

An Archive of the Women's Liberation Movement: a Document of Social and Legislative Change

Abstract: This paper, by Polly Russell, offers an introduction to the material available to researchers in the recently launched 'Sisterhood & After: an Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement' archive at the British Library. Drawing from the archive's oral history recordings, the author demonstrates how they can be used to examine the ways that legislative changes are experienced and raise questions about the relation between legislative change, cultural change and the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM). The paper argues that these oral history recordings provide a unique opportunity to reflect on the ways that legislative and structural change were experienced by WLM activists in their everyday lives.

Keywords: women; gender, equality; sex discrimination; oral history; legal history; archives

INTRODUCTION

Nearly a century since women were first given the vote, issues pertaining to women's rights and sexual equality are regularly in the news and feminist campaigns are on the rise in the UK.¹ This contemporary feminist moment is inextricably connected to a long history of women's activism, of which the most well-known are the suffragette campaigns of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and then the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) of the late 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Though there were overlaps and commonalities between these different movements, where the suffragettes sought to challenge their legal status in relation to suffrage and political and financial equality, WLM activists fought against legal and material inequalities but also against social and cultural attitudes too. Distinct from suffragettes, WLM activists demanded that struggles for gender rights be fought at home as well as in the public sphere.

For suffragettes their history is vividly captured, among other things, via letters, pamphlets, newspapers, photographs, banners and badges. At the same time, the oral history recordings undertaken by Brian Harrison and Jill Liddington in the early 1970s, are rightly recognized to offer something uniquely precious in having captured the voices of suffragettes who had lived on into later life. Inspired by these, a group of WLM activists, myself and a researcher at the University of Sussex determined to record the voices of those active in the WLM, who are now in their 60s and 70s. Though there are rich print format collections of the WLM², the histories of this

later period of activism live on in the memories of many of the women who were part of the movement and who are still alive today. The 2010–2013 collaborative research project, 'Sisterhood and After: the Women's Liberation Oral History Project' (S&A) sought to capture and archive these precious first-hand histories before it is too late.

In this paper I describe the S&A project and the archive and website it produced. Drawing from the project's oral history recordings, I demonstrate how they can be used to examine the ways that legislative changes are experienced and how they raise questions about the relation between legislative change, cultural change and the WLM. WLM activists demanded that struggles for gender rights be fought at home as much as in the public sphere. Oral history recordings, with this generation of feminists therefore provide a unique opportunity to reflect on the ways that legislative and structural change were experienced by WLM activists in their everyday lives.

THE SISTERHOOD PROJECT

S&A was a three-year research project between the British Library, the University of Sussex and The Women's Library³. Funded by the Leverhulme Trust, the project's central aim was the creation of an archive of oral history recordings with 60 key Women's Liberation Movement activists in the UK. Deciding which 60 activists be selected for inclusion in the archive from the thousands of women who were active in the WLM was a challenge⁴. We prioritized as criteria, campaign involvement and

innovation in political vision across a range of ideologies, sectors, places and majority/minority communities, whittling down a long list of hundreds to just 60.

The recordings and transcripts of these activists are archived at the British Library and are available for listening on-site to library readers, subject to interviewee permission⁵. In attempting to understand the impetus and trajectory of an interviewee's activism, the recordings cover family background, childhood, education, work experience and relationships. These recordings therefore attempt to document an individual's engagement with the WLM, while taking account of the context in which this activism was situated. The average length of these recordings is 6 hours but many are significantly longer.

The very richness that makes the collection so valuable to researchers, can, for less specialist audiences, be an impediment. Not everyone, for example, is able to visit the British Library to access material and, even if they were, the volume of material available in any one of these recordings, even with transcripts and summaries as guides, requires significant, and arguably specialist, navigation.

For this reason, written into the funding application for the S&A project was provision to create a website which uses extracts from the oral history recording to explore the history and politics of the WLM. The website was designed for secondary school and undergraduate students, feminist activists and lifelong learners. The website took shape under ten thematic headings such as 'Family & Children', 'Equality & Work' and 'Sex, Love & Friendship.' Each of these thematic areas is subdivided into two or three more. A section focused on 'Education', for instance, has sub-sections covering 'How Girls were Taught and Socialised', 'Sex Education' and 'Women's Studies and Women's History.'

Each of these ten thematic areas is populated with contextual information, images, cartoons and photographs, as well as questions to instigate discussion. What brings the website to life are its 125 sound extracts, selected from the full oral history recordings, and 10 bespoke films commissioned to examine particular stories or histories. These sound extracts and short films represent the diversity of experience and views of WLM activists. Site visitors can hear, for instance, Pragna Patel, co-founder of Southall Black Sisters, describe a 'reverse march of shame' to the house of a domestic abuser. They can listen to Una Kroll, 86 year old campaigner for women's rights to be priests, describe her struggles with the church. Or they can hear from Rebecca Johnson, lifetime peace campaigner, recount the activist strategies of Greenham Common women.

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE BEFORE EQUALITY LEGISLATION

The WLM operated at a strong grass-roots level and was autonomous from any one party or organisation. It

worked hard to change laws concerning women, their status and their relationships with men. They campaigned around 7 key demands⁶ including equal pay, equal educational and job opportunities and the right to a self-defined sexuality. The S&A website explores these campaigns through the biographical accounts of individual activists who led them. The recordings provide evidence for the ways that legal changes such as child custody laws, the Married Women's Property Act 1964 or the Equal Pay Act 1970, impacted on and were experienced in everyday life.

For legal and socio-legal scholars and historians, the website's section on 'Politics and Legislation' might be an obvious place to start exploring. This contains sub-sections on 'The Political Representation of Women', 'Feminist Critique of Political Culture' and 'The Impact of Legislation on Women's Lives'. Here it is possible to hear an account from Lesley Abdela, a women's rights campaigner and journalist, describing the difficulties she experienced applying for jobs prior to the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act,

"I applied to a job – this is before the Sex Discrimination Act, just before then – to my shame at that era, I knew things were going on in Women's Liberation, but it wasn't as though I was against it, it just wasn't part of my thinking very much. I applied to an ad which I was totally qualified for, because quite a lot of the advertising world at that stage you needed to have background in grocery experience, the equivalent of Unilever, which I didn't have, I had Dorothy Gray Cosmetics, Courtaulds fabrics, Bowaters papers, but I didn't have what we now call the supermarket-y type things. But this ad, I fitted absolutely all the qualifications, so I whacked off an application. And of course I forgot Lesley can be a boy or a girl, man or female. And about a week or so later I get a phone call from somebody who says, 'Could I speak to Lesley Abdela?' And I said, 'This is Lesley Abdela'. 'Oh, oh, thought you must be the secretary. Oh, this is a bit awkward. Did you apply for this job we advertised?' and I said, 'Yes'. 'Oh, well we were going to invite you to an interview but we didn't realise you were a woman and I'm awfully sorry but our client wouldn't like a woman'. So I said, 'Who is your client?' and they said, 'The army recruitment office'. Now I could perfectly well have done that, but it was so beyond their ken that they could have a female. But in those days they were allowed to openly say it. And then because, you know, you make a lot of contacts and J Walter Thompson, which was the big agency in Berkeley Square, and I got invited for an interview. And they said we'd really like to have you, we've heard about the work you've done and blah, blah, blah and somebody's spoken about you highly, etc. But we just have one problem here, we

have a policy in this agency of no female account executives, you would have to be assistant, whatever it was. And I said, 'But that would be a step back'. And they said, 'I know, but we'd really like to have you, but it's just it's our policy'. So I didn't go. But if you think about the consequences on from that, because you're at your peak, you haven't got children yet, you're in your mid twenties or early twenties, you can work all the hours they want. That was the climate within which my generation were doing this transition stuff. You sort of felt a bit annoyed, not enough to go and throw up the barricades, because it's, well that's how life was. I mean isn't it absurd?^{7,8}"

Among the 125 extracts featured on the S&A website, there are many which provide evidence of the material reality of inequality in the daily lives of women (of the expectation of marriage and domesticity for instance; of the girl who wanted to be a sailor but whose teacher told her she could only be a sailor's wife, for example). But this extract speaks directly to the issue of the impact of legislative change on women's lives. Abdela, a woman who went on to found the all-party 300 Group to campaign to get more women into local, national and European politics in the UK, had no legal protection from her prospective employee's prejudice prior to the Sex Discrimination Act. The extract provides a poignant reminder of why equality legislation was so necessary but it also hints at the question of cultural attitudes – of why, when and how subjects can resist or start to challenge the material manifestations of their oppression and so change or shape legal and political frameworks.

THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL

Despite significant legal advances in relation to women during the 1960s and 1970s, WLM activists felt strongly that these newly won freedoms were vulnerable and required protection. At the heart of the WLM were campaigns around the politics of reproduction: fertility, childbirth and childrearing. 'Free contraception and abortion on demand' was one of the WLM's initial demands. Throughout the 1970s and '80s there were various attempts to amend the Abortion Act 1967, including restricting the grounds on which a woman could request an abortion or the number of doctors who were licensed to perform one.

WLM activists formed The National Abortion Campaign (NAC) in 1975 to defend women's abortion rights. The S&A website includes a number of interview extracts focused on this, including women's descriptions of having abortions (legal or not) and their involvement with abortion rights campaigns. In a series of short films, commissioned for the S&A project, Dr Jan Mckenley, a national co-ordinator for the NAC from 1978–1979, reflects on her own experience of abortion and her commitment to the NAC. In insisting that the personal is

political, the WLM meant women like McKenley understood their experiences as part of a broader politics:

"I came to a personal rationalisation that I did concede that for me abortion had been a choice between myself and whether I called it a foetus or a baby I was choosing myself over and above another as yet unborn person. And I was comfortable with that. And that's probably still my position now. I still think it's possible to choose yourself first. I know women can make those choices and if it's at all possible they ought to have that choice and that that's what it means to be a liberated person. A liberated person is able to make choices, they're free to make choices and those are the kind of freedoms that women were fighting for....⁹"

Mackenley's involvement with the NAC corroborates political theorist Elizabeth Meehan's (1990)¹⁰ suggestion that in some ways the campaign for abortion rights reflected feminists' general sense that the legal equality they had won was fragile and immediately under threat. The NAC activated a feminist network in the British Labour movement by drawing attention to the difficulties in securing abortions even within a legal framework. McKenley's recording, in which she describes her sadness and loss, alongside her principled stand about abortion, makes it clear that legislating choice away is to infantilise and oppress women. Making available McKenley's three films on the S&A website where she articulates her commitment to legal abortion alongside her personal struggle over the experience of having an abortion, insists on a recognition of the emotional complexity of this issue and suggest the complex interweaving of the social, personal and legal.

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE OF THE LEGAL SYSTEM

The third and final interview extract I draw attention to is part of a recording with Vera Baird QC. Baird is the Police and Crime Commissioner for Northumbria, British Labour Party activist, barrister and the Solicitor General in the Labour Government, 2007–10. As a Criminal Defence Barrister she worked on cases about many protest movements including Greenham Common and the miners' strike; and represented Emma Humphreys in her ground-breaking case about the implications of the law of provocation for battered women who kill their violent partners. She was the first woman Chair of the Society of Labour Lawyers and was Chair of the Fawcett Commission on Women and the Criminal Justice system from 2002. The following extract from Baird's interview describes how the victims of domestic and sexual abuse experience and are let down, by the legal system,

“The Fawcett Commission on Women and Criminal Justice was to look at the way women were dealt with by the criminal justice system as victims and witnesses, as defendants and also as workers in the system. So I, with Katherine Rake, we picked women, mostly but not exclusively, from all the bits of the criminal justice system. So we had a senior police officer, we had senior probation, we had a judge, we had me, the barrister, we had someone from the prison service, we had pretty well everyone you can think of really with an interest. We had a journalist, a legal journalist, on the commission. And we set about finding, putting out a call for evidence. We first of all, I think, did women as victims and we just got an overwhelming amount of stuff back about rape and domestic violence. And we put out another bid saying thank you for that, would people please now send in stuff that’s not about rape or domestic violence but is about women as victims of crime, and we didn’t get anything back. So either the criminal justice system’s treating women well in every other way or people are just so concerned about those that that’s what they focused on. So we did that, then we did women as defendants. And the most interesting single finding, I mean, all of the reports, which are called things like One Year On and so on, they’re all available and the key finding very early on was that, when we talked to women who’d been victims of rape and domestic violence, we had an understanding of how poorly they were dealt with by the agencies outside the justice system and also by the justice system. And then when we came to women as defendants, who were in crime and who were in custody, we found that, as I think the figures made very clear, even today something like two-thirds of women who go into prison have suffered either sexual abuse or violence in their life. Half have suffered domestic violence itself without saying anything about sexual violence. And so, you know, quite amazingly really, we were talking to the same women twice. The victims and the defendants were the same women. They were sufferers from domestic violence. And we were punishing them twice, firstly as a society by not intervening sufficiently early to rescue them from the violence and the sexual abuse, and secondly when those attacks on them threw them into chaotic lifestyles and they started to take drugs or

take drink or to steal to look after their kids ‘cos they were in chaos, we put them in prison, so we failed women twice.”

Baird’s feminist framing provides an insightful critique the criminal justice system and an opportunity to reflect on the role of the WLM in highlighting domestic and sexual abuse as social, political and legal issues.

CONCLUSION

The S&A project sought to capture the history of the WLM through the voices of the women who dreamed and campaigned for equality in the second half of the twentieth century. While the WLM feminists recognised the importance of changing attitudes and social norms, this was inextricably linked to their challenges, changes and redefining of the legal and political environment. Feminists campaigning for the WLM lobbied Parliament and worked with and became a new generation of feminist lawyers and MPs. The movement often found support for its aims in the Labour Party and the trade unions, winning cases of sex discrimination and eventually gaining the principle of equal value as well as equal pay; and increasing the number of women in Parliament. Many of these battles, struggles and victories are documented by the S&A archive.

Response to the S&A project has been encouraging both in terms of website visit statistics and also the various conversations, research and events it has inspired. In the first 4 months of the website launching it received 50,000 visits and since it has been available, daily visit numbers for unique users have consistently been around 350. Heartening too, have been the requests from schools visiting the British Library for S&A workshops – more than 500 school children have attended these to discuss and debate the ideas of the WLM. Beyond the library, the website and archive have been the catalysts for a number of different events. In February 2014, a panel discussion organized by the East London Fawcett Society was inspired by the S&A archive and website. The event focused on feminist action past and present and drew an audience of 200 young activists. Knowing that the archive and website have been used by feminist activists, campaigners and journalists for inspiration and information suggests S&A is contributing to a larger conversation.¹¹ This is important as the project team has been actively inspired by the democratic ideals of oral historical method and of feminism itself. We would be delighted if this conversation extended to include scholars and practitioners with an interest in the socio-legal studies, law or legal history.

Footnotes

¹ See for instance <http://ukfeminista.org.uk>; <http://static.feminisminlondon.co.uk>; <http://www.dofeve.org/about-fgm.html>; <http://everydaysexism.com> plus coverage of the gender gap in the UK identified by the World Economic Forum 2014 (<http://www.theguardian.com/education/educationgendergap>)

² See, for instance, the wonderful collections at the Women's Library at LSE (<http://www.lse.ac.uk/library/collections/featuredCollections/womensLibraryLSE.aspx>) or those held by feminist archives such as Feminist Archive North (<http://www.feministarchivenorth.org.uk>), Feminist Archive South (<http://feministarchivesouth.org.uk>) or The Feminist Library (<http://feministlibrary.co.uk>)

³ For more information about Sisterhood & After: Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement project see <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/clhlwr/research/sisterhoodafter>

⁴ See M. Jolly, P. Russell & R. Cohen, Sisterhood & After: Individualism, ethics and an oral history of the women's liberation movement. (2012) *Social Movement Studies*, 1–16.

⁵ In line with library policy, the British Library & University of Sussex required all interviewees to sign an interview release form stipulating how their recordings could be accessed. Interviewees were able to 'close' sections or the entirety of their recordings for a named number of years if desired.

⁶ Between 1970 and 1978 there were eight national Women's Liberation Movement conferences. At the first conference in Oxford in 1970 four demands were discussed. These were passed in Skegness in 1971. The demands were:

- 1: Equal pay
- 2: Equal educational and job opportunities
- 3: Free contraception and abortion on demand
- 4: Free 24-hour nurseries

Three further demands were added:

- 5: Legal and financial independence for all women (Edinburgh, 1974)
- 6: The right to a self-defined sexuality. An end to discrimination against lesbians (Edinburgh, 1974)
- 7: Freedom for all women from intimidation by the threat or use of violence or sexual coercion regardless of marital status; and an end to the laws, assumptions and institutions which perpetuate male dominance and aggression to women (Birmingham, 1978)

At the Birmingham conference, amid some controversy, 'the right to a self-defined sexuality' was split off and added as a preface to all seven demands.

⁷ Lesley Abdela recording C1420/13; track 3; website link: <http://www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/sisterhood/view.html#id=143445&id2=143291>

⁸ The extracts presented in this paper are verbatim transcripts of oral history interview extracts – they are ideally heard as sound documents where the interviewee's intonation and emphases are made clear. I encourage readers to go to the S&A website to listen to the extracts if at all possible.

⁹ <http://www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/sisterhood/view.html#id=143422&id2=143637>

¹⁰ E. Meehan "British Feminism from the 1960s to the 1980s." In *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Harold L. Smith, 189–204. Aldershot: Elgar, 1990.

¹¹ We were acutely aware of the many other feminist archives and libraries, websites, blogs and histories to which 'Sisterhood & After' was connected and indebted. While wanting to celebrate the creation of a sustainable oral history archive of WLM recordings at the British Library, we make no claims to be the definitive account of the movement or indeed the sole repository of that history. On a page listed under the 'About Us' tab of the 'Sisterhood & After' website we have named and provided connections to many other relevant organizations and resources and we continue to add to this as we become aware of new activities. The 'Sisterhood & After' website is one resource among many and can contribute to ongoing discussions about feminist history, feminism and gender relations among a range of different audiences.

Biography

Dr Polly Russell works as a Curator at The British Library where, among other things, she manages collections relating to women's history. Polly was the British Library's project lead for the 2010–2013 'Sisterhood & After: the Women's Liberation Oral History Project'. Polly is currently managing a project to digitize and make freely available all issues of the feminist magazine 'Spare Rib.'