The Historical Journal, 56, 3 (2013), pp. 801–826 © Cambridge University Press 2013
doi:10.1017/S0018246X12000611

MEN AND THE 1970s BRITISH WOMEN'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT. *This article examines the causes and consequences of the exclusion of men from the British Women's Liberation Movement in the 1970s. In common with many of the new social movements of the period, the Women's Liberation Movement was strongly committed to organizational 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, however sympathetic. Using contemporary archival sources, especially newsletters, conference papers, reports, and correspondence, the article explores the debates that surrounded this commitment, and the differing perspectives offered by socialist, radical, revolutionary, and other feminists. It describes the problems created by the presence of men on the edges of the Women's Liberation Movement in its early years, and the controversies that arose over their removal and the definition of women-only spaces. However, even absent men proved to be divisive, and the 'problem of men' persisted throughout the decade. The article also considers the responses of men to their exclusion, and their own self-organization in men's groups.*

In Britain, and elsewhere in Western Europe, there emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s new forms of grassroots political activity, concerned with the naming of unacknowledged forms of oppression and the expression of suppressed identities. They included the 'second wave' feminism of the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM), as well as movements concerned with sexual orientation and the recognition of the distinctness of particular national, ethnic, or cultural identities. One of the prominent features of such 'new social movements' was a commitment to a self-reliant politics of identity, and especially to the belief that demands should not be formulated and presented vicariously by intermediaries or advocates, but directly by the oppressed groups themselves. To this end, such movements favoured the creation of separate autonomous spaces in which identities could be explored, experiences shared face-to-face, and consciousness raised by and for those most directly affected.

The emergence of these new forms of self-representation in campaigning and organising can be traced to several causes. The new demands themselves have been variously explained in terms of the growing salience of

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X12000611 Published online by Cambridge University Press

post-materialist concerns in relatively prosperous, post-industrial societies, expanded horizons of cultural choice, and cyclical patterns of social contestation.[1] In principle, however, such new demands might have been pursued indirectly through advocacy by others. Three further factors encouraged a greater degree of self-representation. First, the new movements were to an unusual degree populated by better-educated, articulate, and politically confident men and women, emerging from a less deferential and more autonomous youth culture in revolt against the expectations of older generations. Secondly, new social and technological possibilities for self-representation and communication – such as a cheap and informal underground press and expanded systems of residential higher education – made it easier for such groups to interact and speak directly for themselves. Thirdly, the older class-based movements and parties of the left proved reluctant to stretch themselves sufficiently to accommodate the additional dimensions of identity represented in the new demands, without quite surrendering their claim to act as the sorting-house for all struggles of the oppressed.[2]

Indeed, the new movements were sceptical about the role of the political party as a mechanism for aggregation – that is, for the sorting and packaging of demands into electorally viable programmes. They denied the claims of political experts and managers to act as their advocates in the public sphere, contesting, as Deleuze told Foucault, 'the indignity of speaking for others'.[3] They kept their distance from formal party organizations, and the compromising demands of electoral politics and coalition-building in legislatures, favouring instead undiluted single-issue politics, pursued largely in the extra-parliamentary area, and through particular, often local, struggles, in which their own voices could be heard more clearly.

The self-reliant politics of the new social movements therefore had implications both for the parties of the left, and also for the progressive adherents of social struggles, themselves neither victims of historic oppression nor the intended beneficiaries of reform, who had been so prominent in earlier movements. For example, in the politics of gay liberation in Britain, the earliest lobbying groups, such as the Homosexual Law Reform Society, had been dominated by heterosexual men so as to maintain 'respectability', but gave way in the late 1960s to groups such as the Campaign for Homosexual Equality and the Gay Liberation Front, with their emphasis on self-liberation by gay men and women.[4] White-dominated groups campaigning on behalf of immigrant

[1] Nelson A. Pichardo, 'New social movements: a critical survey', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 23 (1997), pp. 411–30.

[2] Geoff Eley, *Forging democracy: the history of the left in Europe, 1850–2000* (Oxford, 2002).

[3] Gilles Deleuze, 'Intellectuals and power', in Donald Bouchard, ed., *Language, counter-memory, practice: selected essays and interviews* (Ithaca, NY, 1977), p. 209.

[4] Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming out: homosexual politics in Britain from the eighteenth century to the present* (London, 1990).

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communities and against racial discrimination were pushed aside by self-organising groups formed at the grassroots of the communities themselves.[5] In disability politics, the able-bodied medical professionals and charitably minded who presided over the disability charities were replaced in the mid-1970s by disabled activists.[6] Finally – in the particular case examined here – men were excluded from direct participation in the British WLM. Historians of the Edwardian women's suffrage organizations in the 'first wave' of feminism have shown that there were often men in the background – and one or two in the forefront – of the campaign for the vote.[7] By contrast, 'second wave' feminists adopted from early on the principle of autonomy; that is, organising and making strategic choices independently of men.

One important dilemma such movements faced was that identity politics, with its defining of new essences and natures, its insistence on the self-authoring of identity claims, and its consequent exclusions, was seemingly at odds with other aspects of the political culture which had spawned it. That culture was, after all, marked by a libertarian view of politics. It was highly participatory, open, and inclusive at the grassroots level. It placed great faith in free and non-judgemental explorations of personal experience. It was spontaneous and informal and disliked conformity, direction, rules, borders, silencing, or any attempt to constrain attempts at self-expression. The separatist implications of identity politics also raised tricky questions of how to influence those whom the movements wished to exclude. Second wave feminism, for example, was deeply concerned with women's relationships with men, as fathers, brothers, sons, and lovers. But how was it to challenge and alter unsatisfactory elements of these relationships, while excluding men from the movement itself?

Besides its significance to the history of the WLM, an investigation of these questions may also shed some light on the changing forms of popular politics in 1970s Britain. That decade has been characterized as one of class and partisan dealignment, in which old loyalties became more fluid, and the meaning of politics itself broadened far beyond the clash of party elites in parliament. Yet single-issue, grassroots, community, and identity politics had complex effects. They widened participation and pushed politics into new areas of social life. But they also constrained the authority of older political actors, and grouped the newer ones into more exclusive enclaves, thereby creating an enlarged and more accessible, but also more fragmented, public sphere.

[5] Adam Lent, *British social movements since 1945* (Basingstoke, 2001), pp. 18–24, 110–23.

[6] Jane Campbell and Michael Oliver, *Disability politics: understanding our past, changing our future* (London, 1996).

[7] Angela V. John and Claire Eustance, eds., *The men's share: masculinities, male support and women's suffrage in Britain, 1890–1920* (London, 1997).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X12000611 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I

The archival history of the British WLM is still at an early stage.[8] But there is consensus on the movement's origins, which traces them to specific generational experiences in the late 1960s in several overlapping arenas. A larger, better qualified cohort of women workers, entering the labour market as the economy slowed down, found their career prospects were still tightly controlled by men, and that they were expected either to give up careers to become wives and mothers, or to carry on working with unrelieved burdens of domestic work, family, and childrearing. Such expectations continued to hamper campaigns for equal pay and better conditions for women workers, both in and through the male-dominated trade unions. They were also reflected in weaknesses in public provision for mothers and young children. Women's dissatisfaction with the constraints of conventional marriage was further intensified by unhappiness with the unequal gains that men and women were making from the sexual revolution. Furthermore, in the expanded higher education sector and on the radical left, women had become more openly critical of the sexism that pervaded the universities and the political organizations. Critical feminist perspectives were already well advanced in the USA and elsewhere in Europe, and news of these spurred the growth of the British movement.

Some early WLM groups did include men, and their exclusion was neither immediate nor straightforward. Men were present at the first national conference, held in Oxford in February 1970, and attempts entirely to exclude them failed. Men participated in several of the larger sessions and a man made the final speech on the second day. Men were 'largely ... unconscious' of their exploitation of women, some women insisted. To exclude them would be 'not the liberation of women, but the domination of men by women'.[9] Around a quarter of the demonstrators on the first national demonstration in March 1971 were men.[10] Although most local groups were women-only from the start, some, including Camden, Coventry, Harrow, Hull, Leeds, Merseyside, and

[8] Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet freedom: the struggle for women's liberation* (London, 1982); David Bouchier, *The feminist challenge: the movement for women's liberation in Britain and the USA* (London, 1983); Sheila Rowbotham, *The past is before us: feminism in action since the 1960s* (London, 1989). New work includes Eve Setch, 'The women's liberation movement in Britain, 1969–1979: organisation, creativity and debate' (Ph.D. thesis, London, 2000), and 'The face of metropolitan feminism: the London Women's Liberation Workshop, 1969–1979', *Twentieth Century British History*, 13 (2002), pp. 171–90; Jeska Rees, 'All the rage: revolutionary feminism in England, 1977–1983' (Ph. D. thesis, Western Australia, 2007), and 'A look back at anger: the women's liberation movement in 1978', *Women's History Review*, 19 (2010), pp. 337–56; Sarah Browne, '"A veritable hotbed of feminism": women's liberation in St Andrews, Scotland, c. 1968–c. 1979', *Twentieth Century British History*, 23 (2011), pp. 1–24.

[9] Marion Tarbuck, 'Equal rights for all', The Women's Library (WL), Anna Davin papers, 7ADA/01; transcript of the 'Oxford Women's Weekend' (1970), 'Friday evening', pp. 8–9, 26, 'Sunday morning', pp. 49–51, 'Sunday afternoon', pp. 18–21, the Feminist Library, London (FL); *Observer*, 1 Mar. 1970; *Guardian*, 2 Mar. 1970; *New Statesman*, 6 Mar. 1970.

[10] Anon., 'Women and men?', *Shrew*, 3, 3 (Apr. 1971), p. 6.

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Wolverhampton did admit men.[11] Others, such as Bristol, welcomed male contributions to their newsletters.[12] A survey for the *Guardian* in 1970 found that 'many groups...welcome men, including members' husbands, and all believe that Women's Liberation is men's liberation'.[13]

The presence of men was the result of the domination of the early WLM by socialist feminists. For them, the oppression of women was one front in a wider struggle against capitalism, in which (some) men were fellow victims, not merely as a consequence of their class position, but also of the way that capitalism defined social roles. Men were expected to be emotionless producers of profit and women to nurture the present and future generations of workers. It followed that at least some men were potential allies of women's liberation. Their participation was needed if the WLM were not to be become isolated from other struggles.

Furthermore, many socialist feminists had worked with men in campaigns on tenants' rights, in trades unions, and in radical political movements. The men who almost always dominated such movements were sometimes willing to add in the demands of women, especially working women, or at least to inflect their programmes to address women's concerns. The exclusion of such men from WLM meetings could therefore seem an unnecessarily alienating gesture. It would drive away not just sympathetic men, but political women too.[14] These included women trade unionists, who had been campaigning for equal pay and nurseries for years, and were sometimes suspicious of the middle-class women in liberation movements.[15] Such women did not always much *like* men, or believe they could change.[16] But they could see no advantage in abandoning work within male-dominated organizations, particularly for the sake of a less well-organized WLM characterized by the informal working practices of an emergent movement.[17]

The younger women associated with the New Left were no less likely to wish to work alongside men. '[W]omen's coffee parties were not for us', Juliet

[11] Replies to questionnaire, WL, 5WRR/B/06; Sheila McNeil, 'Pockets of resistance', *Sunday Times Magazine*, 12 Sept. 1971, pp. 47–51; *Guardian*, 14 and 15 Jan. 1971; correspondence with Mary Stott, WL, Stott papers, 7CMS/06/01; Amanda Sebestyen, 'Tendencies in the movement: then and now', in Reema Pachaci et al., eds., *Feminist practice: notes from the tenth year (theoretically speaking!)* (London, 1979), p. 21.

[12] Bristol Women's Liberation Group, 'Editorial', *Enough! (or not enough?)*, 1 [?early 1970], p. 1; Suzie Fleming, 'Women's liberation', *Enough*, 3 [?mid-1970], pp. 7–10.

[13] *Guardian*, 14 Jan. 1971.

[14] Meg Stacey, 'Older women and feminism: a note about my experience of the WLM', *Feminist Review*, 31 (1989), pp. 140–2.

[15] Sheila Rowbotham, 'The beginnings of women's liberation in Britain', in Michelene Wandor, ed., *The body politic: writings from the women's liberation movement in Britain, 1969–1972* (London, 1972), pp. 91–102.

[16] Sheila Rowbotham, 'Women's liberation and the new politics', in Wandor, , ed., *Body politic*, pp. 3–30.

[17] Ann Reeve, 'The tyranny of structurelessness: a critique', and Anon., 'Some arguments against a structured movement', Apr. 1974, WL, Sebestyen papers, 7SEB/A/01.

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Mitchell recalled. '[S]eriousness was men.'[18] The New Left was fairly silent about women, but like much of the wider social world, it had admitted the 'exceptional woman'. Such tokenism could be seductive. 'I suppose my constant requests for more women were mere bluff,' wrote Mitchell. 'How could I not have been flattered by my position? ... What else was there to be?'[19] The New Left women felt little need to build a defensive space.[20] They hoped feminism would prove to be a common project, in which the new consciousness would be created together.

However, the sexism of the male radical was a formidable obstacle. 'The most obvious block to us', admitted Sheila Rowbotham, 'is the difficulty that men have, no matter of what revolutionary persuasion, in learning anything from women'.[21] Some of the groups responding to the *Guardian* survey had encountered male sympathizers, but others had experienced hostility and cynicism.[22] Male modes of argument, especially lecturing rather than listening, were frequently cited as prompts to separate, as was the assignment of tasks according to traditionally gendered notions of expertise.[23] These had long been apparent on the left, but the looser structures of the student movement and the New Left had thrown them into question. The novel methods of the WLM, particularly its use of inclusive consciousness-raising and the diffusion of responsibilities, testified to a desire to depart from the methods of the male-dominated left, and to discourage male takeover.[24]

Writing, thinking, and talking without men itself provoked further reflections on the male contribution. Men's support, wrote Hilary Rawlings angrily in *Shrew*, the London WLM newsletter, was 'always conditional'.

> [A]s long as you ... accept his buck-passing analysis of your oppression (it's capitalism, not me, sweetheart) you will be given some time off and occasionally – when politically expedient – patronising interest ... I do not intend to give ladylike (read suckass) reassurance to male radical chauvinists ... Let's see how revolutionary and how intellectually and morally rigorous the New Left is. See if they can bring their political values to where their cocks are for the first time in history'.[25]

The provisional strategy offered by socialist feminists was therefore twofold. First, neither socialism nor feminism alone was given priority. Their goals were regarded as mutually necessary conditions. 'No revolution without women's liberation; no women's liberation without revolution', ran the slogan. In organizational terms, this meant autonomy, but not separate struggle. But if working

[18] Juliet Mitchell, *Woman's estate* (Harmondsworth, 1971), p. 57.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Lin Chun, *The British new left* (Edinburgh, 1993), pp. 167–73.
[21] Sheila Rowbotham, 'Problems of organisation and strategy', in her *Dreams and dilemmas: collected writings* (London, 1983), pp. 59–60.
[22] WL, Stott papers, 7CMS/06/01, passim.
[23] *Guardian*, 5 Apr. 1970.
[24] Anon., 'Organising ourselves', *Shrew*, 3, 2 (Mar. 1971), pp. 2–3.
[25] Hilary Rawlings, 'The female separatist', *Shrew* (Feb. 1970), pp. 4–6.

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with men was essential, tolerating sexism was not. Hence – this was the second component – socialist feminists insisted on 'educating the men', hoping that the insights of the WLM might infuse socialism with ideas of sexual equality. It was accepted that this would be neither quick nor easy. 'We must go on our own way but remember we are going to have to take them with us', wrote Sheila Rowbotham. 'They learn slowly. They are like creatures who have just crawled out of their shells after millennia. They are sore and tender and afraid.'[26] Socialist feminists were also wary of the danger that this educational work might alienate male workers with patronizing denunciations of their sexism.

The response of the left wing organizations themselves to the first demands of the WLM was mixed. Alliances could be built readily on issues that already mattered to them, such as equal pay. More distinctively feminist objectives, especially those concerned with the family and sexuality, were viewed with greater suspicion as 'middle class'. But as such they tended to be regarded as irrelevant rather than irreconcilable. Provided they did not alienate male supporters, they might be incorporated into party or union programmes. The left organizations also accepted the need for women-only spaces, but expected women members to follow the party line, report back, take advice, and use feminism to recruit women members for 'real politics'. This was not always done crassly. Had it been so, fewer feminists would have remained in the left organizations than actually did. The most common complaints from socialist feminists concerned the indifference of the male cadres to the implications of women's liberation, and the separation of conventionally defined 'women's issues' from the mainstream of party discussion, rather than the extent of instruction.[27]

II

The working of these arrangements can perhaps best be traced through closer examination of the best-recorded example: the London Women's Liberation Workshop.[28] From the start in 1969, the Workshop was closed to men. 'If we admitted men', its manifesto stated, 'there would be a tendency for them, by virtue of their experience, vested interests and status in society, to dominate.'[29] At the same time, socialist feminists wanted to stay engaged with men, working towards solidarity with other groups of the oppressed.[30] However, this tugging pressure to work with the men was increasingly contested by radical feminists. The London WLM demonstration in 1971 was, like its predecessor, attended by men. They marched alongside the women and dominated the platform during the speeches. This, and also banners displaying slogans such as 'Class War not

[26] Sheila Rowbotham, *Woman's consciousness, man's world* (Harmondsworth, 1973), p. 38.
[27] Geoff Andrews, *Endgames and new times: the final years of British communism, 1964–1991* (London, 2004), pp. 59–69, 148–9, 156.
[28] Setch, 'Women's liberation movement', ch. 2.
[29] Workshop manifesto, *Shrew* (Dec. 1970), p. 29.
[30] Anon., 'Women and men?'.

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Sex War', irritated many women.[31] 'Will someone please tell me', wrote one correspondent to *Shrew*, 'why, proudly wearing our Women's Lib banner, we join any demonstration initiated and controlled by men?'[32]

Although they disliked male leadership, many women felt equivocal about an outright ban on male participation. One view was that both sexes had been damaged by gendered expectations, and it made no sense to exclude men who wished to escape from them. Women's liberation was not anti-men, commented one Workshop publication, in distancing itself from American radical feminism of the SCUM tendency. 'Most of the members have husbands or boy friends and want to help them and get on better with them – not cut them up.'[33] Some men had, after all, caught on quickly, accepting WLM demands, supporting women's participation in the movement, and even beginning to question their own sexist and patriarchal attitudes.[34] 'Undeniable though it is', one socialist feminist wrote in *Shrew*, 'that almost all movements for change are led by and dominated by men, it is only by working with these movements that we will alter what has been until now, a sad pattern of either ignoring women or accepting them in a tea-making, essentially subservient role.'[35]

Although men were excluded from Workshop meetings, relations with them remained a subject of frequent debate. Many women acknowledged that their feminism had strained their personal relationships. Some found male partners unwilling to share childcare to enable the women to go out to meetings.[36] Others found themselves growing apart from the men in their lives, with varying levels of regret.[37] There was discussion over whether men should be helped to see how they oppressed women, or simply told to change. When, in March 1971, one Workshop group met the men to discuss these problems, the men were shy or silent, but 'sympathetic and vaguely puzzled'. The language to put the points across was not yet there. '[W]e did not present a strong position to them or even against them', one woman recorded. 'We even spent quite a long time discussing men's relationships with their secretaries.'[38] A second meeting was also slow going. 'One of the men said that, by coming to the meeting, he was joining the movement', *Shrew* noted. 'We explained to him that just as whites cannot, by virtue of their colour, join the black liberation movement, so men cannot join the women's liberation movement.' The men were sceptical that the WLM could, as the women hoped, contribute to the struggle for socialism.

[31] Anon., 'Marched', *Women's Newspaper*, 2, 28 Mar. 1971.

[32] Anon., 'Why Revolution?', *Shrew*, 3, 1 (Feb. 1971), p. 15.

[33] London Women's Liberation Workshop, *Women's liberation: a beginning* [?1970], WL, Mohin papers, 7LIM/01/04.

[34] Lynne Segal, *Making trouble: life and politics* (London, 2007), pp. 70, 74.

[35] Anon., 'Revolution: why'. *Shrew*, 3, 1 (Feb. 1971), p. 14.

[36] Anon., 'Charity begins at home', *Shrew*, 3, 2 (Mar. 1971), p. 4.

[37] Anon., 'An existential statement of personal commitment', *Shrew* (Nov./Dec. 1969), pp. 13–14; Anon., 'If you get across to a man', and 'Something about being honest', *Shrew* (Sept. 1970), pp. 10, 16; 'MF', 'Encounter', *Shrew*, 3, 6 (July 1971), pp. 14–16.

[38] Anon., 'Meeting the men', *Shrew*, 3, 2 (Mar. 1971), p. 5.

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Its methods, especially the consciousness-raising, were too personal and its demands insufficiently 'political'. 'The main thing to emerge from all this', wrote *Shrew*, 'was that the W[orkshop] does not fit the stereotypes of a political organisation.'[39] Indeed, the very concept of 'experience' altered sharply in these early years, as the greater 'experience' of the men – the expertise cited as their strength in the Workshop manifesto – was displaced by the lived experience of the women.

Radical feminists now made a stronger challenge to the male presence in the WLM. They envisaged a fully autonomous organization, excluding men not for temporary, confidence-building purposes, but for the foreseeable future. They also wanted to raise the price of alliance with the male left, and insist on the priority of feminist objectives over socialist ones. With lines of division so fluid, it is not easy to trace the emergence of these demands very clearly. They partly arose from the growing participation and confidence of women who came to the WLM not via socialism but from the mutual support groups associated with dissatisfied motherhood, such as the National Housewives Register, mother's and children's play groups, and tenants' associations. For such women, the supposed expertise and 'seriousness' of men was less clear, and the advantages of organizing without them easier to see.[40] But socialist feminists also began to think in similar terms. Indeed, the socialist and radical positions, though often counterposed in conference papers, did not neatly divide the WLM into two camps. Had they done so, a simple vote might have resolved matters. But many women felt tugged both ways.

The 'problem of men' came to a head in October 1971. The WLM conference in Skegness was again attended by men, and the socialist feminists defeated a proposal to exclude them. However, an incident in which a male Maoist speaker refused to cede the microphone led to uproar and a reversal of this decision.[41] In the months that followed, it became clear that the incident had exposed a fault-line over the role of men, even if many women remained torn. One account, written in the days after the conference, accused the socialist feminists of being 'male-dominated women' who brought men with them because they did not yet understand what feminism was.[42] Another group pointed out that the socialist organizations only seemed interested in the workplace, rather than the oppression of women 'in the home and in the family structure'.[43] 'We believe that many feminists who characterize men as the

[39] Anon., 'Growing up gracefully', *Shrew*, 3, 7 (Aug. 1971), pp. 12–13.

[40] Jan Williams, 'Peckham Rye', *Shrew* (Feb. 1970), pp. 7–8.

[41] Reports from Skegness, *Shrew*, 3, 9 (Dec. 1971), pp. iii–iv; Sue O'Sullivan, 'Passionate beginnings: ideological politics 1969–1972', *Feminist Review*, 11 (1982), pp. 70–86.

[42] Dorothy Tennov, 'Reflections on Skegness', 19 Oct. 1971, WL, Mohin papers, 7LIM/01/02.

[43] Notting Hill Group, 'After two years' [?1972], London School of Economics (LSE), McIntosh papers, 1/4.

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enemy are making the basic mistake of isolating themselves as an oppressed group', countered the socialist feminists.[44]

A meeting of regional representatives to prepare for the third national conference, to be held in Manchester, decided narrowly that men should be barred not merely from the discussions but from the social events too, but this decision was yet again overturned at the conference itself. 'How many conferences must we have until we finally realise that Women's Conferences are for WOMEN!', complained a correspondent to *Shrew*. 'Are these women so oppressed that they cannot realise that it is their reluctance to be without their men that is part and parcel of their own oppression?'[45] Thereafter, WLM conferences were women-only throughout.[46]

The emerging radical critique was summed up in a paper on 'The man question' written for a radical feminist collection in 1972. The primary charge was the lack of progress with men. The socialist feminists, radical feminists claimed, were making the WLM 'a branch of the male Left'. 'I would forego a million mentions of the heroic Vietnamese / Irish / Panther women in the male left organs', wrote one of them, 'for one sign of their recognising *why* women abandoned the left organisations to form their own.'[47] Another critic noted that even when the male left accepted the need for women-only spaces, it merely created a new sexual division of labour. It handed over 'women's issues' in return for non-intervention elsewhere. The wider struggles that the socialist feminists kept invoking were insufficient, for '[a] change in government or system doesn't change the way men behave in pubs, in the home, in the bedroom, in the office or on a darkened street at night'. Furthermore, the education of the male left must be its own affair. For women to tend to the 'sore . . . tender and afraid' men was to fall into the old trap of being expected to nurture men.[48]

The exclusion of men from conferences was therefore not the last battle in defining the woman-only space. There were persistent debates about whether men should be expected, required, or allowed to run the crèche.[49] Men helped with the crèche at Oxford in 1970 and at other conferences through the 1970s, but their presence was disliked by some women, who argued that there was no place for men in childcare. By the end of the 1970s, this led to the 'bizarre spectacle . . . [of] one group of women demanding that men do the child care

[44] Lancaster Socialist Women's Group, 'Why socialist woman groups as opposed to bourgeois feminism' [?1972], LSE, McIntosh papers, 1/4.

[45] Anon., 'Manchester', *Shrew*, 4, 3 (June 1972), p. 3.

[46] Anon., 'Personal impressions', *Shrew*, 4, 6 (Dec. 1972), p. 11.

[47] Anon., 'The man question', in Radical Feminists, eds., *Thoughts on feminism* (London, 1972), pp. 4–6.

[48] Anon., 'Off each others [sic] backs!', in Radical Feminists, eds., *Thoughts on feminism*, pp. 1–4.

[49] *Birmingham Women's Liberation Newsletter*, Apr. 1973, p. 19; LWLW newsletters, 12 Feb. 1975, 26 Feb. 1975; 1976 conference news sheet, WL, Sebestyen papers, 7SEB/A/01; *Sheffield Women's Newsletter*, Apr. 1976, unpaginated.

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while others hiss the men who turn up for the crèche and insist their daughters go to a girls-only group'.[50] The question of men arose elsewhere too. Should books by men be sold on the bookstall? Should their music be played at the disco (cries of 'Turn this shit off and play some women'[51])? The early WLM newspapers, such as *Shrew* (1969–78) and *Red Rag* (1973–80) had been sold to men, and some, such as *Spare Rib* (1972–93) included occasional male contributors. However, as the WLM struggled to get fair or even serious press coverage, especially from men, it drew back.[52] The dominant mode of communication was the local group newsletter, many of which were effectively already women-only spaces. Newer journals such as *Catcall* (1976–84) and *Scarlet Women* (1976–81) debated the advantages of being formally women-only.[53] The WLM newsletter *WIRES* (1975–83) was at the start willing to answer questions about feminism from men. But it was privately distributed to women rather than publicly sold, and from April 1979 stamped its cover 'women only'.[54]

Most difficult of all was the question of whether women's centres should allow men through their doors, and whether, if not, this included the male partners or children of women visitors. The London Workshop debated this question with some heat in 1973. A proposal to close the new Workshop building to men was passed by 19 votes to 17, but this margin was so narrow that a special meeting on the question was held.[55] The size of the attendance – 'the largest meeting for ages' – suggests that this was a test case for a division of opinion that went beyond the question of the building to the orientation of the WLM itself. The opponents of closure argued that sympathetic men existed and that feminists had to be willing to engage with them 'to treat men better than they have treated us'. More practically, the Workshop's future depended on book-sales and donations which such men might make. Others countered that women needed their own space, and that the increasing numbers of separatist women, who chose to live so far as possible without dealings with men, would feel excluded if men were admitted. This last argument was regarded as a form of 'emotional blackmail' by some, but it appealed to the core values of the WLM, especially to sisterhood and what was becoming known as the 'pro-woman' line, which could not be countered by any male interest, no matter how sympathetic. 117 voted in favour of closure, and 30 against. The last line of the minutes read 'Chaos. Phew.' But the vote did not wholly settle the question.[56] '[W]omen with boy children have been turned away from the . . . women's

[50] Rowbotham, *Past is before us*, pp. 113–14.

[51] LWLW newsletter 57 (new series) [?1974], Feminist Archive South, University of Bristol (FAS).

[52] *Guardian*, 26 Feb. 1970.

[53] *Scarlet Women*, 5 [?1977], p. 2; *Catcall*, 9 (1979), p. 3.

[54] 'Which way for *WIRES*?' [?1976]; *WIRES*, 23 Nov. 1976, 21 Mar. 1977, 9 Mar. 1978, 1 Apr. 1979, FL.

[55] LWLW newsletters, 10 and 31 Oct., 21 Nov. 1973, with attachments, FAS.

[56] Sebestyen, 'Tendencies', 22; LWLW newsletters, 1974, passim, FAS.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X12000611 Published online by Cambridge University Press

centre', socialist feminists complained. '[W]omen in the office have refused to speak to men over the phone, when the men's requests are in genuine solidarity with feminism, or made on behalf of a feminist.'[57]

III

Under these pressures, there was, through the mid-1970s, considerable churning of membership between women-only and 'mixed' groups. There was, for example, a steady flow of disaffected feminists out of the 'male left' organizations.[58] However, a counter-flow of other women moved in the opposite direction. The political and industrial crises of the mid-1970s, and in particular cuts in government spending on public housing, health, and welfare, prompted efforts to build alliances with the unions and the left over tenants' rights, nurseries, family allowances, poverty, employment, and health, as well as issues of direct concern to the WLM itself, such as abortion and violence against women.[59] In April 1974, a socialist feminist conference at Warwick agreed on tactical co-operation with the left, on condition that it 'recognise[d] the significance of the personal and the political'.[60] Within the WLM, socialist women continued to argue that solidarity with men was necessary in the interests of women.[61]

Strategic alliances with men were also sought by some Black and Asian feminists. Women's caucuses had formed in several of the Black Power organizations in the early 1970s and coalesced into the Organization of Women of African and Asian Descent in 1978. However, some groups found the WLM too oriented to the concerns of white women, and the tug to work with Black and Asian men on urgent issues such as policing, schooling, and street racism was compelling by the late 1970s. 'We have... a "controlled relationship" with them', one activist reported. Meetings on Black history and culture were held together, but the women also met separately. Black men's sexism was felt to be less of an impediment to mixed work because it could be explained, if not excused, as the consequence of 'white imperialist culture'.[62]

[57] Alison Fell and Sue O'Sullivan, 'The workshop – a continuing saga', and Sally Alexander and Sue O'Sullivan, 'Sisterhood under stress', *Red Rag*, 8 (Feb. 1975), pp. 16–17, 18–20.

[58] Wanda Maciuszko et al., 'On leaving the International Marxist Group' [?Sept. 1973], and London Group, 'Why there is a need for a separate not autonomous women's movement', LSE, McIntosh papers, 1/8; Celia Pugh and Linda Smith, 'The autonomy of the women's movement', undated, WL, Sebestyen papers, 7SEB/A/05.

[59] Irene Fick et al., 'What's next for liberation? Three views', *Link* 14 (Summer 1976), pp. 8–9, 12.

[60] *Report of conference on the structure and organisation in the women's movement*, 20 Apr. 1974, LSE, McIntosh papers, 1/11.

[61] Chris Blyth, 'Men and the movement', *Sheffield Women's Newsletter*, Feb. 1976, unpaginated.

[62] Beverley Bryan et al., *The heart of the race* (London, 1985), pp. 148–52, 173–4.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X12000611 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The 'problem of men' therefore continued to arise whenever it was necessary to define the relation of the WLM to these other struggles. Men were no longer present at WLM meetings, but in the issue-based campaigning they did attend some conferences, and contact with them was unavoidable.[63] In the campaigns themselves, such as the Working Women's Charter Campaign and the National Abortion Campaign, men acted as speakers and organizers. However, their presence was always fraught with difficulty. There were complaints from women present at an abortion rights demonstration in 1974, for example, that men had been present, leading the march and the chants.[64]

Indeed, the marches on International Women's Day were marked by persistent disputes over whether sympathetic men could participate.[65] On one hand, the marches publicized the WLM demands and demonstrated the breadth of support they had attracted. On the other hand, marches were also demonstrations of women's identity and empowerment. The presence of men gave contradictory signals. In 1975, the march splintered as one group broke away shouting 'men out', while others shouted 'men in' and 'men are human too'.[66] In 1976, men and the banners of mixed groups were initially banned, then permitted, and then banned again in a series of heated debates on the planning committee.[67]

Perhaps more worrying were the compromises of mixed campaigning. The Working Women's Charter, for example, brought together socialist feminists and trade unionists in a set of workplace demands, such as equal pay, nursery provision, maternity leave, and family planning clinics. The Charter was, however, regarded by other parts of the WLM as insufficiently attentive to the feminist critique of the double burden of work suffered by women in traditional family structures. Even concessions which eased the burden of childcare did not address the unfairness of the expectation that women should bear it. One controversial solution argued for 'wages for housework' so as to give women the financial independence formally demanded by the WLM in 1974.[68] Its advocates were prepared to challenge male trade unionists in the workplace if needs be. 'Let's see if they can make Ford cars and change nappies at the same time', ran one slogan.[69] Socialist feminists were divided on the question,

[63] Anon., 'New questions raised in organising the conference', Sept. 1973, WL, 5WRR/B/01; Anon., 'Colchester equal pay conference', 4 May 1974, LSE, McIntosh papers, 1/11.

[64] Elizabeth Wilson with Angela Weir, *Hidden agendas: theory, politics, and experience in the women's movement* (London, 1986), p. 100; Anon., 'Demo', *Brothers Against Sexism*, 3 (Spring 1974), p. 16.

[65] LWLW newsletters, 18 Feb. 1973, 6 May 1973, 20 Feb. 1974.

[66] LWLW newsletters, 12 Mar. 1975, 19 Mar. 1975.

[67] LWLW newsletters 122 [?Nov. 1975], and attached papers, 14 and 21 Jan., 27 Oct., 10 Nov. 1976, 19 Jan., 9 Mar. 1977, FAS; *Lancaster Women's Centre Newsletter*, Feb. 1976, unpaginated, FL; *WIRES*, 23 Jan., 7 and 23 Feb., 17 Mar. 1976, 3 Mar. 1977; resolutions for 1976 conference, WL, 5WRR/B/02; *Spare Rib*, 46 (May 1976), p. 4.

[68] Ellen Malos, ed., *The politics of housework* (London, 1980).

[69] Priscilla Allen et al., 'In defence of feminism' (1973), LSE, McIntosh papers, 1/4, and later version (1975), FAS.

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according to whether they believed that women's work in the home produced a 'surplus value' for capital, whether they believed in making demands on the state, and how far they were prepared to strain alliances with male workers and trade unions. Radical feminists argued that 'wages for housework' did too little to contest the assumption that housework, paid or unpaid, was women's work.[70]

The other big campaign of the mid-1970s was the National Abortion Campaign (NAC), created to defend the 1967 Abortion Act against amendment. The campaign insisted on a woman's right to choose abortion without legal or medical limit, which put it at odds with other defenders of the limited 1967 Act.[71] However, it also wanted to build as wide a coalition as possible, and resisted attempts to widen the demand to one that women 'control their own bodies'. This prompted criticism that feminist principles were being sacrificed for the sake of alliance with the 'male left'. Radical feminists argued that, on its own, 'abortion on demand' merely increased women's sexual availability to men, neglecting women's right to control their own fertility.[72] When the NAC refused to widen its campaign in these directions, they set up the Abortion Action Group, which did not work with men. At the October 1979 NAC demonstration organized by the Trades Union Congress, radical feminists refused to allow male trade unionists to lead the demonstrators, splitting the march, a move that led to bitterness in the WLM press.[73]

Radical feminists also wanted the WLM to develop its own campaigns on issues that did not mesh so readily with the politics of the 'male left'. As well as the 'rights over the body' missing in the NAC, they called for campaigns on the issue of men's violence against women. Socialist feminists were accused of trying to blame violence on unemployment and the other pressures of a resurgent capitalism, rather than on men.[74] The Women's Aid movement split over the question of whether sympathetic men could form part of the answer to male violence. The most prominent advocate, Erin Pizzey, believed that they could, but this was not a widely supported view. The women's refuges affiliated to the National Federation of Women's Aid were barred to male helpers, and the question of whether confronting abuse required talking to men, or even to the abusers themselves, remained divisive.[75] Conferences found it hard to decide whether men should be allowed in. 'Most of Saturday morning was spent trying to decide if men should be present', commented the reporter of a 1977 conference. 'Groups were leaving or threatening to leave . . . and men left and

[70] Malos, *Politics of housework*.

[71] Lesley Hoggart, *Feminist campaigns for birth control and abortion rights in Britain* (Lewiston, NY, 2003).

[72] Roberta Henderson, 'Feminism is not for burning', *Catcall*, 2 (Apr. 1976), pp. 13–14.

[73] *Spare Rib*, 89 (Dec. 1979), pp. 20–5.

[74] Ellen Malos and Frankie Rickford, 'Closed encounters', *Red Rag*, 13 [?1978], pp. 9–11.

[75] Setch, 'Women's liberation movement', pp. 199, 201.

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returned in response to votes.'[76] Socialist feminists were strong supporters of the new campaigns, but they tended to discourage criticism of men in the interests of the alliances with the left. By the late 1970s, this self-restraint was chafing badly. 'I am fed up with being told not to be too angry with men', wrote one radical feminist in an open letter to socialist feminists.[77]

Radical feminists also challenged the socialist feminist view of men as victims and potential allies. All men, they argued, benefited from patriarchy, which they defined not as capitalism's way of exploiting sexual difference, but as the oppressive structures created by maleness itself. Since it was axiomatic to the politics of the WLM that full understanding of oppression could only come from experiencing it, it followed that men could contribute little to feminism. As an opposed interest, men were unlikely to support feminist demands, and, even if they did, were likely to distort them as they had in the mixed campaigns.[78] Few were prepared to argue that men were beyond saving. The problem was the social construction of male power rather than biological difference. But, radical feminists suspected, such patriarchal advantage was so deeply rooted that men would not easily give it up, and it was not worth the risk or effort to seek to persuade them to do so.

IV

The possibility of the male ally therefore turned on whether men could change. Socialist feminists had hoped that some men would do so once alerted to the unfairness they helped to bring about, partly out of a sense of justice, and partly because they would learn how sexism damaged them and their relationships with women. This mattered because such men were ambassadors to the groups with which socialist feminists hoped to work. But progress was slow. It was not possible for men and women to move in a single step to a mutual recognition of equality. The outcome – the equality of status that working with men was designed to produce – was itself a precondition of the work. This made it impossible to proceed directly in a single move, but only in a series of small, crablike steps.

The most obvious early signs were men's reactions to the women's decision to work separately. 'On the one hand, it seems they're so committed they can't be refused admittance', one woman commented in exasperation. '[O]n the other hand, they're so insensitive to the feelings and inhibitions of many women that they are apparently prepared to inflict themselves on women who genuinely don't want them there.'[79] Women acknowledged in their own groups that the men in their lives were made anxious and angry by feminist demands,

[76] 'The National Women's Aid Conference, 7–8 May 1977', *Women's Report*, 5, 4 (May–June 1977), p. 19.

[77] Gail Chester, 'Open letter', in Pachaci, et al., eds., *Feminist practice*, p. 29.

[78] Amanda Sebestyen, 'The left groups', *Catcall*, 3 (July 1976), pp. 1–4.

[79] LWLW newsletters, 8 and 15 Aug. 1971, FAS.

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formulated in meetings from which they were excluded.[80] Men wrote in to the women's newsletters to express their frustration at being left out. Some metaphorically and literally listened at the door, envious of the 'free and easy sisterhood' of the women.[81] The women seem to have suggested that the men hold their own meetings as an exasperated but not unkindly compensatory gesture. From 1971, numerous men's groups sprang up, their memberships drawn mostly from men in personal relationships with women in the WLM or involved in the mixed campaigns.[82]

Men's groups relieved women of the burden of the men's presence inside the WLM. But the men felt their exclusion sharply. Male identities were being questioned, especially that of the male radical. 'We felt . . . frightened at what was opening up underneath our feet', wrote one men's group. At the same time, women's identities were being strengthened through work from which men were excluded. One consequence was jealousy. We were 'very envious of the togetherness of the women', the men admitted.[83] At early meetings, and in their later interactions with feminist women, the men exhibited all the contorted positions that this reversal of normal affairs forced upon them. Juliet Mitchell depicted each in turn, from the plea to 'remember your womanly hearts and pity the woes of the oppressor' to the 'tilting, half-begging posture "let us in"', to the 'falling over backwards "go ahead, show us the way, you're the new revolutionary hope"'.[84] The signals given by the women were new and confusing. Men were told (and felt) that they *must be* feminists; but also told (and felt) that they *could not be* feminists. Some felt the force of this unmeetable expectation acutely. 'The women want to work with women, and the men want to work with women too', one man noted sadly.[85]

The early men's groups were hopelessly weighed down by these complications. There was some sensitivity to the risk of appropriation. '[A]nything that smacked of "suggesting to the girls how to do it" would deserve the rebuff it would get', noted the first conference of Men Against Sexism, held in 1973. '[A]ll we could properly do was to indicate our existence, goals and resources and do whatever we could if and when we were asked for any specific assistance.'[86] Yet, the servicing role proved unattractive. 'It was widely accepted

[80] Miriam Glucksmann et al., 'Sexual politics and the autonomy of the women's movement' (1973), LSE, McIntosh papers, 1/8.

[81] *Birmingham Women's Liberation Newsletter*, Dec. 1973, pp. 30–1, and Jan. 1974, p. 21; Clancy Sigal, 'Married to the cause', *New Statesman*, 19 Mar. 2010.

[82] Andrew Tolson, *The limits of masculinity* (London, 1977); John Rowan, *The horned god: feminism and men as wounding and healing* (London, 1987); Mick Cooper, *Searching for the antisexist man: a history of the men's movement* (Sheffield, 1991).

[83] 'Islington Men's Group, 1974', WL, Rowbotham papers, 7SHR/E/04.

[84] Mitchell, *Woman's estate*, pp. 56–7.

[85] John Rowan, 'Patriarchy: what it is and why some men question it', 5 Sept. 1977, WL, Rowbotham papers, 7SHR/E/02.

[86] Report of first British conference of Men Against Sexism (June 1973), *Brothers*, 1 [?1974], pp. 3–6; 'Manchester Men Against Sexism', undated, WL, Rowbotham papers, 7SHR/E/01;

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that we should not become simply a rent-a-creche organisation servicing the women's movement', one group argued.[87] To men used to leadership, this provided too little incentive for activism. This was apparent in the very small numbers of men who joined men's groups, or stayed long within them, and also in the urge for a positive assertion of masculinity. From the start, men's groups were anxious not to 'get into blanket put downs of everything "masculine"'. 'There are many so-called "male" characteristics that we wish to keep or develop', wrote one group.[88] Before long, therefore, men's groups had started consciousness-raising of their own.[89] This seemed to reveal that men too were oppressed by sexual stereotyping and gendered expectations. In 1974, the Men Against Sexism group broke up in acrimony over whether its priority was the liberation of men or confronting sexism. The last number of its journal appeared early the following year with the title, *The Pig's Last Grunt*.[90]

The degree of confusion in the men's movements was so great that it is not easy to disentangle it. But it seems that there were three main strands of activity, each with its own difficulties. First, 'anti-sexist' work consisted of mixed campaigning alongside the WLM on the latter's early demands, such as equal pay and round-the-clock childcare. As well as the national campaigns already mentioned, it included local initiatives, such as those concerning nurseries, welfare clinics, and co-operatives.[91] Male radicals used to being in charge found it hard to be followers, especially where the campaigns concerned new issues. Men might support equal pay, one feminist argued, but did not see that other issues mattered to women too. When they did, they regarded them as 'women's issues' and unworthy of further attention.[92] Moreover, few men had realized the extent of their gendered privileges, now made visible by feminism, and mixed campaigns went colder as they did so. Men therefore played only a smaller part in supporting the newer public demands of the WLM, especially those directed against sexual violence and pornography.

Few feminists and sympathetic men thought that the battle against sexism would engage only external enemies such as capitalism or patriarchy. Male allies also needed to look inside themselves in order to understand their own masculinity and how it oppressed women. This was the second strand, pursued in men's groups modelled on the consciousness-raising workshops of the WLM. The men's groups were much less successful than those of the women.

Lynne Segal, *Slow motion: changing masculinities, changing men* (3rd edn, Basingstoke, 2007), p. 236.

[87] Dave Leon, 'MAS group', *Men Against Sexism* (Oct. 1973), p. 1.

[88] 'Islington Men's Group, 1974'.

[89] 'The Birmingham Group', and John Walton, 'First thoughts on men's liberation', *Brothers*, 1 [?1974], pp. 7–8, 24–7; Amanda Goldrick-Jones, *Dismantling the master's house: men who believe in feminism* (Westport, CT, 2002), pp. 158–65.

[90] John Walton, 'Sexism and our attitudes to the women's movement', *Men Against Sexism or the Pig's Last Grunt* (Spring 1975), pp. 30–4.

[91] Segal, *Slow motion*, 239.

[92] Penny Remfry, 'Report from the socialist feminist workshop', WL, Sebestyen papers, 7SEB/A/01.

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They were certainly less popular. One estimate in 1975 was of twenty to thirty men's groups with an overall membership in the hundreds.[93] Unlike the women's groups, they showed no pattern of local, spawning growth, but patchy, fragile, and ultimately shrinking participation. They also seem to have found it harder, for reasons neither they nor others could fully explain, to achieve the emotional honesty and mutual empowerment of the women's groups.

Even those men's groups which did achieve personal and collective growth to their own satisfaction found it harder to engage positively with the WLM. The more the men's groups engaged in introspection, the less attractive they seemed to women. Their 'male liberationist' claim to be fellow victims irritated women now becoming conscious of the extent of their own oppression. They claimed, for example, that patriarchy had sapped their confidence, but this seemed unpersuasive to women who had generally found men all too confident. Worse still was the implication, made explicit by some men, that women, and perhaps even feminists, were partly responsible for men's under-development.[94] Contributors to the *Men Against Sexism* newsletter suggested that feminists who criticized men who wanted to change were paralysing them with guilt over what were really society's faults.[95] The female typist of the men's newsletter – a secretarial arrangement with its own ironies – rebelled at having to type these 'old sexist cliches', and added her own marginal commentary, only to be accused of 'female chauvinism' in the next issue.[96] Most challenging of all was the male liberationists' exhibition of suppressed masculinities. 'I believe one of our functions is to betray our sex', one member wrote. '[T]his might mean upsetting many women comrades by unveiling a lot of the shit and rubbish that clogs our heads.'[97] When the contents of men's heads were published in the confessional newsletters of the men's groups, it proved shocking.[98] To the optimist, such exposure perhaps marked the first painful steps on a longer road to change. But it offered little prospect of the immediate alliances socialist feminists needed.

Some men's groups were themselves troubled by men's liberation, disliking its reinvention of maleness and its unwillingness to criticize sexist behaviour in the interests of male bonding.[99] Their problem was not residual or reconstructed sexism, which they disavowed, but how to oppose a social

[93] *New Society*, 15 May 1975, pp. 398–9.

[94] 'Islington Men's Group, 1974'; Segal, *Slow motion*, p. 235.

[95] Anon., 'Where do we go from here?', *Brothers Against Sexism*, 3 (Spring 1974), p. 3.

[96] John Walton, 'Lib or sexism', *Brothers Against Sexism*, 3 (Spring 1974), pp. 12–15; idem, 'Do men need liberation?', *Men Against Sexism* [?late 1974], pp. 5–8; ; and idem, 'It's not all jam', Camden Men's Group, *Men's News*, 5 Feb. 1977, WL, Rowbotham papers, 7SHR/E/01.

[97] Anon, 'Looking at women', *Men Against Sexism* (Oct. 1973), pp. 8–11.

[98] Scarlet Friedman and Elizabeth Sarah, eds., *On the problem of men: two feminist conferences* (London, 1982), p. 232; Marianne Hester, 'Anti-sexist men: a case of cloak and dagger chauvinism', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 7 (1984), pp. 33–7.

[99] Islington Men's Group, 'The story so far...' [?1975], WL, Rowbotham papers, 7SHR/E/04.

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problem that they exemplified. Their solution, which constituted the third strand of men's work, was not to liberate men, but to deconstruct maleness. This, probably more than the celebration of masculinity, was the dominant tone of men's groups in the late 1970s. The men involved genuinely liked discovering their 'female side'. However, even this form of men's work proved hard to reconcile with the WLM. This puzzled men, because they thought that this kind of de-privileging was what the women wanted. But the men who were trying to change were almost as energy-sapping as those who were not. They could not validate themselves without the approval of feminist women. This was, indeed, the nub of their disagreement with the idea of 'men's liberation'. Since many of the men were in close relationships with feminists, their neediness could be hard to ignore. The high maintenance 'new man' became more an object of eye-rolling humour than active dislike. But many women resented the pleas for approval, the unchanged expectation that women would nurture men in their search for change, and under it all, the familiar appeal to be allowed to join the movement.

Women also demanded that 'new man' politics should go beyond the self-cultivation of the more sensitive male. 'New men' claimed that they wanted to renounce their gendered privileges. There were inevitably criticisms of the extent to which they did so. Men who handed back children to their mothers at the end of the conference crèche, for example, were made aware that they had not thereby achieved equally shared parenting.[100] But even men who had renounced the privileges they enjoyed in their personal relationships with women could not renounce those they held simply by being men. For one thing, renouncing a privilege put men in a position quite different to that of women who did not have a privilege to renounce. For another, it failed to acknowledge the way that society handed back men's privileges outside the home. 'New men' therefore needed to contest the privileges of other men in the workplace and wider society. The men's conferences certainly considered doing so. Picketing sexist films, leafleting in the streets, and challenging offensive behaviour in the workplace were all discussed. But the men were forced to acknowledge that very little happened in practice. The 'male liberationists' were often reluctant on principle: such challenges divided men. But anti-sexist men also accepted that this was the weakest part of their work.[101]

The men's groups therefore seemed to show too little progress to justify the price of readmission. Some were reasserting their masculinity in a manner which came close to an anti-feminist backlash. Others had not fully appreciated the extent of their privileges or were unwilling to give them up. Those men that

[100] Nigel Armistead, *Please can I stop being a tree soon? How a group of men looked after 200 children at the 1977 WLM conference crèche* [London, ?1980].

[101] Anon., 'The mens [sic] movement', *Brothers Against Sexism*, 3 (Spring 1974), p. 4; Cambridge Men's Group, 'Men and change', in David Porter, ed., *Between men and feminism* (London, 1992), p. 38.

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did want to change had achieved some personal transformations, but were too introspective and therapeutic, too fearful of confronting other men outside their groups, and either too demanding or too paralysed by guilt in relation to feminist women.[102]

V

In 1977, in Edinburgh, the founding conference of revolutionary feminism defined its goal as the destruction of patriarchy 'without [the] interruption of men at any level'.[103] The oppression of women, revolutionary feminists argued, was not simply a matter of the respective social roles that men and women had acquired under patriarchy, but had a material base in men's control of women's reproduction especially through sexuality and violence. Women formed a 'sex-class' separate from, though controlled by, men, and this was the most important class relationship.[104] Hence men and women's interests were irreducibly opposed.[105] 'Men who claim to support feminism', it was argued, 'have not realised how much they stand to lose'.[106] The appropriate stance towards men was therefore to 'expose and embarrass men's interests and weaknesses, to force them to take a stand and reveal their colours'.[107] 'I do hate all men', wrote one revolutionary feminist. 'I don't claim to be "objective" and neither do I wait to hate them till they've done or said something that proves they're men ... There are no exceptions, no "traitors to their own male class".[108] 'MEN ARE THE ENEMY', declared the revolutionary feminists' manifesto.

> There can be no revolution which will serve equally the interests of women and men. If women gain then men must lose, since all men, even your lover, your son, your comrade, gain simply from being men sexual, economic and prestige advantages from the fact that women are an oppressed class.[109]

[102] Amanda Sebestyen, letter, *Achilles Heel*, 3 [?1979], p. 7; *Guardian*, 15 and 22 Mar. 1979; aspen joycechild wommin, 'Working with women / working with men', *Catcall*, 10 (July 1979), pp. 16–17; Pauline Long and Mary Coghill, *Is it worthwhile working in a mixed group?* (London, 1977); Lynn Alderson, 'Working with men', and anon., 'Notes from Sophie', *Anarcha-Feminist Newsletter*, 5 [?1977], pp. 6–8.

[103] *Revolutionary/Radical Feminist Newsletter* (*RRFN*) 1 [?1978], pp. 13–15.

[104] Jalna Hanmer et al., 'Sex class', *Scarlet Women*, 5 [?1977], pp. 8–10.

[105] Maria, , 'The myth of men's oppression', *WIRES*, 34, 24 June 1977, p. 19; Sheila Jeffreys, 'A revolutionary feminist view', *WIRES*, 50, 22 May 1978, pp. 17–18.

[106] London Revolutionary Feminists, 'Revolutionary feminism: statements from the 1st year' [?1978], LSE, McIntosh papers 1/20.

[107] Sheila Jeffreys, 'The need for revolutionary feminism', *Scarlet Women*, 5 [?1977], pp. 10–12.

[108] Anon., 'Notes taken at a meeting for women who have decided men are the enemy...', and 'Men-hating as an honourable and viable political act', *RRFN*, 1 [?1978], pp. 7–10; Sheila Jeffreys et al., 'Some plans men have for our future', WL, 6WIM/P/02/06.

[109] 'Revolutionary feminism: statements from the 1st year'.

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This meant a sharp severing of any relationship with even supposedly supportive men. The male liberationists were already seen as a threat by most feminists. But this was now extended to the anti-sexist men too. 'Anti-sexist men are the main stumbling block to seeing men as enemies', wrote Annie Smith.[110] It followed that they must be discredited. A male lover might accept his place outside the feminist movement, but 'a male "friend of feminism" might assume or insist on a place within it'.[111]

Socialist feminists thought this a counsel of despair. It rejected half of humanity as beyond redemption, as well as being biologically determinist.[112] 'If . . . a sympathetic male cannot "join" the WLM what collective male response to patriarchy and to fighting masculinity is available?', demanded one critic.[113] 'The superiority of feminism is the superiority of an ideology and practice . . . not . . . a biological superiority', argued others.[114] The revolutionary feminists were 'asking men to be superhuman'.[115] '[Y]ou unite with those whose interests are the same as yours', countered the revolutionary feminists. 'Women. All women. Only women.'[116]

This issue came to a crisis over the question of political lesbianism. The exclusion of men from the WLM had left many heterosexual feminists with lives uncomfortably divided into a political life which excluded men, a personal life which included them, and a set of beliefs which denied that the personal and political could be kept separate. Many had already subjected the politics of these personal relationships to critical examination, but revolutionary feminists now demanded closer scrutiny. One group argued in 1978 that feminists should adopt separatism in their personal lives too, rejecting men not merely as political allies but also as sexual partners.[117] Heterosexual relationships were inherently oppressive and women who engaged in them were sleeping with the enemy. From the start, and ever more through the 1970s, the WLM had believed in the power of all-female communities and in the disruptive effects of the male presence. This had underpinned commitments to organizational autonomy and women-only spaces. But political lesbianism now seemed to

[110] Annie Smith, 'Anti-sexist men: auxiliaries or enemies?', *RRFN*, 6 (Spring 1981), pp. 1–2, and reply in *RRFN*, 7 (Summer 1981), p. 1.

[111] Friedman and Sarah, *Problem of men*, p. 133.

[112] Frankie Rickford, 'War and peace and revolutionary feminism', *Red Rag* [?1979], pp. 28–9; Betsy Ettore, 'Workshop on the differences between autonomy and separatism', undated, LSE, McIntosh papers, 1/19.

[113] Eva Eberhardt et al., 'Amen: patriarchy and feminist politics', *Red Rag* (Aug. 1980), pp. 7–11.

[114] Beatrix Campbell, 'A feminist sexual politics: now you see it, now you don't', *Feminist Review*, 5 (1980), pp. 1–18.

[115] Beatrix Campbell, 'Sweets from a stranger', *Red Rag*, 13 [?1978], pp. 27–9; Kathleen Jones, letters, *WIRES*, 57, 5 Oct. 1978, p. 15, and *WIRES*, 59, 9 Nov. 1978, p. 17.

[116] Sandra McNeill, letter, *WIRES*, 50, 22 May 1978, pp. 21–2.

[117] Anon., *Love your enemy? The debate between heterosexual feminism and political lesbianism* (London, 1981).

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demand the rejection of men as a total and essential practice. Revolutionary feminists regarded women who had not yet adopted it as at best backward and at worst as the carriers of male power in the movement. Through misplaced loyalty to their 'husbands, boyfriends, male friends and female-friends-who-agree with their male friends', wrote one revolutionary feminist in disgust, 'they do the job FOR the men ... And remember they CAN, they are in the movement.'[118] Women who were still sexually involved with men felt they had to conceal the fact, or felt guilty. 'If we have to declare ourselves', one commented, 'we mumble about it and change the subject'.[119]

Nevertheless, if feminists were divided over political lesbianism, no one offered much resistance to the charge that men were highly problematic. The important difference lay between those who saw men as the enemy, and those who thought that extricating themselves from conflicted feelings concerning men was not as straightforward or as vital as the revolutionary feminists seemed to think. Most feminists were more comfortable hating patriarchy or maleness than men, and did not wish to abandon the possibility that men could support feminist demands.[120] But this possibility was defended more theoretically than practically. The experience of mixed work and the disappointments of the men's groups had discredited the idea that the best way to reach men was through working directly with them. Most now believed that relationships with men were very likely to be damaging, and at least for the time being men were probably unrescuable by themselves or by others.

Reached through exhaustion rather than agreement, this position nevertheless brought some relief. It put an end to the directly divisive effects that participant men had produced in the WLM. However, this attempt to expel the male outright was not without its own dilemmas. There remained the question of women's relationships with sons and male lovers, now implicated by political lesbianism as anti-feminist choices. At a conference in March 1980, women 'talked and listened to each other, occasionally yelled at each other, wept in the workshops on mothers and sons, and went home in various states of elation, bewilderment and despair'.[121]

Another unresolved question was whether men should be confronted or ignored. Some revolutionary feminists held that men should be directly challenged by angry women. They favoured actions such as reclaim the night marches or the fire-bombing of sex shops, which might involve such confrontation.[122] In contrast, other separatists, among them 'cultural' and 'matriarchal' feminists, chose to ignore men, developing self-reliant communities, or hoping for scientific developments which would enable an all-female society.

[118] McNeill to Jeffreys, undated, WL, Mohin papers, 7LIM/01/03.

[119] Friedman and Sarah, *Problem of men*, p. 242.

[120] Lorna Mitchell, 'Radical feminism: a subjective view', WL, Mohin papers, 7LIM/01/03.

[121] Friedman and Sarah, *Problem of men*, p, 131; Amanda Sebestyen, 'Thinking about men', *Spare Rib*, 94 (May 1980), pp. 23–4; Reva Brown, 'Feminist mothers & sons', *Catcall*, 16 (May 1984), pp. 26–7.

[122] Rees, 'All the rage', pp. 212–14, 224–35.

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'Men are less whole than we are', wrote the convenor of the Politics of Matriarchy group. 'I don't know if they will ever become whole people or even want to do so.'[123] Some matriarchal 'goddess' movements did exhibit a surprisingly tolerant attitude to men on the grounds that revenge, even for the wrongs men had committed, was not a female practice. Men, though prevented by their sex from participating in feminine rituals or achieving female insight, might (and some did) become disciples.

Still others felt that both variations of separatism let men off the hook too easily. The cultural form failed to confront them at all, and the revolutionary form confronted them in a way they could dismiss. They therefore favoured making demands on men, either to establish a final distinction between false and true friends, or to divide and weaken men. Socialist feminists too, sensing a battle lost, now accepted that they had failed to educate the men. Sheila Rowbotham's hope in 1969 that men could be allies of feminism now seemed little more than 'romantic idealism'. In relation to the men in their lives, feminists were stuck on 'the same roundabouts, the same pathways and the same compromises'. True, the men now washed up, but the feminist found that when the crunch came – 'usually over "her" job, "her" children . . . the years of carefully dismantling a lifetime of male socialisation have failed completely'. Socialist feminists therefore agreed with the radical feminist demand that men must do more than join a men's group. 'The WLM is giving notice that it is no longer sufficient politically to be a "liberated" male towards women', wrote two socialist feminists. 'What we are looking for now is how males / men relate to other men and to the patriarchal structure in which we both live.'[124]

'Making demands' was always troubled by a basic problem of address: how to make demands that could not be interpreted as an appeal.[125] But in any case, the men's groups proved reluctant to accept them. At the revived Men Against Sexism conference in 1979, one group of anti-sexist men proposed a set of formal commitments to feminist principles in daily life. These included standing up in public to criticize sexist behaviour in the workplace, the street, and the pub.[126] At the following year's conference, however, the commitments were withdrawn after others complained that they were too demanding and guilt-inducing. In its place, the conference redrew the commitments as aspirations.[127] A later conflict erupted over the anti-sexist men's attempts to establish a relationship of accountability to the WLM.[128] Most men held that this would leave the judgement of their efforts in the hands of hostile feminists,

[123] Matriarchy Study Group, *Politics of matriarchy* (London, 1978), pp. 21–8.

[124] Eberhardt et al., 'Amen: patriarchy and feminist politics'.

[125] Amanda Sebestyen, 'Britain: the politics of survival', in Robin Morgan, ed., *Sisterhood is global: the international women's movement anthology* (New York, NY, 1984), p. 97.

[126] 'Anti-sexist commitments for men (1980) – draught [sic] 3', *Anti-Sexist Men's Newsletter*, 9 (1980), pp. 18–19.

[127] Paul Morrison, 'Our common ground', *Anti-Sexist Men's Newsletter*, 10 (1980), unpaginated.

[128] *Anti-Sexist Men's Newsletter*, 18 (Summer 1983), passim.

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and thereby paralyse men with a sense of failure. Men should instead develop practices aimed first at making men feel proud to be men.[129] The anti-sexist men who disagreed departed to organize their own work, soon named 'pro-feminist' to indicate their supportive but detached relation to the WLM. While pro-feminist organizations went on to develop their own writing, activism, and conferences, there was almost no sign that the WLM wanted to work closely with them.

By 1980, then, these conflicted approaches made the stance towards men a significant, and confused, dividing line in feminism. Women's views of male sympathizers were no longer mostly hopeful, as they had been at the start of the 1970s, but characterized by a mix of 'extreme suspicion, hostility, curiosity and bewilderment'.[130] For one thing, despite every discouragement, men were still, somehow, present. 'Men crawl in everywhere', complained one 'cynical feminist' in 1980. '[T]hey are either allowed in by [socialist] feminists . . . or weasel their way in somehow.'[131] But even when men were 'not there', they were 'there', requiring address, consideration, confrontation, or effortful neglect: in other words, needing attention. 'Why why why do women have to argue over the issue of men?', asked one writer to WIRES.[132] 'So', one survey concluded, 'we agonize over what to do with the men.'[133]

VI

Although the WLM did work with men on specific campaigns in the 1970s, it did so using the longest of spoons, maintaining considerable suspicion of their attitudes and motives. The grounds for the exclusion of men were always varied and never universally held. But the balance shifted from an initial sense that they impeded confidence- and consciousness-raising, to a later, principled exclusion of men as a necessary condition of the self-definition of women. These reasons show only slight continuity with earlier thinking. Men were least problematic when women sought legislative change in pursuit of some clearly defined, common goal, rather as they had been over the vote. However, when the goal required clarification or prior definition by women, as was the case over reproductive rights, the 'anti-social' family, and many other issues, men got in the way. When the WLM was engaged in cultural or empowerment work, they were redundant.

Men were not a primary source of division. Disagreements over them were almost always derived from differences over concepts of liberation, priorities, and strategies, as well as about the social basis of the movement. But though

[129] 'Notes from the collective', *Achilles Heel*, 3 [?1979], pp. 3–5, and 'Letters', 4 (1980), p. 6.

[130] Friedman and Sarah, *Problem of men*, p. 174.

[131] Marlene Packwood, 'Some notes from a cynical feminist', *Catcall*, 12 (Apr. 1981), pp. 12–17.

[132] Katherine Hamer, letter, *WIRES*, 58, 23 Oct. 1978, p. 21.

[133] Dale Spender, 'No matter what . . . theoretical issues in contemporary feminism', in Joy Holland, ed., *Feminist action 1* (London, 1984).

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secondary, these were persistent divisions, and this meant that the WLM spent much more time talking about men than many would have liked. Socialist feminists lost the battle over keeping men involved in the WLM, though theirs was a long retreat. The radical and revolutionary feminists were successful in excluding men, but not in maintaining a united national movement. They had hoped that dealings with men would only be needed when the WLM turned outwards to confront them in a single, clear voice. Men, however, were not so easily displaced. One reason was that the question could never be treated as one of theory alone. The WLM's urgent need to build support for its public campaigns, especially in the climate of spending cuts and recession from the mid-1970s onwards, created pressure to work with men as they were. Another reason was that, as so often in identity politics, borders once drawn still had to be policed.

While the evidence does not support any claim to restore men to the centre of the WLM, it does suggest some consequences of the attempt to define the centre otherwise. Men were not to be present, but neither were they simply an absence. The WLM still had to agree a position on them, and this was startlingly divisive. Even once the men had been pushed out and the women were facing inwards, the men were somehow still there. The difficulties were not the practical ones of separatist living without men, most of which were solved with determination and ingenuity. Rather, they were a consequence of insisting that women and men differed essentially from each other, but not much among themselves. This involved the denial of difference among men, lumped together as exploiters of women. Some men found this accusation paralysing, but for many more the lumping provided a convenient alibi. It released them from the unsettling double bind created by other feminists: that men must be feminists, but also could not be. The tensions were thus more commonly felt by the women. For the attempt to exclude men from every aspect of women's lives also involved the repression of differences among women, most obviously those between heterosexual feminists and political lesbians. To exclude men turned out not to be a simple matter of drawing a line and pushing men across it, but one perpetually destabilized by the re-emergence of difference on either side.

However, although the WLM did not solve the 'problem of men' in the 1970s, it did manage to work around it. The split over political lesbianism did not lead to the collapse of British feminism, but only of its national conference. Feminist work continued in a variety of more fragmented settings, few directly involving men, but fewer still weakened by their absence.[134] This suggests the possibility that 1970s feminism, and perhaps identity politics more broadly, could live, even thrive, without theoretical unity; perhaps, even, that it required acknowledgement of internal difference to do so. The risk of fragmentation along the lines of self-authorized identity claims was always there, but could be

[134] Joni Lovenduski and Vicky Randall, *Contemporary feminist politics: women and power in Britain* (Oxford, 1993).

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overcome by differentiating spaces – some women-only, but not all – and by working in multiple registers, deploying arguments according to their local resonance rather than their logical entailment. A single organization might have found this impossible, as indeed did the national conference, but a loosely jointed social movement did not. It could draw a border around itself which was not rigid, but redrawn and enforced strategically as needed by local groups and campaigns. Nor did single individuals find living in this split way impossible. Its difficult, contradictory urges provoked in women a variety of different sentiments: some angry and bitter, others pessimistic or cynical, and others still with a mixture of these with humour and 'commitment nonetheless': a combination that, as Simon Critchley suggests, would come to define the post-modern political struggle in the era of identity politics.[135]

[135] Simon Critchley, *Infinitely demanding: ethics of resistance, politics of resistance* (London, 2007), p. 89.

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