated women was limited.

Aberdeen feminists cemented their contacts, networks and friendships through the practice of CR in which women shared intimate and emotional details about their lives. It was through the process of CR and emphasis of personal connections as a means to organise the small local group, that women also discovered feelings of difference and

[141] Interview with FF, p. 9.

personal incompatibility. Women retreated into their preferred social groups, which, although an important practice of lived feminist politics, could appear as cliques to less well known and less charismatic women. The Aberdeen group's system of organisation also saw women attempt to develop a local network of 'sisterhood' through collective direct actions that were organised to encourage broad base participation from women from across the Aberdeen group. Their preferred organisational method and emphasis on the importance of personal contacts and friendships was then effective, in that it inspired intense commitment and had a profound effect on the personal lives of the women and their day-to-day involvement with women's liberation.

Aberdeen feminists were determined to maintain their links to the WLM and the personal relationships they had developed as students. Feminists sought out employment opportunities that would allow them to combine work with their feminist principles and political practices. Involvement in adult education confronted Aberdeen feminists with the insular nature of the group and the detrimental effects of personal contacts and networks as a system of organisation for women's liberation. They looked to move the practices of women's liberation away from the university to include community and working-class women. How successful the group was at expanding their networks in unclear, though their attempts are an indication of how feminists recognised and attempted to integrate difference into the networks they had developed.

The organisational system of the Aberdeen group ultimately dictated how feminists reacted to differences and incompatibility between women and the openness and accessibility of the group. In this case, women formed their own groups around compatible personalities and friendships, which inspired intense commitment to women's liberation and helped to connect and sustain the small local group. How feminists related to each other and connected as a network of 'sisterhood' was at the centre of living feminist politics in Aberdeen. Yet, this organisational method of women's liberation also limited its reach and diversity beyond the university. In the next case study on the Brighton and Hove

Women's Liberation Group, a more defined and structured organisational system and operational form of women's liberation was developed to confront and manage difference and debate amongst women in this much larger and more diverse local women's liberation group.

Chapter Three
The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group: Umbrella Structures and Group Organisation

For the Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group, there was a pressing need for a more defined system of coordination and structural organisation due to the size, diversity and geographical spread of feminist activism across the local area. Brighton is large tourist town situated on the south coast of England with a distinctive identity and reputation for liberalism, radicalism, counterculture and the gay movement.[1] In the late 1960s, feminist activism thrived in this environment and atmosphere of the town and, despite little evidence as to the exact number of women involved, there were groups of feminist activists in neighbouring Hove, at the University of Sussex in Falmer, Lewes, Shoreham and Eastbourne.[2] The geographical spread of feminist activists and wealth of activism in the area meant an amorphous system of organisation would not provide cohesion to women's liberation in Brighton. There were of course collectives and informal groups in this diverse wealth of feminist activism that did not consider themselves part of the women's liberation group. However, for those individual women and groups that did align with the WLM, a clear, defined structure was integral to the multifaceted nature and longevity of the Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group throughout the period. The Brighton and Hove group developed and experimented with several organisational and structural mechanisms in order for feminist activists to connect, communicate and debate the operational form of the feminist movement. Methods of collective representation and the structural fabric of the group were central to daily involvement and experiences of

[1] Suzanne Mackenzie, *Visible Histories: Women and Environments in a Post-War British City* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989), pp. 10-3; Sue Bruley, 'Women's Liberation at the Grass Roots', *Women's History Review*, Issue. 25, No. 5 (2016), pp. 724-5.

[2] Women's Words (eds), *A Woman's Place: A Celebration of Women's Lives in Brighton over the last 25 Years* (Women's Words, 1999), p. 1.

women's liberation precisely because women continued to develop their own organisational methods along feminist principles. The structures of the Brighton and Hove group were under constant review and continuous attempts to solve problems and alter operational form were a significant part of the feminist experience in Brighton and Hove during the 1970s.

As the Aberdeen case study has shown, some women's liberation groups did operate as an amorphous collective network of feminist activists with few defined and formal organisational methods. Yet the Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group offers an alternative model to that of the 'structureless' women's liberation group. Recent research into local and regional women's liberation groups has begun to complicate the depiction of the local group as completely formless.[3] Eve Setch focused on the London Women's Liberation Workshop to argue that the Workshop was itself a coordinating mechanism for over 300 hundred local groups active in London over the course of the 1970s. She noted:

> In London, due to the size of the city, coordination became a pressing need earlier than elsewhere, and a citywide organisation – the London Women's Liberation Workshop – was constructed as the groups themselves started up. The early foundations…of the London Workshop make it an important feature in WLM history.[4]

However, the development of clear, defined structural organisation and coordinating methods should not be viewed as exclusive to the London movement. From as early as 1970, the Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group had defined organisational structures and methods of communication through monthly general meetings, *The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Newsletter* and allocated CR groups. These were the

[3] For example, Jill Radford, 'A History of Women's Liberation Movements' in Gabrielle Griffin, Marianne Hester, Shirin Rai and Sasha Roseneil (eds), *Stirring It* (Taylor and Francis, 2003), pp. 40-58; Elizabeth Armstrong, *The Retreat from Organization* (State University of New York Press, 2002), p. 67; Bridget Lockyer, 'An Irregular Period?', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (2013), pp. 643-7; Sue Bruley, 'Women's Liberation at the Grass Roots', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 25, No. 5 (2016), p. 725.

[4] Eve Setch, 'The Face of Metropolitan Feminism: The London Women's Liberation Workshop, 1969-1970', *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2002), p. 172.

principal sites of exchange and provided feminist activists with regular opportunities and spaces to meet and, importantly, provided a platform upon which disagreement and debate could be explicitly aired and managed. The Brighton and Hove group also espoused the anti-hierarchical, leaderless ethos of the WLM in which personal politics were emphasised. Also integral to the organisation of the Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group was therefore a system of autonomous and permissive action groups, in which feminist activists could pursue the activity that suited their particular individual needs and interests. Newsletters, minutes, reports and oral histories demonstrate the group's structural operation in more detail. For some women of the Brighton and Hove group, structure was of great consequence. It was an important political process in which women experimented and applied innovative political practices, which for the women involved were significant in their lives more broadly, as they rethought power and organisation.

3.1 Organisational Structure of the Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group

3.1.1 General Meetings

The movement for women's liberation in Brighton and Hove was principally coordinated through the establishment of general meetings. These meetings were organised every three weeks and held in Brighton town centre – for the first half of the 1970s women met at the Prince George pub on Trafalgar Street which regularly rented rooms to political groups at low cost.[5] It was of great consequence that women from across the spectrum of activity in the area attended general meetings to avoid a separation between students based at the University of Sussex in Falmer just outside Brighton and women living in Brighton and Hove and the surrounding areas.[6] The result was a concentration of feminists focused on activity in the town centre and surrounding housing estates, alongside women from the

[5] Interview with Penny Summerfield (PS), 5 March 2015, p. 8.

[6] Interview with Nicola Fryer (NF), 9 September 2015, p. 2.

University of Sussex campus and student groups. Penny Summerfield joined the Brighton and Hove movement in 1971 after moving to Brighton to study history at the University of Sussex. She recalled her first impressions of the group's membership:

> The diversity of the population in Brighton…it was a very diverse group…at the general meetings we really did have a big mix of women…[big mix of] social class, probably not kind of straight forward class division like middle-class, working-class, but all the subtle gradations of kind of different socio-economic groups, different kinds of ways of making your living, so professional, secretarial, and…age, I remember that there were women who were members of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom who faithfully came and were much older, they were in there 60s and 70s, we were all 20, this is forty years ago so I'm in my 60s (laughter) but I mean they were special and interesting… [7]

Penny's recollection of the group's diversity was also echoed by Dorothy Sheridan, who reflected on the vibrancy of the Lewes group as she read aloud a diary entry from the early 1970s: 'their circumstances are all so different. Many of them are students, some of them are unemployed or work part-time at any assortment of jobs and some of them spend their time in political and social activities. Some of them have full time jobs and some of them are mothers'.[8] This diverse membership was a defining characteristic of the Brighton and Hove group from its beginnings. Yet, this diversity could also prove problematic for communication between women and a sense of group cohesion. The organisational structures of the Brighton and Hove group were fundamental to overcoming a number of potential fractures and to maintaining momentum. General meetings provided the only regular opportunity for women to connect face-to-face outside of smaller action groups and friendship networks. A collective approach was fundamental to facilitating participation from as many women as possible during general meetings and as such women were encouraged to speak out and contribute to discussions and debates.[9]

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[7] Interview with PS, p. 12.

[8] Interview with Dorothy Sheridan (DS), 8 April 2015, p. 12.

[9] 'How We Organise', Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Information Leaflet, Undated, Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics.

For this reason, it was essential that general meetings were well attended. From as early as 1971, some women feared that general meetings could be unrepresentative of the wider group as many women could not commit as much time or energy as others. There was a particular concern over the inaccessibility of general meetings for mothers, as meetings took place during weekday evenings. For example, the Nursery Group, who campaigned for improved child-care services in Brighton and against the presumed responsibility of mothers for childcare, implored: 'there is a real need now for an organised baby-sitting service for the whole Brighton group; it's difficult enough funding a baby-sitter once, let alone a regular one'.[10] There had been a mounting interest in the poor provision of child-care services in Brighton from 1970 when a campaign to set up a crèche at the University of Sussex was established. The impetus for organising a collective child-care service internal to the women's group was to ensure that the group remained accessible to all women through the general meetings and to ensure that the perspectives of women with children were included in discussions.

Despite these efforts attendance was persistently problematic due to the diversity of the group's membership, the differences in time and energy women could commit, and also, as a symptom of inflated expectations as not all women wanted to attend. In 1972, the Brighton and Hove group reported:

> Attendance has fallen off during the summer months for various reasons, but a reversal of this trend is now expected. If you are a lapsed member who feels that you weren't getting enough from women's liberation, how about doing something to change that, do something revolutionary like giving a little more of your time, energy, ideas, even enthusiasm, you will be surprised at the result. Women's liberation depends on your caring about yourself and those around you. If you have dropped out but still feel that women's position is bad,

[10] 'Nursery Group', *The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Newsletter* (April 1971), Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics, p. 2.

> attend the next general meeting and if you have ideas don't hesitate to express them, otherwise women's liberation will never be a viable organisation.[11]

For example, the involvement of students in the group meant that attendance would drop during university holidays and as women graduated during the summer months. This trend obviously meant that some women would return once the academic year had recommenced. However, student absence created a noticeable gap in discussions at general meetings and contributed to growing frustrations over what was perceived by some feminist activists as lack of commitment. Many felt that by non-attendance, women had missed importance discussions and decisions affecting the wider group and that to simply re-join without partaking in such important political processes was damaging both to their own political development and the development of the wider group. There was also a concern that sporadic attendance would result in women feeling that they did not have an influence or emotional stake in women's liberation and, as a result, would become disillusioned. In an attempt to overcome this, women not attending general meetings were encouraged to prepare reports on their activity or current interests. These reports were designed to break down barriers of geographical location and prevent cliques from forming in an effort to ensure that the group remained as transparent and as accessible as possible.[12] Penny Summerfield remembered: 'those general meetings that happened regularly were sort of noisy, fun, inspirational meetings where basically plans to do other things would be hatched'.[13] General meetings were busy, vibrant sites of communication and exchange which gave new women the opportunity to grasp the ideas of the WLM, understand the history of actions organised in Brighton and Hove and join action groups that suited their particular needs and interests.

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[11] 'Attendance', *The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Newsletter* (No. 4, 1972), Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics, p. 1.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Interview with PS, p. 8.

However, the organisation of general meetings around action reports proved problematic for some new women. The structure of meetings emphasised open discussion and debate, which for some newcomers highlighted how established members could dominate conversations and intimidate less confident participants. One woman wrote anonymously of her experiences:

> I recognise that my newness disqualifies me from having experiences of those same forces/struggles/campaigns/arguments etc. that women of many years standing within the movement have undergone. And whilst that remains true for me, it also applies to all new women who become feminists, of whatever ilk. This statement of obvious fact however has been used against me and I suspect others, for voicing criticisms of certain defects/shortcomings that our newness makes us aware of.[14]

For some, the general meetings presented the Brighton and Hove group as a stagnated political party that was dominated by members who used their length of service as a way in which to silence new members and created certain 'credentials of feminism'.[15] The anti-hierarchical ethos of the movement seemed to be in contradiction to the domination of meetings by women who allegedly used their experiences to monopolise discussions and debates. Women new to the movement were also concerned over the language used at meetings. Words and acronyms used without explanation could often mystify conversations to women who were not familiar with the language of women's liberation. Penny Summerfield recounted a particularly humorous incident:

> I do remember being amused one day because we had this meeting and it was a time when we talked about the importance of the grassroots and the term 'the grassroots' kept being bandied around in this meeting and a woman who was definitely not a student, definitely from the town and a bit older got up at the end and said with her notebook and pen, 'please could you give me the address of this Grassroots Group' (laughter)…be clear, don't just use jargon, that was what I learned from that.[16]

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[14] 'A Personal View of the Women's Liberation Movement in Brighton', *The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Newsletter*, Undated. Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Interview with PS, p. 12.

Women's liberation activists attempted to overcome this and promote the accessibility of general meetings through the production of information leaflets, which described 'what the mystifying initials [stood] for', for example CR (consciousness raising).[17] It was hoped this would better introduce women to the ideas of the WLM and present clearly the core activities and political practices of the Brighton and Hove group.

However, newcomers continued to face problems in deciphering the language of the group throughout the period. Sally Munt talked at length about the challenges she faced when trying to break into the group in the early 1980s:

> When I moved here to join all that I just didn't understand what was going on around me, I couldn't understand the codes of behaviour, I couldn't understand the language they were using…certain words were good, certain words were bad…I remember feeling that at the time.[18]

The success of general meetings as a coordinating mechanism was complex as not all women were comfortable attending or participating in such busy and diverse discussions. Yet, efforts to develop the structural organisation of the group were continuous throughout the 1970s as the inclusion of new women at general meetings was imperative to the group's growth and cohesion. This was evident from as early as 1971 when women present at a general meeting established a New Members' Group after a surge in numbers. It was hoped that a New Members' Group, alongside regular participation at the general meetings, would give new members 'an initial impression of the reasons for and the aims of the WLM'.[19] The group was designed to offer additional support and information to women who were coming to terms with understanding the women's movement, demystify

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[17] Clare, 'Letter to the WLM', *The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Newsletter*, Undated, Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics, p. 4.

[18] Interview with Sally Munt (SM), 9 April 2015, p. 6.

[19] 'New Members' Group', *The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Newsletter* (April 1971), Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics, p. 2.

the discussions and to overcome the domination of established group members at general meetings.

Much like the networks of the Aberdeen Women's Liberation Group, a women-only policy was introduced to protect the general meetings as the principal site of exchange and, in this case, as an important access point for new members. Penny Summerfield recalled the first Brighton and Hove WLM general meeting at the Prince George pub in 1971:

> In the Summer…there was an announcement that the first women's liberation group was going to form in Brighton and Hove and its first meeting was going to happen in a pub…a guy with long blonde hair and a long beard who was in the Socialist Society asked me if I was wanting to go and I said 'oh yeah' and he said 'well I'll give you a lift'… I went to this pub…and it was absolutely bursting, the meeting room in the pub was absolutely bursting, absolutely full and there were a few women who were kind of running the meeting who I didn't know, just two or three of them and they said 'the first thing we should do is we should have a vote on whether men may attend this meeting, all those in favour of men attending', and there were about four men in the room and they put their hands up and nobody else did, 'all those against' and a whole forest of hands went up, and so this poor bloke with the long blonde hair who'd given me a lift had to go, so he left, I never remember speaking to him again after that (laughter)…[20]

The decision to exclude men from general meetings and adopt political separatism was taken to develop meetings as a space for the 'free exploration of womanhood'.[21] It was hoped that this would facilitate the development of a new group consciousness in which women could hear the diverse opinions, positions and interests within the membership and organise the relevant actions around their oppression on a collective basis.[22] For many women who had been involved in mixed political organisations previous to their participation in the women's movement, and for the many women whose involvement with the WLM was their first such engagement with a political group, women-only political

[20] Interview with PS, pp. 3-4.

[21] Maud Bracke, *The Reinvention of the Political* (Routledge, 2014), p. 66.

[22] 'What is the Women's Movement?', Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Movement Leaflet, Undated, Penny Summerfield Collection.

meetings were a revelatory experience.[23] As Dorothy Sheridan discussed during interview, political separatism created an environment in which some women felt more confident in vocalising their opinions and personal experiences during political discussions and, as a result, contributed to their development and an enrichment of their feminist consciousness.[24] While political separatism at general meetings was accepted as part of the organisation and operation of the Brighton and Hove group, questions over male exclusion emerged and were re-examined at specific periods in relation to certain issues, for example the inclusion of male children at the Women's Centre and at feminist social events.[25] The organisational structures and mechanism of the Brighton and Hove group were sensitive to the differences between women on how the group should operate and were constantly changing to reflect the diverse opinions and standpoints of the women involved.

While such an open, collective structure fostered a busy and exciting atmosphere at general meetings, it depended on the involvement of women from a variety of ages, social backgrounds, cultures and life experiences at any given time. As such, general meetings could also become unproductive and confusing. An attempt to combat this was made in 1971 when thirty-seven members present at a general meeting decided to make Maureen Daniels secretary of the group. Her responsibilities were primarily to deal with the increasing amount of correspondence the Brighton and Hove group was receiving, as well as keeping up to date information and contacts on other women's groups. At the same general meeting, the women present also agreed to keep records of meetings in the form of minutes.[26] In Sarah Browne's study of the Scottish WLM, she observed that 'unlike women's groups of the fifties and sixties, the WLM's position to organisation meant that in

[23] Julie Stephens, 'Our Remembered Selves', *Oral History*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (2010), p. 84.

[24] Interview with DS, p. 12.

[25] Interview with NF, p. 6.

[26] 'Report on General Meeting', *The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Newsletter* (April 1971), Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics, p. 2.

practice they did not elect committees nor take minutes of meetings'[27]. However, the necessity of organisational structures in the Brighton and Hove group meant that minute taking was introduced to ensure that decisions were recorded and information at subsequent meetings was circulated more seamlessly. The minutes were typed up and stored in a minute book that all members could access and were later published in the monthly newsletter. The women responsible for taking minutes were never to repeat the task at subsequent meetings in a bid to prevent power falling into the hands of a few women. The issues of structural organisation were never simple in the context of WLM ideas and philosophy. The Brighton and Hove group was acutely aware of the necessity of the collective. However, as numbers grew and general meetings were developed as staples in the cohesion of the group, it also relied on introducing clear and efficient ways to keep track of previous attendance, discussions and decisions taken on the direction of the wider group.

This was also reflected in the decision to introduce a chairwoman into the structure of general meetings in order to avoid confusion and promote transparency. Again, this responsibility was to be rotated at each meeting. As some women were not experienced in acting as chair, the movement published a guide 'of 5 points, which are not rules, to help people who've never done it before, and maybe keep the meeting as clear and interesting as possible'.[28] The guide suggested that a chairwoman should make out an agenda before the meeting, keep business and reports to a minimum as they tended to be time consuming, request that each speaker address the chair directly, keep the discussions on topic and agenda, and offer summaries of discussions before moving on to other points to ensure the women listening had clarity over the discussion. Although a chairwoman could appear at odds with the anti-leadership ethos and collective philosophy of the WLM, it was essential

[27] Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 8.

[28] 'Chairing a Meeting', *The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Newsletter*, Undated, Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics, p. 3.

in developing general meetings as the principal meeting place of the Brighton and Hove group. It was also key to the political development of the women who volunteered. It provided the opportunity for women to take up roles that had usually been reserved for men in other Left organisations.[29] Moreover, this structure emphasised the importance that every woman should have the opportunity to speak on issues affecting the wider Brighton and Hove group.[30] Participation at general meetings continued to promote an atmosphere of skills development and exchange between the women in attendance. Nicola Fryer, whose first experience of a political group was at these general meetings, said: '…the ideas, in these constant discussions and meetings…how to run a women's movement, how to do things, how to make them not replicate what goes on in the patriarchal world'.[31] For women like Nicola, who had no previous experience of political discussion or debate, the coming together of feminists was vital for the development of distinctive feminist political processes and practices in Brighton. Through such organisational methods, women formed their own practices, shared ideas and learnt new skills and techniques in how to sustain and manage numerous groups and campaigns in the local area.

This combination of a collective approach with more traditional organisational methods characterised the Brighton and Hove general meetings as the principal site to explicitly address and manage debate and discord between the participants of the group. The coordination of the group through general meetings was an early recognition of the need to connect such a diverse group of women together and confront, celebrate and build on their different perspectives and interests. From 1972 onwards, general meetings were dedicated to discussing past failures and addressing conflict as well as the 'business' of the

[29] Sheila Rowbotham, *Promise of a Dream* (Penguin, 2001), p. 227; Celia Hughes, *Young Lives on the Left* (Manchester Scholarship Online, 2016), p. 145.

[30] Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 8.

[31] Interview with NF, p. 17.

group.[32] For example, a series of general meetings was planned that focused discussion on controversial divisions. It was titled 'How do We Oppress Each Other?' and aimed to explore the question 'How can feminism break down barriers and unite women?' Suggested areas for discussion were: mother/non-mother, lesbian/heterosexual, working class/middle class, young/old, black/white, intellectual/non-intellectual and quiet/vocal.[33] The aim of the discussions was to go beyond the simple notion of patriarchy as men oppressing women and discuss how competitive tendencies, misunderstandings and prejudices affected their view and approach to each other.[34] These discussion points emphasise how the Brighton and Hove WLM, as a large diverse local group, attempted to reconcile and assess differences between women, rather than women form groups based on personal compatibility as in the smaller Aberdeen Women's Liberation Group. This series of general meetings again demonstrates that the women involved were aware of potentially divisive issues much earlier than has been suggested elsewhere and, moreover, in this case, how they worked to explicitly challenge and overcome the barriers between women. Nicola Fryer spoke at length about her attendance at general meetings and awareness of divisions between the women involved. She remembered the 'on-going rows' that occurred and said, 'it was awkward but it was necessary you know it was pretty obvious that we were being totally blinkered if we didn't…you couldn't remain unchallenged basically…and I quite enjoy being made to think about things so that's alright (laughter)'.[35] Debates and disputes often contributed to the personal development of feminist consciousness as it demonstrated the complexity of the different manifestations of feminist subjectivity within their own local group. Dorothy Sheridan read aloud a diary entry during

[32] 'General Meetings', *The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Newsletter* (No. 4, 1972), Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics, p. 1.

[33] 'How do we Oppress Each Other?', *Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Newsletter*, Undated, Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics, p. 4.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Interview with NF, p. 10.

interview: '…I know that my own idea of feminism which itself has changed as I've grown older is not the same as that of other women even within the local women's liberation group. I see it as strength of the Women's Liberation Movement that it has been able to embrace women with very differing ideas about feminism…'[36] Debate was a marker of the Brighton and Hove group's vitality and dynamism and a demonstration of the group's ability and success in attracting women with, at times, oppositional life experiences and situations but who were deeply committed to its politics as a lived experience.

It must be made clear that not all women encountered debate with the same positivity and acceptance as Nicola and Dorothy. Confrontation between women could be an incredibly painful experience for members of the Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group. Penny Summerfield remembered a particularly painful encounter in which she was accused of alienating 'ordinary' women from the movement:

> I remember going in a fairly bizarre Mexican smock which a friend who'd been to Mexico gave me and it was bizarre, it had loads of brightly coloured embroidery all over it and it was this sort of floaty smock and she turned on me and used me as an example…she said 'just look at you, look what you look like, how can you possibly expect ordinary women to want to be members of women's liberation if you look like that', and I was terribly hurt and at the same time made to feel terribly self-conscious because I'd just worn my Mexican smock because I thought it was pretty and nice and eccentric and different…and that's how we could be and I hadn't thought how other women might perceive the Mexican smock…[37]

Penny went on to say:

> I do remember that woman and she was definitely something like a secretary or in clerical work of some sort and she had a car, I remember that because you tend to remember people who had cars because they could give lifts…she wasn't normally unfriendly but that was a sharp criticism like a slap in the face and made me more self-conscious…[38]

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[36] Interview with DS, p. 11.

[37] Interview with PS, pp. 7-8.

[38] Ibid, p. 14.

As the Brighton and Hove general meetings were the key sites of exchange of ideas for women aligned with the wider group, they were also a coming together of women from across the spectrum of socio-economic class. It is not clear as to whether the class composition of this local movement was a particular painful division for other women, but it is clear that there were working-class women in the Brighton and Hove group and that class as an area of debate was never disregarded or ignored. Women of the Brighton and Hove group were aware of class as a major point of contention in developing a movement that reflected every woman's needs, priorities, and the language it used.[39] However, Penny's testimony does suggest, rather, what debate and confrontation could *feel* like for women in the Brighton and Hove group. Penny's recollection of this painful encounter also demonstrates the explicit nature in which disagreements between women were approached and integrated into the structure. Confrontation would arise and cause intense emotional reactions for the women involved. As such, Penny's testimony also illustrates that while debated, the issue of class difference among feminist activists was not necessarily resolved to overcome such obstacles.

Another area of debate and disagreement that regularly led to tensions during general meetings were the relationships and dynamics between lesbian and heterosexual women. Many women discovered their lesbianism through their participation in the WLM.[40] Nicola Fryer remembered the confidence her feminism gave her in leaving her heterosexual relationships behind:

> What I remember as one of the most important things that I did in that period of my life apart from being able to be a lesbian and get rid of the boyfriend,

[39] Eve Setch would agree with this point of view. See Eve Setch, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Britain* (PhD Thesis, University Royal Holloway, 2000), p. 58-59. Also see George Stevenson, 'The Women's Movement and "Class Struggle"', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 25, No. 5 (2016), pp. 741-55.

[40] Emily Hamer, *Britannia's Glory: A History of Twentieth-Century Lesbians*, (Continuum, 1996), p. 194.

> was actually fall in love with different women, sometimes several at once, and…express that and explore that and enjoy it.[41]

Sally Munt also described her coming out: 'I started reading these women's press books and I realised it was a thing called a lesbian and it was tied to lesbian feminism and it all became a kind of awakening really'.[42] The Brighton and Hove group provided a supportive, informative and political context for women discovering their sexuality. Many lesbian groups and networks were formed in Brighton during the period – from lesbian discussion groups and reading groups, to social groups that met in lesbian friendly pubs which were a characteristic of Brighton and Hove.[43]

While this environment was essential in providing lesbian women with supportive networks, it also left some open to accusations of doing so at the exclusion of heterosexual women.[44] Equally, some lesbian women felt marginalised and misunderstood by heterosexual women in the Brighton and Hove group. For example, Nicola Fryer recalled her frustrations and reluctance to become involved in the organisational structures that were centred on child-care:

> Women with children would have a go and we would defend ourselves on an individual basis I think, and other women would feel guilt tripped into doing some child-care, or 'I'll run the crèche then', but you have to do what you're interested in don't you, the whole thing is on a voluntary basis and it's an expression of your own politics…and my politics were, I don't think it was hard luck that they had children but it was partly their choice, in some cases it wasn't their choice at all, but I do think there were plenty of people who did want to do child-care, I didn't have to.[45]

As Nicola's testimony suggests, some lesbian women in the Brighton and Hove group felt, at times, immense pressure to be involved and support the interests and priorities of heterosexual women that were raised during the general meetings. This was confounded by

[41] Interview with NF, p. 5.

[42] Interview with SM, p. 1.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Interview with Maria Jastrzębska (MJ), 8 April 2015, p. 2.

[45] Interview with NF, p. 12.

the accusation from a heterosexual woman that lesbian women 'had taken over my movement'.[46] These tensions peaked in 1974 during an incident after a general meeting in the Prince George pub. Maria Jastrzębska remembered this incident vividly as it was her first time in attending a Brighton and Hove group meeting:

> …The first women's liberation meeting I ever went to there was a huge row and…it was my first ever meeting and there was a row because the women's liberation group used to meet in this pub called the Prince George…and two women and the group…were thrown out and the women were accused of kissing…then there was a meeting to discuss what had happened and the meeting sort of divided between some women saying…'we can't have lesbians…giving women's liberation a bad name'…kind of 'whatever next…because we'll be thrown out of everywhere' and…if you said you were a feminist or into women's liberation you would be accused of being a lesbian'…so myself as a newbie and some of the other women were saying, 'well…don't treat it as an insult, say well so what if I am or OK'…but there were a lot of women who were worried about their reputation of the women's movement so didn't want to see it associated with lesbianism…[it] was quite a political education for me…I mean I just thought this was hilarious, these two women had kissed in the bar and some landlord had thrown them out but some women were taking it very seriously and like this was a threat to women's liberation so that was my introduction to the Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group…it was just the cut and thrust of political debate…bring it on…[47]

Some lesbian women felt attacked and unsupported in their demands for the freedom to determine their own sexuality and lifestyle. They felt the group presented a contradiction, as on the one hand they were encouraged to prioritise relationships with women and reject any relationships that did not suit their desires or politics, yet on the other hand, lesbian women were accused of usurping the WLM and forming exclusive lesbian enclaves.[48]

However, such incidents integrated confrontation and debate into the structural fabric of the group, as these issues were explicitly objected to and debated at general meetings. As much as some lesbian women felt unsupported by heterosexual women, some heterosexual women felt that the rise of lesbianism oppressed and silenced women in the

[46] Interview with MJ, p. 4.

[47] Interview with MJ, p. 4.

[48] Interview with SM, p. 9.

movement. For example, Penny Summerfield also recalled the Prince George pub incident. She said:

> The Prince George pub, well that was interesting, I think that was the summer of 74…we met as usual up the stairs in the Prince George pub and after the meeting we came down and it was common to get a drink and to have a chat, a very informal mood breaker and one woman embraced another women, I'm not sure whether it was actually a kiss or just a hug but quite a demonstrative embrace…and the landlord was very angry and threw them out, quite nastily and men in the pub were shouting abuse…it was such a horrible incident that we all had a meeting…it was actually in what became Brighton University…in one of their rooms, anyway we had this meeting and everybody sort of gave their worried views and some people felt that…we ought to carry on because the Prince George pub was such a good meeting place, such a central place on Trafalgar Street and sort of…conducive to having an inclusive group, but others said 'no if they're going to treat us like that…why should we pay', so the decision was to boycott the Prince George pub…so then we had to find somewhere else to meet…[49]

Penny's recollection of the subsequent meeting after the incident emphasises the concern that some heterosexual women voiced in the Brighton and Hove group. Some women were concerned that if the meetings were moved away from the town centre location, it would make the general meetings more difficult to attend and alienate new women from joining the group. Boycotting the Prince George pub was seen by some as a hyperbolic reaction to the incident itself as the group had stood their ground during the altercation and condemned the landlord's actions. The position of these women was not to dismiss the concerns and struggles of lesbian women in the group, but wanted to ensure that the movement stayed as inclusive as possible and maintained clear structures during a climate in which they felt ever more excluded.

These tensions were confounded by the emergence of sexual separatism, also known as political lesbianism, in the wider British WLM. Sexual separatism was distinct from political separatism and 'women-only' organisation, and proved controversial for

[49] Interview with PS, p. 10.

activists and groups the length and breadth of Britain.[50] The sexual separatist position argued that the only way to achieve the aims of a true feminist revolution was through women completely dissociating themselves from men. They believed that it was 'inconceivable to believe men could be convinced of the value of women's rights. Those women who chose to remain in relationships with men were effectively "collaborating with the enemy"'.[51] Although lesbianism and political separatism were separate and not symbiotic, in that some lesbian women maintained their political relationships with men and not all political separatists were lesbians, they were at times conflated by the wider movement and in wider public perception as one ideology.[52] This upset many heterosexual women who remained committed to their relationships with male partners, fathers, brothers and friends. Dorothy Sheridan read aloud a diary entry: 'in Brighton every woman I meet seems to be thinking about political lesbianism. There is a cogent case for giving up men. It has challenged me more now than it ever did before. Sleeping with men is seen as even more collaborationist than working with them even though that is selling out to the male Left. I have a great deal of thinking to do'.[53] Dorothy's diary entry reveals that sexual separatism challenged and confronted women in the Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group, as women began to question whether feminism required a particular sexuality to fully commit to the cause. Penny Summerfield also reflected on the debates caused by sexual separatism in the Brighton and Hove group. She said:

> I had a nice boyfriend who was quite supportive of my involvement in women's liberation…I loved women but I wasn't going to be lesbian and I sort of knew that I wasn't going to be lesbian…I've known many lesbian couples in my life and still do and very comfortable around lesbians but not sure about

[50] Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 332; Paul Byrne, 'The Politics of the Women's Movement' in Joni Lovenduski and Pippa Norris (eds), *Women in Politics* (Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 63.

[51] Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 191; Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet Freedom* (Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 29.

[52] Esther Breitenbach, 'Sisters Are Doing It for Themselves' in Alice Brown and Richard McCrone, *The Scottish Government Yearbook 1990* (Edinburgh University Press, 1990), p. 215.

[53] Interview with DS, p. 15.

> separatism, I was very keen on women-only, I thought women-only meetings and conferences etcetera were absolutely right and how could you possibly discuss violence against women in the presence of men, that kind of thing, even sympathetic men, I did think it was important to change men…[54]

This conflation of lesbianism and separatism is also found within historical accounts of the movement.[55] Yet, the issues of lesbianism and separatism were controversial and problematic in the Brighton and Hove group precisely because they were different manifestations of lived feminist politics. The ways in which individual women related their politics to the daily reality of their lives was obviously different and also fluid, as women changed as they engaged with feminist politics and, therefore, debate was inevitable in such a diverse local women's liberation group. In Brighton, it was at general meetings in which women could come to an understanding of the practical realities of each other lives, as well as challenge each other through discussion of such ideologies. Maria described this process of understanding: 'there were different sexualities…we were trying to…work with that'.[56] The meeting held after the group had been evicted from the Prince George pub was described as 'fairly chaotic debate despite the chairperson's desperate efforts to maintain order. Strong convictions, opinions and emotions were thrown about and although nothing was really resolved, I felt that there was some clarification of positions'.[57] The debates and discord between women in Brighton were fundamental in developing the group's ideologies, theories, and multifaceted manifestations of lived women's liberation politics.

To ensure that these debates did not become insurmountable and disruptive to the development of the Brighton and Hove group and to ensure that communication between feminists continued, a group focused on developing organisational structure was formed in 1974 after the incident at the Prince George pub. The Structure Group was formed initially

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[54] Interview with PS, p. 48.

[55] For example, see Barbara Caine, *English Feminism* (Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 266.

[56] Interview with MJ, p. 2.

[57] 'General Meeting', *Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Newsletter*, Undated (although the incident occurred in 1974), Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics, p. 1.

by twelve women who were interested in developing their own understanding of political structure and organisation along feminist principles. This process went hand-in-hand with the development and growth of the women's liberation in Brighton; as the group expanded and women became more interested in the efficiency of structural organisation and operational form, the structural and organisational fabric of general meetings was developed and altered. This process was central to producing new ideas and theories. It was also essential in the personal development of individual women as they questioned systems and policies inside the group as much as outside. Penny Summerfield was a founding member of the Structure Group. She first became interested in the structural organisation of the WLM, after Jo Freeman's pamphlet, 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness', was circulated in Brighton in 1973.[58] Jo Freeman's article argued:

> The idea of structurelessness…has moved from a healthy counter to those tendencies [of continual elitism and over structuredness] to becoming a goddess in its own right. The idea is as little examined as the term is much used, but it has become an intrinsic and unquestioned part of women's liberation ideology.[59]

Freeman argued that while 'structurelessness' had worked for initial meetings in which women shared their experiences and began to form political groups, 'structurelessness' was hindering the development of the wider movement as it went unquestioned and unchallenged. This, she argued, ultimately led to hierarchies and domination in which power resided unequally within groups. While the Brighton and Hove group was never without a defined structure, Freeman's article highlighted the problems that could arise through idle acceptance of the structural organisation of a local group. The Structure Group met in the interest of developing the structural organisation of the Brighton and Hove group, which would be implemented first and foremost at general meetings. The group focused on the problems and potential conflicts between certain groups of women:

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[58] Interview with PS, p. 10.

[59] Jo Freeman, 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness', http://www.jofreeman.com/joreen/tyranny.htm. Accessed April 17, 2017.

students/ex-students/nonstudents, university orientated/town orientated, working women/professional/nonprofessional.[60] The Structure Group grew into the Working Party on Policy and presented their interests to the wider Brighton and Hove group at a general meeting in October 1974. Women from across Brighton and Hove responded to the discussion of structural organisation and a decision was taken to expand the Structure Group to include one woman from each action group to ensure that it was representative of the wider Brighton and Hove group.[61] The structural organisation of the general meetings was then developed as a result of on-going discussions and decisions taken by the Structure and Policy Group. For example, rather than discussing each issue as one large group, the agenda was duplicated and the women in attendance were split up into smaller groups. These smaller groups would then discuss the agenda together for one hour and then reconvene as a larger group to contribute to a mass deliberation of the issues.[62] The restructuring of the general meeting was an attempt to overcome the problems of domination, shyness and inarticulateness that some women experienced during the general meetings. The Structure Group also implemented policy on how the events, discussions and decisions taken at general meetings were to be communicated to the wider Brighton and Hove group. *The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Newsletter* was to be expanded in function to act as a site of communication and exchange that would contribute to the dissemination of information across the local the group.

3.1.2 *The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Newsletter*

After general meetings, *The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Newsletter* was the principal channel for communication across the Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation

[60] Interview with PS, p. 10.

[61] 'What's it all about then', *The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Newsletter* (1974), Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics, p. 3.

[62] 'Report on General Meetings', *The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Newsletter* (May 1974), Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics, p. 2.

Group. The newsletter was first established in 1971 and was launched to 'improve communication between the small groups and to keep in touch with women who can't always come to meetings'.[63] The distribution of the first issue was paid for out of the group's general funds with a subscription system implemented at the first general meeting after its launch.[64] As shown, attendance at general meetings had always proved problematic for such a busy, large local group. Some feminist activists recognised the necessity of relaying the decisions taken at general meetings and so it was decided that an internal newsletter was necessary to act as a form of communication for the wider group. The newsletter reported the minutes taken with particular attention paid to decisions regarding organisational structure and policy, as well as activities and campaigns in which women at general meetings had expressed interest. Similar to the structure of the general meetings, the newsletter was comprised of reports from the smaller action groups.

The first issue contained pieces written by the Education Group, New Members Group, the Women at Work Group and the Nursery Group.[65] As the newsletter was launched at the subsequent general meeting and subscriptions taken, contributions of reports also doubled in the next issue. The second issue of the newsletter was comprised of reports from the Women's Liberation and Socialism Group, Sussex University Women's Liberation Group, Unsupported Mothers' Group, Islington Rights Group, the Working Class Women and Bail Group and the Brighton Claimants' Union. The reports tended to state the interests, aims and membership of each small group. For example, the Education Group wrote in the first issue:

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[63] 'The Newsletter Collective', *The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Newsletter* (April 1971), Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics, p. 1.

[64] 'Front Cover', *The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Newsletter* (May 1975), Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics, p. 1.

[65] 'Group Reports', *The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Newsletter* (April 1971), Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics, pp. 2-3.

> The Education Group meets fortnightly at different houses and flats each time. Our main concern as a group is schoolchildren, girls in particular…at present our main aim is to obtain access to schools in Brighton and provoke some sort of debate in which it is hoped that questions will be raised about women and the roles they are forced to play. Phone number for the education group: - BRIGHTON 62429.[66]

Countless groups were formed and campaigns launched during the 1970s with some short lived, fading away due to a lack of interest whilst other remained active until the early 1980s. The report function of the newsletter continued to expand as it became fundamental to ensuring that action groups were connected and aware of each other's activities across the local area.[67]

The newsletter also acted as a space for women to share their opinions and disagreements over broader movement ideologies and ideas. This included objections to the way in which general meetings were run, to criticism of the British WLM demands, in particular 24-hour nurseries on the basis it did not fully challenge the role of women as mothers and carers.[68] Women were encouraged to contribute in any way they wished from writing opinion pieces to submitting cartoons and poems for publication. The news-based function of the newsletter was further emphasised when women wrote in to express their support of the newsletter as an internal document rather than a way in which to reach new women. For example, a woman named Clare wrote: 'it's about the only formal means we have at the moment of keeping in contact with each other and voicing our thoughts and worries. And rather than make it general, if anything, we ought to make it more specific to us'.[69] Clare proposed that the Brighton and Hove group should produce public information

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[66] 'The Education Group', *The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Newsletter* (April 1971), Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics, p. 2.

[67] 'Cut down on Business at General Meetings', *The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Newsletter* (1974), Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics, p. 3.

[68] '24 Hour Nurseries', *The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Newsletter* (May 1971), Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics, p. 3.

[69] Clare, 'Letter to the Brighton Women's Liberation Movement Regarding the Newsletter', *The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Newsletter*, Undated, Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics, p. 4.

packs and leaflets describing women's liberation ideas and aims, as well as the WLM's relevance to the situation in Brighton such as the local media portrayal of women in newspapers and information on Brighton Family Planning Association Clinics, rather than use the newsletter as a way in which to reach new women.

However, the function of the newsletter as an internal form of communication depended on the contribution of women from across the wider group and the submission of reports from action groups. From as early as 1972, the women who produced the newsletters were frustrated by the lack of information that had been supplied to them from the smaller groups. For example, the newsletter stated:

> Education Group – on holiday, Women at Work Group – on holiday, several members have left Brighton…with so many groups on holiday and temporarily out of action it is important that women's lib members attend general meetings to keep in touch.[70]

While the newsletter was only meant to supplement attendance at general meetings rather than provide a substitute, the lack of information being communicated between groups was emphasised as undermining the structural organisation and connectedness of the Brighton and Hove group. Complaints were also voiced when some women felt the responsibility of production had become a thankless burden. The newsletter collective wrote: 'we are now reduced to four people and Charlotte wants to drop out too. In fact, the collective that wrote this newsletter consisted of two people…Seriously, some of you lazy buggers better get up off your arses and do some work, OK'.[71] Tensions arose as those who were involved in the newsletter collective felt they were being exploited for their time and labour during production which other women were seemingly unwilling to do. There was also a particularly contentious issue over who would join the newsletter collective and assume

[70] 'The Newsletter Collective', *The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Newsletter* (No. 4, 1972), Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics, p. 3.

[71] Ibid.

responsibility for collecting student subscriptions and securing grants from the University of Sussex Students' Union for production and distribution. In 1974 Adi Cooper wrote:

> At the moment, I am still responsible for finances, chequebook signatory etc. I'm giving this up in January – having done it far too long. It is necessary that a student volunteers to take over and deal with the union, to get cheques signed, collect student subscriptions, use our union grant, put in next year's grant application in the summer etc. I am willing to help during the changeover period. Please contact me – it is not a difficult job but someone has to do it or things will fall apart.[72]

These tensions arose as women of the Brighton and Hove group negotiated their own methods of operational and organisational form. It was clear that a collective approach was preferred as it promoted the involvement of many women, avoided the formation of cliques and the rise of leaders. Yet, this idea proved difficult to implement in reality as women like Adi became saddled with the responsibility for tasks that had to be done to ensure the continuance of the newsletter and the group's cohesion.

Women were acutely aware of the newsletter's function as a forum and site of exchange for the wider movement and, so, when the newspaper's production appeared to be in jeopardy, rallied to its cause. For example, Nicola Fryer was a long-time member of the Newsletter Collective and remembered:

> If you were in the Newsletter Group that's what you did…it was basically who would do it, everybody that would do it got roped in and there were times when it was at a pretty low ebb…I remember when the Women's Centre was down in the Resource Centre in North Road…there was very few of us left doing it and 'oh I want to go to the pub' and 'now come on we've got to stay and stick these things' and 'the machine isn't working' and 'oh let's make it work' and wind it by hand when the electric wouldn't work and you just did it…[73]

Producing the newsletter required intense commitment, as the work of typing, duplicating, designing the layout and addressing each newsletter to its recipient was time-consuming and laborious. This demand meant that the Newsletter Collective regularly went through

[72] Adi Cooper, 'The Newsletter', *The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Newsletter* (1974), Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics, p. 1.

[73] Interview with NF, p. 4.

changes in membership, as women could not sustain the level of commitment required for long periods of time. The production of the newsletter thus depended on the involvement of many women and constant rotation. The collective was established as a political process in itself and in an appeal to recruit volunteers:

> Ideally women stay on the Collective for several issues so that they can pass on knowledge and skills to new members. When new members are needed, women volunteer at a general meeting…the Collective tries to find time to discuss what we're doing and what the function of the newsletter is, write material for the newsletter and go out for a drink afterwards.[74]

Women were encouraged to participate in the production of the newsletter rather than remain passive readers. Involvement in the production of the newsletter meant women could share knowledge, connect with each other and, moreover, contribute directly to the ways in which the wider group communicated, grew, and was organised. For women like Nicola, this was an essential process and commitment that reinforced the importance of developing feminist organisational methods which avoided hierarchies and domination but which also promoted communication between women and the various action groups of the Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group.

3.1.3 Allocated Consciousness Raising Groups

As in Aberdeen, CR groups were fundamental to the structural organisation of the Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group, as they provided regular opportunities for women to meet in smaller, intimate groups, and develop their own practices, interests and ideas based on their personal experiences. However, in the Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group, women were allocated to a CR group principally through general meetings and the internal newsletter. The Brighton and Hove group introduced a structure in which one woman was responsible for the allocation of women who had expressed interest in the practice of CR into organised groups. Nicola Fryer described this process:

[74] 'The Newsletter Collective', Brighton and Hove Women's Centre Leaflet, Undated, Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics, p. 2.

> 'Who wants to be in a CR group?', 'right how shall we sort them [out]?' …We did it a bit like football teams… 'one, two, three, four, one, two, three, four', and all the ones that go together and etcetera…. if you picked, it wouldn't work, the whole idea was you were random…'.[75]

The Brighton and Hove group aimed to organise women who were unacquainted with each other into groups as it was theorised that this would enable women to talk more freely as none of the women were familiar with each other previous to their first meeting. The organisation of women into CR groups was also adopted to ensure that the group's diversity was represented and the different perspectives and experiences of participant were included in discussions, rather than groups forming around personal compatibility and familiar association. It was hoped this organisation of CR would foster a sense of openness, whilst also introducing women to other members they had not yet connected with at general meetings. Penny Summerfield remembered:

> …a nice sunny evening in Brighton in…somebody's little room, all these friendly women sitting round and we started talking about the clitoris and it was like gosh, I've got a clitoris (laughter) and we also talked about oral sex and I remember sort of [saying] 'that's just disgusting' and someone said 'no just taste your own vaginal fluid and you'll know it's not disgusting' and again it was a kind of wow can I do that, why not, it was like empowering and I think that the time we discussed sex is a good example really of feeling kind of when I actually do own my body, I can decide what happens and I can work out what gives me pleasure, I don't have to just accept whatever someone else, you know, a boyfriend decides for me and that was like the scales falling from my eyes…[76]

Penny's testimony reveals how revelatory and freeing practicing CR with unfamiliar women could be in the Brighton and Hove group.

However, the organisation of CR through general meetings proved to be a problematic way of organisation and another example of how feminist organisational theory was complex in practice. The organisation of CR groups at general meetings meant some women who attended general meetings on a regular basis had already established a good rapport, and also meant that some women were grouped together regardless of where

[75] Interview with NF, p. 7.

[76] Interview with PS, p. 7.

they lived in or around Brighton and Hove. As a result, the responsibility of the organisation of CR was shifted to the newsletter. Penny Summerfield recounted this structural shift:

> …There was a coordinator…in the *Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Newsletter* who was a name and a phone number and if you wanted to be in a group you phoned up and she made sure that they weren't too big and that they were sort of sensible…people from roughly the same area not people from Shoreham and Eastbourne…[77]

The coordinator would organise women into CR groups based on geographical location, women's ability to travel and ensure there was a variation of social and economic backgrounds in each group. As memberships were not recorded it is impossible to know the compositions of women from different socio-economic backgrounds, ethnicities or sexualities in any of the multiple CR groups formed in Brighton and Hove throughout the period. As CR groups varied in longevity, with some disbanding after only a few meetings and some continuing to meet for the entire decade, a coordinator also ensured that new CR groups could be formed quickly. The coordinator could also provide information on the process of CR more generally. This was especially useful for new members who could use CR sessions as an introduction to the WLM. For this reason, CR groups in the Brighton and Hove group were kept strictly small. Early Brighton and Hove CR groups were called Rap Groups, a clear influence from the American WLM with RAP simply meaning 'to talk'.[78] The newsletter stated:

> Our most successful meetings have been those at which we have managed to cut through surface superficiality and to talk with a reasonable degree of honesty about ourselves. This is always difficult and sometimes painful. Experience has shown that it is in small groups that we have met with most

[77] Ibid, pp. 6-7.

[78] 'Rap Group Report', *The Brighton Women's Liberation Newsletter* (April 1971), Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics, p. 2.

> success and further that where there is a rapport between a few members those people are encouraged to keep coming to meetings week after week.[79]

CR groups in Brighton and Hove were kept between eight and sixteen women. It was stressed that any more than sixteen participants would make the group too large and could contribute to a breakdown in the continuity of discussions.[80] Feminist activists needed to balance the size and diversity of the Brighton and Hove group with unimpeded personal development for individual activists, and, as such, once women were allocated into a CR group, the group became closed to new members.

Women from the Brighton and Hove group also produced guides for the practice of CR in leaflets, pamphlets and the internal newsletter. These guides were produced to ensure the continuation and success of CR groups throughout the 1970s. It is often assumed that the principal texts on CR in the British WLM were American imports. For example, Sue Bruley said of her CR group:

> The key document on consciousness raising comes from the USA. On November 27, 1968 Kathie Sarachild presented a paper on consciousness raising to the first National Women's Liberation Conference, held near Chicago. Sarachild stated that her women's group, New York Radical Women, were undertaking much active work for women's liberation, but felt they need to do more collective thinking about the ways in which they were oppressed…. The group resolved there and then to 'raise its consciousness by studying women's lives by topics like childhood, jobs, motherhood etc.'[81]

The key element of CR was for women to start their political thinking from their own lives and experiences. Echoing this, women from the Brighton and Hove group began to produce documents on the theory and practice of CR from their own perspectives and experiences of raising consciousness. These guides contained practical advice on running a CR group, what was expected of members, what the purpose of CR was, as well as, advice on topics and activities. For example, Joan Nolan wrote in the newsletter:

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[79] 'CR Group', *The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Newsletter* (No. 3. 1972), Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics, p. 3.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Sue Bruley, 'Consciousness Raising in Clapham', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 22, No. 5 (2013), p. 721.

> Only serve tea and coffee and perhaps biscuits. Having the group to your place should not cost you anything and also, we're trying to get women away from the kitchen sink so you shouldn't feel any need to supply your sisters with hostess type snacks![82]

It was made explicit that women should not burden themselves with providing refreshments for the other members, as it was essential that at each session every woman had the opportunity to fully engage with and explore the topics raised from the perspective of their personal experiences. The Brighton and Hove CR guides also advised that in the first session women should begin with giving short introductions to their lives. This was to act as a window for the group into the reality of each other's lives. Initial introductions included where they lived, whom they lived with, and their occupation.

CR was centred on self-reflection, which meant that open and honest talking was imperative to the success of CR groups. As already mentioned, in Brighton and Hove it was important that CR groups were made up of women who did not already know each other to foster an environment where women felt inhibited to analyse their own experiences. Yet the organisation of CR groups also meant that sharing intimate details with new and unfamiliar women could be daunting. In an attempt to overcome the intimidating nature of CR, women from the Brighton and Hove group also produced guides on prearranged subjects for discussion. It was suggested that groups should start with topics that focused on childhood.[83] It was hoped these suggestions would enable women to begin to pinpoint early experiences of sexism and conditioning that impacted their adult lives. It was stressed that discussion should always be related to the personal rather than 'chatty meaningless drivel'.[84] Feminist literature was also suggested as a focal point for sessions in the event that women struggled to talk about their personal details or when discussion points had been exhausted. Maria Jastrzębska read many seminal feminist

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[82] Joan Nolan, 'Guide to Consciousness Raising', *The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Newsletter* (1974), Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics, pp.4-5.

[83] Ibid.

[84] Ibid.

works during CR sessions from Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* to feminist novels such as Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*.[85]

It must be noted that not all women had such a positive experience of the practice and that not all dedicated CR groups flourished despite the organisation of feminist activists into allocated groups and the production of how-to guides. As mentioned, some CR groups were closed to new members once established from as early as 1972.[86] The justifications and implications of closed CR groups were discussed across the wider WLM and clearly influenced the Brighton and Hove group to adopt a similar system and policy.[87] The closed group policy was instigated in Brighton to control numbers and preserve the close rapport of an established group. Yet for some women on the outside of closed CR groups, this was a particularly difficult and painful situation. Nicola Fryer, for example, remembered feeling jealous of a closed CR group, the Sisterhood Group, and rebuffed at not being allowed to join. She said '…it was a group I wanted to be in but I wasn't invited…but that's just how it was…not that I have anything against each of them personally but I think I did have a slight green eyed monster going on but it's fine…'.[88] Nicola's experience of organised CR groups was not particularly positive, as her group did not gel together beyond the initial introductory sessions. In Nicola's CR group, there were tensions over what women expected from the sessions. This was primarily over the role of CR as a cathartic and therapeutic practice. Some women in the group were uncomfortable with revealing such intimate details, which, of course, in turn, produced conflict with those who saw CR as an opportunity to break down barriers between women and discuss every aspect of their lives. The group eventually faltered and Nicola stopped attending. Sally

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[85] Interview with MJ, p. 7. Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (Paladin, 1970); Erica Jong, *Fear of Flying* (Henry Hold and Company, 1973).

[86] 'RAP Group Report', *The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Newsletter* (No. 3, 1972), Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics, p. 2.

[87] Sue Bruley, 'Women Awake: The Experience of Consciousness Raising' in Feminist Anthology Collective, *No Turning Back* (The Women's Press, 1981), p. 61.

[88] Interview with NF, pp. 22-3.

Munt also found the organisation of CR groups detrimental to her involvement with women's liberation:

> I remember I thought I'd just join this and that will be the end of my problems and it'll be perfect, and I was so excited when I found out this consciousness raising group existed, so anyway I rang up this lead contact, the woman from the group and I said 'look I've just moved to Brighton and I don't know anybody and I'd like to join the group' and the woman was really unfriendly and said 'oh we're not taking new members at the moment'…as if I'd kind of almost said something rude by presuming that I might go, offended I presume because it was by invitation only, and I remember being really upset by that because I'd pinned my hopes on it really, and I didn't know what I'd done wrong.[89]

Not all women had positive experiences of feminist organisational and structural methods, and, for those like Nicola and Sally, allocated CR groups became a source of tension and so ultimately mutable. However, their testimonies reveal an understanding and appreciation that the practice was not only essential for their personal development as feminist activists, but also important in connecting the women of the local group together, and so closed CR groups could feel like personal rejection from women's liberation. Yet, the Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group had central organisational structures of general meetings, an internal newsletter and allocated CR groups in an attempt to provide regular opportunities for women across the area to connect and ultimately provide women with a sense of group belonging, cohesion, and collectivism. The Brighton and Hove group, while connected through these central organising structures, was also flexible and accommodating for women through a system of autonomous action groups.

3.1.4 Autonomous Action Groups

The coordination of the Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group also included the development of 'autonomous action' groups, to allow women who were interested in similar areas of action, theories, and discussions, to come together outside of general

[89] Interview with SM, p. 2.

meetings and CR groups. Small action groups were formed throughout the 1970s which reflected the shifting areas of interest and prioritisation of the women involved. Numerous groups formed around a diverse number of issues, themes and actions with little knowledge or awareness of other groups that had gone before them. For example, there was a Women's Education Group, Women Against Fascism and Racism Group and even a Women's Photography Group. This meant that at times there were overlaps in interests, actions and memberships between groups. Women could pick and choose what action they were involved with which was essential to the growth and development of the Brighton and Hove group as it was accommodating to the changing needs and priorities of the women involved. The connections between the small groups and the general meetings were never simple or consistent but were vital in maintaining wider group cohesion and communication. As shown, the Brighton and Hove movement attempted to keep track of these groups through regular reports in both the general meetings and internal newsletter. This was essential in promoting connectedness between feminist activists and was ultimately the purpose of the group's structural organisation. Small actions groups on the periphery could use the principal sites of exchange to attract more members and interest to their campaigns. Equally, small groups were under no obligation to communicate at the general meetings, with the internal newsletter or with CR groups, which makes it almost impossible to follow the development of these groups. The small group structure meant that while there were clear lines of communication through general meetings and the newsletter, the Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group also appealed to those women against formal and imposed organisational structures.

The Brighton and Hove Women's Centre (WC) was established from one such action group in 1974 and was still operating in Brighton in 2017.[90] Though the WC operated autonomously from the Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group, it maintained consistent communication through the general meetings and the newsletter.

[90] http://www.womenscentre.org.uk. Retrieved April 26, 2017.

The WC is an important example of how action groups operated in coordination with other organisational structures and operating mechanism of the Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group. Women interested in the ideas around opening a WC established a small group and took their action forward. The group was open to all women wanting to join but was not an action imposed upon by a majority of women from the Brighton and Hove WLM. The WC is also an important example of the operation of action groups, as it demonstrates how groups were managed as more women became involved. A WC Collective was formed, and, in turn, a transparent and flexible structure was adopted for the management of the Centre. Once open, the WC was developed into a central physical space for the wider feminist movement in Brighton and Hove and thus became integral to the structural fabric of the Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group.

Women's Centres had become popular across the UK and by 1981 a national WC conference was organised.[91] Women in Brighton were not exempt from this national trend and began to organise around opening a Centre from as early as 1972. Penny Summerfield, for example, remembered that her CR group had discussed the possibility of opening a facility for working-class women in Brighton as groups from other towns and cities across the UK had begun to do the same.[92] Nicola Fryer referred to this as 'an idea that was in the air….'[93] The initial motivation behind such a facility was to offer support to women who were not already involved with women's liberation. A drop-in facility would accommodate busy working women, mothers and students who were unable to commit to attending the general meetings or CR group sessions. The opening of a WC was seen as crucial to the expansion and accessibility of key sites of exchange that structured and connected feminist activists operating in the area.

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[91] Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 144.

[92] Interview with PS, p. 10.

[93] Interview with NF, p. 11.

Opening such a Centre was a huge task for the women involved and required a different level of commitment from previous campaigns or groups they were involved with. Penny Summerfield was instrumental in pushing the WC group towards establishing such a facility. She conducted extensive research into Centres in London over the course of 1973/1974. Each WLM facility was looked at in terms of its function, operation and problems. Penny concluded that the success of the Brighton WC would rest on its location, financial support of the local council, and, above all else, intense commitment from the women involved. It was decided that a WC in Brighton would be in affiliation with, yet separate from, Women's Aid as 'providing a refuge is not the same as playing an activist role within a community...The added weight of responsibility running a refuge imposes can break the back of a woman…'[94] Penny's research focused the group on outlining what the main functions of the WC in Brighton were to be and how to put their plans into action. The group felt that the Centre should open primarily as a contact point and resource for women who needed information on employment rights, social security, and childcare, as well as for women who wanted to know more about the women's movement. The Centre would go on to affiliate with organisations outside of, but sympathetic to, the women's movement. These included Gingerbread, the Brighton Citizens Advice Bureau and the Brighton Resource Centre. The Centre was to affiliate with other local organisations that focused on and contributed to the growing culture of community action in Brighton but from the perspective and prioritisation of women.[95] The Brighton and Hove group also realised the potential of a WC as an organisational base for women's liberation. Women could meet there to plan and go out on actions and release the wider Brighton and Hove group from the instability of relying on pubs or the universities for space and use of equipment. This also meant that the Centre could act as a refuge from household isolation

[94] Penny Summerfield, 'Research into Women's Centres', Penny Summerfield Collection (1973/4).

[95] Interview with NF, p. 11. Also see Women's Words (eds), *A Woman's Place*, (Women's Words, 1999), p. 52.

in which women could meet other feminists to 'discuss common problems and talk about alternatives'.[96]

The group secured temporary financial support from East Sussex County Council in 1974 when they were granted premises at 78 and 79 Buckingham Road for one year.[97] Sue Bruley commented that 'by the 1980s most WLM activists had learned that if they wanted to bring practical benefits to women they had to engage with local and national state agencies for funding and this entailed compromise'.[98] In this case, feminist activists in Brighton ushered in temporary coordinators for administration and organisation, finance and press and publicity. The coordinators were to also appeal to women from the Brighton and Hove group to help with the refurbishment of the property as the premises were in severe disrepair.[99] Women involved with the WC from this early stage poured their efforts into sourcing donations of paint and furnishings to hasten the opening of the Centre.[100] The on-going task of development and maintenance of a physical space meant that the group also decided a caretaker was necessary to keep the Centre open and running. It is unclear as to whether this organisation was purely adopted as a prerequisite to securing council funding or steps taken by the group to ensure the WC had a clear structural operation and would open before the end of 1974.

However, the group's affiliation with the local authority was vehemently contested by other women from the Brighton and Hove group and raised questions about interrelationships between the feminist movement and other organisations. Some feminists felt that involvement with the local council contradicted the movement's aims as rather than opposing and dismantling patriarchal systems the movement was simply operating

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[96] Penny Summerfield, Research into Women's Centres, Penny Summerfield Collection (1973/4).

[97] 'Report of Council Meeting 21/06/1974', East Sussex County Council Social Services Committee, Penny Summerfield Collection.

[98] Sue Bruley, 'Women's Liberation at the Grass Roots', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 25, No. 5 (2016), p. 736.

[99] 'Minutes of the Women's Centre Meeting', Social Services Brighton (May 1974), Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics.

[100] Interview with PS, p. 10.

within them. This conflict was also evident over the role of the Centre as a child-care service. It was made clear from preliminary council meetings that resources for child-care facilities had to go through the East Sussex Social Services department. For the Centre to have a playgroup it would mean an increased relationship with the council and social workers. Some women opposed this as they 'felt social workers were "professional helpers" and were not on the same wavelength'.[101] For the women who wanted to be involved with the WC the ways in which it was structurally organised as inter-agency were constantly up for scrutiny and debate. These early tensions led to the establishment of a Women's Centre Collective. A collective system of operation was adopted to encourage the participation of women from across the Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group as it was anti-hierarchical, open and leaderless, whilst managed and structured around meetings, co-ordinators, and subgroups for its day-to-day operation.

The WC Collective was made up of around thirty women from across the Brighton and Hove group, who were interested in and committed to running the service.[102] In 1977 the WC said of the collective, 'we have a very open structure which enables any woman to participate as much or as little as they wish'.[103] Membership was constantly changing as women joined and left the Collective, leading, at times, to a sense of instability in the organisation of the Centre. Yet, the collective structure was adopted to ensure that the Centre could continue to operate during periods of such disruption and instability. It would be unfair to suggest that the women who joined the Collective for short periods of time were uncommitted, rather, the involvement of some women for shorter periods of time meant women did not become exhausted or disillusioned with the Centre's aims or operation, and could possibly recommit at a later stage.

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[101] 'Minutes of the Women's Centre Meeting' (July 1974), Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics.

[102] 'The Brighton and Hove Women's Centre Application to the Equal Opportunities Commission for Financial Aid' (1977), Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics.

[103] Ibid.

The responsibility of running a WC that acted as a contact point for women both within and outside the WLM was too big a burden for a few women. Women involved in the initial planning of the Centre recognised this and began to appeal to new women to join the Collective from the Centre's first opening. They wrote in the newsletter:

> The Centre is open! We opened on Saturday November 9th after a great deal of hard work by a few women. Now it's open we need a lot more help to keep it going. More women are needed in the information room. Please try and sign up on the rota, if only for one three-hour session a week. The rota will be drawn up again after Christmas so don't feel you have to commit yourself for the next twelve months! If you can't manage every week or the exact times, please write down when you can come. There should be a minimum of two people there all the time to answer queries and welcome women coming in.[104]

The Centre's primary services were information on welfare and employment rights, pregnancy testing, a social room for women to talk about the WLM, as well as numerous classes and self-help groups including relaxation, self-defence, and women's health.[105] The collective system ensured that there was continuous movement between the different roles and that no woman assumed power over one service or another. The ambitious services that the Brighton WC offered could be daunting for women who had no previous experience or knowledge of equality legislation, pregnancy advice or self-help and, as a result, the Collective introduced sub-groups into the structural fabric of the Centre. These groups were finance, information, outreach, publicity, premises, fundraising, and events. Sub-groups were used to share the responsibility of the Centre and to avoid the daily operation from grinding to a halt if women were to leave.[106]

To ensure that there was efficient communication between the women working at the Centre at different times, it was decided to introduce the use of a logbook to the

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[104] 'Women's Centre Report', *The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Newsletter* (November, 1974), Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics, p. 2.

[105] 'Brighton Women's Centre Leaflet', Undated, Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics.

[106] 'The Brighton and Hove Women's Centre Application to the Equal Opportunities Commission for Financial Aid' (1977), Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics.

organisational structure. The logbook served as a record of who came in and out, and noted what services were most popular (pregnancy testing). The logbook made the structural organisation of the Centre transparent, as women could clearly see who had worked when and what had been done. It allowed women to pass on information to other volunteers for follow up phone calls to women who had come into the Centre for help, calls to social services on their behalf, or when it was necessary to accompany or visit a woman outside of opening hours. The logbooks also acted as a forum for feminists to express frustration to the wider Collective. For example, Sandy wrote:

> While I am writing this little essay, feeling more and more pissed off because very few women have been in on rota this week, even fewer showing any interest at all in anything that's going on here. Would like to say that I cannot understand the attitude of the women in Brighton, who have been given this building to turn it into a really great Women's Centre and yet can't be bothered to even come and put a bit of effort in for a couple of hours per week. I know for a fact that other parts of the country would give anything for the opportunity we have been given. So please get your fingers out and just try a little bit harder for the next 10 months, that's all we've got.[107]

The logbook proved an effective method of recording the inevitable tensions and frustrations over differences in commitment to the Centre. Discussions also became heated when the suggestion of employing a full-time paid worker arose due to the instability of relying on volunteers. Alison Hammer felt that a paid worker would lead to hierarchies between the women working at the Centre. Moreover, it would also lead to the huge responsibilities and tasks of running the Centre to rest upon one woman.[108] Instead, Alison stressed the importance of continuing with a collective structure and the use of the logbook to improve communications between women. She wrote:

> …I think probably communication is the most basic thing – without communication no-one knows what everyone else is doing, we can't take

[107] Sandy, 'Brighton Women's Centre Log Book' (December 1974), Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics.

[108] Alison Hammer, 'How Collective Are We? Open Letter to Women's Centre Collective', *The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Newsletter* (August 1978), Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics, p. 3.

> responsibility or make decisions collectively, tasks don't get shared and we feel isolated…To communicate on a day-to-day basis we have the diary and it's important to use it – to write down everything we do on rota and make sure that we read what everyone else wrote…[109]

This collective structure encouraged women to criticise the direction of the Centre and scrutinise the organisational methods put into practice.

Communication between women in the Collective was also encouraged through WC meetings. Much like general meetings, WC meetings were the only opportunity for sub-groups and individual women of the Collective to meet and discuss operational form and management. The WC meetings were also advertised as open to the whole Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group, to encourage participation and support:

> The Collective meets every other Monday at the Women's Centre. So by coming to the meetings you can help in the decision making of the Centre and help in the organisation of its activities.[110]

WC meetings were also the principle opportunity for the Centre's collective to discuss crises and plan for the future. As discussed, when the Centre first opened in 1974, it secured a council owned building for one year of occupancy, which offered a physical space and sense of permanence to women's liberation in Brighton and Hove. Yet, for the remainder of the 1970s, the WC faced major difficulties in securing funding and a permanent space. The Centre moved from place-to-place with daily operation taking place in basements, church halls, the Brighton and Hove Resource Centre and individual's flats.[111] Each move and period of upheaval meant that the Collective had to fight off crises and ensure the continuance of the Centre rather than develop and expand its reach within the local community. The meetings proved to be an important organisational method in maintaining the continuity and communication of the Collective when the Centre did not have secured funding and was in temporary accommodation. However, the constant pleas

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[109] Ibid.

[110] 'Women's Centre Advertisement Leaflet', Undated, Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics.

[111] Interview with NF, p. 7.

for attendance and involvement in the meetings suggests a degree of apathy from the wider Brighton and Hove groups towards attending yet more formal 'business' meetings, and the drudgery of discussion and debate centred on organisational structure and operational form. As the Centre sought to expand its function beyond that of information and offer services to women such as child-care and counselling, the methods of collective management could also be chaotic, inconsistent, and frustrating for many women committed to keeping the Centre open.[112]

3.1.5 Organised Social Activities

Social events were also important organisational methods integral to the structural fabric of the wider Brighton and Hove group. They were intended to create spaces and opportunities for women's liberation activists to meet away from general meetings, CR groups, and action groups, which characterised and structured the wider Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group. The social aspects of the WLM have often been overlooked, yet the organisation of social events was, for some women, crucial to organising a movement that radically altered and incorporated every aspect of their daily lives. Nicola Fryer said:

> …We were doing all this political stuff together. There was the campaign to start a Women's Centre, the abortion campaign, setting up a women's refuge in the town. So it meant I spent a lot of time in the evenings at meetings with women but there was no really social time with them. So one of the other exciting things that happened was women-only social events. We started to have a social life together without men, which was seen as very, very threatening to everybody's boyfriends and husbands.[113]

Much like the personal networks of the Aberdeen Women's Liberation Group, women-only social activities were part of the structural organisation of the Brighton and Hove group precisely because they promoted an intense commitment to a movement that was as much social and personal, as political.

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[112] Jen Murray in Women's Words (eds), *A Woman's Place*, (Women's Words, 1999), p. 52.

[113] Nicola Fryer in Women's Words (eds), *A Woman's Place* (Women's Words, 1999), p. 81.

The organisation of women-only discos was central to this social aspect of the structural organisation of the Brighton and Hove group. The first women-only discos were held in 1976 in response to some women wanting events 'to go have fun together, away from men'.[114] Women wanted to continue their political development away from the confines and formality of political meetings and CR sessions. The object of women-only discos was to hold regular, cheap, entertaining and, most importantly, open events that feminists and new women from across the geographical area could attend.[115] A Women's Disco Collective was formed in the mid-1970s and was responsible for the planning and organisation of events. This included researching sympathetic venues, publishing the events to the wider Brighton and Hove group and DJing. Nicola Fryer was in the Women's Disco Collective, which became the main focus of her activism from the mid-1970s. She said:

> …We clubbed together, everyone put in five quid who was interested and we bought proper speakers and we bought a record deck so we could use records so it was much easier…buying records started and being a Collective and then working in different venues…[116]

The formation of a Collective ensured that the women involved shared the laborious tasks of holding events for such a large and diverse movement. It also meant there was a united group of women in the face of male hostility towards the women DJs.[117] The Collective continued to grow as the women-only discos proved popular and became important organised events that supported the cohesion of the wider group outside of more traditional political meetings. This process meant that, like many other organisational methods of the Brighton and Hove group, the Collective could debate and scrutinise their structures and practices. For example, the Collective debated what a women-only disco would practically

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[114] 'Women's Liberation in Brighton: An introduction', The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group Leaflet, Undated, Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics.

[115] See Interview with SM, p. 8.

[116] Interview with NF, p. 14.

[117] Ibid, p. 14.

consist of. The Collective reported: '…we also try not to include any music which is blatantly anti-women. This has led to many fascinating discussions of what is and what is not ideologically sound'.[118] Nicola referred to this as leading to 'big rows' over what was classified as women's music rather than what music simply featured a female vocalist.[119] Sally Munt was a regular at these events in the 1980s and reflected: 'the dancing and the bar scene, the disco scene, it was dramatic and exciting…you were reading during the day and then living from one kind of club thing to the other'.[120] From the mid-1970s, organised social events had continued to thrive. Women's fairs were held annually with exhibitions of feminist art, poetry readings, bookstalls and feminist film.[121] These events were organised as celebrations of the women's movement and its achievements. Moreover, for many women, engagement with the social aspects of the Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group outlived commitment to general meetings, newsletter, and many action groups active throughout the 1970s. Women, who felt exhausted with activism, discussion, and debate, could still connect with women's liberation through attending organised events.[122]

Conclusions

This case study has made clear that Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation group had a clearly defined, if mutable structure. The wider group was connected through clear channels of communication and meeting spaces to ensure that the accessibility and transparency of women's liberation was maintained. These structures are examples of the

[118] 'Women's Disco Collective' in '*Women's Liberation in Brighton: An introduction',* The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group Leaflet, Undated, Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics.

[119] Interview with NF, p. 14.

[120] Interview with SM, p. 8.

[121] 'Women's Fair Report', *The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Newsletter* (May, 1974), Uncatalogued Brighton and Hove Collection, Women's Library, London School of Economics, p. 2.

[122] Interview with SM, p. 8.

group's constant strive to remain open to all women as numbers grew and activity in the local area became ever more diverse. The acknowledgement of such diversity was part of the group's growth in managing the debate and discord amongst the women that made up its members. The structural organisation of the Brighton and Hove group was essential in providing a platform to air debate and develop resolutions. Yet these structures were never without fault. Organisational methods were constantly under review and scrutiny as women developed their own ways of communication and organisation along feminist principles. The continuous alterations and debates over group structure were not a sign of its weakness, rather a marker of a flexible and accommodating organisation. This was accompanied by a structure of small action groups, which allowed women to pursue action that reflected their interests and priorities. Actions groups centred on specific issues, themes and discussions were important to the movement's growth and establishment of physical spaces that gave the movement a sense of permanency. Similarly, feminist social events were a part of the group's organisational and operational form, as women-only events emphasised group cohesion and connectedness and were the expression of lived feminist politics. The Brighton and Hove case study presents an alternative to the 'structureless' women's liberation group, as women developed clear, defined structures to manage and connect feminist activism from across the local area. In the next case study on the Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group, the organisation of feminist conferences will chart the national operational and organisational form of the WLM, and its impact on the local women's liberation group.

Chapter Four
The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group: Feminist Conferences and Broader Movement Communication

Over the course of the 1970s there were eleven national WLM conferences held in different locations across Britain. These events were the principal method of national coordination for local women's groups and key sites of exchange for feminist activists to meet on a large-scale to discuss and decide the aims and objectives of the movement. For example, it was at national conferences that the seven demands were adopted and developed and *WIRES* was created.[1] Yet historical accounts have largely focused upon the first and last national conferences in order to emphasise a progression towards divisive schisms between the women who attended.[2] The first conference held in 1970 at Ruskin College, Oxford, is often depicted as the beginning of the WLM in Britain and a moment of revelation as women discovered 'sisterhood'.[3] For example, Michelene Wandor commented of her own experience:

> For me the Ruskin weekend was an exhilarating and confusing revelation. It was, I think, the first time I had been away from my children and husband, away from my secure home structure, operating as an individual in a collective context. Here I was, surrounded by about six hundred women…. all seemingly articulate and knowledgeable about the role of women in history, the position of women in today's world…and who all seemed hell-bent on changing the world and our self-image as women.[4]

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[1] Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet Freedom* (Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 45.

[2] Eve Setch would agree with this point of view. See Eve Setch, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Britain* (PhD Thesis, University Royal Holloway, 2000), pp. 71-2.

[3] For example, see Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet Freedom* (Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 13; David Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge* (Macmillan Press, 1984), pp. 93-4; Sheila Rowbotham, *A Century of Women* (Viking, 1999), p. 401; Lynne Segal, *Is the Future Female?* (Virago, 1987), p. 2.

[4] Michelene Wandor, *Once a Feminist* (Virago, 1990), p. 2.

The 'euphoria' of the first conference is then contrasted sharply with the apparent 'catastrophic' events of the final conference held in Birmingham in 1978.[5] In this narrative, the final plenary session erupted as disagreements over a proposal to dissolve the movement's six demands, put forward by revolutionary feminists, spilled over into intense arguing and physical altercations over use of the microphones. Dozens of women abandoned the conference and no other group volunteered to organise the next national event.[6] The final conference is therefore depicted as the 'end' of the WLM in Britain, as attempts to organise and coordinate as a broader movement had failed. As such, in both personal and historical accounts of the movement, the first and last conferences have been used to support a narrative of sudden rise and equally dramatic decline, whilst other conferences throughout the decade have been ignored.[7] The processes of developing conferences as an organisational method of women's liberation, and the nature and function of conferences as powerful sites of exchange and important learning opportunities in terms of organisational and political practices, have largely been overlooked in histories of the British movement.

This case study on the Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group challenges the depiction of WLM conferences as moments of disorganisation and as events that ultimately led to the collapse of the movement in Britain. This research considers, for the first time, the impact and development of conference organisation in the context of a local group. Edinburgh is a historical city and the capital of Scotland, located on the east coast. It is dominated by the tourist industry and middle-class professions such as banking and

[5] Eve Setch would agree with this point of view. See Eve Setch, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Britain* (PhD Thesis, University Royal Holloway, 2000), p. 70.

[6] Jeska Rees, 'A Look Back at Anger', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (2010), p. 351.

[7] For example, see David Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge* (Macmillan Press, 1984), pp. 132-3; Angela Weir and Elizabeth Wilson, 'The British Women's Movement' in Elizabeth Wilson (ed), *Hidden Agendas* (Routledge, 1986), p. 100; Lynne Segal, *Is the Future Female?* (Virago, 1987), p. 56; Barbara Caine, *English Feminism* (Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 267-71; Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet Freedom* (Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 245.

lawyering and is often charged with being more 'English' than Scottish.[8] While feminist activists in Edinburgh were largely middle-class, university-educated women, this case study will go on to discuss the women involved who identified as working-class feminist activists. There was also an international aspect to the group with a mix of Scottish, English and American women connected to the University of Edinburgh. The city was a hub of feminist activism, reputable and accessible to feminist activists across England and Scotland and, as such, was the site of multiple movement conferences and events throughout the period. The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group was also the only local group to organise and facilitate both a British national conference and multiple Scottish women's liberation conferences. The group hosted the 1974 National Women's Liberation Conference and the Scottish Women's Liberation Conference in 1973, 1974 and 1978, as well as a plethora of issue-specific workshops, conferences and one-day events throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Approaching an examination of women's liberation conferences through the perspective of a local group reveals how methods of national coordination were invented and negotiated at the grassroots throughout the period, and how the development of feminist organisational practices arose from women's experiences of being activists and needs to create new ways to communicate and share ideas as a broader national movement. A local group approach also allows this research to explore how questions of socio-cultural difference among women and inclusivity as an issue was discussed and perceived from the very beginnings of national women's liberation organisation and continued to be so, and perhaps could not be otherwise for a movement that was based on one specific social identity ('woman'). This case study argues that differences and divisions between women were visible and intensified at national

[8] Esther Breitenbach and Valerie Wright, 'Women as Active Citizens: Glasgow and Edinburgh, c. 1918-1939', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (2014), p. 401; Angela Bartie, *The Edinburgh Festivals: Culture and Society in Post War Britain* (Edinburgh Scholarship Online, 2013), pp. 12-4.

conferences as women from different localities met for the first time, and in the context of an annual national conference, could not overcome such obstacles in any meaningful way.

Recent research into the British WLM has begun to challenge the depiction of conferences as characterised by dissention. Eve Setch examined national conferences as part of her study on the LWLW. She demonstrated continuities between national conferences in the early 1970s and later in the decade, especially the importance of debate at the events. Rather than depict the 1978 conference as being 'catastrophic' to the movement, Setch instead argued that disagreements were 'acknowledged as educative; as central to feminist thought as the more positive aspects'.[9] Similarly, Jeska Rees examined the events of the 1978 national conference to combat the suggestion found within the historical narrative that the disruption at the final plenary session was the fault of 'unreasonable' revolutionary women. She demonstrated that mass meetings of women's liberation activists were always characterised by confusion and arguments and, therefore, that ideological disagreements were one of a myriad of factors that led to the abandonment of national events.[10] The research presented here uses oral history testimony of Edinburgh-based feminist activists, the *Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* and the broader feminist press, to further deepen historical understandings of women's liberation conferences. Conference organisation was an enormous task for a local group to undertake and assume responsibility for – national events could draw thousands of women and smaller events could attract hundreds of attendees. The local group responsible for planning a movement event had to organise and structure workshops, papers, plenary sessions and social events, as well as logistics such as catering and accommodation. For feminist activists in Edinburgh, the processes of developing feminist methods of national organisation were central to their experiences of the movement and the ideas that were produced. This case study also examines the experiences of Edinburgh-based activists who

[9] Eve Setch, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Britain* (PhD Thesis, University Royal Holloway, 2000), p. 73.

[10] Jeska Rees, 'A Look Back at Anger', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (2010), p. 351.

attended multiple national conferences throughout the 1970s. National movement events were exhilarating experiences in which women were confronted with and energised by the scale of the WLM. Personal experiences reveal how feminist conferences were sites for women from different geographical locations to connect, network, share local approaches to feminist campaigns and intervene in movement debates. Yet, the perspectives of Edinburgh-based feminist activists also reveal a gradual disillusionment with national coordination and organisation as the movement grew throughout the decade, rather than the more dramatic 'end' as often depicted in historical accounts of 1978. While conferences were important learning opportunities in terms of organisational methods and political practices, national conferences were large-scale events, which proved at times to be intimidating and ineffective for personal political development, and on occasion proved to be too big a burden on the energies and resources of the local groups responsible for such organisation. Moreover, feminist activists in Edinburgh and the broader Scottish movement found national conferences to be geographically unrepresentative and too focused on the legal, social and political context of England, with gruelling journeys to national conferences also a key characteristic of their experiences. The last major conference in 1978 should therefore not be seen as an endpoint of women's liberation as a broadly based social movement, but rather that there was a desire to explore new methods and forms of communication and organisation. This case study argues then that rather than abandon conferences as an organisational tool of women's liberation and as a central method of coordination and site of exchange beyond the local group, as is depicted in some historical accounts, feminist activists sought out alternative methods and structures of broader movement organisation as a means to connect, coordinate and communicate between the broader movement north of the border.

This case study will therefore turn to an examination of the experiences of the Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group in hosting three Scottish women's liberation conferences. Sarah Browne's assessment of the Scottish movement focused on national

events in relation to the connections between activists across Scotland and the main areas of debate and discord. She argued:

> The organisation of conferences...was important in making links between the different Scottish groups…. Although they were part of an international movement, from the early seventies onwards women north of the border wanted to meet on their own terms in their own cities. Despite this, discussions at the Scottish women's liberation conferences did not significantly differ from those occurring at similar events elsewhere in Britain.[11]

The research presented here to some degree supports Browne's view, yet looks more closely at conference organisation in Scotland from the perspective of one particular local group. This case study argues that the organisation of Scottish conferences was a political process in which feminist activists were reacting to the southern domination of national movement events and their experiences of attending and organising the annual conferences. As such, feminists highlighted the shortcomings and obstacles of national conferences and questioned the benefits of large national gatherings. Women's liberation activists instead sought out alternative methods of political organisation and broader movement sites of exchange in which women developed the organisational principles of shared responsibility, collectivism and transparency. The development of Scottish-wide communication beyond the annual conferences is also considered here through an assessment of the *Scottish Women's Liberation Journal* (*SWLJ*). The *SWLJ* presented feminist activists with another opportunity not only for refining political and organisational practice, but also for creating a distinct site of exchange for women across the broader Scottish movement. Feminist activists were then invested in the direction, organisation and communication of the Scottish movement and so followed closely the debates and discussions that occurred over issues of power and representation in national sites of exchange, particularly conferences and movement publications.

[11]Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 169.

Rather than focus exclusively on national conferences and large-scale feminist events, this case study also considers smaller conferences organised in Edinburgh throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Much like the Aberdeen and Brighton and Hove women's liberation groups, women from the Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group organised along feminist principles, and developed their ideas and organisational methods as the needs, interests and priorities of activists changed. Women in Edinburgh continued to organise, facilitate and attend feminist conferences and events throughout the 1970s and 1980s. However, rather than continue to focus on general feminist events which were designed to attract activists from across the broader movement for women's liberation, this research will demonstrate that feminist activists turned their attention to the organisation of issue-specific conferences and events – a process of organisation which allowed women to develop specialised networks and contacts. This case study argues that the organisation of smaller and specialised conferences reflected a pattern of growth, development and proliferation of the British women's movement more broadly, and that political practices and the purpose of political forms were constantly re-thought. Through an assessment of the personal experiences of women who attended women's liberation conferences, the processes of organisation in the Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group, and the nature and function of conferences as sites of exchange for the broader movement, the research presented here challenges historical narratives of the British WLM which depict conferences as the epicentre of insurmountable differences between women and a collapsed movement at the end of the 1970s, in which national coordination was defunct. Rather, the invention, development and refinement of methods and sites of national organisation and coordination were processes linked to the personal experiences of feminist activists in the local group, and the growth of the movement more broadly.

4.1 National Women's Liberation Conferences: Local Group Responsibility and Gradual Disillusionment

As can been seen from *Table* 4-1, national women's liberation conferences were held annually or biannually from 1970 to 1978.

Table 4-1 Date and Location of National Women's Liberation Conferences and Scottish Women's Liberation Conferences

Date	National Women's Liberation Conference	Scottish Women's Liberation Conference
1970	(1) Oxford* (2) Sheffield	-
1971	Skegness	-
1972	(1) Manchester (2) London	Glasgow
1973	Bristol	Edinburgh
1974	Edinburgh ^	Edinburgh
1975	Manchester +	Aberdeen
1976	Newcastle	(1) St. Andrews (2) Glasgow
1977	London	(1) Aberdeen (2) St. Andrews
1978	Birmingham ~	Edinburgh

*** The first four demands were adopted**
^ The fifth demand was adopted
+ The sixth demand was adopted
~ The sixth demand was split into two

These events were organised on a voluntary basis with a local group assuming responsibility to host, organise and structure the annual conference and accommodate the thousands of women who might attend. How these national events impacted on the development of feminist organisational methods or the personal political trajectories of the women involved is largely unknown. The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group hosted the 1974 national conference and Edinburgh-based feminist activists attended national events across Britain throughout the 1970s. Many women wrote reports of the events and personal accounts of their experiences for *The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter*. Oral histories of Edinburgh-based feminist activists, personal accounts and reports reveal that women shared and reflected on positive and negative experiences of conferences as a

process of developing national organisational structures and practices in the context of the local group. A close analysis of the Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group brings to the fore a more nuanced picture of what women experienced and came to expect of national WLM events, and how they redefined political methods of national organisation along feminist ideas, principles and their own personal experiences.

For many women of the Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group, national conferences were exhilarating events that energised their political efforts. In a report to the Edinburgh newsletter, a woman named Chris wrote of the 1977 national conference held in London:

> I get high on conferences every year, for different reasons. The first time was just to see women coming together and being creative with their hands and their minds for women. This year, as the political movement that is feminism becomes much more real to me, I watch how the theory and practice meet, and wonder that all of us and each of us, by making this conference exist, will make waves moving forward.[12]

Fran Wasoff, who was first involved with women's liberation as a postgraduate student at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, before moving to Edinburgh in 1973, remembered national conferences as:

> Thrilling…absolutely thrilling because we could see how much larger this movement was than our particular interests in Edinburgh…it was really a national movement that was going to run and run....[13]

As demonstrated in the previous case studies on the Aberdeen and Brighton and Hove groups, the decentralised nature of the WLM in Britain meant that for many women the local group characterised their day-to-day experiences of women's liberation. The annual national conferences were therefore the principal sites of exchange for feminists to meet outside of their local groups and regional connections. For some women in Edinburgh,

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[12] 'The London National Conference 1977 – Chris' View on London', *The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* (May, 1977), Uncatalogued Edinburgh Women's Liberation Collection, Glasgow Women's Library, p. 5.

[13] Interview with Fran Wasoff (FW), 24 March 2016, p. 5.

attending national events alongside thousands of other feminist activists was a profound moment in their commitment to the WLM. Ellen Galford was first involved with the movement in the early 1970s as an international student, before moving to Glasgow and continuing her activism with connections to both groups. She reflected on her experiences of attending national conferences throughout the decade:

> I felt this must have been what it felt like with Rosa Luxemburg and Anna Goldman…you felt you were a part of a long line of people on the cusp of some kind of revolution, that you were really in the thick of making change, it was very exhilarating and it was really scary…there was this huge sense of energy and excitement…there was that sense of a lot of things going on….[14]

National conferences were an important method of broader movement organisation as the scale of the events emphasised the movement's potential for revolutionary change. Feminist activists attended national events then, as they were exciting opportunities to revel in the energy and diversity of the movement beyond the local group. WLM national conferences were thus central to the feminist experience of connecting and networking with other feminist activists, as without national events, many women were unlikely to do so outside of their local groups and personal networks.

The national conferences also provided women with opportunities to share ideas, activities and strategies in order to strengthen the efforts of the local group and replicate campaigns and tactics being undertaken elsewhere across Britain. Esther Breitenbach was an influential member and prolific commentator of the Edinburgh group and Scottish movement more broadly. She reflected during my interview with her: 'It was certainly an opportunity to make links with people and there were all sorts of links that crossed borders…you'd be working with people you'd share interests with....'[15] The national conferences were structured primarily through workshops with a plenary session held as the final event of the conference weekend. The plenary session was designed to bring all

[14] Interview with Ellen Galford (EG), 8 March 2016, p. 5.

[15] Interview with Esther Breitenbach (EB), 2 March 2016, p. 7.

attendees together to decide on proposed resolutions such as the movement's demands and decide where the next national event would be held. The workshop structure of conferences meant that a wide variety of topics were covered. As Esther's testimony suggests, and much like the action groups of the Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group, like-minded activists working and prioritising similar issues, campaigns and theories, would attend dedicated workshops to share their local perspectives and experiences, and develop their ideas and activities. Moreover, national conferences saw women establish specialised networks that could offer information and support beyond the scope of the local group. For example, in Chris's report of the 1977 National Women's Liberation Conference held in London, she wrote:

> Also went to one on bisexuality and lesbianism, which wasn't as predictable as I thought it would be. Basically we talked about coming to terms with our sexuality; however, we defined it – bisexual, lesbian, straight, and celibate! – And the process of such identification…. A few of the women talked about their own histories in a really vulnerable way which was very moving; probably the best thing about the workshop for me was reminding myself to explore not only what I do see of myself, but to question what I'm not looking at, and why.[16]

Attending conference workshops brought new and varied perspectives to discussions that women had previously had within their local group and personal networks – allowing feminist activists to connect around their specific interests and priorities for action, as well as through discussion, analysis and acknowledgement of the differences between personal experiences and individual outlooks.

Alongside the development of connections beyond the local group, attending a national conference and participating in workshop discussions also encouraged women to confront divisions between them in the context of a national site of exchange. For example, an Edinburgh-based activist named Josie wrote in her account of the 1977 national conference:

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[16] 'The London National Conference 1977 – Chris' View on London', *The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* (May, 1977), Uncatalogued Edinburgh Women's Liberation Collection, Glasgow Women's Library, p. 5.

> …There is a real need for a dialogue between the two [mothers and non-mothers] so that non-parents can learn to cope with sisters who are parents and listen to their very real needs and not let men be solely responsible for meeting these needs. Non-parent sisters have to understand the real fears of parents such as long-term plans which non-parents often destroy by having short-term interest in child-care, thus destroying the continuity and security of the situation for both child and parent…. Hopefully, given the interest in the workshop and its size, parents and non-parents will get together soon on a constructive basis and try to support each other in providing alternative relationships to replace the mother-child dyad in its present restrictive form.[17]

As shown with the Brighton and Hove group, difference and debate between women was integrated into the structure and organisation of some local women's liberation groups. For some women of the Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group, conferences were likewise opportunities to intervene in movement debates and develop fuller understandings of the socio-cultural differences of women's lives across Britain. Differences between women, both in terms of political ideologies and lived experience, were central to the organisation, structure and purpose of national conferences. Sheila Gilmore was involved with the Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group from 1970 and reflected:

> …It didn't happen by accident…people had had experiences of organisations that were much more controlling… to have something that was not hierarchical where anyone could come along and have their say, where everyone was in a fairly equal position was all part of that…we were very conscious and things seemed very fundamental…let's sit in a circle and not in rows with a front table and anyone who'd been to political party meetings before…the traditional set up is that you have the chair and secretary in the front and everybody else in rows facing them… something as apparently tedious as we are going to go round and everybody is going to have their say, everyone is going to speak, sometimes people find that as an oppressive way of doing it and it can be if you overdo it but it is a way of getting people more involved…[18]

Kath Davis also echoed this sentiment as she reflected during interview:

> …There was everything to work out, everything to think about, there weren't any models, you were making your own way and it was inevitable that there

[17] 'Josie's View of the London Conference', *The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* (May, 1977), Uncatalogued Edinburgh Women's Liberation Collection, Glasgow Women's Library, p. 6.

[18] Interview with Sheila Gilmore (SG), 29 February 2016, p. 8.

> were huge differences of about how to achieve what you wanted to achieve and you had to work out the dynamics….[19]

The ways in which women would communicate at national conferences were under continuous development, as women recognised that the ways in which conferences were structured were fundamental to how women would experience the events and engage with feminist ideas. Feminist activists thus rejected traditional conference structures that some had previously experienced as activists involved in Left groups and movements and, instead, developed new methods of feminist organisation in the planning of the 1974 national conference. The experience of hosting a national event was part of a developmental process as women invented new approaches to broader movement organisation and coordination, as well as implementing and refining structures from previous women's liberation events. Non-hierarchical and open structures were developed to encourage participation and communication between the women attending, and were an attempt to overcome potential barriers of misunderstanding and division between women from across the broader British movement.

While in theory national conferences were aimed at encouraging the mass participation of activists from across the country, in practice, the huge events could be overwhelming for the women attending. Lorna Mitchell reflected in her personal account of the 1977 conference:

> Two and a half thousand people, the vast majority of whom are strangers, is way too much for me. Sitting in that place with the comfy chairs outside the bar on Saturday morning, feeling I'm about to drown in a tidal wave of noisy women. I can't always cope with small numbers of people I know in Edinburgh let alone 2.5 thousand. I found myself often in a state of anxiety about not meeting people, getting lost in a crowd of strangers. I controlled it to some extent but never felt comfortable. It took about half of Saturday just to work out where the hell anything was…. I'm a fantasist. I went to the conference imagining I would be able to express myself/communicate with people I didn't do this with already…. People were always rushing off: to talk to somebody/to find someone/to a workshop... By the time I might have felt at ease or relaxed enough to talk half decently, they'd gone – or I'd gone. I found myself unable

[19] Interview with Kath Davis (KD), 16 March 2016, p. 8.

> to concentrate on the present and always frantically in search of a lot of communication, and of course not finding it because I was too anxious about it. The only people I could really talk to were the people I knew well already and most of them were as spaced-out as I was. Moral: have absolutely no expectations of meeting new people or getting to know people any better.[20]

Lorna's account was published in the Edinburgh newsletter as a warning to other women who had not attended, as to the overwhelming nature of national conferences. The sheer numbers of women present, while thrilling for some, proved isolating for others more comfortable with the smaller networks of their local group. Lorna's expectation of meeting new women, communicating and contributing to a national forum of feminist activists, was not met due to the overwhelming scale and variety of events taking place and, for her, was blocked by the open workshop structure. Chris went further in her criticisms of the overwhelming scale of national conferences as she reported:

> 1100 women came to the Manchester 1975 conference, Newcastle '76 there were 1300, this year in London there were over 2000. It wasn't an easy conference to cope with if you were new to conferences, feminism, or you're agoraphobic….[21]

Chris' concern demonstrates how problematic national conferences could be as the principal method of national coordination and site of exchange. How were newcomers, or women who had attended through curiosity or acquaintance, able to connect with other feminists in a meaningful and politically constructive way in such a busy and noisy environment? While large numbers of attendees led to a carnival atmosphere that many women enjoyed, for others, it was an intimidating experience and thus hindered their engagement and connection with the broader movement.[22]

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[20] Lorna Mitchell, 'The London Conference – a quick reaction', *The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* (April, 1977), Uncatalogued Edinburgh Women's Liberation Collection, Glasgow Women's Library, p. 7.

[21] 'The London National Conference 1977 – Chris' View on London', The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter (May, 1977), Uncatalogued Edinburgh Women's Liberation Collection, Glasgow Women's Library p. 5.

[22] Interview with FW, p. 10.

The overwhelming scale of national conferences also impacted upon the efficiency of the workshop structure, which was developed to promote discussion of personal experiences and foster connections between women active in different geographical locations. Sheila Gilmore reflected on the national conference held in Edinburgh in James Gillespie's School for Girls in 1974:

> [It was] a bit like being children in a sweetie shop, there was just so much you don't know where to start… 'oh should I go to that or I'll miss out on this'… maybe we didn't gain as much from that as we could of done because we were just a bit sort of 'oh', there's all these things being talked about and done and you just didn't have time to pick up on it all.[23]

Despite the intention of feminist activists to organise a conference with a range of topics, theories and issues for discussion, a mass meeting of viewpoints and priorities led to a schedule of events that overlapped and clashed. This forced some women to make difficult decisions on which events to attend and which discussions to potentially miss out on. This was a recurring problem at subsequent national conferences as numbers of attendees and workshops continued to grow. The movement struggled to offer national coordination which could satisfy the ever more diverse political standpoints and represent the different shades of opinion of feminist activists. For example, Lorna Mitchell wrote of her experience of the conference of 1977:

> …. As usual, there were so many workshops to choose from it was impossible to work out the perfect strategy for doing most learning in two days. It would have taken me a week to feel a bit at home, in 2 days it was over before I'd even begun to think about finding my niche at all… Moral: don't go to conferences that big ever again unless I have specific well-worked-out-beforehand purpose in going.[24]

The number of workshops on offer proved impossible for women to attend all in one weekend. Moreover, workshops designed to act as issue specific discussion groups could

[23] Interview with SG, p. 10.

[24] Lorna Mitchell, 'The London Conference – a quick reaction', *The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* (April, 1977), Uncatalogued Edinburgh Women's Liberation Collection, Glasgow Women's Library p. 7.

become overcrowded and busy. As shown in the Brighton and Hove group case study, controlling the size of discussion groups was essential to honest and open discussions between women. Some women from the Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group reported that they ultimately found the open workshop structure of national conferences uncomfortable and ineffective, as numbers grew too large for personal contribution and reflection.[25]

Alongside a vast number of workshops, there were also countless social events held at national women's liberation conferences. For many attendees, social events presented a distraction from political discussion and the development of ideas, theory and campaigns. In a report titled 'A Personal Lament for the 1978 National Women's Liberation Conference' a woman of the Edinburgh group wrote anonymously:

> I got really pissed off at the Birmingham conference. I kept thinking where are the real feminists? Where are the women who are serious about the need for a feminist revolution? Perhaps they weren't there; perhaps they were there but were keeping quiet. There seemed to be an awful lot of women there to have a good time, getting drunk, listening to loud music, getting high on controversy at the plenary. I know women's culture is vital but this was supposed to be a conference to talk about the women's movement, not a birthday party. I wanted to get some validation for what is going in Edinburgh, to find out what is going on elsewhere, to feel a sense of political solidarity. I didn't really get it...
>
> Disillusioned, Leith.[26]

As mentioned, the 1978 conference held in Birmingham is infamous in historical accounts for the disastrous final plenary session and the apparent failure of the WLM to organise a national event for the subsequent year. Yet, the experiences of the Edinburgh women who attended this event shed light on those who questioned conferences more broadly as effective methods of national coordination and productive sites of exchange due to

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[25] 'The London National Conference 1977 – Chris' View on London', *The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* (May, 1977), Uncatalogued Edinburgh Women's Liberation Collection, Glasgow Women's Library, p. 5.

[26] Anonymous, 'Personal Lament for the 1978 National Women's Liberation Conference', *The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* (May, 1978), Uncatalogued Edinburgh Women's Liberation Collection, Glasgow Women's Library, p. 6.

increasing focus on social events, rather than political discussion and development of theory. These concerns were not isolated to the events of the final WLM national conference, as women from the Edinburgh group had previously shared their opinions that indicated the movement had become distracted by the social element of national conferences.[27] For example, in 1977, the Edinburgh group circulated an article titled 'The Role of the Women's Liberation National Conference', written by Frankie Raffles and Paula Jennings. The article was written as an open invitation to women from across the British movement to identify problems that reoccurred at national events and proposed solutions to move forward with the organisational development and national coordination of the movement. Raffles and Jennings wrote:

> Is the conference supposed to be a political or social event? At the moment it functions as an uneasy combination of both. There are too many things happening at the same time and too many different motives for being there…It seems to us that a conference trying to combine all these elements cannot (and does not) do justice to even one of them. National conferences have been increasingly chaotic and bewildering.[28]

The article proposed that future national conferences should focus primarily on the theory and strategy of women's liberation, with a dedicated week-long national women's festival to be held annually to celebrate women's culture, which would focus specifically on feminist art, performance and music. Raffles and Jennings also suggested that social events at national conferences should be limited to one disco, to allow women to relax 'after a hard day's political discussion'.[29] This article reflected the experiences and accounts of the Edinburgh-based women who had attended national conferences, as feminist activists were

[27] Lorna Mitchell, 'The London Conference – a quick reaction', *The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* (April, 1977), Uncatalogued Edinburgh Women's Liberation Collection, Glasgow Women's Library, p. 7.

[28] Paula Jennings and Frankie Raffles, 'The Role of the Women's Liberation National Conference', *The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* (June, 1977), Uncatalogued Edinburgh Women's Liberation Collection, Glasgow Women's Library, pp. 11-13.

[29] Ibid.

concerned with the efficiency of conference structures that were not accommodating their expectations of political discussion and personal development and connections.

Some feminist activists also felt that the preoccupation of national conferences with social events was symptomatic of a movement that was too introspective. Sheila Gilmore expressed this concern as she wrote: 'I personally feel there is a tendency to concentrate too much on our own consciousness and lifestyles'.[30] A woman named Beverly also echoed this sentiment when she reported her national conference experience in the Edinburgh newsletter: '…the women's movement is too inward looking… and too totally concerned with women who are self-defined feminists already…'[31] Feminist activists from the Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group criticised the social dimension of national conferences not only because it stunted the development of theory and strategy, but also as it contributed to the assumption that the events were primarily for the enjoyment of women already familiar with the movement. These criticisms were aired within local groups and can be seen as a process of developing and negotiating the role of the conference for women's liberation – a process of reflection which outlined what women, familiar and unfamiliar with the movement, needed from national events to fully engage and participate in the political practices of women's liberation.

National conferences were also remembered as a bitter experience for the local group who had volunteered to undertake the responsibility for the organisation. Esther Breitenbach reflected:

> You might have a thousand women and as an organisational task that's really quite difficult for people to take on and it was all done on the basis of volunteer…you'd say 'who's going to host next year's conference?'…[32]

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[30] Sheila Gilmore, 'Letter to the Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group', *The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter*, Undated, Uncatalogued Edinburgh Women's Liberation Collection, Glasgow Women's Library, p. 9.

[31] 'Beverly's View of the London Conference', *The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* (May, 1977), Uncatalogued Edinburgh Women's Liberation Collection, Glasgow Women's Library, p. 6.

[32] Interview with EB, p. 2.

The huge task of organising a venue, accommodation and food for a national conference could be overwhelming and tiring for the women of a local group. Sheila Gilmore spoke at length of her experience of organising the 1974 event in Edinburgh:

> …There was a feeling that some of us went away from that event that some women seemed to take all that for granted, there wasn't a lot of thanks or 'thanks very much, it was really great', it was more of 'oh there's a crèche, we're dumping our kids now, we're off'…it just shows that we're not always supportive of each other despite all this theoretical stuff going on about 'sisterhood' but on a very practical level they didn't always think about washing their cups…attendance was bigger than people had necessarily anticipated…some of us felt we were too busy keeping the show on the road to be as involved as we wanted to…we were going round being taken for granted but it was quite powerful at the time…there was a feeling that…our practicality organising was being taken for granted [sic]…I don't think for some of us it was that enjoyable…we were left feeling maybe they'll go…somewhere else next time (laughter).[33]

For some feminist activists in Edinburgh, national conference organisation appeared to be a thankless task. As Sheila reflected, provisions put into place were simply expected by attendees as standard of national WLM events. The responsibility of conference organisation often spilled over into managing the weekend's events, as well as overseeing the final mass meeting to ensure women who wanted to speak could access the microphones. As Sheila's testimony suggests, the experience of conference organisation is remembered as painful as many activists felt taken for granted, unsupported and exhausted by the end of the conference weekend – a complete contradiction of the collective and participatory aims and objectives of the WLM.

Moreover, feminist activists from the Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group had discussed and debated the provisions and resources on offer to ensure that the structures in place reflected the philosophy and ideologies of the movement as much as possible. For example, Fran Wasoff revealed that there had been intense debates in Edinburgh during the organisation of the 1974 national conference over who would be responsible for the crèche. Some women wanted the conference to be completely women-only, meaning men were not

[33] Interview with SG, p. 5.

to be responsible for child-care. Yet, as Fran highlighted to the rest of the Edinburgh group, this would contradict the principle of the conference as being open to all women, as some, at least, would have to be responsible for attendees' children.[34] The year-long process of developing organisational methods and structures made criticisms and accusations of mismanagement from the broader movement more difficult to accept. For many women, first-hand experience of the daunting and seemingly thankless task of national organisation impacted on their involvement and enjoyment of future events. Ellen Galford remembered the final plenary session of the 1978 national conference not as the moment of divisive schisms and 'end' to women's liberation, but, rather, as a moment in which the arguments that erupted dwarfed the efforts of the Birmingham women who had organised the event:

> Birmingham…I remember feeling heartsick for those poor Birmingham women who had worked their arses off to get that conference to happen…I just remember these torn faced, angry, righteously angry at something they felt hadn't gone the right way… and I was just thinking these are really nice women who are trying their best to organise this damn conference and put us all up and organise things like that…. Why should it end in such a sour way when we know how hard it is to put these things together and keep them running and…god this is bloody awful…[35]

Personal experience of the commitment required to plan and organise the practicalities of a national conference for thousands of women with different needs, expectations and interests, meant that some feminist activists not only questioned the purpose and effectiveness of large-scale national events from the perspective of attendees, but also the toll such organisation took on the energy and morale of the women responsible for the organisation.

National conferences were also exhausting experiences for feminist activists in Edinburgh due to where the events were held. The 1974 conference in Edinburgh was the only national conference held in Scotland throughout the decade. From the early 1970s,

[34] Interview with FW, p. 3.

[35] Interview with EG, p. 4, p. 12.

reports on national conferences were frequently published in the Edinburgh group newsletter to ensure information was circulated to feminist activists who could not attend. For example, two conferences held on the seven demands in Oxford and London, which some Edinburgh women could not attend due to the long distance of the location, the cost of travel and time taken up by the event, were of particular interest to the group as discussions and decisions taken there would have impacted on the direction of the movement more broadly.[36] When women based in Edinburgh and other areas of Scotland could attend national conferences, long and demanding journeys were a central characteristic of their experiences. Ellen Galford reflected on how exhausting attending a national conference could be for Scottish-based women:

> …I remember that there were a bunch of us going down from Scotland…so there were Glasgow women and Edinburgh women going down and some of us went together…everyone was always hiring minibuses and things that were always wrecks, nobody could ever afford decent transport so…we had a van and driving down…you couldn't leave Edinburgh until some very late hour…it took a hundred years and of course the van kept breaking down and we arrived in the mysterious labyrinthine of the city layouts…we were all sleeping in the arts lab…my entire experience of Birmingham is in the dead of the night with everybody sort of tired with the van breaking down and anxious about whether we'd ever get there, whether we'd get off these motorways and into the right bit of the city and then I remember the sleeping bags, all in this room, so I remember that and that trip down and how gruelling it was…[37]

Lorna Mitchell wrote of the 1977 conference in London with similar frustration:

> Have all national conferences in Carlisle – so that the Southerners have to do some travel as well. Would those 'high powered' Londoners be so high powered after 10 hours in a minibus? Here's my quote of the conference 'people would have to be very dedicated feminists to travel all the way up to Edinburgh for a conference'.[38]

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[36] 'Conference on the Seven Demands', *The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* (April 1974), Uncatalogued Edinburgh Women's Liberation Collection, Glasgow Women's Library, p. 1.

[37] Interview with EG, pp. 9-10.

[38] Lorna Mitchell, 'The London Conference – a quick reaction', *The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* (April, 1977), Uncatalogued Edinburgh Women's Liberation Collection, Glasgow Women's Library, p. 7.

The physical and financial demands of travelling to a conference held hundreds of miles away, followed by an intensive programme of workshops and social events, proved too much for some women, especially when they were met with ignorance about their efforts to attend and reluctance from other women to travel the distance themselves. How geographically representative, fair and inclusive national conferences were was questioned by feminist activists in Edinburgh and Scotland more broadly, as they began to piece together experiences of the London-centric nature of the WLM, and as a result, to what extent putting any of their energies into broad national organisation was effective and productive for women's liberation and their personal political development.[39]

Frustrations with national women's liberation conferences were also aggravated by the perceived ignorance of some southern-based women to the context in which feminist activists campaigning for social and political change in Scotland operated. Sarah Browne has argued that many historical accounts, which detail the debates of the movement, overlook the resentments and frustrations of women outside of the main metropolitan areas of London and the South East of England.[40] The ways in which Edinburgh-based feminist activists viewed and engaged with national conferences complements her work. For example, at the 1974 national conference in Edinburgh, the fifth demand for legal and financial independence was adopted. There were already established Legal and Financial Independence Groups in both Glasgow and Edinburgh, yet a gathering of the national movement in Edinburgh presented the opportunity for women interested in the issues to meet and discuss their campaigns more broadly with women from across the UK. The demand was universally adopted at the conference in an effort to take the feminist struggle into areas not yet covered by the original four demands of the WLM. The fifth demand for legal and financial independence was a direct challenge to discriminatory legislation

[39] 'Josie's View of the London Conference', *The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* (May, 1977), Uncatalogued Edinburgh Women's Liberation Collection, Glasgow Women's Library, p. 6.

[40] Sarah Browne would agree with this point of view. See Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 166.

covering women's independent status in taxation, pensions, social security, divorce and property, and coincided with other movement demands such as equal pay. However, feminist activists from Edinburgh and Glasgow mobilised their campaigns for legal and financial independence in a different legal and cultural context to that of their English 'sisters'. For example, changes in divorce legislation, which were central to the demands of the campaign, were introduced later in Scotland than in England. The Divorce Reform Act of 1969 had been passed in England and Wales and had introduced the principle of irretrievable breakdown as grounds for divorce, whereas similar divorce reforms were not introduced in Scotland until 1976.[41] Such legal and political differences contributed to feelings of frustration for feminist activists operating in Scotland, as, at times, Scottish culture seemed particularly hostile to their demands and actions, and which appeared to go unnoticed by the broader WLM. Sarah Browne noted that in the Scottish WLM 'male domination and oppression of women was viewed as being rooted in the peculiar nature of Scottish society'.[42] As such, Scottish-based feminist activists sought to interact and connect with groups and individuals from the broader Scottish movement who operated in the same 'strongly patriarchal society'[43].

Frustrations with the generality of national organisation and the Southern dominance of the movement were also intensified in the late 1970s, as women from the Financial and Legal Independence Groups used the opportunity of the upcoming 1979 referendum on a Scottish assembly to draft proposals for radical changes in the form of a women's charter. Sheila Gilmore wrote:

> The virtual certainty of the Scottish assembly opens up greater opportunities for changes in 'family law'. Some changes are almost bound to come in the not too distant future, especially in regard to financial provision on divorce and separation. The women's movement should be ready with its alternative proposals. Especially with a Scottish assembly there is no reason for reforms to

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid, p. 170.

[43] David Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge* (Macmillan Press, 1984), p. 178.

> slavishly follow the English model. Rather we should be looking for imaginative proposals which are better than the current position in England. If we in the women's movement don't make our voices heard any reforms which do come are unlikely to be especially helpful to women.[44]

The referendum of 1979 was held to determine if the people of Scotland wished to see more powers devolved from the Westminster parliament to a Scottish Assembly based in Edinburgh. Sarah Browne discussed why the Scottish WLM did not engage with broader political debates in the lead up to the 1979 referendum. She argued firstly that many feminist activists were opposed to engagement with political parties and were anti-statist. Secondly, that campaigns for women's liberation were international and so opposed national boundaries. Finally, that many women in the Scottish WLM, as is evident with the Edinburgh group, were English, European or American and, as such, did not identify with or pursue a nationalist cause.[45] Yet the Edinburgh and Glasgow-based women committed to the fifth demand seized the opportunity to draft and deliver proposals that were to be implemented by a Scottish assembly.[46] While, as Browne demonstrates, many women in Scotland did not engage in the debates leading up to the devolution referendum, women working on specific areas of women's liberation used the opportunity to connect Scottish campaigns together and draft outlines that could have introduced real changes to the lives of women in Scotland if such an assembly was established.[47] Alongside growing frustration with the geographical representation and the overwhelming scale of national events, many Edinburgh-based feminist activists thus began to prioritise connections with other Scottish-based feminists working on similar campaigns and actions, rather than

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[44] Sheila Gilmore, 'Scottish Divorce: A Guide to the Present Law and some Proposals for Reform, *The Scottish Women's Liberation Journal*, No. 4 (1978), The National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, p. 10.

[45] Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 174.

[46] Edinburgh and Glasgow Women's Legal and Financial Independence Groups. *Scottish Women's Charter - Proposals Designed to Extend Women's Control Over Their Lives*, (1978), National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh.

[47] Interview with SG, p. 6.

networking with feminist activists from across the UK or expending their energies on traveling and contributing to national conferences.[48]

From 1972 onwards therefore, irrespective of whether women had been born in Scotland, feminist activists began to organise separate Scottish women's liberation conferences as sites of exchange for women north of the border. For example, Fran Wasoff, who is North American, described the development of Scottish conferences out of a need to connect the Scottish women's liberation groups:

> One of the problems with national conferences is that they're not really national, you know there's people with concerns for England and Wales, there are people with concerns for Northern Ireland but you know the elephant in the room is England which you know constitutes the majority of the UK population and English people in general think England is the UK and therefore the differences between England and the other nations is often lost and you know you just got fed up saying 'it's different in Scotland, you're not speaking about the UK, you're speaking about England', and it got, it was I suppose the first time I came across that…[49]

Ellen Galford, who too is North American, also described this process as she said: 'there would be people who would go to national conferences and then come back and say well let's have a Scottish conference'.[50] As we have seen in the previous two case studies, the WLM was sensitive to issues of power-imbalance and representation in the organisational structures of the movement. The organisation of Scottish conferences thus arose as feminist activists in Edinburgh and other local women's liberation groups across Scottish towns and cities, fought for greater recognition from the wider British movement and craved more particular and focused discussion on the peculiarities and specificity of Scottish society and culture in which they operated.

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[48] Esther Breitenbach, 'Sisters are Doing It for Themselves' in Alice Brown and Richard McCrone, *The Scottish Government Yearbook 1990* (Edinburgh University Press, 1990), p. 216.

[49] Interview with FW, p. 5.

[50] Interview with EG, p. 10.

4.2 Scottish Women's Liberation Conferences: Developing Collective Organisation and Negotiating Inclusivity

Scottish women's liberation conferences were organised annually from 1972, with events held twice yearly in 1976 and 1977.[51] The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group hosted three such events over the course of the 1970s. As shown in the case made above, Scottish conferences were organised partly as a result of growing frustration with the representation and inclusiveness of events held in the South of England, and offered women alternative sites of exchange to network and connect with other feminist activists operating in Scotland's legal, political and social context. This research now turns to an analysis of the organisation of Scottish women's liberation conferences and the experiences of the Edinburgh-based feminist activists involved. It is argued here that women north of the border did not abandon the principle of national conferences as an organisational method and potential coordinating mechanism of the broader WLM. Instead, through an analysis of how Scottish conferences were planned throughout the 1970s, this case study argues that feminist activists used their personal experiences and insights of broader movement organisation to develop alternative methods and structures, which were often more collective, representative and inclusive. The experiences of feminist activists in the organisation of the 1974 national conference and subsequent attendance of other national conferences, had a direct impact on how Scottish conferences were conceptualised, organised and structured throughout the period.[52]

Unlike the organisation of national movement conferences, no single local group was to assume complete responsibility for the huge task of organisation and management of Scottish-based events. Rather, local groups rotated the responsibility of hosting the events across Scottish towns and cities to ensure that the burden of organisation was shared

[51] Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 157.

[52] Esther Breitenbach, 'Sisters are Doing It for Themselves', in Alice Brown and Richard McCrone, *The Scottish Government Yearbook 1990* (University of Edinburgh, 1990), p. 211.

and that the movement was geographically representative. Organisational decisions were then reached at collective planning meetings held in the host town or city to which women from across Scotland were invited to participate, to shape the structure and form of the conference, and collectively assume responsibility for the practicalities of running large-scale movement events. Ellen Galford recalled planning the 1976 Scottish conference in Partick, Glasgow:

> …We were all young and tough and idealistic…the planning sessions involved people from all over Scotland so there were some women who came from Fife and Tayside, some from St. Andrews and Dundee, there were women who came from Edinburgh and…from Glasgow, so you came to know each other in those planning sessions…[53]

The planning meetings focused on the practical and logistical elements of organising a broad movement conference – primarily which workshops to run and the schedule of the weekend's events, stalls, exhibitions, food and accommodation.[54] Sheila Gilmore also reflected on the shared responsibility of Scottish conference organisation as she said: 'I think there maybe was a bit of we don't need to do all of that, we can actually share, why should we sit in our little Edinburgh saddle…it's just nice to feel you're part of something bigger…there is always a lot to learn…'[55] This broader collective approach to organisation was developed to accommodate and include the varied opinions of women from across the country, and distribute the toll of conference organisation on the time, energy and resources of local women's liberation groups.

This collective method of organisation also extended to appeals for help in facilitating and managing the conference workshops. For example, Esther Breitenbach encouraged other Edinburgh-based feminist activists to come forward and take a proactive part in the organisation of the 1977 conference held in Aberdeen. She wrote:

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[53] Interview with EG, pp. 2-3.

[54] See 'Report of the Scottish Conference Planning Meeting', *The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* (October, 1976), Uncatalogued Edinburgh Women's Liberation Collection, Glasgow Women's Library, p. 3; Interview with EG, p. 4.

[55] Interview with SG, p. 10.

> Suggested workshops are – …NAC, Women's Aid, Legal and Financial Independence, Education and Women, Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts, Lesbianism and Separatism, N.U.S. Women's Campaign, Women and the Care of Children, Women and Community Work, Women's Liberation in Scotland, Scottish Culture and Sex Roles, Health, Health and Safety at Work, Women and the Trade Unions, Sexuality and Literature, Broadening the Movement…. Aberdeen have undertaken to definitely put some of these workshops on, but others will only go on if someone from elsewhere takes on the responsibility of running them. So if there is something you definitely want to see happen, or if you have other suggestions to add to the list, please contact the Aberdeen group.[56]

The success of transparent and inclusive organisational methods, in which responsibility for conference organisation was shared, obviously depended greatly on the participation of women from across the broader Scottish movement. As was shown with the general meetings of the Brighton and Hove group, inclusivity and transparency were thorny issues for the organisation and structure of the women's movement, and were exacerbated by poor attendance and non-participation. In this case, it was not uncommon for a small number of women to be the most regular attendees at planning meetings; in some instances, nearly all the core organisers were from the place that particular year's event was held.[57]

A collective approach to conference organisation also meant that organisation was a process of development in which practices and structures were questioned more broadly across the Scottish groups, and collectively revised as women refined their methods along personal experience. This approach was a marked distinction to national women's liberation conferences, which were the sole responsibility of the local group hosting the event and were of such a large-scale that discussions of potential changes to organisation and structures could not be inclusive of those who had attended from such a wide geographical spread. As the model of open, collective and transparent planning meetings depended on attendance, it was important that there were also channels of communication

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[56] Esther Breitenbach, 'Future Events – Scottish Women's Liberation Conference Report', *The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* (May, 1977), Uncatalogued Edinburgh Women's Liberation Collection, Glasgow Women's Library, p. 3.

[57] Ibid. The report detailed that nine women were present at the meeting with eight from the Glasgow group and only one from Edinburgh, presumably Esther.

between local groups and the planning groups, in order to include and inform women who had not attended the planning meetings. For example, in 1976, Esther Breitenbach reported to the wider Edinburgh group:

> Representation of other areas of Scotland besides Glasgow at planning meetings has not been high… Thus circulation of information is impeded. This leads to the kind of complaint that arose at the second meeting – the issue of a registration fee should have been settled at the first meeting. The implication of this was that I, or the Edinburgh women more generally, could have registered our disagreement more quickly. This in fact was an impossibility. Unless a proposal had been circulated in time for it to be adequately discussed there could be no final decision at that meeting. The view of the Edinburgh women on the fee could not have been communicated more quickly, given that it was necessary for me to report to a business meeting, put forward my proposal for me to obtain the agreement of the W.L. group, and communicate this to the Glasgow group. The issue had then to be thrashed out at the subsequent Scottish planning meeting…. It is, indeed, a very slow process, but neither Edinburgh women, nor myself, can be accused… of bringing it up too late. We could have not brought it up sooner. If this mode of communication is unsatisfactory then we have to think about what alterations can occur to make communications better.[58]

The ways in which women would meet, disseminate information on the decisions taken and consider suggestions on alternative structures from across the Scottish movement was, in principle, a fundamental part of the political process and practice of organising Scottish events. The Edinburgh group's discussions on how to communicate their opinions to planning groups in other towns and cities demonstrates that women acknowledged that feminist organisation depended greatly on the development of methods and channels of communication beyond local networks. Such discussions were, therefore, as important to the development of feminist ideas, practices and theories of broader organisation, coordination and structure, as the events themselves.

The structure of Scottish women's liberation conferences was also further refined as women continued to develop a critique of national movement events throughout the decade. For example, in 1976, feminist activists in St. Andrews introduced a more simplified structure to Scottish conferences in order to avoid the schedule of events

[58] Ibid.

becoming overcrowded with workshops and, as a result, avoid the hectic atmosphere women had experienced at national women's liberation conferences. Discussion at the 1976 conference centred on the question 'What are the best strategies for a feminist revolution?', with women divided into small groups that focused on lesbian separatism, socialist feminism and violence against women, over the course of the conference weekend.[59] The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group retained this structure for the 1978 Scottish Women's Liberation Conference, with 'randomly allocated groups on Saturday morning and topic workshops for the rest of the weekend', with the decision taken not to include a final plenary session in the schedule of events. In addition, the Edinburgh-based feminist activists involved in the planning of the 1978 conference took the decision that the women attending would need to provide their own bedding, plates, cups and cutlery and, after much discussion, decided to provide food only on a limited basis.[60] These measures were introduced to ensure that the women involved in planning the practicalities were not saddled with responsibilities that would drain their energies, and to promote the conference as an event that would focus on political discussion and developing strategy, which would emphasise the political purpose of the conference to women's liberation. Sheila Gilmore reflected on this development as she said:

> … [It was] a bit like starting to reinvent the wheel and you had to too some extent because this was something very different…we were kind of feeling like we were very much starting from scratch and inventing ways of organising, ways of doing things, ways of thinking…[61]

The structure of conferences in Edinburgh were then, reviewed and changed as feminist activists attempted to balance the tension between wishing to preserve the spontaneous and

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[59] 'The Scottish Women's Liberation Conference in St. Andrews', *The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* (1976), Uncatalogued Edinburgh Women's Liberation Collection, Glasgow Women's Library, p. 3.

[60] 'Organisation of the Scottish National Conference', *The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* (May, 1978), Uncatalogued Edinburgh Women's Liberation Collection, Glasgow Women's Library, p. 4.

[61] Interview with SG, p. 10.

revolutionary impulse of women's liberation, with structures conducive to allowing political discussion, consensus and conclusions to emerge. The experiences of Edinburgh-based feminist activists in hosting multiple large-scale events and their willingness to explore new methods and forms of communication, thus challenges the depiction of WLM conferences as annual examples of disorganisation, crippling disunity and failure to coordinate local networks more broadly.

The organisation of conferences in Scotland had, to some extent, addressed the imbalance of geographical representation at national WLM events. Conferences were then powerful sites of exchange, as well as important learning opportunities in terms of organisational and political practices. However, the effectiveness of conferences as sites of meaningful broad movement exchange was limited, as the events were held only once or twice per annum and as such did not allow a mutual process of political growth and development for activists. Despite the development of methods of collective organisation then, some feminist activists continued to question the usefulness and efficiency of women's liberation conferences as an organisational method, both in terms of encouraging the revolutionary potential of the movement and facilitating women's personal political growth.[62] Feminist activists in Edinburgh and other Scottish groups therefore sought to overcome the shortcomings of broad movement conferences as a method of national coordination, and develop and explore new, more frequent methods and forms of movement communication. This case study will now turn to an examination of another broad movement site of exchange, which had different aims and different outcomes than movement conferences: the *Scottish Women's Liberation Journal*. The *SWLJ* offers a clear example of different forms of communication beyond national conferences, in which feminist activists continued to develop broader movement coordination and organisation, and moved further beyond the general and impersonal meetings of the movement at national conferences. This case study will then return to an examination of the

[62] Interview with EG, p. 6.

development of feminist conference organisation in Edinburgh, specifically the emergence of issue-specific and localised events, which provided women with sites of exchange to create specialised networks in which to debate and continue their activism with women from across the broader movement well beyond 1978.

4.2.1 *The Scottish Women's Liberation Journal*

The idea to create a *Scottish Women's Liberation Journal* (*SWLJ*) arose from the 1976 Scottish Women's Liberation Conference held in Glasgow and was launched the subsequent year.[63] The aim of the journal was to provide another site of exchange for broad-movement communication, discussion and debate beyond the annual or biannual meetings of the broader Scottish movement. The first issue of the journal stated:

> …So far, our development has been unselfconscious and unanalysed…. This process will serve both to unite and to divide. It will unite women around the nuclei of existing currents of thought, and, at the same time, it will divide groups or tendencies through open expression of their differences. The thorough formulation of our views, though it will uncover splits, is essential to the strengthening of the movement. Strength does not only lie in a sense of sisterhood, but also in a clear formulation of theory. This is the primary reason for producing a journal…. It is simply impractical to attempt to conduct discussions through already existing journals in London. It is to be hoped that the journal will encourage active participation in discussion from women both inside and outside the movement.[64]

The *SWLJ* was developed as an alternative publication to the London-centric *Spare Rib,* as an open and representative forum for all shades of political thought and opinion found across the Scottish groups. Esther Breitenbach was a driving force behind the establishment of the journal and reflected:

> Well I think that that was very much a sense of we wanted to explore our own experience in Scotland… it was important to look at the nature of our

[63] Esther Breitenbach, 'Sisters are Doing It for Themselves', in Alice Brown and Richard McCrone, *The Scottish Government Yearbook 1990* (University of Edinburgh, 1990), p. 214.

[64] Editorial Collective, 'Introduction to the Journal', *The Scottish Women's Liberation Journal*, Vol. 1 (Spring 1977), The National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, p. 1.

> experience in Scotland…a sense of cultural difference …those sort of elements I think motivated the journal.[65]

Much like the Scottish conferences, the journal focused on the social, political, economic and legal position of women in Scotland in order to frame discussions and the development of feminist ideas and theory specifically for women living and operating as feminist activists north of the border. The journal's Scottish perspective was also adopted in a bid to encourage participation from women who had not or felt they could not contribute to discussions at British level.[66]

The *SWLJ* was ran by an Editorial Collective, with members representing local groups from across the Scottish movement. Much like the organisation of the Scottish conferences, the Editorial Collective was open to any feminist woman interested in participating in the production and publication of the issues.[67] To further develop methods of organisational transparency, the Editorial Collective published their intent to hold 'readers' meetings', which were proposed as an opportunity for women to express their opinions on the journal's contents and the editorial policy driving its publication. Space was also made within the pages of each issue for the publication of correspondence in which criticisms, suggestions and responses to articles were included for the broader movement to discuss. This was also reflected in what material was to be included in the journal and how it was distributed. For example, in the second issue the Editorial Collective stated:

> …We feel that the journal can only take its strength from the women's movement itself; this is reflected in the way the journal is distributed, through local women, women's groups and Women's Centres, and in the way in which, through the same network, material for it has been gathered. Articles, graphics, poems and news items are being sent in. Already women are responding by formulating ideas for articles. We want to encourage any woman who would like to contribute to do so, whether a major article, a review or news item….

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[65] Interview with EB, pp. 8-9.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Editorial Collective, 'Editorial Policy', *The Scottish Women's Liberation Journal*, Vol. 1 (Spring 1977), The National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, p. 2.

> women in Scotland are involved in a great deal of work and activity which deserves report, analysis and discussion. Research, information and debate are crucial to the Scottish Women's Liberation Movement and its development.[68]

For the journal to meet the Collective's aim of a representative publication, and to continue the movement-wide dialogue and coordination established at Scottish conferences, it relied heavily on contribution and support from feminist activists from across the Scottish groups. Without contribution from women outside of the Editorial Collective, the journal could not reflect the growth or diversity of the WLM, or develop further the movement's ideas, theories and approaches to collective national organisation.

However, much like the problems encountered in the organisation of Scottish conferences, the collective processes of these networks presented difficulties in practice. The inclusive policy of the journal meant that any woman defining herself a feminist could contribute an article, poem or letter for publication. In practice, this created a thorny issue for those women who wanted to drive the journal forward as a site for political comment and analysis, rather than as a forum for less conventional political contributions, i.e. poetry, art and personal reflections. Esther Breitenbach remembered these tensions as she said:

> Of course it was a majority decision so that really led to a situation where the initial grouping that had really done all the work in creating the journal were faced with a situation where you couldn't actually necessarily control what was going in it and when I say control that could be an issue of what the balance was say between poetry and political comment.[69]

The journal's collective structure also meant that other women could join the editorial board freely whenever they chose to become involved – ultimately affecting the direction and focus of future issues much to the irritation of established editors.[70]

The tension between operating as an open collective engaged in movement-wide dialogue and retaining editorial control of what was to be published in each issue of the

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[68] Editorial Collective, 'Introduction', *The Scottish Women's Liberation Journal*, Vol. 1 (Spring, 1977), The National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, p. 1.

[69] Interview with EB, p. 8.

[70] Ibid.

journal, ultimately lead the Editorial Collective to split over ideological differences in 1978. Esther Breitenbach, Sally Henry, Marian Keogh and Geri Smyth issued a statement to the remaining editors and the wider Scottish movement:

> …We wish the main orientation of the journal to be towards the Scottish political scene, looking at the situation of women in Scotland in the context of the changes occurring at present…. We wish also to direct the journal towards women in the labour movement, towards the problems women face at work, and to their links with women in trade unions and the labour movement who can also contribute their experience and ideas to the journal. We wish to analyse the position of women in Scotland, both past and present. We also wish to develop theory about women's position in society, both in the specific context of Scotland, and in wider Scottish society, and women's role in Scottish politics, and to formulating ways of organising for women in Scotland. We believe that these aims correspond to the original aims of the journal.[71]

Further to this, the statement made clear that the women involved were opposed to an increase in the amounts of poetry, fiction and personal accounts published, as, in their opinions, such contributions did not develop feminist theory and, moreover, ultimately produced a journal that was confused both in terms of its function and audience.

Reactions to the statement were fierce with women responding from across the Scottish movement, as the divisions between the Editorial Collective raised questions of the viability of broader movement coordination, collective organisation and sites of exchange. As with the organisational development of conferences, the Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group published all personal statements and reflections on the issue in the group newsletter in order to contribute and remain involved in the ensuing discussions. The opposition to cultural and personal contributions, and preference for articles on class, politics and economics, outlined in the statement to the Collective, resulted in many women suggesting the split was due to the unwillingness of some socialist

[71] Esther Breitenbach, Sally Henry, Marian Keogh, Geri Smyth. 'Statement to the Scottish Collective', *The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* (May, 1978), Uncatalogued Edinburgh Women's Liberation Collection, Glasgow Women's Library, p. 3.

feminists to work with or develop the ideas of radical feminists.[72] For example, Alison Buckley expressed:

> I feel it is an essential part of the radical feminist perspective that women work from the personal to the political, in order to discover the roots of our oppression, and in order to attack male-supremacy from the roots. I identify as a radical feminist. I have seen some very good articles in Red Rag (under the section consciousness) which show how the very real feelings and condition of everyday lives are in fact political in that they are the result of the oppression of women by men. This is my concept of the meaning of the word political. Feminism is my concept of political, because as far as I can see we are the only group to be working for truly revolutionary change…I don't want material to be excluded from the journal because it's radical feminist in approach or content….

Edinburgh activists implored the Collective to reconsider the split in order to preserve the networks and connections established through the coordination of the broader Scottish movement, and the potential of the journal for reaching women not yet involved with the WLM. For example, a woman named Linda B stated in the *Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter*:

> As feminists, we should be aligned to feminism – to women – we are our experiences and ideas…the journal is reaching more and more women. I think we can show our solidarity as women to women not yet in touch with the movement by putting articles that contain all different ideas into the *Scottish Women's Liberation Journal*.[73]

Katherine McIndoe of the Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group also expressed a similar sentiment as she stated: 'a balanced and representative journal where women with varying perspectives can stimulate each other is one I would like to see… not a "Scottish radical feminist" or "Scottish socialist feminist"'.[74] There were also concerns that the journal could no longer be titled the *SWLJ* as a separate socialist or radical feminist publication

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[72] 'Reaction One', *The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* (May, 1978), Uncatalogued Edinburgh Women's Liberation Collection, Glasgow Women's Library, p. 5.

[73] Linda B, 'Reaction Five', *The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* (May, 1978), Uncatalogued Edinburgh Women's Liberation Collection, Glasgow Women's Library, p. 7.

[74] Kathryn McIndoe, 'Reaction Four', *The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* (May, 1978), Uncatalogued Edinburgh Women's Liberation Collection, Glasgow Women's Library, p. 6.

would not represent the spectrum of views and opinions found across the Scottish movement.

Tensions between socialist and radical feminists were found elsewhere in group dynamics, as well as the Scottish movement and the British movement more broadly.[75] Historical accounts of the movement have emphasised the ideological differences between socialist and radical feminists as divisive and destructive to the WLM at the end of the 1970s.[76] For example, Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell noted that 'since the early 1970s, many feminists within the Women's Liberation Movement have identified themselves as "radical feminist" or as "socialist feminist", and the gap between the two has seemed increasingly wide and unbridgeable'.[77] Martin Pugh also commented that 'by the end of the 1970s the movement was increasingly divided between economic causes on the one hand and the issues of sexual politics on the other'.[78] These accounts depict socialist feminism as addressing women's oppression as resulting from class conflict, and radical feminism as believing male supremacy as prior to and necessary for all other forms of social oppression, i.e. race and class.[79] However, as research into the British WLM gains pace, it has become clear that this is a too simplistic picture, as neither socialist nor radical women were united behind rigidly defined theories – many women often ascribed to more than one theory of women's oppression and strategy for liberation, and tended to adopt a perspective and analysis issue by issue as they arose in the context of the local groups in which they

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[75] For example, see Eve Setch, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Britain* (PhD Thesis, University Royal Holloway, 2000), pp. 92-102; Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), pp. 184-191.

[76] See for example, Imelda Whelehan, *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second Wave to Post Feminism* (Edinburgh University Press, 1995), p. 61; Lynne Segal, *Is the Future Female?* (Virago, 1987), pp. 61-5; Barbara Caine, *English Feminism* (Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 256-61; Tony Cliff, *Class Struggle and Women's Liberation: 1640 to Today* (Bookmarks, 1994), pp. 175-6.

[77] Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet Freedom* (Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 27.

[78] Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 331.

[79] Esther Breitenbach, 'Sisters are Doing It for Themselves' in Alice Brown and Richard McCrone, *The Scottish Government Yearbook 1990* (University of Edinburgh, 1990), p, 212; Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 188; Anna Gurun, *Second-Wave Feminist Approaches to Sexuality* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2015), p. 38.

operated.[80] Moreover, radical feminists, and more often than not 'radical and revolutionary' feminists, are caricatured as unreasonable and uncooperative in historical accounts of the WLM.[81] For example, David Bouchier commented:

> When radical feminism first appeared, its distinguishing feature was the way in which it located the origins of women's oppression. Liberals blamed the system of learned sex roles, socialists blamed the economic and cultural exploitation of capitalism, radicals blamed men… For radicals, the socialist revolution was not nearly revolutionary enough.[82]

The problems and controversies surrounding the Editorial Collective of the *SWLJ* challenge the narrative in which the movement's 'demise' is accredited to the ascension of 'extreme' radical feminist politics. Rather, many women, including those self-identified as radical feminists in the Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group, were opposed to the split, the establishment of separate journals dedicated to distinct feminist theories, and the abandonment of a broad movement publication that aimed to provide an alternative site of exchange for movement coordination and dialogue. The analysis here then does suggest that strong disagreement emerged over questions of strategy and priority – in this case, how to balance conventional political analysis on the one hand and the creative expression of new forms of female subjectivity on the other. However, when taking a closer look, it emerges that this did not neatly map on to a clear-cut socialist-radical division.

Ultimately, the members of the Editorial Collective who had issued the statement went on to produce *MsPrint* in 1978, a feminist publication with an explicitly socialist feminist perspective and closed editorial policy is which women wishing to join had to apply to the existing editorial board.[83] The remainder of the Collective chose not to continue with the *SWLJ*, which folded after only four issues.[84] The *SWLJ* can be seen as an

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[80] Sheila Rowbotham, *Women in Movement* (Routledge, 1992), p. 313.

[81] For example, see Barbara Caine, *English Feminism* (Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 276.

[82] David Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge* (Macmillan Press, 1984), p. 74.

[83] Interview with EB, p. 10.

[84] Ibid.

attempt to further develop and expand broad movement links and communication across local groups. Similarly, problematic issues of who had power, control and responsibility emerged during the collective organisational development of broader movement networks, channels of communication and sites of exchange. Both Scottish women's liberation conferences and the *SWLJ* were collective ventures across local groups to connect and link women operating in similar social, economic and political contexts. However, as the movement continued to grow in the latter half of the 1970s, events and forums which attempted to include every shade of political opinion, standpoint and theory, could not contain the multiple identities found within the movement, and the open collective structures no longer proved suitable for the women who were burdened with the organisational responsibility, or for the women engaged in the hope of personal political development and fulfilment. While certainly divisions became more *visible* by the end of the decade as the movement grew in size, and was more detectable politically and in wider society, disagreements and socio-cultural diversity among women were present from the outset. In this case, the Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group experienced a proliferation of feminist conferences and events, in which groups of like-minded women with shared identities and interests, organised specialised conferences, workshops and localised events. As national conferences and movement-wide channels of communication proved too general and problematic as the movement developed, specialised conferences and events allowed women to continue to meet, organise and develop broader feminist coordination and methods of collective national organisation beyond 1978.

4.3 Issue-Specific Conferences and Localised Events

As with the Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group, there was a multitude of feminist groups and campaigns active in Edinburgh throughout the period. For example, operating as part of the Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group, there were lesbian discussion groups, women's health groups, a Women's Aid Group and a Rape Crisis

service.[85] This wealth of feminist activism in Edinburgh led to a plethora of issue-specific conferences and events, which were organised and held within the city from the mid-1970s into the 1980s. Many of these issue-specific conferences were organised as women with particular interests and prioritises for actions met at broad national movement events and became, as shown above, frustrated by the generalised and often chaotic workshops. Instead, feminist activists sought out more focused and detailed political discussion which would drive the development of their ideas and campaigns forward. As women turned to specific areas of action and sought out specialised sites of exchange, general national meetings were then no longer a viable method of broader movement organisation for women's liberation.[86]

The very existence and increasing organisation of specialised conferences before and beyond 1978 further challenges the depiction of the final national conference as the 'end' of the WLM in Britain. For example, in 1977, the Edinburgh Radical Feminist Theory Group (ERFTG) organised and hosted a radical feminist conference, which was advertised nationally across the WLM. The idea for a specific conference focused on radical feminist theory originated from a workshop at the 1977 National Women's Liberation Conference. The workshop had focused on an introductory paper titled 'The Need for Revolutionary Feminism – Against the Liberal Takeover of the WLM', written by Sheila Jeffreys. The workshop had encouraged feminist activists to discuss their experiences of isolation and frustration over what they felt was the 'dominance' of socialist feminist analysis within the broader WLM. The ERFTG reported to the Edinburgh newsletter: 'we were powerfully united in our desire to meet and support each other, to set up some kind of revolutionary

[85] For more detailed information on the campaigns and actions of the Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group see, Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), pp. 115-21.

[86] Eve Setch would agree with this point of view. See Eve Setch, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Britain* (PhD Thesis, University Royal Holloway, 2000) p. 94.

feminist network and to build theory. Out of these needs came the call for a conference'.[87] The ERFTG went on to report that the group had taken on the organisational responsibility for the conference and would base the structure of the event on the development of conference organisation on-going at British, Scottish and local level. The group stated:

> Process is as important as content: in other words, the structure in which our discussions take place will greatly determine how we will cover/analyse the subject matter.[88]

While the conference was focused on the specific aim of bringing together women interested in radical feminism and developing theory, the Edinburgh women organising the event were aware that the national advertisement and potential draw of the conference could result in the large and often impersonal workshops associated with annual national conferences. To avoid this, the ERFTG set out that the event was centred on the small group structure developed at Scottish women's liberation conferences. They argued that such a structure would:

> …Increase the likelihood of more participation by a greater number of women, a chance to learn more to the personal experience of each woman which is important to the subject matter itself, a chance to analyse what is happening as it's happening, to collectively change and control the dynamics if unsatisfactory and better support for women in the group who may be new to the WLM.[89]

The group also published more details on the structural fabric of the event. For example, articles were to be reprinted and distributed before the event took place, papers were not to be presented formally as to encourage participation from all attendees, a random allocation system was put into place, with each woman given an allocation number on her registration

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[87] The Edinburgh Radical Feminist Theory Group, 'A Conference Towards a Theory of a Radical Feminist Revolution', *The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* (June, 1977), Uncatalogued Edinburgh Women's Liberation Collection, Glasgow Women's Library p. 3.

[88] The Edinburgh Radical Feminist Theory Group, 'An Aid to Conference Survival', *The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* (October, 1980), Uncatalogued Edinburgh Women's Liberation Collection, Glasgow Women's Library, p. 4.

[89] The Edinburgh Radical Feminist Theory Group, 'A Conference Towards a Theory of a Radical Feminist Revolution', *The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* (June, 1977), Uncatalogued Edinburgh Women's Liberation Collection, Glasgow Women's Library, p. 3.

ticket and grouped together with women she did not necessarily know, and with each group then free to choose to remain open or closed to other women.[90] The group stated:

> …Good communication at this conference is important both for now and the future… this meeting could take many different forms. We suggest that it could be used as a forum for ideas and opinions generated from the small groups and additional workshops during the day. It is also a chance for the whole conference to meet and discuss how the conference structure has worked so far.[91]

Specialised conferences allowed women with similar priorities and interests of feminist ideas and theory to meet in order to formulate more detailed and thought-out strategies. As evidenced by the ERFTG, specialised events also enabled feminists to test new methods and structures which were innovated and developed through their experiences and frustrations of larger and more generalised WLM conferences – structures which were designed to meet the needs of women who sought out smaller and more focused groups of like-minded women whilst still connecting with feminist activists from across the national movement. Edinburgh-based feminist activists also traced the increasing popularity of similar theory-focused conferences held around Britain in the group newsletter, such as the Socialist Feminist Conference held in Manchester in 1978, in order to remain updated and involved in the organisational development, successes and problems of specialised events across the wider movement.[92]

Feminist activists in Edinburgh also organised a feminist writers' conference in 1983, which aimed to bring together the different branches of feminist literature and academia. The workshops organised included 'the feminist novel, feminist science fiction, feminists in journalism, academic writing, working-class, third-world, lesbian writing,

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[90] Ibid.

[91] The Edinburgh Radical Feminist Theory Group, 'An Aid to Conference Survival', *The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* (October, 1980), Uncatalogued Edinburgh Women's Liberation Collection, Glasgow Women's Library, p. 4.

[92] 'Socialist Feminist Conference', *The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* (April, 1978), Uncatalogued Edinburgh Women's Liberation Collection, Glasgow Women's Library p. 1.

writing and isolation and writers block'.[93] The organisers provided registration subsidies, a crèche and promoted the event as accessible to disabled women in a move to incorporate the inclusive and collective philosophy of movement events, which had been developed and refined over the course of the 1970s. However, the conference garnered criticisms from women within the broader Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group. Lorna Mitchell expressed her objections as she wrote:

> The title implies that only women who call themselves 'writers' would go to it – how many women will be put off going because they don't have the confidence to call themselves 'writers'? – How many working-class women do we know who call themselves 'writers'? It may be objected that it's awkward to find another word, but the hand-out about the conference makes no attempt at all to encourage any woman who wanted to, to attend…. Among the topics listed for possible discussion, a subject called working-class writing is thirteenth on the list, six places after academic writing – I bet that will be a popular subject, I mean how many academics are there in the WLM? – And how many working-class 'writers'? Clearly the subject of 'working-class writing' has been slipped in patronisingly, to look concerned about the issue…[94]

Thus, the title 'Feminist Writers' Conference', while used to focus the event on the process, impact and political significance of creating feminist literature, proved controversial. This controversy within the Edinburgh group demonstrates the problems women faced in organising specialised events for those interested in specific aspects and practices of the movement. Such events relied heavily on the assumption that women had developed a distinct identity to their politics and activity. In this case, attendees would, at least, have some relation to the identity of 'feminist writer' in order to attend – as Lorna's criticisms and concerns suggest, this could exclude some working-class women who were less willing to adopt the identity of 'feminist writer' than their middle-class counterparts. The deeper issue here then is the dilemma posed to the movement as it was increasingly

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[93] 'Feminist Writer's Conference', *The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter*, (1983), Uncatalogued Edinburgh Women's Liberation Collection, Glasgow Women's Library, p. 3.

[94] Lorna Mitchell, 'Reaction to Feminist Writer's Conference', *The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* (1983), Uncatalogued Edinburgh Women's Liberation Collection, Glasgow Women's Library, p. 4.

torn between the promise of 'feminism' as a totalising and unifying identity on the one hand, and the need to articulate much more specific agendas and debate, if it wanted to grow into a socially and politically impactful movement.

The proliferation of feminist groups in Edinburgh and subsequent organisation of issue-specific conferences did give rise to more distinct groups of identities within the local group. In the case of class, for example, there emerged a Working Class Wimmin's Group [sic], which positioned itself as a group open to women who identified as working-class feminists and sought to develop their ideas based on that specific combination of identity. In 1980, the Working Class Wimmin's Group reported to the wider Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group:

> We've been together as a group of working-class wimmin since the beginning of the year and are now wondering about the possibility of having a conference. We feel that there is a real need to do this so that we can all link up and start providing for ourselves the solidarity so badly lacking for us within the WLM. We'd be quite happy… no, in fact we are excited at the idea of arranging it, if it is to be in Edinburgh, which is what we are suggesting. Do other wimmin think this is a good idea?
>
> P.S. some kind of system for keeping down travelling expenses etc. would have to be dreamt up, but it shouldn't be too difficult.[95]

While the growth of such groups could be used to support the historical narrative of crippling fragmentation of the movement more broadly, in the case of the Edinburgh Working Class Wimmin's Group, it emphasises the importance and the *value* of difference within the movement's organisational development and structure, and demonstrates that such groups were very much connected and in communication with the local feminist community in which they operated. Moreover, the group's interest in developing a conference structure that reflected the needs of working-class women, i.e. a system of shared and subsidised travel expenses, demonstrates further that the organisation of

[95] Working Class Wimmins' Group, 'Working Class Wimmin's Conference', *The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* (May, 1980), Uncatalogued Edinburgh Women's Liberation Collection, Glasgow Women's Library, p. 3.

specialised conferences actually allowed women the opportunity to develop structures and strategies of organisation which reflected the collective and inclusive philosophy of movement events.

Alongside the growth of specialised conferences from the mid-1970s, was also a turn towards more geographically localised events.[96] For example, in 1979, the *Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* reported on growing interests around a one-day conference focused on the history of the movement in Edinburgh and breaking down 'the loneliness of being a feminist'.[97] The conference aimed to connect women within the immediate local and regional vicinity who were interested in sharing their experiences of the movement and drawing conclusions about how it had developed, as well as exploring issues of intergenerational conflict between feminists new to the movement and those women who were veterans to feminist activism. This increase in geographically localised conferences and events was also supported by the advent of gay and lesbian feminist bookshops in Edinburgh, notably the First of May, Western Wile and Lavender Menace. Information on future conferences, how to become involved in the organisation and key contacts for groups were shared and sought out at the bookshop notice board. Kath Davies reflected on the importance of the Lavender Menace bookshop as she said:

> It was marvellous (laughter)… it stocked all the things you wanted to read and it was friendly… there was of course a lot of information about local groups there… as well as the bookshop, it was another place you could go, find out what was happening… in Edinburgh.[98]

Ellen Galford also stressed the importance of the bookshops as central in spreading information about local conferences and events, and thus in connecting feminists beyond the national movement conferences of the 1970s. She said:

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[96] See for example 'The Scottish Women's Liberation Carnival held in Edinburgh', *The Scottish Women's Liberation Journal*, No. 4 (1978), The National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, p. 19.

[97] 'One Day Conference on Feminism in Edinburgh, March 24th', *The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* (March, 1979), Uncatalogued Edinburgh Women's Liberation Collection, Glasgow Women's Library, p. 2.

[98] Interview with KD, p. 7.

> …Political life in the 1970s was about bookshop notice boards and the '80s, because you could come… and you might be able to find… activities and events, that was the nexus, that was really the switchboard for your life… a bookshop, anybody mildly curious can walk in so… it was absolutely crucial… I mean they were absolutely crucial…[99]

Lucy Delap explored the flourishing of radical bookshops in Britain from the 1960s, as 'stable and public spaces that helped constitute the British women's link to international activist networks and literature'.[100] Delap's work also focused on the importance of feminist bookshops as spaces which facilitated the movement's social networks and intellectual exchanges. Mapping the organisational development of feminist conferences in Edinburgh supports this view, as women not only used feminist bookshops as sources of new literature and spaces in which to develop ideas, but also as important sites of exchange and information on movement coordination through periods of organisational and structural flux. As women moved into specific areas of campaigns and actions, and moved beyond general national meetings of women's liberation, localised conferences and events maintained a sense of broader movement communication, and continued to provide feminist activists with forums and spaces to exchange ideas beyond immediate personal networks and action groups over the course of the 1970s and 1980s.

Conclusions

In some histories of the WLM, feminist conferences have been used as annual signposts of the movement's failure to coordinate and organise nationally, and of the rise of bitter and insurmountable divisions between feminist activists. Yet, the research presented here indicates women's liberation conferences as a more complex pattern of growth and development. The experiences of Edinburgh-based feminist activists who organised and attended national movement conferences, and the organisational development of the events

[99] Interview with EG, p. 12.

[100] Lucy Delap, 'Feminist Bookshops, Reading Cultures and the Women's Liberation Movement in Great Britain, c. 1974-2000', *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 81, No. 1 (2016), p. 173.

over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, present an alternative account that demonstrates the exhilaration, energy and excitement of such events. Moreover, approaching a study of national organisational methods from the perspective of a local group highlights that women approached the organisation of conferences as a process of development in which problems were identified and new ways of meeting were put into practice. Feminist organisation on a national scale was, therefore, not simply abandoned in 1978, but rather constantly refined and developed, as women recognised that the ways in which conferences were structured were central to the ways in which women experienced and engaged with the broader movement. Furthermore, rather than abandon conferences in 1978 due to growing differences between women, the experiences of Edinburgh-based feminist activists demonstrate that socio-cultural difference among women was an obstacle from the very beginnings of developing broad movement sites of exchange, and that such difference drove the search to explore new methods and forms of communication. Feminist activists in Edinburgh were also acutely aware of the burden and toll of national organisation, which contradicted the collective ethos of women's liberation. Feminist activists across Scotland had grown frustrated with the lack of geographical representation at national conferences held in the South of England, and the ignorance of the broader movement to the legal, cultural and political context of Scotland. Thus, women reconstituted methods of broader feminist organisation to suit their particular needs as the movement grew. Scottish conferences were organised in response to the negative experiences of national meetings and allowed women to develop ideas and methods of collective organisation, and reinvent organisational processes that promoted the principles of transparency and inclusivity in decision-making and structures. However, broad-based annual conferences, events and sites of exchange such as the *SWLJ*, although proving their value momentarily, were ultimately not viable methods of broader coordination and organisation as the movement continued to grow over the course of the 1970s. Ultimately, issue-specific and localised conferences were developed and favoured as methods of

organisation as the movement matured – a sign of strength as the movement proliferated into countless branches of campaign activity. The need to diversify programmatically and in terms of forms of communication and sites of exchange was a real and growing one throughout the decade. While it put into question earlier, naïve views on the 'unity' of all feminists, it also offered the opportunity to create original political practices. It is clear, however, that the narrative upheld in some of the literature of a simple antagonism between radical and socialist feminists, and even more so, the simple argument that unity was undermined by a radical-feminist challenge at the 1978 conference, does not in any way do justice to the more complex developments, as illustrated here, of constant trial-and-error and methodological experimentation. In the next case study on the Bolton Women's Liberation Group, this research turns to an analysis of the organisation of single-issue feminist campaigns and the strategic development of feminist activism, specifically in this case, the campaigns to extend and protect contraception and abortion rights.

Chapter Five
The Bolton Women's Liberation Group: Single-Issue Campaigns and Strategic Development

In seeking a reappraisal of the organisation and structure of the WLM, this final case study will now explore the processes central to the organisational development and mobilisation of feminist campaigns – in this case the contraception and abortion campaigns of the Bolton Women's Liberation Group. In histories of the British WLM, feminist campaigns have, so far, been approached from the perspective of the movement's fragmentation and apparent 'end'. Dominant historical discourses of the British WLM have argued that the emergence of single-issue campaigns were a symptom of the broader movement's fragmentation in the later 1970s, as competing currents of feminist identity and theory could no longer unite and instead pursued separate and distinct issues as active campaign agendas. Single-issue campaigns have also therefore tended to be assigned to specific feminist theories and political viewpoints in order to define and categorise allegedly competing currents of feminist identity and theory within the broader WLM.[1] For example, David Bouchier categorised and defined radical feminism with the campaigns to end violence against women and the campaigns focused on establishing Women's Aid and Rape Crisis services. In contrast, socialist feminism is defined, in part, as deeply committed to the campaigns for equal pay and free childcare.[2] As a result, single-issue campaigns have been used to pigeonhole the interests of feminist activists under rigid definitions of feminist theory and, as a result, cast the efforts and actions of the women involved in opposition to each other. As such, WLM single-issue campaigns have been overlooked as moments integral to the feminist experience of local women's liberation

[1] See for example, Sheila Rowbotham, *The Past is Before Us* (Pandora, 1989), p. xii; Elizabeth Meehan, 'British Feminism' in Harold Smith (ed), *British Feminism* (Aldershot, 1990), p. 198; Barbara Caine, *English Feminism* (Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 266.

[2] David Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge* (Macmillan Press, 1984), Chapter 4.

groups throughout the period, and the organisational development of the feminist movement at local and national level.

Recent research has begun to complicate the depiction of feminist campaigns beyond narratives of the movement's fragmentation. For example, Sarah Browne traced the Scottish National Abortion Campaign (SNAC) and the Scottish campaigns to end violence against women, to demonstrate the influence and legacy of the WLM in Scottish society. Browne argued that the development of single-issue campaigns led to the diversification of the movement in Scotland, and opened up alliances between feminist activists and other political groups working in similar specialist areas to ensure their continued influence beyond the 1970s.[3] The research presented here will complement this perspective and approach. However, through assessing the organisation and mobilisation of the campaigns of one specific local group throughout the 1970s and 1980s, this research reveals how local groups developed and refined the ways in which feminist demands were organised into active campaigns and pushed forward into local communities throughout the period, and the impact of active campaigning on the personal development of feminist consciousness from the very beginnings of women's liberation in the early 1970s. The contraception and abortion campaigns of the Bolton Women's Liberation Group were important single-issue campaigns that occupied the group's energies for the entire period, from the early 1970s to the mid-1980s. The campaign activities of the Bolton Women's Liberation Group thus present a unique opportunity to explore how the organisation of feminist campaigns and public activities developed both locally and nationally as the movement developed and grew, and as women's liberation activists gained more experience and confidence as political actors – from ideas and discussions to public demonstrations, lobbying and direct actions.

[3] Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 201.

Bolton is a small former cotton mill town in the North West of England on the northern edges of Manchester which, like many other post-industrial towns and cities in the twentieth century, developed a range of service industries.[4] The Bolton Women's Liberation Group was formed in 1971 and, from the group's beginnings, feminist activists sought to challenge traditional representations of womanhood that depicted women as 'delectable, dressy, dainty and dumb'.[5] Like many women's liberation groups across Britain, activists had a range of interests and priorities for action. This early action saw women in Bolton establish weekly meetings, read and discuss literature and begin the process of CR. By June 1971, the group had around twenty members and continued to grow in influence as a local pressure group for women's rights and issues. Moreover, the Bolton group claimed to 'consist of quite ordinary women: housewives, students, schoolgirls and divorced and single women with varying shades of political opinions'.[6] It is difficult to number exactly how many women were actively involved at any one time, as membership was not recorded and women were involved depending on their interests and ability to commit time and effort throughout the period.[7] As new members joined in the early 1970s, the interests and campaign priorities of the women involved became more focused on the local circumstances of Bolton. The North West of England, specifically Lancashire, the historical county of Bolton, and the Metropolitan Borough of Greater Manchester, which Bolton joined in 1974, had a large concentration of Catholic residents, with over 65% of church memberships to the Roman Catholic Church.[8] The theological beliefs of the Catholic Church and electorate thus influenced the decisions of the local

[4] Sue Bruley, 'Women's Liberation at the Grass Roots', *Women's History Review*, Issue. 25, No. 5 (2016), p. 725.

[5] 'What is Women's Liberation?', Bolton Women's Liberation Group Pamphlet (12/06/1971), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box One, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

[6] Ibid.

[7] 'Not One Burning Bra to Show Shoppers', *The Bolton Evening News* (12/06/1971), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box One, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

[8] Callum Brown, 'Religion' in Rex Pope (ed), *Atlas of British Social and Economic History, Since 1700* (Routledge, 1990), p. 215; Peter Brierley (ed.), *Prospects for the Eighties: From a Census of Churches in 1979* (Bible Society, 1980), pp. 23-66.

council, with Bolton supplying only minimal contraceptive and abortion services. Therefore, from 1972, the Bolton group developed a campaign agenda that focused on the feminist demand of 'free contraception and abortion on demand'. Historical accounts of the WLM have tended to focus almost exclusively on feminist campaigns for contraception and abortion post-1975, in relation to the national protests and demonstrations of the National Abortion Campaign (NAC). Yet the activism of the Bolton group throughout the 1970s and 1980s challenges this narrow perspective and highlights the influence of the personal interests of feminist activists on the campaigns taken up by local groups, and the ways in which feminist activists responded to the local contexts in which they operated. The organisation and mobilisation of campaigns for 'free contraception and abortion on demand' throughout the period saw the Bolton group establish their local presence and authority, develop their strategies and tactics and, as such, the organisation and development of active campaigns was a profound experience that shaped the politicisation and consciousness of the women involved.

This case study uses the oral history testimony of women from the Bolton Women's Liberation Group, alongside documentary evidence such as newsletters, leaflets and pamphlets, and press coverage from the local newspaper, the *Bolton Evening News* (*BEN*), to uncover the organisation, development and refinement of feminist campaigns over the course of the 1970s and 1980s. This case study firstly charts the Bolton group's local campaign for free and accessible contraception and abortion services. The campaign was launched in 1971 as activists took their demands beyond feminist circles and personal networks and into public sites of exchange, to transform what was considered private and intimate into public discourse, and challenge social and religious taboos surrounding contraception and abortion. Feminist activists focused on building alliances with and support from the residents of Bolton, 'traditional' women's organisations, the local press, the local council and medical profession, and published their own research on the poor local availability of contraception and abortion services. These political methods and

alliances were pursued deliberately to publicise, politicise and make palatable the issues of poor local contraceptive provision and the feminist demand for bodily and sexual autonomy for women. The group's early campaign activity demonstrates the extent to which some feminists were willing to compromise and work closely with the political establishment to implement change – challenging the stereotype that the WLM operated completely outside of government systems, devoid of organisation and structure and that, when in its infancy, was consumed by personal discussion and CR sessions. Rather, feminist activists in Bolton were determined to channel their energies into a public campaign that would lead to the implementation of real, concrete changes for local women. The processes of developing such a public and widely considered local campaign for free contraception and abortion was a profound learning experience for the women involved in how to practically organise and mobilise feminist demands.

Like many other local groups across Britain during the mid-1970s, the Bolton Women's Liberation Group also campaigned to defend and protect the 1967 Abortion Act from legislative threats.[9] The 1967 Act had legalised abortion up until twenty-eight weeks of pregnancy and also legalised the procedure on the grounds of mental or physical risk to the mother. Moreover, the 1967 Abortion Act acknowledged a woman's actual or foreseeable environment and thus made it possible for medical practitioners to judge cases of abortion on medical *and* social grounds.[10] Histories of the 1967 Abortion Act have characterised the legislation as one part of a broader liberal and permissive trend of British politics in the 1960s and 1970s, in which legislation was introduced to reform personal aspects of people's lives.[11] However, the 1967 legislation was the culmination of feminist

[9] See Sue Bruley, 'Women's Liberation at the Grass Roots', *Women's History Review*, Issue. 25, No. 5 (2016), p. 731.

[10] Barbara Brookes, *Abortion in England 1900-1967*, (Croom Helm, 1988), p. 134; Marge Berer, 'Whatever Happened to "A Woman's Right to Choose"?', *Feminist Review*, Issue. 29 (Summer 1988), p. 126.

[11] Other examples of 'permissive' legislation in this period include the 1967 Sexual Offences Act, which decriminalised male homosexuality in England and Wales, and the 1969 Divorce Reform Act, which introduced irretrievable breakdown for no fault divorce. Historians such as Christie Davis, Jeffrey Weeks and Callum Brown point to these as significant in the 'liberalisation' of

campaigns for the legalisation of abortion from the 1930s, which had centred on the risks of backstreet abortionists to working-class women's health.[12] The WLM's position on abortion introduced, for the first time, the feminist demand for female bodily and sexual autonomy with the principle of 'a woman's right to choose'.[13] The demand for 'free contraception and abortion on demand' encapsulated the feminist critique of patriarchy, in which men created the laws controlling women's bodies. Drude Dahlerup has argued therefore that 'the issue of [defending legalised] abortion was to the new women's movement of the 1970s what the suffrage issue had been to the feminist movement around the turn of the century'.[14] Therefore, this case study then turns to an examination of how the Bolton Women's Liberation Group utilised their organisational campaign experience to launch an impassioned and heated abortion campaign in defence of the 1967 Abortion Act in 1974: the group once again established supportive networks and information services for local women, and lobbied local politicians. Yet, from 1975, their activism also developed a more urgent, fevered and direct approach, as legislative threats to the existing 1967 Abortion Act were continuously put forward and became increasingly severe towards the end of decade, and women with new perspectives of how to organise joined their ranks.[15] The Bolton Women's Liberation Group developed their tactics, organisational structures and methods of communication in response. New ideas of how to push forward campaigns were introduced and shared within the local group, as well as a clear focus of not only how to garner support but, moreover, on how to counter the aggressive and organised local

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sexuality in the 1960s and 1970s. See, Christie Davis, *Permissive Britain: Social Change in the Sixties and Seventies* (Pitman, 1975), p. 13; Jeffrey Weeks, *Making Sexual History* (John Wiley & Sons, 2013), Introduction; Callum Brown, *Religion and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Routledge, 2014), p. 269.

[12] Anna Gurun, *Second-Wave Feminist Approaches to Sexuality* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2015), p. 52.

[13] Dorothy McBride Stetson, *Abortion Politics, Women's Movements and the Democratic State* (Oxford University Press, 2001), p. Introduction.

[14] Drude Dahlerup, *The New Women's Movement* (Sage, 1986), p. 10.

[15] There were three main attempts to change the 1967 Abortion Act during this period: The White Abortion (Amendment) Bill (1975), The Benyon Abortion (Amendment) Bill (1977) and The Corrie Abortion (Amendment) Bill (1979). See Table 5-1, p. 183.

Catholic anti-abortion movement opposed to legalised abortion. The campaign launched to defend abortion rights also saw the Bolton group contribute to a national campaign through attending mass marches, demonstrations and collecting signatures for national petitions for the NAC, whilst balancing local activism and campaign agendas. The Bolton Women's Liberation Group's campaign trajectory demonstrates how the processes of feminist organisational development were not only ongoing internally between feminist activists to develop group structures and practices but, also, that such processes of operational and organisational development saw feminist activists scrutinise and refine their approaches to public campaigns and mobilisation both locally and nationally over the course of the 1970s and 1980s.

5.1 The Campaign for Free and Accessible Contraception

From the 1920s to the 1960s, birth control groups and organisations campaigned for contraceptive technologies and information to be made available within the public health service. These included: Marie Stopes' Society for Constructive Birth Control and Racial Progress, the Women's Co-operative Guild, the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship, the Women's National Liberal Federation and the Workers' Birth Control Group. From the 1930s, the Family Planning Association (FPA) had also led the voluntary movement on birth control clinics and, to some extent, made up for the lack of state funded provision.[16] Histories of the birth control movement of the earlier twentieth century have noted that these organisations were concerned with the 'health of the nation', and framed their arguments in a discourse of neo-eugenical thinking concerned with limiting birth-rates along class and racial lines.[17] However, historians such as Lesley Hoggart and Clare

[16] Clare Debenham, *Birth Control and the Rights of Women: Post Suffrage Feminism in the Early Twentieth Century* (I. B. Tauris, 2014), p. 164.

[17] See Ibid, p. 109; Lesley Hoggart, *Feminist Campaigns for Birth Control and Abortion Rights in Britain* (Edwin Mellen, 2003), p. 69; Dorothy McBride Stetson, *Abortion Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2001), Chapter 7; Rickie Solinger and Mie Nakachi (eds), *Reproductive Sates: Global Perspectives on the Invention and Implementation of Population Policy* (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2015), p. 6.

Debenham have observed that these groups and organisations also established and developed the politics of feminist campaigns for birth control, based upon a desire for freer expression of sexuality, women's rights to exercise individual reproductive control and a challenge to the social organisation of reproduction.[18] Lesley Hoggart noted:

> Women can only take charge of their lives if they can control their own reproduction. This means either sexual abstinence or the separation of sexual activity from procreation. In twentieth century Britain, feminists rejected sexual abstinence and mounted a number of campaigns for reproductive rights precisely in order to break the connection between sexual activity and procreation. The level of reproductive control that British women now enjoy, limited though it is, should not be taken for granted. It is something for which past generations of women have actively campaigned.[19]

Indeed, the Pill was introduced in late 1961, and by 1964, 480,000 women were taking the oral contraceptive.[20] As Eva-Maria Silies has commented, 'the spread of the so-called Pill was a watershed in sexual relationships between men and women… Now women were in the position to decide if they wanted to take precautions and, as a result, they no long had to worry about pregnancy'.[21] However, access to the Pill was restricted: the pill was an artificial hormonal supplement that was accessible only with a prescription from a doctor. It was considered a drug, and physicians gained new responsibility and control over women taking the oral contraceptive. Reproductive control therefore once again became the subject of feminist campaigns in the 1970s. The WLM's fourth demand expanded on earlier feminist birth control campaigns with the principles of sexual freedom, the disconnection of heterosexual sex from motherhood, self-determination and autonomy for women and a challenge to the social and sexual relations surrounding responsibility for pregnancy and childcare. The Bolton Women's Liberation Group began to formulate their

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[18] Ibid, p. 2.

[19] Lesley Hoggart, *Feminist Campaigns for Birth Control* (Edwin Mellen, 2003), p. 1.

[20] Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex and Contraception, 1800-1975* (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 268.

[21] Eva-Maria Silies, 'Taking the Pill after the "Sexual Revolution": Female Contraceptive Decisions in England and West Germany in the 1970s', *European Review of History*, Vol. 22. No. 1 (2015), p. 42.

interests and prioritisation of free and accessible contraceptive services, backed up by free and safe abortion services, into an active local campaign from 1972. It was Elaine Glover, a member of the Bolton group from early 1971, who was instrumental in organising and mobilising the group's efforts towards improving local services. She remembered:

> …I got the idea from a little article…about the London borough of Harrow, campaigning for the same thing, free contraception…and there was a little bit about Harrow and how they went about it so we agreed to do that…[22]

Elaine had taken inspiration from the agenda of the broader WLM, specifically the movement's fourth demand, and other women's liberation groups across Britain, such as Harrow, moving on local issues of poor contraceptive services.[23] The FPA and the Birth Control Campaign had also pushed the prospect of free NHS contraceptive services for married and unmarried women on to the national stage in the 1960s and 1970s, and had lobbied parliament to enact legislation which would make contraception available to all men and women over the age of sixteen regardless of local council approval.[24]

There was also international debate within the broader women's movement over the benefits of 'free contraception and abortion on demand', with some feminist arguing that contraceptive technologies did not 'emancipate' women or allow them to experience sexual liberation on the same terms as men. Rather, it was argued by some, that by removing fear of pregnancy, contraceptives had made women more available to men and, as a result, women had only been liberated from the right to say no to sexual intercourse and lay the responsibility for preventing pregnancy solely with women.[25] The dangers of

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[22] Interview with Elaine Glover (EG), 26 March 2016, p. 2.

[23] Elaine Glover, 'How the Health Service Can Give Us a Better Deal', *The Bolton Evening News*, Undated, The Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box One, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

[24] Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 300-1.

[25] The idea that the Pill made women more sexually available to men was first put forward in the USA. See Anselma Dell'Olio, 'The Sexual Revolution Wasn't Our War', *Ms*. (Spring, 1972); Sheila Jeffreys, *Anti-climax: A Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Revolution* (Women's Press, 1990), p. 92; Eva-Maria Silies, 'Taking the Pill', *European Review of History*, Vol. 22. No. 1 (2015), p. 42.

female controlled contraception, specifically the Pill, had also become an international interest of the global feminist movement and raised the issue of contraception and reproductive freedom as an area for feminist action in the 1970s. Hera Cook noted that:

> …The discovery of the life-threatening side effects of the Pill and medical arrogance had radicalised the merging women's health organisations in the early 1970s, encouraging strong feminist opposition...This was reinforced by the increasing awareness of the use of sterilization without consent on vulnerable groups throughout much of the twentieth century.[26]

However, despite the debates ongoing within the women's movement over the application and use of the contraceptive Pill and IUD, the local circumstances of Bolton, in this case poor contraceptive provision, meant feminist activists were initially focused on securing and expanding free and accessible services and provisions, rather than developing a feminist critique in response to the dangers of the male dominated medical profession or the use of contraception as a method of social engineering on the basis of class, race or ethnicity.[27]

The Bolton Women's Liberation Group were thus motivated to prioritise free contraception as a local campaign issue due to the poor provisions on offer to residents of the town.[28] The group had a clear objective focused on the 1967 National Health Service (Family Planning) Act. The 1967 legislation granted powers to local councils regarding family planning services – including a choice of the agency used to provide services and the amount spent on such provisions. The legislation also gave permission for local councils to expand services from medical grounds only to social circumstances and placed no restrictions on access such as age or marital status. Hera Cook has observed that once the National Health Service Act was passed, 'local authorities could legally provide

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[26] Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 332.

[27] See Linda Grant, *Sexing the Millennium: Women and the Sexual Revolution* (Harper Collins, 1994), p. 185; Linda Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: The History of Birth Control in America* (Penguin Books, 1990), pp. 401-2; Elizabeth Siegel Watkins, *A Social History of Oral Contraceptives, 1950-1970* (John Hopkins University Press, 1998), Chapter 5.

[28] 'Family Planning Hit Out at Towns', *The Bolton Evening News* (29/6/1972), The Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box One, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

contraception free if they chose to do so, and a series of battles between the supporters of free contraception and their opponents commenced in the council chambers throughout Britain'.[29] In Bolton, the local council had approved scheme six from the FPA in 1972, which provided a minimal service on medical grounds only to married women. The Bolton Women's Liberation Group intended to pressurise Bolton council to raise the service to scheme four, which would provide a completely free service of advice and contraceptive supplies paid for through local rates and government grants.[30] However, as Anna Gurun has observed of the WLM in France and Britain more broadly, 'Catholic beliefs on conception were behind much of the opposition to feminist [contraception and abortion] campaigns'.[31] As Lancashire had a large concentration of Catholics residents, the Catholic Church and electorate's theological opposition to the use of contraception, influenced the Labour-controlled council's position on which services would be provided freely and to whom. The *BEN* reported in June 1972 that Bolton council spent only the minimum of four pence per possible pregnant woman for the 1972-1973 period and refused to even give contraceptive advice to women on non-medical cases.[32] For some of the feminist activists involved in the Bolton group, personal experience of poor local provision cemented the importance of the availability of free and accessible contraception to women's liberation. Elaine Glover reflected:

> Well would it be important to you? Would you want to go to a doctor that you thought wouldn't supply the Pill? I mean it happened to me…I went across the road to the nearest doctor, actually because I cut my thumb and it was bleeding and I thought it might need some attention and I said 'while I'm here can I register to have the contraceptive Pill' and he said 'No! You certainly cannot'

[29] Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 302.

[30] Bolton Women's Liberation Group, *A Local Campaign for a Free Contraceptive Service* (1973), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box Two, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

[31] Anna Gurun, *Second-Wave Feminist Approaches to Sexuality* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2015), p. 57.

[32] 'Family Planning Hit Out at Towns', *The Bolton Evening News* (29/6/1972), The Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box One, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

> and that was that and I didn't register there you can bet…nobody wants to be treated like that...[33]

Furthermore, Eileen Murphy, who joined the Bolton Women's Liberation Group in the early 1970s, remembered:

> There was a contraceptive clinic in Bolton, it was open odd hours and you had to be pretty thick skinned, they were quite judgemental…because there were still strict rules about contraceptives… they could not be prescribed except if you were married and in a stable relationship.[34]

The scarce services available in Bolton were further restricted exclusively to married women, who often encountered judgement, hostility and reluctance when trying to access contraception and advice. Thus, the Bolton Women's Liberation Group were faced with a local situation in which the majority of women living in the area had at least some difficulty in gaining access to contraceptives, whether that was being refused access to free provision due to being too young or unmarried or defending their decisions and preferences in the face of hostile and reluctant medical staff.

The Bolton group's approach to active campaigning was an ongoing political process, characterised by building community relationships and networks with the residents of Bolton and the local council. In doing so, the group sought to challenge religious and social taboos and bring the issue of free and accessible contraception into public sites of exchange such as the local press and shopping precinct. Elizabeth Perry, a member of the Bolton group from the mid-1970s, reflected on the ways in which the group operated: '[we] became a bit more professional, less perhaps nurturing but it was a way of saying we're not taking any kind of nonsense'.[35] Launching a public campaign for free contraception saw the Bolton group move into a new stage of organisational development, which required a heightened level of commitment to activism to ensure their demands were

[33] Interview with EG, p. 6.

[34] Interview with Eileen Murphy (EM), 25 March 2016, p. 6.

[35] Interview with Elizabeth Perry (EP), 25 March 2016, p. 7.

won. Much like the Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group, the Bolton group scrutinised their internal structures through a proposed constitution. Although never fully adopted, a group constitution was intended to ensure the continuation and momentum of the group and, moreover in this case, to ensure that the campaign continued to make progress towards their demands for a free and accessible local contraceptive service.[36]

5.1.1 Public Support and Community Connections

From the outset of the campaign, feminist activists sought to establish themselves as a local point of reference and pressure group on the issues of women's reproductive rights and, for the first time locally, publically discuss, debate and campaign for free and accessible contraceptive services. The Bolton Women's Liberation Group looked outwards to the local residents of Bolton for support and sought to occupy public sites of exchange to publicise their proposals for an extended free service. A central activity of the campaign was thus to firstly gather public support for their proposals, before taking their demands to the council for consideration. For example, the Bolton group recognised the potential of gaining the support of other women's groups and organisations operating in the local area. Though not explicitly feminist, there were a number of local women's societies and associations who were interested in the aims and objectives of the free contraception campaign and the new ideas and political practices of the WLM.[37] Feminist activists gave public talks to the Red Rose Association and the Bolton Ladies Guild to establish support, awareness and promote a network between themselves and more 'traditional' women's organisations.[38] This approach raised questions of which local groups and organisations the Bolton Women's Liberation Group were willing to make alliances with and to what extent

[36] 'Draft Constitution for Bolton Women's Liberation Group' (25/7/1972), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box Two, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

[37] Catriona Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens* (Manchester University Press, 2013), p. Conclusion.

[38] 'Letter from the Red Rose Association' (16/4/1972) and 'Letter from Bolton Ladies Guild' (3/12/1973), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box Three, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

the group were prepared to make their demands more palatable by framing their arguments in social terms for maternal welfare, rather than explicitly for women's rights for bodily and sexual autonomy. In this case, developing links to 'traditional' women's organisations allowed the group to establish itself as an open collective with links to sympathetic local women's groups and organisations and, more importantly, as a reputable feminist authority on how to improve the local situation of poor contraceptive provision and education for women.

The Bolton Women's Liberation Group also encouraged women's organisations and local residents to sign public petitions in order to demonstrate the strength of support for the campaign.[39] The *BEN* reported:

> The Women's Liberation Movement are stepping up their fight to have free contraception made available to all… and members of Bolton Women's Liberation Group are in the precinct each day this week handing out leaflets outlining their aims.[40]

The presence of feminist activists on the shopping precinct was a symbolic occupation of public urban space, which allowed the group to approach women and discuss the local availability of contraception publically. Sue Bruley commented on the public presence of the WLM in urban spaces in relation to Women's Centres and Refuges:

> A sense of physical space for women within urban centres was very important. Bearing in mind the traditional gendered concept of 'public and private' and the designation of much urban space as masculine, it is not surprising that many WLM activists sought to establish a local safe place for women.[41]

The Bolton group's occupation of public space, in this case the shopping precinct, was a strategy which similarly intended to reach out to ordinary women out with of the WLM,

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[39] 'Free Contraception Campaign Petition and International Abortion Week Leaflet', Undated, Bolton Women's Liberation Movement Collection, Box Three, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

[40] 'Women's Lib Set Up Their Fight', *The Bolton Evening News* (3/5/1972), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box One, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

[41] Sue Bruley, 'Women's Liberation at the Grass Roots', *Women's History Review*, Issue. 25, No. 5 (2016), p. 728. Also see Fiona Williamson, who draws attention to the importance of gender in defining urban space. See Fiona Willamson, 'The Spatial Turn of Social and Cultural History: A Review of the Current Field', *European History Quarterly*, Issue. 44, No. 4, pp. 703-717.

publicise the aims of the campaign and elevate the issue of poor local provision and the prospect of a free contraceptive service to public consciousness. The group collected over 1000 signatures from Bolton residents between July and August of 1973.[42] Eileen Murphy reflected on how unconventional such a public approach was to the issue of contraception in the local area:

> The campaign…to get free contraception…was absolutely unheard of, I mean it's just so much part of our understanding now but it wasn't then, this was regarded as a completely personal matter between husband and wife… and the fact that we wanted a place where you could go openly and ask for what you needed or ask for information you needed was completely new and we were regarded to some extent as loud mouth harridans (laughter).[43]

As Eileen's testimony suggests, the focus of feminist activists on publicising and politicising the issue of contraception, meant that the campaign was criticised by other residents who deemed the issue as inappropriate for public discussion, and which gave the group a controversial reputation within the town. However, despite the controversies surrounding the public nature of the campaign, feminist activists were able to engage with local residents about the aims of the campaign, collect signatures of support and challenge social and religious taboos surrounding contraception.

As a key strategy of the campaign, the Bolton Women's Liberation Group also made efforts to establish a relationship with the local press. The daily evening newspaper, the *BEN*, was a key site of exchange to engage and share ideas with the local public on the issues of free and accessible contraceptive services – a marked departure from other women's liberation groups such as Brighton and Hove, which shunned interaction with the mainstream media in favour of producing their own newsletters and interacting with the broader feminist press. For many women within the Bolton group, it was important to control what was written and to ensure that their opinions and viewpoints were fairly

[42] Bolton Women's Liberation Group, *A Local Campaign for a Free Contraceptive Service* (1973), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box Two, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

[43] Interview with EM, p. 3.

represented in local news coverage. Yet despite these issues of representation, the local evening newspaper remained an obvious space to address and engage with the wider local population and garner further support for the campaign. In June 1972, Elaine Glover, on behalf of the wider group, wrote in the *BEN*:

> I am writing to you to clarify the position of the Bolton Women's Liberation Group on extending the family planning service in Bolton. It is certainly true that our group would like to see a free and comprehensive service here… There are, however, several alternatives to the provision of a completely free service... It would, for instance, be possible to extend the service by implementing Agency Scheme 5 under the 1967 National Health Service Act. This would mean that all clients would be given free advice but would – except for 'medical cases' – continue to pay for contraceptive supplies… Although our ultimate objective is, and will continue to be, a free service, we would regard the implementation of scheme 5 as a step in the right direction.[44]

Feminist activists monitored coverage of the campaign in the local press and responded to the criticism and concerns of residents – reassuring readers that their objectives were in the interests of Bolton women and that, as such, any improvement to services would be welcomed.

The group's contribution to the local newspaper also engaged some members of the public in conservation and debate around the issues of a free contraceptive service. A number of Bolton residents began to debate the prospect of free contraception in relation to issues of population control. For example, Mary Robinson of Bolton wrote in the *BEN*: 'in the next 20 years, Britain will need more babies, not fewer. People are living longer, which will result in a giant spiral of too many old people, supported by only a few young'.[45] Maurice Murphy, also a resident of Bolton, expressed contrary views: 'to say that if action is not taken trouble will ensue is to show foresight, not pessimism. Many responsible people are concerned about our population problem, including some of our elected

[44] Elaine Glover, 'Readers Letters', *The Bolton Evening News* (8/6/1972), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box One, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

[45] Mary Robinson, 'Why This Worry', *The Bolton Evening News* (7/8/1972), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box One, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

representatives'.[46] Hera Cook has observed this as an international trend of the birth control movement, as birth control supporters employed argument in favour of population control to ensure that individual women could access contraception:

> The concept of the population explosion gave birth control huge importance, while placing it in a sphere of scientific, depersonalised concerns separate from sex and morality. Proponents argued that improvements in modern Western medicine had led to a massive increase in the human population, with which food production could not keep up…famine, for which the West was responsible, would result. It was now selfish to resist the use of both control rather than selfish to wish to limit one's family.[47]

By framing the issue as a solution to the global problem of rising populations, proponents of free and accessible contraception such as the FPA and the Birth Control Campaign were able to push for NHS services without raising concerns over sexual morality. Public interest in population figures culminated in Bolton in 1973 when a Conservation Society was founded in the town.[48] The society shared the Bolton Women's Liberation Group's focus and aim of pressurising the local council to supply an improved contraceptive service. However, the Society framed their demands in a neo-Malthusian discourse of class-bias, which justified birth control through an economic doctrine that attributed poverty to uncontrolled reproduction and large families, and thus blamed poverty on the poor themselves rather than social conditions.[49] The Society's main concern was therefore the detrimental effects such over-population had on the global environment.[50] While feminist activists in Bolton were encouraged to see an increase in local interest around the aims of their campaign, and recognised that support for population control gave their

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[46] Maurice Murphy, 'Right Figures, but Wrong Conclusions', *The Bolton Evening News* (10/08/1972), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box One, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

[47] Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 297.

[48] 'Population is New Groups Worry', *The Bolton Evening News* (1/3/1973), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box One, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

[49] Ann Taylor Allen, *Feminism and Motherhood in Western Europe, 1890-1970: The Maternal Dilemma* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 98.

[50] For detailed discussion on the Malthusian League see Lesley Hoggart, *Feminist Campaigns for Birth Control* (Edward Mellen, 2003), pp. 67-71; Clare Debenham, *Birth Control and the Rights of Women* (I. B. Tauris, 2014), pp. 109-131.

campaign political conceivability, the Bolton Women's Liberation Group resisted alliances with groups linked to social engineering. Feminist activists used the local press to maintain ownership and authority over the issue and frame the campaign in explicitly feminist terms. Writing in response to the Conservation Society, Kathleen Cropper of the Bolton group argued:

> Perhaps Mr Gelling is not aware Bolton Women's Liberation Group campaigned for the very same thing…It seems rather late in the day for the Conservation Society to enter the campaign...[51]

Moreover, through establishing a relationship with the local press and continuing to build relationships with the public through the pages of the evening newspaper, feminist activists were able to gauge and collate support for their demands. For example, in November 1972, a J. Higgins of Bolton shared his personal experiences of the results of scarce and expensive contraception:

> One winter's night back in 1922, I and eight of my brothers and sisters were huddled upstairs in the dark, while downstairs in the little up and two down my mother was shouting, moaning and crying. As it turned out they were the last few hours of her life. I was only 12 years old at the time. It was only later in my teens that I realised my mother had died of overwork, undernourishment and too much childbearing… Contraceptives are an essential part of modern living. They make for happiness in marriage, improve the quality of life and reduce the quantity.[52]

Through taking their campaign into public sites of exchange, and instigating debate and discussion among Bolton residents, the group was able galvanise support for their demands with deeply personal and intimate stories from supporters well beyond their immediate feminist networks – a key strategy in highlighting the life altering importance of contraception to women's lives. This approach to campaign organisation also opened up

[51] 'Women's Lib Have Led Way on This', *The Bolton Evening News* (7/3/1973), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box One, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

[52] J. Higgins, 'The Night I'll Never Forget', *The Bolton Evening News* (10/11/1972), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box One, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

the debate and included the responses of moderates in the discussion – giving the group an appeal to those wary of such an overtly feminist agenda.

5.1.2 Pressurising the Local Council and Combating Catholic Opposition

Other sites in which feminist activists developed their campaign organisation and strategies were local institutions and the local council. The Bolton Women's Liberation Group first raised their campaign to the attention of local institutions by writing to every member of the Health Committee and Social Services Committee.[53] In 1972, the group put forward that:

> The 1967 National Health Service Act empowers local authorities to give free contraceptive advice and treatment to anyone over 16 years of age; and free supplies to cases of medical or social hardship. Most London boroughs have implemented this Act, and we would be very grateful if, at the next meeting of the Health and Social Security Committee, Bolton council would consider following suit… It has been estimated that only one in four births in Britain in planned. To quote professor Garret Hardin: 'Unwanted Children are more likely than others to become delinquents; and when they become parents they are more likely than others to become poor parents themselves. This is a vicious circle. The consequences of ill-advised parenthood are paid for by society for decades and even generations'… The Women's Liberation Group in Bolton is still engaged in research on this topic but it seems that money spent by public authorities on contraception would save them a great deal of money in the long run.[54]

Though the campaign was centred explicitly on the feminist demand of 'a woman's right to choose', the group appealed to Bolton Health Committee to draft proposals to extend contraceptive provisions on the basis of cost and strain to existing local services. This approach allowed the group to appeal to committee members who were not sympathetic to feminist demands but who were open to proposals that would alleviate spending – somewhat of a compromise in the politicisation and framing of the issue as a feminist

[53] Bolton Women's Liberation Group, *A Local Campaign for a Free Contraceptive Service* (1973), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box Two, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

[54] Bolton Women's Liberation Group, 'Letter to Bolton Health Committee' (April, 1972), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box Two, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

demand in the council chambers, but a deliberate compromise taken in an attempt to win a comprehensive service. This approach proved initially successful, as by July of 1972 the Health Committee resolved that from April 1973, a completely free family planning service would be provided for all Bolton residents.[55] The Bolton group was jubilant to have won their demands with Kathleen Cropper telling the *BEN*: 'we didn't expect to get support from the Health Committee without more of a fight…we're absolutely amazed; its fantastic news'.[56] Following the formal processes of raising objections and proposing alternatives allowed the group to position themselves as serious, well informed and determined to usher in change.

Although the Health Committee had approved a completely free contraceptive service, Bolton council had to approve the decision. It was reported that the service would cost at least £8,670 on local rates.[57] The Health Committee's decision had thus generated heightened public awareness around the group's campaign due to the proposed increase in public spending. Feminist activists in Bolton had to continue their efforts in building public support and community links in order to prove that local residents approved the cost of their proposals. However, this strategy of campaign organisation also saw the Bolton Women's Liberation Group develop experience in countering religious opposition, as their proposals attracted more public attention as they were deliberated and consider by the relevant institutions for implementation. Gaining the support of the local council would see feminist activists forced to develop their campaign tactics, approach and resilience, as social and religious objections were raised against their demands for a free and accessible contraceptive service. The experience of lobbying the council, whilst countering the criticisms of some local residents and religious opponents, further cemented the group's

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[55] Bolton Women's Liberation Group, *A Local Campaign for a Free Contraceptive Service* (1973), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box Two, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

[56] 'Local Lib is Jubilant', *The Bolton Evening News* (13/7/1972), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box One, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

[57] 'Town in Move Planning Help', *The Bolton Evening News* (13/7/1972), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box One, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

role as a local pressure group for women's rights and provided women from the group with profound experience as political activists.

Opposition to the group's campaign grew rapidly from July 1972 after the Health Committee approved the proposal for a completely free contraceptive service. It was reported in the *BEN*:

> Six Astley Bridge clergymen have spoken out in protest over a plan to provide a free family planning service in Bolton. The six have circulated a letter to councillors in the Astley Bridge ward expressing their concern over the scheme... The protest letter from the clergymen notes that the committee has recommended that free contraceptives should even be made available to young teenagers. …The letter states: 'we, the representatives of the churches of Astley Bridge, and therefore, of a vast number of the electorate, wish to make known our objections to this proposal. A great deal is at stake. If the recommendation is accepted, then there is bound to be a further decline in Christian standards. There will be an increase in promiscuity and a rise in the incidence of venereal disease…. Many Bolton people realise these predictable consequences and rightly object to public money being spent in this way. We earnestly hope that the council will reject this proposed expense on birth control.[58]

The initial opposition from the Christian community was led by both Catholic and Protestant leaders. The religious opposition focused on the indignation of Christians opposed to birth control having to pay for the service, and framed their arguments in a discourse of moral and religious objections, on the premise that a free service would result in heightened promiscuity, especially among young people. Interestingly, in this case, religious opponents did not raise concerns over the issue of a free service leading to forced/non-consensual contraception, but instead, religious opponents of the group's campaign saw the implementation of a free service as a demand for 'sex on the rates'. The issue of free contraception thus revealed deep divisions within British society more broadly over changing sexuality, sexual practice and the security of the family. Hera Cook has observed:

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[58] 'Clergymen Slam Free Family Planning', *The Bolton Evening News* (27/07/1972), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box One, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

> Many of the people arguing against local authorities paying for contraception had themselves lived lives in which values such as self-control and restraint were paramount and they did not see why others, particularly the unmarried, should not do the same. The results of widespread provision of contraception have been what those opposed to it claimed would be the case: greater promiscuity and the breakdown of the family, as they understood it.[59]

The concerns and protest from prominent Christian clergymen encouraged further religious opposition, especially from the local Roman Catholic Church. The Catholic Dean of Bolton expressed:

> My concern arises from the fact that I know that the proposal will be offensive to many citizens and because of its dangerous implications. Many citizens in Bolton are opposed in conscience to any form of artificial contraception and to compel these to pay for this service for others would appear to be as unjust as it is offensive. If the service is to be made available to the unmarried and to teenagers my concern is even greater since it…must lead to a further lowering of already low moral standards. Many respected citizens of Bolton are trying to bring up their children with a sense of responsibility, self-respect and self-control; what is proposed would appear to be public repudiation of these very principles.[60]

Residents of Bolton were also encouraged by the Catholic Church to voice strong opposition to the council and, as such, the Bolton group was increasingly attacked and labelled as 'dangerous' by members of the public. For example, one reader of the *BEN* wrote:

> The vociferous minority, personified by pressure groups like women's lib are, I believe, largely responsible for the decline in moral standards. Free contraception for all would only encourage promiscuity among the young…and the deterioration of family life...Bolton council…must not be brow beaten by the so-called 'progressives'.[61]

Such attacks extended to individual members of the group, with Elaine Glover receiving threatening hate mail. One such letter mocked the 'selfish' view of the WLM, with the author anonymously writing:

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[59] Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 304.

[60] 'Contraception Plan, Offensive, Unjust', *The Bolton Evening News*, Undated, Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box One, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

[61] 'Readers Views', *The Bolton Evening News* (9/8/1972), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box One, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

> 'Allow women to exercise a greater degree of control over their lives'. How bloody selfish…If for one minute I could be so self-centred as you and give myself the right to murder – you would be the first person to die (sic).[62]

The mobilisation of religious opposition forced the Bolton Women's Liberation Group to develop and adapt their campaign to the mounting hostility from parts of the local community. As a result, women from the group became vigilant in monitoring public opinion and religious opposition. For example, Elaine Glover fought back against Catholic criticism by writing:

> Firstly, our women's liberation group…believe that it should be the right of any woman to choose whether or not to have a child. The choice not to have a child depends at the moment on whether a woman can afford to pay for contraceptives or can persuade her mate to pay. We do not think that the right to choose should depend on one's ability to pay…. It should be noted as well that it is male members of the community who have been most vociferous in their objections.[63]

Through the group's efforts in developing community links, and using public sites of exchange to engage and involve the residents of Bolton in the discussions surrounding the issues of free contraceptive services, feminist activists were also able to galvanise backing from some Bolton residents in combating the voracious criticisms of religious opposition. The group were praised for their efforts with many local women voicing their approval, want and need, for a free and accessible service, and with many residents acknowledging the work of Bolton feminists in organising around the issue, raising it to public and local council consciousness and continuing with the 'struggle to establish free contraception and abortion on demand' in the face of mounting hostility.[64] Furthermore, the groundwork put in by feminist activists to convince and establish links with the residents of Bolton saw some Catholic residents voicing their support in the face of mounting religious opposition.

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[62] 'Anonymous Letter to Elaine Glover', Undated, Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box Three, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

[63] Elaine Glover, 'Response to Father Ashworth and Opponents of Free Contraception', *The Bolton Evening News* (July, 1972), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box One, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

[64] 'Abortion on the NHS', *The Bolton Evening News* (1972), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box One, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

In a letter signed Forward Looking Moralist, one Bolton resident anonymously wrote in the *BEN*:

> …Believe me, I am no ardent women's lib worker – just an average mother with four children. However, if a little extra on my rates can prevent…unwanted pregnancies I will willingly pay it. I hope the service is approved.[65]

The Bolton Women's Liberation Group tried to garner further public support by pointing to local Catholic residents who supported their campaign for free and accessible contraception. Yet this strategy did seem to dilute their explicitly feminist arguments for free and accessible contraception, as it highlighted moderate support for their campaign based on social concerns over maternal welfare, rather than sexual and bodily agency for women.[66]

The Bolton Women's Liberation Group's campaign culminated in a town council meeting in August 1972. Elaine Glover remembered: 'there was a furore, there's not many town hall meetings where people are turned away because there's that many that want to get in'.[67] The group's campaign had rested on raising public support, building community relationships and pressurising the local council and, in turn, provided reason for religious opposition to mobilise against their demands. As a result, when the proposal came before the council for final approval, tensions in Bolton were at fever pitch. Eileen Murphy reflected:

> They still talk about it in the council, they do a tour of the town hall… the councillors take your round and one raised it with a sort of laugh…I pulled him on it, I said, 'I was up there in that gallery the night it was raised…it wasn't a laugh for us'…[68]

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[65] 'Forward Looking Moralist Readers Views', *The Bolton Evening News* (July 1972), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box One, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

[66] Anna Gurun noted a similar approach to feminist abortion campaigns in France. See Anna Gurun, *Second-Wave Feminist Approaches to Sexuality* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2015), p. 32.

[67] Interview with EG, p. 3.

[68] Interview with EM, p. 6.

For feminist activists in Bolton, the public support for their demands and the controversies the campaign had generated, demonstrated to the group their potential as a force for local change – a profound experience for the political consciousness and development of the group as an organised active collective. Ultimately, Bolton Council rejected the proposal for a free and comprehensive contraceptive service with concerns over the cost and social consequences of the availability of free contraception.[69] Feminist activists reacted furiously – sharpening their skills of critique and countering opposition. The group argued:

> Most of the objections raised by councillors were on 'moral' grounds. For instance, a male Tory asked 'how would you feel if your daughter or son is going to the health office to get contraceptives for a dirty weekend?'…Another male Tory actually claimed that 'if the Pill was available to 16 year olds, it would soon be passed on to 15, 14 and 13 year olds'.[70]

The issue of free contraception was then referred back to the Health Committee for a second time and a compromise and conditional scheme was eventually approved in which all residents were entitled to free family planning advice, yet drugs and appliances remained chargeable to the patients.[71] Eileen Murphy released a statement on behalf of the wider group to express that they were 'naturally' disappointed with the result. The statement read: 'we hope people who need contraceptive advice will try to get it, despite the reactionary attitude of the old and male-dominated council'.[72] Such a public and controversial campaign had, to some extent, hardened the group's approach, whilst also providing crucial experience in which setbacks and the hostile attitudes of the local council and Catholic Church did not deter the group from pursuing their demands.

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[69] Bolton Women's Liberation Group, *A Local Campaign for a Free Contraceptive Service* (1973), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box Two, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

[70] Ibid.

[71] 'Free for all Family Planning Scheme Off: Compromise Instead', *The Bolton Evening News* (10/8/1972), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box One, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

[72] 'Protest at Family Planning Rethink', *The Bolton Evening News* (3/8/1972), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box One, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

The Bolton Women's Liberation Group also recorded the organisational development and refinement of their strategies throughout running such a publically scrutinised campaign – although not the free and comprehensive service intended at the beginnings of the group's mobilisation, contraceptive services and advice were somewhat extended across Bolton. Feminist activists thus went on to produce a pamphlet, *A Local Campaign for Free Contraception*, which detailed the organisation of the campaign and the processes and practices the group had developed to raise their demands to the attention of the local council and public interest. This process of development, in which feminist activists gained valuable experience as political actors, and developed their campaign and mobilisation skills, encouraged the group to share their experiences with the broader WLM in the hopes that other local groups interested in establishing similar activity, could base their organisation on the model of the Bolton group. Throughout the publication, women from the group reflected that their first attempt to pressurise local government and instigate change had provided a formative experience and understanding of how to mobilise feminist demands and how to generate support and relationships with women out with of a local group's immediate network. The free contraceptive campaign developed the group as a local pressure group and exposed feminist activists, for the first time, to the realities of organising, mobilising and sustaining an active, public campaign in the face of mounting opposition.

5.1.3 Establishing Women's Health Services

Although the Bolton Women's Liberation Group did succeed in extending some local provisions, feminist activists were still determined to deliver a free and accessible local contraceptive service. As a result, whilst still focused on pressurising the local council, the Bolton group established their own women's health clinic as a site of information on local services and contraceptive education. The establishment of a contraceptive clinic can be seen as a heightened stage in the group's organisational campaign development, as

feminist activists reacted to the defeat of the initial campaign and actively took up their role as a source of support and information on women's rights and local contraceptive services. As discussed in the case study on the Aberdeen Women's Liberation Group, interests in women's health and methods of self-help practice can be seen as an international characteristic of the WLM, in which feminist activists challenged the patriarchal power of the medical profession as an exercise of self-empowerment through learning how their own bodies worked. As shown with the Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group, Women's Centres also allowed the WLM to offer information and support on issues of women's health, as well as a range of other services and courses, and were important in the organisational development and physical expansion of local women's liberation groups.[73] However, in the context of poor local provision, the Bolton Women's Liberation Group sought to establish a short-term dedicated clinic that focused specifically on supplying contraceptive information, education, pregnancy testing and referrals to abortion-clinics and sympathetic doctors. Self-managed women's health clinics have been noted as an international characteristic of the WLM in histories of 1970s feminism, with similar clinics found in the USA, France and Germany. For example, Maud Bracke observed the development of women's health clinics in Rome: 'such clinics were able to have a real impact on women's lives in local communities, as well as articulate a feminist position in the public domain on contraception, sexual health, child-care and abortion'.[74] Though not as radical as some of their Italian counterparts, in that the Bolton clinic did not offer illegal abortions, a clinic focused specifically on contraceptive information and education played a similar role in challenging public taboos surrounding female sexuality, reproduction, contraception and abortion.[75] Establishing a women's health clinic also ushered in a new stage of maturity and commitment for the Bolton group,

[73] Sue Bruley, 'Women's Liberation at the Grass Roots', *Women's History Review*, Issue. 25, No. 5 (2016), p. 728.

[74] Maud Bracke, *The Reinvention of the Political* (Routledge, 2014), p. 108.

[75] Ibid, p. 109.

as the activity carried more responsibility than ever before. The clinic was advertised in the *BEN* and through the distribution of leaflets – the group's clinic could offer a free pregnancy test, same day results and a sympathetic ear. [76] In a leaflet detailing the group's history, the group outlined: 'we run a pregnancy testing service every Saturday morning…many of the women who come wish to be pregnant and some come partly to hear more about abortion'.[77] Elizabeth Perry reflected on her involvement in the clinic as she said: 'it felt like a big responsibility to make, help women realise that they did have some choices….[78] For some of the women involved in running the service, giving advice and offering support to women became the forefront of their activism. Feminist activists had to become well informed and educated themselves on issues surrounding women's health and reproduction, contraceptive methods and local clinics that were sympathetic to women seeking further contraception and abortion services.

The initial success of the clinic, coupled with the personal political satisfaction of the women involved in running it, meant the Bolton group quickly looked to extend their services. Women from the group sought to go beyond offering testing, support and advice, to selling contraceptives, at cost price, to any woman that came to the clinic looking for help. However, a public backlash quickly mounted as many residents saw the escalation as irresponsible, immoral and overstepping the supportive and informative role the group had established within the local community – that of a pressure group, local mouthpiece and source of advice and information. The group came under fire through their insistence that any woman, regardless of age, was welcome at their service – many Bolton residents feared this would result in girls as young as twelve and thirteen buying contraceptives. Councillor Barbara Hurst took great opposition to the group's proposals: 'we do everything we can to educate our daughters about moral issues and then something like this is done to

[76] 'Women's Lib Set Up Shop, Birth Control for all', *The Bolton Evening News*, Undated, Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box One, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

[77] Bolton Women's Liberation Group, *Our History*, Undated, Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box Three, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

[78] Interview with EP, p. 5.

encourage them to lose all moral dignity'.[79] The group were also faced with opposition from the medical profession with prominent local doctors coming out against the group's planned services. Dr Phillip Silver, a venereologist, claimed:

> Their knowledge is so limited that it is dangerous… I don't allow my nurses to give advice until she has been working in the clinic for at least a year… it takes that long to get enough experience.[80]

While the group moved into a new stage of campaigning, that of public services, feminist activists were conscious of needing to retain the public support and local influence they had established in the beginnings of their campaign organisation. As a result of the overwhelming local opposition, the group's plans to sell contraceptives never came to fruition. However, the Bolton group continued to fiercely defend their perspective and approach to contraceptive services. In response to public opposition, the group stood firm as they stated:

> We do not encourage a woman of any age to have sexual intercourse, but neither would we discourage her from doing so. It is the right of every woman to know how to protect herself against an unwanted pregnancy, and to have the means of doing so freely available.[81]

The group's move into service provision was a rewarding and profound experience for the women involved – offering local women a service, and themselves up as sources of support and information, provided fuller understandings of the realities of women's lives, which lobbying and protest methods of campaigning had not provided in such deeply personal terms. Eileen Murphy remembered:

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[79] 'We'll Fight Birth-Shop Plan, Every Mother Disgusted by Move', *The Bolton Evening News* (8/11/1972), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box One, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

[80] 'Doctor Warns on Women's Lib Plan', *The Bolton Evening News* (16/11/1972), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box One, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

[81] 'Women's Lib Hits Back at Doctor', *The Bolton Evening News* (17/11/1972), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box One, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

> There were [pregnancy testing kits], they were very new and very laborious compared to what you do now, you had to do the test, the urine test, and then you had to wait an hour for the results, it was a very long hour, it's a long hour whether you want the baby or not, it's a long hour…I remember there were some very hard and tough cases and choices women were having to face.[82]

Elaine Glover also echoed this when recounting her experiences of working in the group's clinic:

> …Sometimes it was distressing, sometimes women wanted to be pregnant and when they found out they weren't were quite understandably upset…one had to relate to the person involved I think, we were successful at doing that…I think they came expecting to find not only a service but possibly some information and probably came because they wanted a sympathetic ear.[83]

Involvement in the group's clinic could be emotionally and physically taxing on the women who ran the service. Nevertheless, the pregnancy testing and advice services were profound experiences, as the women involved realised many women living in Bolton simply did not have access to information or education on many aspects of women's reproductive health.[84]

As an extension of the group's tactics to bring the issues of contraception and reproductive health into public sites of exchange, and the group's advice giving services, the Bolton Women's Liberation Group also published a women's health pamphlet, *The Bolton Women's Guide*, which became highly influential for other women's groups across the broader WLM. The Bolton guide was similar to the seminal feminist text, *Our bodies, Ourselves*,[85] as discussed in the Aberdeen case study, and was published in 1976 with the group declaring:

> Most women have experience of various medical services. Even if we are healthy most of us seek treatment at some time in our lives – for pregnancy, or the menopause – simply because we are women. On such occasions, many

[82] Interview with EM, p. 6.

[83] Interview with EG, p. 5.

[84] 'Woman's World, Book that Supplies the Answers', *The Bolton Evening News* (16/2/1976), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box One, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

[85] Angela Phillips and Jill Rakusen, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (Penguin, 1978).

> women feel they are not treated as responsible people. We are told little and do not always have the confidence to ask…and so consequently even those medical staff who are willing to give information get out of the habit of volunteering it. It is these attitudes we need to change – by asking questions, and more questions about what is happening to us, and by making our own decisions, with the help of professional advice, not professional pressure.[86]

The guide included information on a range of women's health issues from contraception to the menopause, subfertility to cervical smear tests and, moreover, comprehensive information on what services were available locally and the options available to women on the NHS. The guide also dedicated space to dismiss 'old wives' tales' regarding contraception and pregnancy – many of which had come to the group's attention through their pregnancy testing service and community outreach work. Women from the Bolton group wrote:

> Old wives' tales say you can't get pregnant when you have intercourse standing up or whilst having a period – you douche or pass water after intercourse – the woman doesn't have an orgasm – the woman is breast feeding – it's your first time – you hold your breath – the penis doesn't go right in – you jump up and down afterwards. If you believe any of these things you will soon find yourself pregnant.[87]

The group's approach to producing a guide that was accessible, written in layman's terms and demystified medical jargon, included information on health for women of all ages and was tailored to the situation of provision in Bolton, was a reflection of the way in which the Bolton Women's Liberation Group had connected with and served local women as they organised, developed and broadened their campaign strategy. The guide was also a critical success, with the Guardian writing:

> Suddenly, Bolton is a great place to have a baby. Nothing special about the facilities or the climate. But a unique little book tells you exactly what you need to know if you are pregnant and living in that area. It takes you step by

[86] Bolton Women's Liberation Group, *Bolton Women's Guide* (1976), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box Two, Feminist Archive North, Leeds, Introduction.

[87] Bolton Women's Liberation Group, 'Old Wives Tales' in *Bolton Women's Guide* (1976), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box Two, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

> step from the antenatal clinic to the labour ward at Townleys, the local hospital'.[88]

Feminist activists were also inundated with requests for copies of the guide. For example, the National Childbirth Trust, the Medical Mentor and other women's groups such as the Luton Women's Liberation Group, were interested in Bolton's example.[89] Producing a guide that proved successful with local GPs, the Health Committee and social services, whilst also maintaining their campaign to pressurise the local council for a free and accessible service, further cemented the group's authority and demonstrated their ability to organise around any local issues of women's health.

5.2 The Campaign to Defend the 1967 Abortion Act

As shown by *Table* 5-1, throughout the 1970s and early 1980s there were multiple legislative threats to the 1967 Abortion Act.

[88] 'Bolton Babes', *Guardian Women* (14/6/1976), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box Two, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

[89] 'Letter from the National Childbirth Trust' (June 1976) and 'Letter from Luton Women's Liberation Group' (June 1976), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box Two, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

Table 5-1 Abortion Amendment Bills 1974-1982

Bills	Stage Reached	Key Provisions and Proposed Restrictions
White, 1975	Select Committee	Sought to prohibit non-resident women seeking abortion, sought to lower the upper time limit to twenty weeks and required that the pregnancy must present a 'grave' risk to the life or health of the pregnant women for an abortion to be carried out.
Benyon, 1977	Standing Committee	Required one of two certifying doctors to have at least five years clinical standing, sought to introduce statutory conditions for the licensing of clinics, sought to reduce upper time limit to twenty weeks, attempted to introduce new protections for conscientious objectors under 'conscience clause'.
Braine, 1978	First Reading	Sought to lower the time limit for legal abortion to twenty weeks, sought to clarify and reinforce law regarding grounds for 'conscience clause'.
Corrie, 1979	Report Stage (Adjourned)	Sought to tighten the licensing of abortion clinics and ensure that they could not be financially associated with referral agencies, sought to lower the upper time limit to twenty weeks, sought to amend the 'conscience clause' to allow greater protections for conscientious objectors.

Compiled from: Joanna Chambers and David Marsh, *Abortion Politics* (Junction Books, 1981), pp. 11-40 and Fran Amery, *Abortion Politics in the UK: Feminism, Medicine and the State* (PhD Thesis, University of Birmingham, 2013), p. 129.

A number of MPs launched private member amendment bills to restrict the grounds on which abortion could be granted and attempted to curtail the time limit in which women could terminate a pregnancy. The first challenge came from James White, a Glasgow Pollok Labour MP, whose Abortion (Amendment) Bill sought to limit abortion to less than twenty-four weeks of pregnancy. Though White was defeated, his bill opened the way for more severe threats to the legislation. In 1977, William Benyon, Conservative MP for Buckinghamshire, launched a bid to restrict abortion to twenty weeks. Moreover, Benyon's bill sought to ensure that any abortion given to a woman under sixteen years of age would have to be carried out in the presence of her parents, and would allow doctors and nurses more grounds to refuse to perform an abortion under the 'Conscience Clause'.[90] Benyon's threat was then followed by John Corrie's Abortion (Amendment) Bill, Conservative MP for North Ayrshire, in 1979. Corrie's bill is viewed as the most serious legislative threat to the 1967 Abortion Act in this period; as the amendment sought to restrict the criteria on which abortion could be obtained for 'social reasons'.[91] Historians such as Sarah Browne have drawn attention to the Conservative parliamentary majority during the period and, therefore, how close the bill came to being passed. Browne noted, 'the only reason it did not succeed is due to a "lack of parliamentary time". There was a feeling that had the government allotted more time for this bill then it would have definitely passed'.[92] Maud Bracke observed a similar trend in Italy, describing the period from 1975 onwards as marked by 'the "over-activity" of parliament on the [abortion] issue, as nearly all political parties presented bills on abortion in frenzied attempts to "occupy" this space'.[93] Legislative threats thus raised the issue of abortion to the top of the broader WLM's

[90] Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 226.

[91] Anna Gurun, *Second-Wave Feminist Approaches to Sexuality* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2015), p. 55.

[92] Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 226.

[93] Maud Bracke, Feminism, the State and the Centrality of Reproduction: Abortion Struggles in 1970s Italy, Forthcoming in *Social History* (2017), p. 3.

agenda – leading many local women's liberation groups to enter a new stage of activism in which feminist activists were constantly poised for organisation and mobilisation in defence of legalised abortion.[94]

The Bolton Women's Liberation Group, like many other women's liberation groups across Britain, including Aberdeen, Brighton and Hove and Edinburgh, launched campaigns to defend, protect and secure legalised abortion rights from the mid-1970s. Elizabeth Perry reflected on why organising to defend the 1967 Abortion Act was central to the feminist experience of the 1970s:

> It became personal, maybe in a way that other campaigns weren't, every sort of oppression and degradation to women, it was a blow to all of us, if they could do that to you, they could do it to her, they could do it to all women…because we're all in the same boat together…were all in it together.[95]

Legislative attempts to repeal abortion rights, which many feminists felt were already hard won, enraged women from the Bolton group – such anger provided the impetus to organise once again around the issues of contraception, abortion and women's control over their own reproductive health and bodies. Much like free contraception, the right to abortion was also central to the group's demand for bodily autonomy and sexual freedom for women, and allowed the group to further develop a public discourse on what was considered personal and taboo in public sites of exchange. The group's campaign to defend abortion therefore provides an important perspective on the ways in which feminists developed and adapted their approach to active campaigning – from more palatable campaigning methods such as petitions, to the development of direct actions and combative tactics in the face of Catholic anti-abortion groups and increasingly severe legislative threats to abortion rights.

There was, however, a diversity of opinion within the Bolton Women's Liberation Group over access to abortion on demand up until full term. Sheila Rowbotham noted:

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[94] Dorothy McBride Stetson, *Abortion Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 143.

[95] Interview with EP, p. 10.

'there is not a universally accepted feminist case for abortion'.[96] Given the publicity around the movement's principled position of 'abortion on demand', the disquiet many women felt about abortion with no upper time limit has remained underrepresented in histories of the abortion campaigns of the WLM. Elizabeth Perry reflected:

> The idea that you can keep a child alive earlier, I mean, I still agree with the principles of abortion on demand and 'a woman's right to choose' but...as medical science improves it changes the picture but I do think women have the right to choose.[97]

The changing viability of a foetus made some women feel uneasy with the principle of abortion on demand in the later stages of a pregnancy. However, as Elizabeth's testimony suggests, the Bolton group's stance on abortion with no upper time limit was consistent with the wider women's movement across Britain – with abortion inextricably linked to the notion of women's rights, equal opportunity and integral to self-determination. Eileen Murphy crystallised this as she reflected:

> You can talk about number of weeks and all that but in the end, you have to trust women, you have to trust women themselves to know what they are going to do…women don't do these things lightly, on the whole they are very responsible about this…[98]

The legislative threats to repeal the 1967 legislation also introduced a period of co-operation between WLM feminist activists and mixed sex organisations campaigning to defend legalised abortion. For example, feminist activists worked with the Trade Union Movement, sections of the Labour Party and the National Abortion Campaign (NAC). The NAC was formed in response to James White's bill, and continued to campaign well into the 1980s on issues surrounding reproduction, contraception and abortion rights. The NAC was a mixed sex organisation with a national steering committee and local affiliated groups. Many organisations were members of the steering committee of the NAC. These

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[96] Sheila Rowbotham, *The Past is Before Us* (Pandora, 1989), p 86.

[97] Interview with EP, p. 9.

[98] Interview with EM, p. 10.

included: ALRA, the Birth Control Campaign, the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, Doctors for a Woman's Choice on Abortion, Tories for Free Choice, the Young Communist League and the Pregnancy Advisory service.[99] As such, Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell have observed that 'the relationship between the NAC…and the women's movement as a whole was not entirely comfortable' due to the involvement of men.[100] The NAC presided on the principle of a woman's right to choose abortion without a legal or medical limit. However, as the campaign sought to build as wide a coalition as possible, it stopped short of widening the demand to women's control over their own bodies and sexualities. Feminist activists across the WLM saw this as a 'dilution' of feminist demands, specifically the 'sixth demand' for 'the right to a self-defined sexuality'.[101] Affiliation with the NAC also raised questions of male involvement in feminist campaigns internationally, as Anna Gurun has noted, the issue of abortion led to feminist movements in France and across Britain more broadly to address 'similar questions about the relationship of outside organisations…. Both movements wanted to examine the relationship between men, women and sexuality'.[102] The affiliation of the Bolton Women's Liberation Group with the NAC highlights how principles of women-only organisation within the WLM were negotiated at the grassroots as the campaign agendas of local groups changed. The previous case studies have demonstrated that the organisational development of women-only political separatism was not always straightforward in the context of the local group, as questions over the presence of men re-emerged and were debated in specific circumstances, such as the presence of male children at feminist social events and the presence of men at national women's liberation

[99] Lesley Hoggart, *Feminist Campaigns for Birth Control* (Edward Mellen, 2003), p. 4. See also, Stephen Brooke, *Sexual Politics: Sexuality, Family Planning, and the British Left, from the 1880s to the Present Day* (Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 214.

[100] Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet Freedom* (Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 11.

[101] Nicolas Owen, 'Men and The 1970s British Women's Liberation Movement', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 56. No. 3 (2013), p. 814.

[102] Anna Gurun, *Second-Wave Feminist Approaches to Sexuality* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2015), pp. 59-60.

conference crèches. Affiliation with the NAC posed similar organisational questions for feminist activists in Bolton and the WLM more broadly, as feminist activists had to reconcile the women-only political separatism of their previous campaigns, with the potential of working with male activists in the NAC. The Bolton Women's Liberation Group recognised the NAC's potential to organise mass action and protests against the anti-abortion bills, due its role as a national centralising body and ability to fundraise through donations. The legislative threats to the 1967 Abortion Act had ushered in a sense of urgency for campaigns to defend the legislation, and lead to feminist activists and women's groups across Britain questioning whether ensuring the Act was defended through the involvement of as many supporters as possible, i.e. men, surpassed the principle of 'women-only' organisation. Feminist activists in Bolton worked within the NAC from the mid-1970s and brought their explicitly feminist demand of 'a woman's right to choose' and demand of 'the right to a self-defined sexuality' to the local debates around abortion rights and female bodily and sexual autonomy.

The Bolton Women's Liberation Group launched their NAC campaign in early 1974 with a statement released to the local press: 'don't drive women to the backstreets again for abortions. We want free abortion on the NHS for all women who want it. Every mother a willing mother: every child a wanted child'.[103] The group utilised their previous campaign experience to first and foremost reach out to the women residents of Bolton for support. The group framed their campaign in a class discourse to stress that working-class women would be worst hit by changes to the existing law due to the high costs of private procedures. Feminist activists quickly looked to once again occupy public sites of exchange to place the issue of women's rights to reproductive freedom in public view. The group set up stalls on the shopping precinct and much like their campaign for free

[103] 'Libbers in Abortion Protest', *The Bolton Evening News* (26/3/1975), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box One, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

contraception, began to collect signatures of public support, this time for a national petition. Eileen Murphy recounted:

> …We used to go out on the precinct with a petition…and I was absolutely dreading it and thinking we would be balled off the precinct or whatever, do you know, it was fairly easy and it was fairly easy to get signatures on that petition because we'd approach women and do you know why, think of it, this is the 70s and some of the women in the precinct then…some of these middle aged women on the precinct that we were approaching with regard to abortion services, they had needed an abortion before it became legal and they would say that to you and 'I'll sign that', and 'I'll sign that, I know so and so and she had to', 'I've known women who had to go to the backstreets'…of course you'd meet people who would say 'I'm absolutely against it and I won't sign your petition' but a lot of women were very keen to sign the petition to keep the advances we'd made with the '67 Act, so that was a great relief…[104]

Rita Hudson, who joined the Bolton group due to its focus on active campaigning, also echoed this as she remembered:

> Quite often they were pleased to talk to you and they had personal experience they wanted to share, either their own or somebody they'd known…it was something they felt very strongly about, once they started talking to you and realised why you were there, it wasn't something you had to work hard to get, once you turn the tap on you got a response…[105]

As abortion was largely unavailable before 1967, many working-class women turned to unsupervised, primitive and often unhygienic practices of backstreet abortionists. Knowledge of who could perform such procedures or ways to induce miscarriage was often passed down from generation to generation.[106] Jane Lewis described that for many women, especially working-class women, 'this was a natural and permissible strategy'.[107] Advice ranged from how to induce miscarriage through consumption of caraway seeds, nutmeg or gin, to using knitting needles to abort a foetus – leaving many women with

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[104] Interview with EM, p. 4.

[105] Interview with Rita Hudson (RH), 25 March 2016, p. 2.

[106] Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 203.

[107] Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950* (Hemel Hempstead, 1984), p. 18.

haemorrhaging or permanent damage.[108] The group's abortion campaign therefore brought to the fore personal accounts and experiences of women who had needed an abortion before the legalisation was introduced and, thus, the campaign resonated with local women who offered their support. Moira Hill described this as 'a validation of what we were doing' and for some it highlighted the absolute need to defend abortion as a woman's right. Elizabeth Perry said, 'I was really shocked actually at how many women had been affected [by backstreet abortions]'.[109] For many women of the group, this put their activism and campaign efforts into a historical perspective – rooting their campaign in the experiences of ordinary women living in Bolton and focusing on the defence of existing legislation rather than improvements in services for local women.

The Bolton Women's Liberation Group also sought to render visible its debates and positions through the production, publication and local distribution of pamphlets, newsletters and leaflets. Feminist activists produced literature that drew global comparisons of the result of illegal abortion. For example:

> In 1972, 157, 000 women needed to terminate a pregnancy under the Abortion Act. Would you like to think that these women had to resort to illegal back-street abortion? In Latin America terminations are illegal in most counties, 1 abortion still occurs for every 3 live births. Abortion deaths have been halved in this country in the five years since the passing of the Act. And throwing out the Abortion Act in Britain would not mean an end to abortion, rather that many women would die as in Latin America where a botched abortion is the biggest single cause of death among fertile women… We must have the means whereby to exercise choice.[110]

The Bolton group's campaign to defend the 1967 Abortion Act centred on pragmatic arguments of keeping working-class women safe from the dangers of backstreet abortionists, and the feminist demand of a woman's choice in deciding whether to continue

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[108] Angela Holdsworth, *Out of the Doll's House: The Story of Women in the Twentieth Century* (BBC Books, 1988), p. 98.

[109] Interview with Moira Hill (MH), 25 March 2016, p. 6; Interview with EP, p. 2.

[110] 'Every Child a Wanted Child: A Woman's Right to Choose', Bolton Women's Liberation Group Leaflet, Undated, Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box Three, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

a pregnancy or not. The group also began to distribute their literature and write to local doctors and GPs, appealing for public displays of support and rejection of any attempt to curtail the 1967 Act.[111] The group's attempts to cultivate doctors' support for abortion rights was an attempt to ensure the 'respectability' of their campaign, and thus make their feminist demands seem more moderate and palatable to sceptical residents of the town. Anna Gurun has noted the importance of doctors' support in feminist campaigns as 'it broadened the argument into the medical sphere, and showed that abortion could be seen as a medical issue and not just a moral one'.[112] A favoured slogan within the group's literature was, 'since 1967 over a million women have had abortions… and we had over a million good reasons why'.[113] The group used such slogans to ensure that their arguments for abortion rights remained centred on female bodily and sexual autonomy, while appealing to the public and medical profession through reference to the harrowing and desperate experiences women had shared with the group in the early stages of their campaign organisation.[114] Much like the campaigns for free contraception, the Bolton Women's Liberation Group deliberately developed a very public, impassioned and deeply personal and emotional approach to campaigning to protect the Abortion Act, which initially centred on the group's respectability and authority as a local pressure group, and sought to gain as much support as possible for their message that 'this bill must be stopped'.[115]

The Bolton Women's Liberation Group used local public support and referred publically to the personal testimonies they had collected to lobby parliamentary MPs. For example, feminist activists had established a relationship with Ann Taylor, Bolton West

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[111] 'Letter from the Bolton Women's Liberation Group to Dr Blacklay', Undated and 'List of Sympathetic and Helpful Doctors', Undated, Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box Three, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

[112] Anna Gurun, *Second-Wave Feminist Approaches to Sexuality* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2015), p. 64.

[113] 'Abortion on Demand', Bolton Women's Liberation Group Leaflet, Undated, Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box Three, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

[114] Ibid.

[115] 'Defeat the Benyon Anti-Abortion Bill', Bolton Women's Liberation Group Leaflet (1977), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box Three, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

Labour MP, who had showed the group support from the beginnings of the campaign for free and accessible contraception. Rita Hudson recalled:

> We'd take the petitions to our local MP Ann Taylor who was very sympathetic and would always assure us that she had no intention of voting for any bills…she had no intention of any attempts to curtail abortion rights…'[116]

Ann Taylor MP also supported the group's 'week of action' aimed at driving up public support against James White's proposed amendment. She gave a speech in which she argued the bill was 'a disservice to women' and commended the work of the Bolton Women's Liberation Group in fighting to protect the already limited access women had to free and safe contraception and abortion services.[117] Developing relationships with local MPs, and hosting public talks, furthered the group's legitimacy and position within the local community. Moreover, through the group's experience as seasoned campaigners, they also knew to turn their attention to local MPs in favour of amendments to the 1967 legislation, as Elizabeth Perry recalled, 'we were constantly looking for ways to put pressure on MPs'.[118] However, feminist activists also knew through campaign experience the reluctance and, in some cases, the open hostility of some local MPs to the group's feminist politics and agenda. Therefore, when moving to lobby local politicians, feminist activists in Bolton took a much more critical and fevered approach than they had done in the previous campaign for free contraception. The group picketed and disrupted David Young MP's political surgery to demand an answer to where he stood on the abortion issue after voting to support James White's bill. It was reported in the *BEN*: 'women members of the Bolton abortion campaign used a loud hailer to attack their MP in the town centre precinct'.[119] Such a public shaming of an elected MP was an unprecedented move for the

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[116] Interview with RH, p. 2.

[117] 'Bolton MP Slams Abortion Move', *The Bolton Evening News* (14/6/1975), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box One, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

[118] Interview with EP, p. 3.

[119] 'Women Slam MP Over Abortion Vote', *The Bolton Evening News* (29/11/1976), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box One, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

Bolton Women's Liberation Group and the beginnings of a much more direct stage of campaign organisation and mobilisation.

5.2.1 Fighting the Catholic Anti-Abortion Movement

From 1975, legislative threats to restrict access to abortion encouraged the fierce mobilisation of the anti-abortion movement. The anti-abortion movement presented feminist activists in Bolton with an unprecedented scale of local organised religious opposition to feminist demands, and forced feminist activists to adopt a campaign strategy based on competing rights: that of the woman and the foetus.[120] Anti-abortion groups presented major opposition to the feminist demand of 'a woman's right to choose', with the SPUC operating locally in Bolton. The SPUC was a national organisation, with hundreds of local branches centralised through an executive committee, and which drew much of its political support from British Catholics.[121] As Anna Gurun has noted, the SPUC claimed that 'pro-abortion groups "made an abortion sound like a benediction, the pulling of a tooth at the most", and [argued] that the sterilisation of women who did not want children rather than abortion was the answer to the "unwanted baby syndrome"'.[122] The national structure and scale of the organisation also allowed Catholic anti-abortion groups to expand rapidly in size – opening new branches and increasing memberships from the mid-1970s to the 1980s.[123] In Bolton, fighting to defend the 1967 legislation against a backdrop of fervent Catholic opposition was then central to the feminist experience of organised campaigning in the 1970s.

In 1974, as White's bill was being prepared, it was reported that five coachloads, over two hundred anti-abortionists from Bolton, travelled to London to attend and rally

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[120] Lesley Hoggart, *Feminist Campaigns for Birth Control* (Edwin Mellen, 2003), p. 23.

[121] Anna Gurun, *Second-Wave Feminist Approaches to Sexuality* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2015), p. 57.

[122] Ibid. p. 56. Also see Joni Lovenduski, 'Parliament, Pressure Groups, Networks and the Women's Movement' in Joni Lovenduski and Joyce Putshoorn (eds), *The New Politics of Abortion* (Sage, 1986), p. 56.

[123] Dorothy McBride Stetson, *Abortion Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 135.

against the 1967 Abortion Act.[124] Moreover, through the encouragement of the Catholic Church, particularly from priests encouraging congregations to support the SPUC from the pulpit, the anti-abortion movement had further established a strong presence in Bolton. Eileen Murphy, an ex-Catholic member of the Bolton group, said:

> …My mother was a member, at the end of my mother's life, she lived until she was ninety-nine and a half…at the end of her life I was doing what I called her small banking…and you'd have died laughing if you'd looked at one of my mother's bank statements and one of my bank statements because the organisations we were supporting were completely the opposite and the SPUC was one of the ones she supported…[125]

For Eileen, the mobilisation of the anti-abortion movement in Bolton was a difficult period in her activism, as it positioned the Bolton Women's Liberation Group against members of her family who were supportive of the absolute message of the Catholic Church and the anti-abortion organisations operating in the local vicinity. The SPUC also attempted to cement their influence in Bolton by displaying large images of supposed aborted foetuses and by framing their arguments with emotionally distressing language, for example, referring to abortion as murder.[126] Such an organised, financially strong and emotive religious opposition, forced the Bolton Women's Liberation Group to develop their approach, innovate new tactics and focus less on the informative and more palatable methods of political campaigning used in their earlier activities.

Feminist activists in Bolton began to step up their opposition to the anti-abortion movement by occupying the latter's spaces, such as Catholic demonstrations, marches, and Catholic churches, and tracking the plans of anti-abortion groups such as the SPUC. Eileen Murphy reflected on the group's campaign development as the organisation of direct actions had ramifications for her personal life:

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[124] 'Big Local Group for Anti-Abortion Rally', *The Bolton Evening News* (25/4/1974), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box One, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

[125] Interview with EM, p. 8.

[126] Ibid, p. 9.

> The Catholic Church mobilised in Manchester and a number of us went across to oppose this march, well the Catholic mobilisation was huge, absolutely huge…we stood there and we shouted all day, 'women must decide their fate, not the church and not the state', I remember it distinctly and remember I was an actor at the time so the state of my voice was quite important really, and I remember at the end of that day, I think it was a Sunday, not having much voice left and having to take steps so that I could work the next day, however, the most upsetting thing of course and it was an abortion march and I was by this time convinced that we needed this, and my family walked past on the other side and I sort of knew in my head that they would probably be there but it was a huge march so I was sort of hoping that I wouldn't see them, but I did, and they saw me and…they didn't speak to me then, well we didn't speak to each other for months…[127]

For Eileen, this more direct and confrontational approach to campaigning publicised her feminist principles to her family and the Catholic community she had grown up in. However, the ferocity of the anti-abortion movement had convinced her of the need to step up the group's approach and fight the opposition with equal ferocity. The Bolton Women's Liberation Group utilised Eileen's connection to the Catholic Church in order to plan further disruptions to anti-abortion events. She went on to recount:

> I also remember something else I did and I'm not sure I'd do this again, because my name is Eileen Murphy, I'm Catholic…we wanted to know, we knew they were planning something locally and we wanted to know where it was going to take place…and I rang up the number and said 'my name is Eileen Murphy and I'm very interested in this meeting or this demonstration' and they said to me 'what Parish are you in?' that fairly floored me and I…coped with that and they told me…[128]

On reflection, Eileen queried whether such a deceptive approach was ethical. However, as the anti-abortion movement continued to mobilise, such an approach allowed the group to precisely plan counter demonstrations and protests – signifying a turn in which feminist activists sought more confrontational campaign tactics to fight against the increasing tide of the religious anti-abortion presence in Bolton.

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[127] Interview with EM, p. 3.

[128] Ibid, p. 9.

The Bolton group's organisational development toward direct action was exemplified in a protest held inside St. Edmunds Catholic Church in 1976.[129] Of the six Bolton women interviewed, all recalled the significance of the event to the group's development of campaign organisation, strategy and approach. Again, the group used Eileen Murphy's knowledge and connection to Catholicism to orchestrate the action. She recalled:

> They [the SPUC] came to Bolton and they had a march through the town, it was a Sunday and we were opposing them, they went into St. Edmunds Church…we had banners concealed under our coats and we followed them into the church and they were going in to have a mass and because I was an ex-Catholic it was down to me to know when was the best time to stand up in all of this because the plan was we would walk to the front of the church and reveal our banners which were things like 'an acorn is not an oak'… and so in we trooped…horrible sort of atmosphere really and sort of sitting there…got in my mind when I was going to get up but it started to get to me, the priest was going on…and I thought, 'you know Eileen, if you don't get up soon, you're not going to get up at all'…so I had to get up then…I just had to get up and lead the way which I did and we revealed our banners and slogans and t-shirts we had on and then I got some courage back by the time we got to the front door so I suggested we go round again (laughter)…[130]

Feminist activists were outraged that the SPUC were holding a march and mass dedicated to the 'Massacre of the Innocent'. Hilary Eastham recalled:

> We were just angry that they thought they could use the church as a means of avoiding other opinions being heard by going into the church…partly because of my job I had slightly respectable clothes available and I don't know what I was wearing but I was standing next to this woman in the church and she turned to me and said 'oh I hope they aren't going to do anything in the church' and I thought 'oh yes I am'.[131]

The church demonstration left activists vulnerable to arrest and could have led to fierce confrontation between the opposing sides of the abortion debate. Hilary said of the protest: 'it was the sense of breaking a taboo that made it more frightening, more tense were

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[129] 'Abortion Demo in Church', *The Bolton Evening News* (29/3/1976), Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box One, Feminist Archive North, Leeds.

[130] Interview with EM, p. 8.

[131] Interview with Hilary Eastham (HE), 26 March 2016, p. 3.

situations where you might of got arrested'.[132] Elizabeth Perry also echoed this sentiment as she recounted:

> That was kind of one of the riskiest things we did to disrupt a Catholic mass…when I got home it had been on the radio, local radio and my mum said, as soon as I walked in, she said 'as soon as I heard it I knew it was you'.[133]

Feminist activists in Bolton were also keen to maintain the group's role as a local source of support and information in the wake of an increasingly hostile atmosphere towards abortion and contraception. Elizabeth Perry particularly pursued this role during the period:

> …What happened for me was a lot of women, my friends, their friends, ended up coming to me if they needed help, and I guess that possibly was the same for other women in the group, on a personal level for quite a while I ended up driving women to abortion clinics and picking them up and bringing them back…and yeah I remember quite a few times going to abortion clinics all over the place, with friends, with friends of friends and people that knew that I knew how to, the procedures and stuff… that felt important… well for a lot of women it was a case of nobody was to know, they didn't want anybody to know they'd been for an abortion so a lot of the problems around that were keeping the secret…it felt right...[134]

Understandably, some women residents of Bolton wanted to avoid the stigma of having an abortion, especially during a period in which local and national debates surrounding abortion were tense, and so turned to women's liberation activists for help. This can be seen as an expansion of the group's health services established in the earlier 1970s, and as further tactics employed to undermine the message of the anti-abortion movement.

Another key strategy in the group's campaign to defend the 1967 Abortion Act were national protests and demonstrations held in London. Eileen Murphy reflected on her involvement in the national demonstrations:

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[132] Interview with HE, p. 6.

[133] Interview with EP, p. 2.

[134] Interview with EP, p. 7.

> It was smashing, it really was, and I remember standing on the embankment for hours because our bit hadn't set off…just standing there waiting for our turn to start moving…it felt absolutely tremendous and the fact there were so many kids on them as well…you ignore people at your peril…because it means the consciousness of the country is there…if that many people have gone to London….[135]

The local campaigns of the Bolton Women's Liberation Group provided feminist activists with an understanding that one of the most effective tactics in combating the anti-abortion movement was to demonstrate public support, defiance and determination to protect the existing legislation, which thus encouraged their involvement with national demonstrations. Moira Hill went further in her recollections as she said:

> One of the really important things about national marches is you feel this whole weight of people behind you so you can go back and take the energy back into local campaigns and that was so important…it was about the energy it gave you, the conviction that you were right and there were a whole load of people with you who agreed it.[136]

Much like the organisational development of the Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group was influenced through the scale of national conferences, the scale of national demonstrations profoundly affected women from the Bolton group. Though such events could be exhausting for women travelling from the North West, the events ultimately bolstered the energy of the group and inspired the continuation of local campaign organisation.[137]

The series of legislative threats to repeal the 1967 Act pushed the Bolton Women's Liberation Group to develop their campaign approach with original, creative and public spectacle tactics. However, some women found the efforts required to sustain the abortion campaign relentless in nature. Rita Hudson reflected on the toll the campaigns took on the group's energies:

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[135] Interview with EM, p. 10.

[136] Interview with MH, p. 7.

[137] Interview with EP, p. 1.

> They just used to come thick and fast and I used to think this is so hard, it seems that all your energy is going to defending what's been won with such a lot of struggle and it just seemed so sad to me that everyone's energy had to go to that.[138]

Hilary Eastham also reflected on her activism and tiredness as she said:

> The fact that these were male bills…I think we were just really angry, and it was just one thing after another, when you've defeated the first but it just doesn't go away so you got more fed up.[139]

As we have seen, many women from the Bolton group found abortion campaign activities to be exciting, thrilling and necessary. Yet, feminist activists also found the organisation of campaigns draining and, to some extent, dispiriting as the anti-abortion opposition would once again mobilise and pose new threats.

5.3 Activism Beyond the Contraception and Abortion Campaigns

The period from 1975 saw many feminist activists poised to mobilise in the face of the very real possibility that another legislative threat would be launched to curtail existing abortion rights. To combat the dispiriting onslaught of local religious opposition, and to ensure that the group did not simply revolve around the defence of legalised abortion, women from the Bolton Women's Liberation Group used their experience of campaign organisation to publicise and generate support for other feminist demands. This activism allowed the group to maintain its local presence, develop new campaign methods and helped to maintain active campaigning as an exciting experience central to involvement with the Bolton group. Moira Hill reflected on this as she said:

> When it wasn't repealed, it wasn't repealed…it meant you could spend your energies on something else…there were local things like there was a woman

[138] Interview with RH, p. 2.

[139] Interview with HE, p. 3.

> sacked from the Octagon and we supported her, there were local things going on and of course all of those things are good in uniting us.[140]

The group organised sex shop pickets, protests at cinemas showing gratuitous male violence towards women and some members of the group became involved in establishing Fortalice, a domestic violence refuge still in operation as of 2017.[141] The Bolton group also used their energies outside of abortion campaign mobilisation to develop feminist theatre. Rita Hudson reflected fondly on this stage of the group's organisation of feminist activism:

> We used to write plays, there was going to be a festival one summer… so there was a call for stalls and everything to be in the precinct, so we did a play instead and did something called the Pink Medicine Show… it was about a woman and a bloke and the bloke is kind of sitting in his chair all the time and the bloke won't do anything and she's rushing round…and somebody comes along and gives him some pink medicine and that transforms him and he stops watching the football and starts helping, goes and does the washing up and gets her tea and stuff…it would be so funny at the meetings when you were writing this stuff (laughter).[142]

The group sought to demonstrate the relevance of their politics to the lives and situations of ordinary women living in Bolton, by performing a storyline about the drudgery of domestic work, the unequal division of labour and women's double role at home and at work. The Pink Medicine Show was written to suggest alternative ways of living and raise the consciousness of those watching. The group also set up game stalls during local festivals, as Hilary Eastham recounted: 'we had lots of fun, the festivals were really good fun…we did stalls at throw a ball, knock down an abuser, this is the thickness of the stick you were allowed to beat your wife with'.[143] Such events embodied the direct, creative and public approach the group had developed during their campaigns for free contraception and abortion on demand – women utilised their organisational skills, ingenuity and group

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[140] Interview with MH, p. 4.

[141] 'Women Plan Sex Shop Protest', *The Bolton Evening News* (12/1/1981) Bolton Women's Liberation Group Collection, Box One, Feminist Archive North, Leeds; Interview with EP, p. 6. Also see, http://www.fortalice.org.uk. Accessed 29 April, 2017.

[142] Interview with RH, p. 4.

[143] Interview with HE, p. 7.

connections, to ensure the continuation of their influence and voice within the local community in a celebratory and relatable tone. Feminist activists also utilised tried and tested methods of campaign organisation to gain public support for other feminist demands and viewpoints. For example, the group held a petition stall in the shopping precinct to protest the burden of Christmas upon women, as women are mainly responsible for the organisation and labour of family events.[144]

As the group's interests and membership proliferated in the latter half of the 1970s, connections to feminist networks outside of Bolton also strengthened and grew – further introducing new methods of campaign organisation and mobilisation. Hilary Eastham recounted:

> The Greater Manchester-wide Greenham group was quite a good forum for different kinds of tactics because a lot of things about Greenham was the different way of doing things and there were people in the greater Manchester-wide group from every borough round about so people had tried different things….[145]

As shown in the Aberdeen, Brighton and Hove and Edinburgh Women's Liberation Groups, the 'fragmentation' of local movements at the end of the 1970s should not be viewed as a signal that the WLM was no longer a viable social and political movement. Instead, through exploring the processes and development of feminist organisation throughout the period, the Bolton Women's Liberation Group has demonstrated further that many local groups went through a process of growth and change, in which interests, groups, connections and networks expanded and diversified – thrusting the influence of 1970s feminism, and feminist ways of organising and mobilising, well beyond the scope of this project. As Elizabeth Perry commented, 'we got good at it'.[146]

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[144] Ibid, p. 2.

[145] Interview with HE, p. 7.

[146] Interview with EP, p. 9.

Conclusions

The organisation of campaigns for feminist demands was crucial to the development of the Bolton Women's Liberation Group, central to the formation of feminist consciousness for the women involved, and shaped the dynamics and approach of the wider group. The group's early campaigns for free contraception were characterised as a period in which women gained experience, confidence and valuable skills in articulating and fighting for their feminist agenda within the local community. This early activity saw feminist activists establish themselves as an authority on women's rights by taking their demands into public sites of exchange – cooperating with the local council, communicating through the local press, establishing alliances with other women's organisations and, in some cases, establishing relationships with sympathetic Councillors and MPs, to ensure their perspectives were included and their proposals taken seriously. This approach is often overlooked in histories of the WLM that depict local women's liberation groups as overtly hostile to political systems, or that focus exclusively on the movement's efforts to establish 'a woman's right to choose' from 1975 onwards. These early experiences of public campaigning allowed the group to mobilise quickly in 1974 as the first legislative threats to existing abortion rights emerged. This action introduced a new stage of campaigning for the Bolton group in which their earlier experiences and development of campaign strategies were combined with a much more direct and confrontational approach. The vitriol of the anti-abortion movement was so strong that Bolton women also sought to contribute to national demonstrations of unity in support of abortion rights. For many women of the Bolton group and across the British movement more broadly, defending contraception and abortion rights epitomised the feminist challenge to patriarchal control over women – thus occupying much of the energy women could commit to the movement. In response, feminist activists in Bolton were also determined to pursue other interests and organise other campaigns in periods of quiet on the abortion issue – writing plays,

developing street theatre and expanding the public reach of women's liberation. Yet such activities embodied the principles of the group's free contraception and abortion on demand campaigns with a focus on gaining public support and maintaining their position as a women's rights pressure group in the local community. Moreover, such activities continued the excitement, exhilaration and ingenuity of active campaigning, which was at the forefront of the feminist experience in Bolton throughout the 1970s. As such, this research challenges histories that depict single-issue campaigns as evidence of the movement's fragmentation towards the end of the 1970s. Instead, the organisational development and diversification of the WLM was inextricably linked to the experiences of women as political activists engaged in public single-issue campaigns and agitations for feminist demands throughout the 1970s.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, the concentration has been on the operational and organisational forms of the WLM in order to emphasise that the movement's growth and development was more complex than has often been assumed in dominant discourses of the movement's history.[1] This study then has disrupted narratives of the movement's 'structurelessness' and offered new insights and understandings of the development of feminist political organisation, structures and internal political practices at the grassroots. It has revealed these structures as the future political visions of women's liberation and how these differed and played out in practice in a range of local contexts. The organisation of local groups impacted on, and was influenced by, the ways in which feminist activists lived, with their politics of collectivism, anti-hierarchy and representation at the centre of their daily involvement with women's liberation, social interactions, relationships and life choices. The search for new and alternative feminist methods of collective representation was central to the daily experience of the WLM precisely because women continued to develop their own organisational methods as their ideas, needs and priorities changed. The combination of oral history interviews and documentary sources was then imperative in gaining a grassroots perspective of the movement's operational and organisational development, and how this emanated from the personal experiences and ideas of the women involved and the 'personal is political' ideology of the broader movement.

Furthermore, this research has revealed that the problems, debates and tensions that arose as a result of practising feminist organisational methods were essential to producing new ideas, methods and practices. Feminist activists sought out more effective, representative and inclusive forms of political organisation. Each of the four case studies have thus revealed that the operation and organisation of the WLM was not just complex,

[1] Eve Setch would agree with this view. See Eve Setch, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Britain* (PhD Thesis, University Royal Holloway, 2000), p. 234.

but that one of the most critical elements of the movement's organisation was that ways of working and group structure were continuously changing and never fixed. Central to feminist operational and organisational form was then flexibility, centred in the ideas of women's liberation activists, which were inevitably subject to change and revision. The flaws and problems of group structure and practice are revealed as a positive aspect of 1970s feminism, as new ideas, theories and methods of organisation were conceived from the inevitably imperfect practice of new non-hierarchical and collective structures of political organisation and representation.

Constant discussions and debates over the organisation and structure of women's liberation were then a daily feature of local women's liberation groups, as women conceptualised, actualised and tested their own methods of collectivism. The local perspective of this research has revealed that feminist activists relished the decentralised nature of the WLM and the freedom to concentrate on their own ways of working. The local contexts and issues women's liberation groups faced likewise shaped the ideas, theories and practices of feminist organisation and internal political practices. This is best exemplified in the Aberdeen and Brighton and Hove case studies and the practice of CR in each context. CR is viewed as a cornerstone of the first groups of the WLM as an exercise designed to link personal experience of oppression to broader political conclusions. However, as this research has revealed, it should not be assumed that the political practices of women's liberation were the same in every local group. Rather CR was used in different ways and for different means within the contexts of the Aberdeen and Brighton and Hove groups, in order to serve the organisational structures of the groups and construct a shared feminist consciousness between the women involved. Another example from this research is the development of women-only political organisation. While a central principle of women's liberation ideology was the autonomy of the movement from the oppressors, however sympathetic, it should not be assumed that every local group rejected the presence of men in every circumstance. Instead, as shown within each case study of this thesis, the

question of male involvement with women's liberation was revisited and discussed as situations arose. Exploring the divergent strategies and goals of the four local groups as case studies of the broader WLM, has revealed the importance of understanding activists in their own milieu and communities, and how local context shapes and is shaped by feminist activism.[2]

The research presented here then has demonstrated the usefulness of looking at smaller case studies to enrich and complicate our knowledge and understanding of the complexity and diversity of 1970s feminist activism. The evidence presented here has pointed to the involvement of a lively and diverse cadre of feminist activists. Dominant historical discourses of the movement have suggested that the membership of the WLM was young, middle-class and highly educated. Yet the local groups concentrated upon here, challenge this stereotype, and have highlighted that the WLM was successful in attracting and reaching women from a wide variety of ages, class backgrounds, cultures and varying family and work circumstances. Women inevitably had differing ideas and visions for how their groups would work practically and how best to impact change in their local communities. Throughout this thesis, it has become clear that feminist activists always had complex points of view and had differing ideas on the strategies and goals of women's liberation. The groups focused upon here demonstrate that the movement in Britain was more organisationally complex, dynamic and multifaceted in terms of its membership and regional diversity than has hitherto been recognised. Therefore, this research has contributed to expanding historical understandings of the growth and impact of feminism in Britain in the 1970s.

This thesis has also revealed that one of the most significant aspects of 1970s feminist political organisation was the making of sites of exchange in which these differences and divisions between women were confronted, and that attempts to manage tensions were a central part of group structure and practice from the very beginnings of the

[2] Stephanie Gilmore, *Groundswell* (Routledge, 2013), p. 131.

WLM. As such, this research has challenged historical narratives of the movement's fragmentation over the impact of opposing and competing identities. Women were not simply united under the broader banner of 'sisterhood', but were always aware of the socio-cultural differences between women of the movement. For many of the women interviewed in this research, 'sisterhood' encapsulated the sense of excitement and possibility they felt as the raised their feminist consciousness and became involved in active feminist politics, rather than a concept that overlooked social, economic and cultural differences between women. Disagreements over radical and socialist feminism are often cited as the major reason why the WLM went into decline in the later 1970s. However, as this research has demonstrated, women were aware of differences and divisions from the beginnings of their groups and campaigns, and were a fundamental part of the movement's operational and organisational forms. Feminist activists also took on numerous different issues from rape, reproductive justice and economic inequality, to child-care and sex discrimination at work. Feminist activists working at the grassroots then did not subscribe rigidly to ideological standpoints, but rather developed much more fluid and complex identities, and in many instances theorised and implemented their own solutions to local obstacles and problems of groups structure and practice. Moreover, when ideological disagreements did appear to pose a threat to the future of the broader WLM, the issues were discussed movement wide and women sought to propose solutions and overcome barriers between women. The disagreements and differences between feminists are also shown not to have been as debilitating to the movement at large as is suggested in dominant historical discourses. Feminist conferences, events, campaigns and services continued well into the 1980s. Far from fragmentation being a drawback of 1970s feminism, the acknowledgment of different identities and divisions between women's liberation activists actually helped the operational and organisational forms of the WLM to grow, diversify and represent women in multiple ways across Britain.

This research has also demonstrated that divisions between women were multifarious and cannot be fully understood with rigid categorisation along ideological lines, or simplistic understandings of the impact of identities of class, race and sexualities. For example, across the four case studies, class as an issue of difference was never disregarded or ignored as an area for debate and confrontation within the context of the local women's liberation group. Women were conscious of issues of inclusion when innovating the organisational systems and mechanisms of representation of their groups and campaigns – though undoubtedly some women found the realities of division painful and sours their memories of the WLM, feminist activists did not intentionally seek to exclude any woman from involvement and participation. Moreover, as shown throughout, it is clear that there were working-class women in the groups and, therefore, potential differences in the class backgrounds and education of activists were considered and incorporated into the language of politics the groups developed to express their collective experiences of oppression and strategies for implementing feminist change. Acknowledging socio-economic, cultural and sexual differences between women was therefore also essential to the personal political development of individual women and the relationships they developed, as they questioned power relations inside the local group as much as outside. Researchers such as Joni Lovenduski and Vicky Randall, amongst many others, have also drawn attention to the 'divisive' nature of race in which many black women felt that 'no account of their experience was taken up by white feminists'.[3] Unfortunately, this did not emerge as a theme to explore in this research. This would have significantly altered if I had interviewed someone who was non-white. However, interviews were conducted along group lines rather than as a representative sample of the WLM. The lack of voices from women of colour in this collection of oral history testimony

[3] Joni Lovenduski and Vicky Randall, *Contemporary Feminist Politics: Women and Power in Britain* (Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 79. See also Nathalie Thomlinson, 'The Colour of Feminism', *History*, Issue. 97, No. 327 (2012), pp. 453-475; Natalie Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement in England, 1968-1993* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 64-103.

may confirm that the groups focused upon were mainly white and untroubled by race as an issue of debate and difference, or it may indicate that the networks of feminist activists I interviewed were not entirely representative of the groups more broadly.[4] Although oral history has been imperative to understanding how women felt about the movement and to recording their contribution and experiences, concerns remain about which voices were included and which have been left out. As researchers undertake more interviewing of this kind, it is hoped the diversity and vibrancy of the WLM is preserved. Ultimately, this research has argued throughout that rather than see divides as entirely problematic and leading to the movement's 'end' in the later 1970s, division, disagreements and interpersonal problems were signs of the movement's vitality and diversity. As Stephanie Gilmore has observed, 'sisterhood may have been employed as a term, but it would never suffice as an organising principle'.[5] The divides between women drove the continuous search for non-hierarchical, anti-elitist and collective methods of political organisation and representation in local women's liberation groups across Britain throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s.

In questioning the historical discourses on the fragmentation of the WLM, this thesis has also further challenged the 'rise and fall' chronology of WLM.[6] The Aberdeen Women's Liberation Group demonstrated that rather than emerge out of nowhere, the operational and organisational forms of women's liberation had their roots in a wider feminist rejection of the methods and discourses of late 1960s radicalism, and the longer historical context of the girlhood experiences of those women who became feminists activists in the 1970s.[7] Approaching the roots of the WLM and the organisation and

[4] Sarah Browne encountered similar issues with her research on the Scottish WLM. See Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 298.

[5] Stephanie Gilmore, *Groundswell* (Routledge, 2013), p.128.

[6] Eve Setch would agree with this view. See Eve Setch, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Britain* (PhD Thesis, University Royal Holloway, 2000) p. 8.

[7] Sarah Browne would agree with this view. See Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 296

structures of local groups through the life stories of the women involved was important in determining why certain organisational methods, internal political practices and sites of exchange were developed and given precedence over others. Through questions of feminist political organisation, this thesis has also challenged notions of the 'end' of the WLM in Britain across the four case studies, and presented the 'fragmentation' of these groups as a positive development in the growth of the broader movement and dissemination of women's liberation politics.

Through tracing the operational and organisational development of local women's liberation groups, and in questioning the dominant chronology of the WLM, this thesis has also demonstrated that the activities and influence of women's liberation groups continued well into the 1980s. Single-issue campaigns and actions were not necessarily a sign of the movement's fragmentation and weakening of activists' goals to challenge and change gender relations and male domination in all forms. Rather, such actions were central to the development of feminist theories and practices of collective and representative political organisational methods, through which local groups were able to attract new women to the ideas of women's liberation and respond to the local circumstances in which they operated. Feminist activists in Aberdeen set up Women's Studies courses and community projects, which ran well beyond the time frame of this research. Feminist activists in Brighton and Hove fought to establish a Women's Centre to support the organisational structure of the wider group with a sense of permanence and physical space. Though the Centre went through multiple instances of crises and temporary accommodation throughout the 1980s, feminists maintained the Centre as a site of exchange for women already involved with the movement and for women from the local community, and is still operating to empower local women and tackle gender inequalities in 2017. The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group case study challenged the standard view of the 1978 conference as the movement's moment of downfall, and demonstrated that rather than abandon feminist conferences, women continued to organise feminist events and conferences well beyond the supposed

'end' of the movement in the late 1970s. Moreover, as demonstrated in the case study on the Bolton Women's Liberation Group, the abortion campaign also continued to provide feminist activists with a focus well beyond the late 1970s, with the introduction of Abortion Amendment Bills to parliament up until 1987, all of which attempted to restrict the grounds on which abortion could be granted. Moreover, the group's focus on a local single-issue resolved feminist activists to use their organisational campaign experience to establish a domestic violence refuge, FortAlice, which again is still in operation in 2017.

These campaigns and actions were then incredibly important in connecting and maintaining feminist momentum and activism, and spreading feminist ideas well beyond the late 1970s. Moreover, through concentrating on the operational and organisational development of local women's liberation groups, this research has revealed that feminists were able to widen the coalition for women's liberation and create outside alliances, which would ensure the continued influence of their ideas, practices and ways of working as the broader political and economic climate of Britain changed. The advent of the Thatcher Conservative government and the widespread public sector cuts during the 1980s have been widely noted to have challenged the WLM, in many cases forcing feminists to defend rather than articulate and campaign for women's rights.[8] In the case of the four local groups looked at here, the organisational development of the groups, and subsequent proliferation of feminist actions, events and single-issue campaigns, led to feminist activists raising questions about interrelationships between the feminist movement and outside organisations in order to ensure they made gains for gender equality in the preceding decade. Feminists in Aberdeen for instance began to work for the WEA and

[8] For example, see Alexandra Dobrowsolsky, 'Shifting States: Women's Constitutional Organizing Across Time and Space' in Lee Ann Banaszak, Karen Beckwith and Dieter Rucht (eds), *Women's Movements Facing the Reconfigured State* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 118; David Myer, 'Restating the Woman Question - Women's Movements and State Restructuring' in Lee Ann Banaszak, Karen Beckwith and Dieter Rucht (eds), *Women's Movements Facing the Reconfigured State* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 283-4; Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 301.

Trade Union Movement more broadly, to ensure the influence of feminist perspectives on issues of women's work and women's adult education. Feminist in Brighton and Hove developed relationships with Gingerbread, the single parent support group and Brighton Right's Advice Bureau. The Bolton Women's Liberation Group worked closely with the mixed sex NAC to defend the 1967 Abortion Act. Yet the group also worked closely with more 'traditional' local women's groups and organisations, the local council and medical profession to campaign for contraceptive rights. The questions of outside alliances which women debated in their local groups, and the subsequent relationships they developed, are an aspect of 1970s feminist organisation often overlooked in histories of the British WLM, particularly in dominant discourses that emphasise the 'structurelessness' of the movement and 'end' of the 'second wave' in 1978. Unfortunately, this research could not detail the organisation and development of these relationships and coalitions as part of its scope. Yet it is hoped that with new understandings of the operational and organisational development of the movement and its multifarious structures, future research will continue to uncover the activism, influence, legacy and reach of women's liberation groups into the 1980s and beyond.

Local women's liberation groups were then important in providing the energy and inspiring the commitment of individual women to carry feminist activism and campaigns forward. Many of the women interviewed for this study went on to work in areas and fields where their feminist consciousness and politics inspired their work. Women like Penny Summerfield, Esther Breitenbach, Fran Wasoff and Sally Munt established academic careers, continuing to write and teach about women's history and gender roles in their respective disciplines at universities across Britain. Women such as Ellen Galford wrote feminist and lesbian novels, stories of women challenging and overcoming gender roles, sexism and discrimination. Elaine Glover worked as an abortion counsellor for the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, and Hilary Eastham worked for Bolton council, ensuring feminist theory of domestic violence was considered in local housing policy. The work of

these women further illustrates that far from 'ending' in 1978, the ideas, theories and practices of women's liberation continued to influence British society as women continued to fight for women's rights in a number of groups and organisations. Dominant historical narratives of British feminism have tended to overlook the impact of the WLM as activists moved into different life stages and professions. A major concern of these women raised in oral history interviews was the legacy of the WLM and the influence of feminist ways of working beyond the concept of a feminist movement. Historical research of the legacy and achievement of 1970s feminism does indeed remain work for the future, and will require much more research to explore and understand the numerous operational and organisational forms of local groups, the impact of the movement on activists lives thereafter, and the myriad of ways in which feminist activists went on to raise women's aspirations, expand their opportunities and transform how women's oppression was discussed and understood in British society more broadly. What is presented here then is a feminist movement that was organisationally diverse, complex and shaped by the struggles of women at the grassroots. Local groups incorporated multiple stands of thought, action and ways of working which reflected the personal experience of the particular women involved and the socio-cultural contexts of their communities. Therefore, many histories are required to uncover just how complex, influential and exciting 1970s feminist activism was for local women's liberation groups and the thousands of individual feminist activists whose lives were transformed across Britain.[9]

[9] Jill Radford, 'A History of Women's Liberation Movements' in Gabrielle Griffin, Marianne Hester, Shirin Rai and Sasha Roseneil (eds), *Stirring It* (Taylor & Francis, 2003), p. 40.

Appendix: Biographical Notes of Oral History Interviewees

Aberdeen

Chris Aldred

Chris was born in 1950 and had been introduced to the WLM in London as an undergraduate student. She took part in a women's liberation march along Oxford Street but did not join a local group until her arrival in Aberdeen as a postgraduate student in 1971. She campaigned to establish a crèche at the university and was involved in a group focused on lobbying MPs on the inefficiencies of the Equal Pay Act 1975. Chris was also instrumental in the development of Women's Studies courses with the Workers Educational Association and still works in adult education currently based at the University of Aberdeen.

Chrissy Bruce

Chrissy was born in 1941 and lived in Torry, Aberdeen for most of her adult life. She was a community activists focused on breaking the household isolation of women and worked to establish youth clubs and single parent groups throughout the 1970s. She was introduced to the Aberdeen Women's Liberation Group through community education projects.

Fiona Forsyth

Fiona was born in Edinburgh in 1957. She moved to Aberdeen in 1969 as a student of politics but transferred to sociology after becoming frustrated at the Conservative focus of the course. She was politicised through involvement in a number of student protests and joined the women's liberation group not long after its formation. She became involved with the WEA and community projects before leaving Aberdeen to become involved with Women and Manual Trades.

Sandie Wyles

Sandie was born in Stirling in 1957 and joined the Labour Party Young Socialists as part of her family's political tradition. She studied librarianship in Aberdeen and was an important figure in boosting political momentum as other women graduated and left the university campus. She was involved in a number of direct actions organised across the city and the first WEA women's course. She moved on to work in community education and youth development projects.

Brighton and Hove

Dorothy Sheridan

Dorothy was born in Galway, Ireland, in 1948 but grew up in Yorkshire. She was first involved with the WLM in Edinburgh and subsequently joined a closed women's group in Lewes when she moved backed to Sussex in the early 1970s. She was involved in a number of campaigns and actions including an abortion campaign in Lewes and the Brighton and Hove Women's Centre.

Maria Jastrzębska

Maria was born in 1953 in Poland and moved to Brighton as a student at the University of Sussex. She was involved in a closed CR group, the Love Between Women group, which focused on women's relationships and interactions. Maria was also instrumental in the organisation of a women's sexuality conference and campaigned for the NAC throughout the 1970s.

Nicola Fryer

Nicola was born in 1953 in Thames Ditton, Surrey. She studied developmental psychology at the University of Sussex. Her involvement with the Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group was her first participation with politics and she subsequently became

involved with the production of the newsletter and ran the feminist bookstand at the Students' Union. She was also instrumental in the development of organised social events for the Brighton and Hove movement and became a feminist DJ. She currently lives in Edinburgh.

Penny Summerfield

Penny was born in London in 1951. She became involved with the Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group as a student of history at the University of Sussex. Penny was involved in a number of groups and campaigns including a women's history study group and was instrumental in the establishment of the Women's Centre, undertaking research and fundraising. She is currently Professor of Modern History at the University of Manchester.

Sally Munt

Sally was born in 1960 in Huddersfield. She moved to Brighton as a postgraduate student in the early 1980s and was eager to become involved with the women's liberation group. She found the movement hard to break into until she met Nicola Fryer at the university bookshop and subsequently became a regular on the feminist and lesbian club scene. Sally is currently Professor of Cultural Gender Studies at the University of Sussex.

Edinburgh

Ellen Galford

Ellen was born in 1947 to Jewish parents living in New York City. She moved to Edinburgh in 1971 for postgraduate study and became involved with women's liberation soon after. She moved to Glasgow and continued her involvement with connections to both groups. She was active in the abortion campaign and helped to establish a feminist writing

collective focused on producing feminist fiction. She currently lives in Edinburgh and has publicised various feminist and lesbian writings since the 1980s.

Esther Breitenbach

Esther was born in 1950 and first became involved with women's liberation in Dundee in 1972. She was an influential member of the WLM in Scotland with connections to groups in Edinburgh and Glasgow throughout the 1970s, and was active in the Financial and Legal Independence Campaign and the Scottish Abortion Campaign. She was also instrumental in the formation of the *Scottish Women's Liberation Journal* and *MsPrint* publications. Her commitment to feminism continued well beyond the parameters of this research as a founding member of Engender. She currently works as a historian at the University of Edinburgh researching women's political history in Scotland.

Fran Wasoff

Fran was born in 1945 in the United States and was first involved with the WLM in the early 1970s as a postgraduate student at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. She moved to Edinburgh permanently in 1973 whilst completing her PhD. She became involved with the Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group when it was meeting at 31 Royal Terrace and had an early interest in domestic violence. She was a founding member of the first Women's Aid group and refuge in Scotland. She is currently a Professor at the University of Edinburgh based in the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships.

Kath Davis

Kath was born in 1945 and joined the Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group in 1973. Working as a book editor and writer, Kath, among others, set up Edinburgh Women and Media. The group focused on representations of women and the position of women

working in the media industry. Kath continues to live in Edinburgh and was awarded an OBE in 2000 for services to women's issues.

Sheila Gilmore

Sheila Gilmore was born in 1949 and moved back to her hometown of Edinburgh after completing study at the University of Kent in 1970. She was involved in student politics in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which led her into contact with the WLM. She was involved with the Edinburgh Women's Liberation Group from the first meetings in 1970 and was involved with the abortion campaign and the Women's Legal and Financial Independence Group. As a solicitor, she was involved in researching the specific legal context of Scotland for the WLM and in supporting domestic violence victims. She was also involved in the organisation of the 1974 National Women's Liberation Conference held in Edinburgh. Sheila continued her involvement with politics as a member of the labour party and, more recently, as a local councillor in Edinburgh.

Bolton

Eileen Murphy

Eileen was born in 1946 to Catholic parents. She first became involved with the Bolton Women's Liberation in 1971 after seeing a leaflet for the group at the Octagon Theatre where Eileen worked as an actress. She quickly became involved in the contraception and abortion campaigns and used her connection to the Catholic Church to help orchestrate some of the group's most confrontational and direct actions. She was also instrumental in the production of the feminist play *Sweetie Pie*, which toured the North West of England as part of the promotion of the WLM's message.

Elaine Glover

Elaine was born in 1944 in the United States. She became involved with the Bolton Women's Liberation Group in 1971 after seeing an advertisement in the local newspaper. She was instrumental in steering the group to a focus on active campaigning for improved contraceptive services and in publishing an account of the group's contraceptive campaign and local health guide for women. She still lives in Bolton.

Elizabeth Perry

Elizabeth Perry was born in Bolton in 1950. She was involved with the International Marxist Group and through this came across the Bolton Women's Liberation Group in 1974. She subsequently joined the Bolton group and was actively involved in a range of direct actions and tactics across the town in defence of the 1967 Abortion Act. She was also a source of support for local women seeking information and travel to abortion clinics.

Hilary Eastham

Hilary Eastham was born in 1947. She was first involved with the WLM in Birmingham and joined the Bolton group after moving back to her hometown in 1974. She became involved in the contraception and abortion campaigns, street theatre and later the Manchester Greenham Group. She also worked for Bolton Council Housing Department and was instrumental in shaping domestic violence policy and establishing Fortalice, a domestic violence shelter in the town.

Moira Hill

Born in 1951, Moira was a younger member of the Bolton Women's Liberation Group. She joined the group while working as a teacher and quickly became involved in the campaign to defend the 1967 Abortion Act. Moira, along with others, also experimented

with communal ways of living during the period with members of the group buying six connected terrace houses in Horwich, just outside of Bolton.

Rita Hudson

Rita moved from Southampton to Bolton in 1975 after meeting the group at the 1975 National Women's Liberation Conference. She was especially keen to become involved in an active women's liberation group and soon became involved in the group's abortion campaigns. Rita was also involved in writing feminist plays and performances for Bolton Summer Festival. She still lives in the North West.

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When I undertook archival research, The Edinburgh Women's Liberation Collection was uncatalogued at the Glasgow Women's Library and was available on request. The Brighton and Hove Women's Liberation Group Collection was also uncatalogued and stored in twenty-six boxes at the Women's Library in the London School of Economics.

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