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The Feminist Library: “History is Herstory, Too”

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University of Southern Mississippi
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Reader: Dr. Teresa Welsh



Figure 1. Outside of the Feminist Library
(Photo by Lauren B. Dodd)

“History is Herstory, too.” –Author Unknown

“...without documents women have no history, and without history, women will be accorded little respect in the present or in the future[;]therefore collections of archives, family papers, oral histories, and artifacts should be preserved to document and honor the contributions of women...” –Eva S. Moseley

Introduction

The Feminist Library resides at 5 Westminster Bridge Rd, SE1, in the London borough of Southwark.

According to their website, The Feminist Library:
Archiving our herstories since 1975:

The Feminist Library is a large collection of Women's Liberation Movement literature based in London. We have been supporting research, activist and community projects since 1975. In 2015 The Feminist Library celebrated 40 years of archiving and activism. Totally volunteer-run, we have created and looked after one of the most important

collections of feminist material in all of the U.K., and provided an inspiring learning and social space for thousands of people.

Premises Update: We are still in our current premises, but working hard towards securing a new home for the Feminist Library and will post a progress update soon. All the vital support of our volunteers, friends, and donors are much appreciated.

[\(http://feministlibrary.co.uk/\)](http://feministlibrary.co.uk/)

The Feminist Library is not a typical public library; it is an organization with roots in the historical revolution. Its history, services, and classification system are unique; its collection is irreplaceable.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to document the history, resources, and organization of the Feminist Library in London, England.

Research Questions

- R1. What is the history of the Feminist Library?
- R2. How is the library organized and staffed?
- R3. How is the collection currently funded?
- R4. What kinds of resources are in the Feminist Library's collection?
- R5. What services does the library offer, and who uses them?

Importance of the Study

Due to lack of a source of steady funding and high rent, the Feminist Library has been under threat of closure many times throughout its history, and has been forced to reduce services, hours, and even cease operation for prolonged periods of time. The library may soon cease to be a whole entity; in the near future, the collection may be split up and distributed to other libraries. Furthermore, while the library has received on-and-off attention in news and literature throughout its existence, no detailed studies of the library in recent years could be located at the time of the study.

This study aims to recognize the Feminist Library as an important historical organization for women's studies and feminism that also holds contemporary significance, as well as an institution labeled "library" whose existence contains relevance for both library and information science researchers and archivists.

Literature Review

Background of British Feminism

In order to understand the purpose and function of the Feminist Library and its collection, it is necessary to relate a brief overview of the history of the Second Wave feminist movement, particularly in Britain and London. While it is impossible to give an all-encompassing definition of feminism due to the range of beliefs and activities among feminists, an

incredibly broad, inclusive version by Bouchier (1983) states, "Feminism includes any form of opposition to any form of social, personal, or economic discrimination which women suffer because of their sex" (p. 2). Therefore, the feminist movement "includes all forms of collective action against such discrimination, from political organisation or cultural separatism" (Bouchier, 1983, p. 2).

The First Wave of feminism began in the 1830s, simmered when women achieved the right to vote in the 1920s, and subsequently produced the Fawcett Library, later renamed the Women's Library in London in 1926. The radical Second Wave of feminism occurred around 1963, corresponding to the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan. Change and discontent were stirring beforehand, but the highly publicized, best-selling book examined and criticized the myth of the "happy housewife," leaving women everywhere contemplating their "ideal life" (Bouchier, 1983, p. 43). In 1966, Friedan and 300 charter members began the National Organization for Women, or NOW, in America.

Britain's feminist movement was strongly influenced by the movements in America, France, and Germany, but it was revolutionary from the start and was viewed in socialist, Marxist terms. Many parties of differing levels of liberalism were formed. In early 1969, a loose collective of groups formed the London Women's Liberation Workshop, which was open to all women regardless of political affiliation. At its peak in 1971, there were seventy small groups in The Workshop, and its newsletter, *Shrew*, played an influential role in the British movement, of which the first official gathering occurred in Oxford in 1970 (Bouchier, 1983). The conference set up the Women's National Co-ordinating Committee, which, as a starting point, detailed four demands: equal pay for equal work, equal opportunities and education, free contraception and abortion on demand, and free 24-hour childcare. The first public demonstration for the four demands was held in London in 1971, and "women, men, and children marched from Hyde Park to Trafalgar Square to present a petition to the Prime Minister" (Bouchier, 1983, p. 94).

The British movement primarily organized itself in small groups and women's centres were created in England, Scotland, and Wales to combat small group isolation. These centres allowed women to coordinate meetings, workshops, campaigns, and other projects. While some obtained council grants, some had no money and met in abandoned buildings; most women could not contribute much money, yet the movement grew without financial resources (Bouchier, 1983).

For the feminist movement to spread, there was a need for publications, and feminists began starting their own journals and newsletters instead of using male-controlled outlets. Some of the publications in Britain included *Shrew*, *Socialist Woman*, *Spare Rib*, *Women's Voice*, and *Sappho*. Finally, in 1975, the academic interest in feminism led to the formation of the Women's Research and Resources Centre in London, later known as the Feminist Library (Bouchier, 1983). The first feminist journals in Britain appeared just a few years later. Thus, "every significant aspect of the movement is recorded in print" (p. 103). While the movement certainly did not end here, the brief overview demonstrates that the Feminist Library was formed at a crucial time, documenting an incredibly powerful movement in history when it was needed the most, providing a safe environment for women to learn and research women's issues.

Feminist Library Research

Literature about the Feminist Library, other than what was directly on the Web, such as the Feminist Library website and newsletters, was incredibly difficult to find, and indeed, what is out there is scarce. The oldest article found that was written exclusively about the Feminist Library was McKibben's 1991 brief piece, "The Feminist Library and Information Centre," for the journal *New Library World*. The piece mentions that McKibben is a Feminist Library volunteer, but does not mention whether she is a librarian or library school student.

Others studies related to the Feminist Library were unpublished theses mentioned in other sources, but not available at the time of this study in *WorldCat*, *Dissertations and Theses* database, or on the web, but only in their respective U.K. university libraries.

Two of these sources were both M.A. theses completed in 1992 at Sheffield University. "What is Feminist Library Policy?" by Sayers, focused on the Feminist Library's organizational structure, and "The Feminist Library: A User Survey," examined users' perceptions of the Feminist Library. A summary of each of these theses' main points is included in a 1995 article by Collieson and Follini on women's studies and grassroots feminism that appears to be scholarly but does not include a bibliography. Therefore, it is similar to McKibben's article in scope and the authors were also library volunteers; one is a librarian, and the other completed an M.A. in Women's Studies.

Ilett's unpublished 2003 dissertation from Glasgow University on feminism and librarianship is often cited in Tyler's 2006 dissertation, "A Library of Our Own: The Potential for a Women's Library in Wales" and appeared in *WorldCat*, but was only available at the time of this study in the Boston Spa branch of the British Library, and presumably, Glasgow University Library. According to Tyler, Ilett conducted a study on three women's libraries, one of which was the Feminist Library, based on formal interviews of staff at each library.

Research on Other Women's Libraries

It is important to frame the Feminist Library within the context of the literature of similar collections in the United Kingdom, or indeed, worldwide. Literature about other women's libraries, collections, and archives exists and shares similarities with the information found about the Feminist Library. Literature about women's libraries is often difficult to find, as it is spread across many disciplines, not just library science or women's studies (though those categories are rarely combined, except for discussion of women in librarianship and the influence of feminist thought on the profession) and the articles tend to be about individual collections, written by staff who work or volunteers there.

Hildenbrand's 1986 work is an early example of comparative studies involving women's collections in libraries and archives. It is primarily a resource that contains information on women's collections within academic institutions, and details American institutions almost exclusively, but Hildenbrand

acknowledges that the “definition, classification, and selection of women’s collections pose numerous problems” and that they “owe their number, size, and vigor to feminism, with its dual commitments to activism and scholarship on behalf of women” (p. 1, p. 7). This fairly early work can be seen as influential for future comparative studies and conferences on women and information.

Doughan’s 1992 article expressed concern over the housing situation of the Fawcett Library (which later became the Women’s Library) and speculated whether the flooding basement would wash away women’s history. He expounds on the valuable resources housed in the Fawcett Library and the type of research done by patrons of the library. Doughan’s article is one example in women’s library/archive literature that focuses on the institution in which the author is a staff member, and libraries in similar situations may not be acknowledged. Many authors of related articles are trying to promote their own underfunded, understaffed institutions, rather than conduct objective research that focused on several of the institutions.

Published proceedings of a conference on women, information, and the future edited by Moseley (1994) is a unique resource for learning about international women’s libraries. Most are from Europe, included one on the Feminist Library (Collieson & Follini, 1995), but there are also African, Asian, Australian, and Latin American institutions included. While many are case studies, none include a bibliography but include practical articles such as “Information For and About Women,” “Information for Information Workers,” and “Outside Library Walls.” While not as structured as scholarly library literature, the publication is one of the few that provides information about several international women’s libraries.

Finally, Tyler’s 2006 dissertation on women’s libraries is a thorough, excellent study that contains detailed information about nine women’s/feminist libraries and archives in the U.K., as she conducted interviews and questionnaires for each institution. However, the focus of the study is not reflected in the title, which appears to be about only one library since her thesis focused on whether or not founding a women’s

library in Wales was viable. In spite of that, if Tyler’s dissertation were edited without the focus on Wales, it could serve as a comprehensive study of women’s libraries in the U.K., and since it was written from a library science literature perspective, it is a scholarly study.

Overall, it was difficult to place this study within the context of an already existing body of literature, especially to compare it to studies with similar methodologies, since that body of literature is scattered throughout disciplines and with little actual library science-style research. Research on women’s and feminist libraries, based on the location of the databases and journals in which they were retrieved, tend to stay within the framework of women’s studies, but even that discipline has yet to build a comprehensive body of research on women’s libraries or collections. Furthermore, most articles focused on raising awareness of a specific independent or struggling library rather than an objective, scholarly study. Women’s libraries and feminist collectives have unique histories and structures, and awareness of this field as a research topic in library and information science is a worthy one.

Methodology

Information for this study was gathered in three stages. First, the Feminist Library website and official Twitter, Facebook, and MySpace pages were visited to gather data about the organization from the perspective of the organization. Brief background information, community event postings, and collection information were noted and the most recent edition of the Feminist Library Newsletter was reviewed. Next, an onsite visit to the Feminist Library was made, the collection was perused and documented with notes and photographs. Older newsletters and other available ephemera were collected and general information about the library was obtained from a staff volunteer.

Scholarly university databases included *Library Literature and Information Science Full-Text*, *Library Literature and Information Science Retrospective*, *LGBT Life Full-Text*, *Academic Search Premier*, and *Dissertations and Theses* were searched with multiple keywords, such as “feminist library,” “women’s

library," "gender," "archive," and many combinations and variations, leading to a retrieval of relevant journal articles, newspapers, and theses. OCLC *WorldCat* and university OPACs were searched and Google was used to conduct a Web search, which retrieved online news articles, conference abstracts, British feminist websites, and even abstracts of journal articles and theses that had not shown up in scholarly database searches. The digital materials were reviewed and their bibliographies perused for other relevant sources. The term "relevant sources," for the purpose of this study, meant any source that mentions the Feminist Library or British feminism, and/or any study with a focus similar to the current study.

Results

R1. What is the history of the Feminist Library?

Origin and Early History

The Women's Resource and Research Centre (WRRC) was established in 1975 and originally housed in a room near the University of London (Collieson & Follini, 1995). Its founders were Dale Spender, Zoe Fairbairns, Leonora Davidoff and Wendy Davies (McKibben, 1991).

Shortly after the centre was founded, it outgrew its room and moved to premises above a women's bookshop in Islington called Sisterwrite. Here, the library became more prominent as it was discovered, and not only "initiated extensive outreach work" but was also visited by local schools (McKibben, 1991). When the Greater London Council started a Women's Committee, however, the library relocated again to Hungerford House, which was owned by the council. This occurred in April 1983, and shortly thereafter, the WRRC changed its name to the Feminist Library and Information Centre to reflect the political nature of the collection (McKibben, 1991).

Purpose

The WRRC's original purpose was to keep a current register of research on women, provide a network of support for women doing research, and circulate results of that research with newsletters, seminars, and other publications (Collieson & Follini, 1995). Furthermore, the library was created to collect print material from the women's liberation movement, particularly periodicals and ephemera, as this

material was not being gathered by other libraries of the time. As this material was recognized as being "critical for the future of women's studies," collecting it soon became the centre's main focus (Collieson & Follini, 1995, p. 159). As the library continued to develop, it became "an information and library service for all women, with an active drive for inclusion and accessibility" (London-SE1, 2009, p. 1).

History of Funding

In 1979, the library became a registered charity. The problems with being a charity, however, was a relentless competition with larger charities as well as the need for constant fundraising. In 1983-84, the Greater London Council bestowed grants totaling £8 million upon London-based women's organizations including the Feminist Library. In 1986, the Greater London Council disbanded, and while the London Boroughs Grant Unit continued to help the library, this funding also ended in 1988. In 1991, the library had a fundraising group that applied to trusts for grants (McKibben, 1991).

After Loss of Funding

Ever since the library's loss of funding in 1988, it never truly recovered financially. In 1989, the library moved again, this time to its current four-room premises in a shared building on Westminster Bridge Road. The Southwark Council essentially allowed the library to exist by charging only £1 for rent. However, in 1992 the Feminist Library faced its second real threat of closure when the Council announced that it needed to charge £12,000 in rent. The threat of closure was highly publicized, with excerpts about the crisis appearing in *The Guardian*, British library journals such as the *Library Association Record*, and even the *Feminist Collections* journal through the University of Wisconsin. During this time, the library fought for its life, and the Council agreed to give a grant of £7,239 plus a redirection of funds for the remainder. It was noted that the money would only help maintain the status quo and that at least £70,000 would be needed to build the library back up to its status when funded (Raven, 1993).

Unfortunately, this was only the first of many brushes with closure to come. There was another face-off with the Southwark Council in 2004, and the library closed for stocktaking in 2005. In February 2007, a

press release circulated asking for volunteers to help save the library, and a meeting occurred in which volunteers offered support for another year (until February 2008) in order to find the library a new home or to decide to split up the collection. In May 2007, the library reopened to the public, only to be locked out by the Southwark Council two weeks later (Feminist Library, 2007). In their 2007 newsletter, they stated that they were “determined to re-house the collection in more suitable, long-term accommodation . . . ideally, we would like to stay independent but are currently exploring all options, including housing ourselves with other radical libraries and archives, or within an academic institution” (p. 2). The library met with other independent or radical London libraries to consider forming a network, and possibly living in one consolidated building, in which to “offer a shared pool of information and support and a united front with which to face growing changes . . . [that will] aim to provide a united voice for radical, minority, and independent libraries and archives across the country (Feminist Library, 2007, p. 2).

R2. How is the library organized and staffed?

Organization

Shortly after the library was founded in 1975, it was decided that existing classification schemes, such as Dewey Decimal and Library of Congress, were not appropriate for the women-centric material. Therefore, librarian Wendy Davies created a unique classification system for the library that is non-patriarchal (McKibben, 1991). As seen in Figures 2 and 3, this classification scheme is in use to the present day.

The categories are, from A-P: A. General; B. History; C. Society, Customs, and Beliefs; D. Education; E. Politics, including the Women’s Liberation Movement; F. Health, including Mental Health, Psychology and Socialisation; G. Sexuality; H. Lifestyles; I. Work; J. Law and Rights; K. Crimes Against Women, including Violence Against Women; L. M. Communications and Mass Media; N. Arts, including Literary Criticism; P. Leisure, Sport, Women Travellers. Coloured dots are used to denote books in

certain subject areas, such as Black Women and Women of Colour, Working Class Women, Women with Disabilities, Jewish Women, Lesbians, and Irish Women.

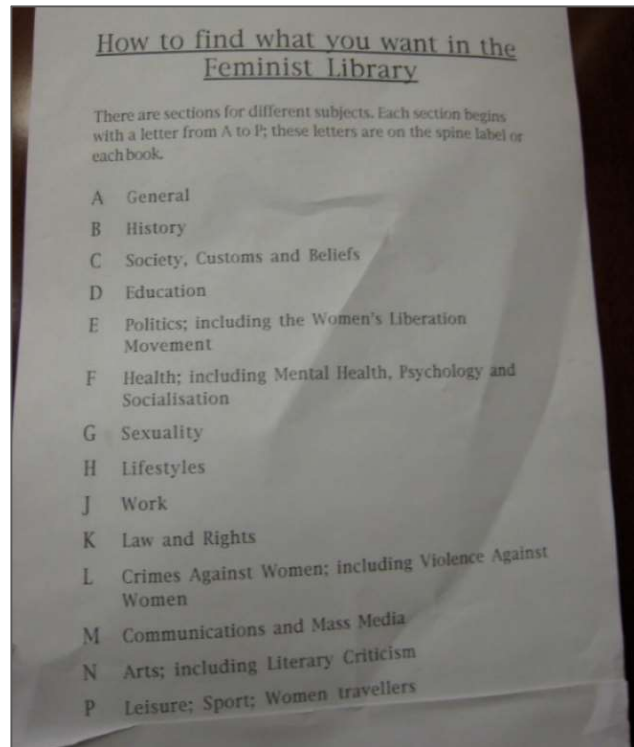


Figure 2. Feminist Library Subject Classification (Photo by Lauren B. Dodd, 2009)

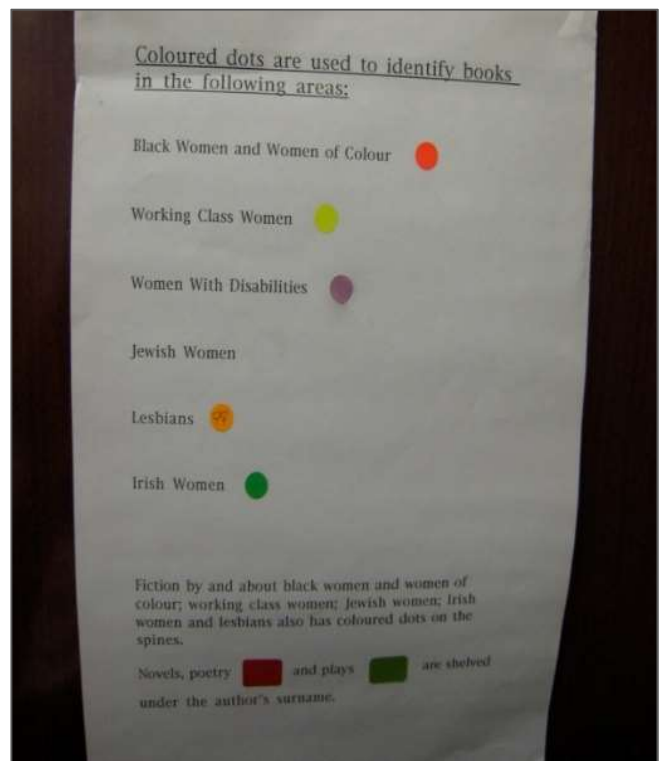


Figure 3. Feminist Library Dot Classification (Photo by Lauren B. Dodd, 2009)

The Feminist Library has a unique card catalog that was created before OPACs (online public access catalogs), which is not only useful for information retrieval, but it is an “important work of intellectual history” (Chester, 2008). Beginning in February 2009, the library undertook an open source online cataloging project using the Koha Library Management System. The cataloging project was utilized as both an inventory and a “record of a unique collection and system of thought” (Welsh & Lomax, 2009). While a link to the catalog was online, the nature of the staff and demands of the collection, such as incomplete bibliographic information and providing context for ephemera, meant that the time-consuming project was far from finished.

Staff

During the time of Greater London Council funding, the library employed three full-time workers and four part-time workers. After the loss of funding in 1988, volunteers staffed the library. The Feminist Library is run as a collective and volunteers could opt to help make policies or join subcommittees such as the “fundraising group, cataloging group, journals group, an outreach group, and newsletter group” (McKibben, 1991). The choice to act as a collective was inherently a feminist principle and the “informal, nonhierarchical structure and atmosphere of the Feminist Library [is] seen as very important and welcomed by all volunteers . . . it is seen as essential to the Library’s purpose and to running the Library in the interests of women” (Sayers, quoted in Collieson & Follini, 1995, p. 161). Indeed, the Feminist Library itself noted that the library’s management structure “embodies the egalitarianism it works to promote” (Feminist Library, 2007, p. 1).

At the time of the study, at least two volunteers were information professionals (Welsh & Lomax, 2009). According to a staff member, many volunteers have a background or interest in women’s studies, but not all. Many simply fell in love with the library and its collection and wanted to preserve it. According to the volunteer staff, only women were allowed to be staff members.

R3. How is the collection currently funded?

The collection is a registered charity. As noted earlier, the library received funding from the Greater London Council and the London Boroughs Grant Unit in the early-to-late 1980s. At the time of the study, the collection was funded solely by donations and memberships. The library continued to seek donations to support the organization and it was still supported by memberships. The Library had about 1000 members in 1982, and in 1985 they reached a peak of 1700, but by the year 2000, this had fallen to 95 (Ilett, quoted in Tyler, 2009, p. 192).

R4. What kinds of resources are in the Feminist Library’s collection?

The Feminist Library described itself on its website as a “large archive collection” of the Women’s Liberation Movement, “particularly second-wave materials” from the late 1960s to 1970s, by and about women. The collection held about 1,500 periodical titles from the 1960s onward. There were about 5,000 non-fiction books dating from 1900 to the present, and 2,500 fiction books in various languages. Furthermore, the library had a poetry collection of some 500 publications from self-published women poets to more commercially published women. There were three major donations that became a part of the collection: the Matriarchy Collection, the Marie Stopes/Birth Control Collection, and 75 boxes worth of Women’s Health Library materials acquired in 2006, which the library agreed to take so that the materials would be preserved (London SE1, 2009).

Examples from the collection noted in the onsite visit included a first-edition copy of Adrienne Rich’s *Compulsory Heterosexuality*; posters from the 1970s with messages like “Women Are Revolting” and “Every Mom is a Working Mom”; *Bitches, Witches, and Dykes*, a periodical from New Zealand; *Raise Some Hell! A Feminist Childrearing Zine for Everyone*, and *Bold in Her Breeches: Women Pirates Across the Ages*. The Library contained many other materials available at no other library such as a transcript of the *Women’s Liberation Conference* held at Oxford in 1970 (Feminist Library, 2007, p. 1).

R. What services does the library offer, and who uses them?

Services

The library is a reference, non-lending library, but anyone could visit and use the materials, although opening hours were limited or by appointment, as the staff focused on keeping the library alive and preserving the collection. The staff worked on the online cataloging project and solicited volunteers to help with the massive, yet rewarding cataloging project. The staff was committed to the production of a quarterly newsletter, such as the one published on March 2009, which contained information about a visit from members of Lambeth Libraries for International Women's Day and promoted a whole page worth of feminist and women's events around London. According to the website, Sabrina Chapadjiev, a fairly well-known female playwright, singer-songwriter, and editor of *Live Through This*, gave her only London talk at the Feminist Library in May 2009. In spite of the library's limited financial capacity, the staff hosted and promoted events that empowered women, as per its community outreach mission.

Users

In 1991, the library became a women-only space (Collieson & Follini, 1995). The women-only policy was controversial, as some users and staff saw it as an isolating factor for a library that already had a degree of political alienation. Some believed that access to the library was essential to men's education as well, but it was set in place so that women could have a comfortable place in which to "study, network, and socialize" (Collieson & Follini, 1995, 164). Later, at the end of the 1990s, the library reopened to men.

In 1992, before the library was scheduled to close, *The Guardian* interviewed a few users of the Feminist Library. Female writers came for inspiration, graduate students for research opportunities, and one unemployed woman came to research a subject she could not have afforded to elsewhere. In spite of the years that have passed since those interviews, and the limited hours compared to the previous schedule, women still visit for those same reasons (Welsh,

2007). However, statistics on library usage, whether female or male, are unknown.

Conclusion

The Feminist Library, a 34-year-old respected institution in London that housed the "most significant collection of contemporary feminist material in England (Feminist Library, 2007), has existed since 1988 only through the sheer drive of its volunteer staff; yet, in 2009, the collection as an independent whole appeared to be coming to an end. In the March 2009 *Feminist Library Newsletter*, Byrne et al. stated that the library was "in negotiation with an institution in London to house the entire pamphlet collection and will be able to make it available for everybody to view and use . . . within this institution, it will remain as an autonomous whole and will forever be 'The Feminist Library Pamphlet Collection'" (p. 1). However, nothing was finalized, and it was noted that "before any material is handed over, it will be fully integrated into the digital catalogue...then anyone will be able to see what the Feminist Library collection consists of, and where it can be found" (p. 1).

Thus, even though the collective had struggled to keep the collection independent and true to its original activist aims, the staff realized that the best place for the collection is one where it can be accessed for years to come. The library's online cataloging project is working to preserve the library as a whole in spirit, even if it may not always be a whole physical entity. This seemingly represented a paradigm shift in the Feminist Library; while feminism and activism were a larger focus than actual library science for decades, using library science would ultimately preserve the library if it no longer physically exists.

The Feminist Library, as well as other independent, underfunded community collections, should continue to be studied, and more efforts should be taken by library scientists and archivists to raise awareness of unique, irreplaceable historical materials. The library has always been in a precarious hybrid position of being both a library and an archive, but no historical collection should be lost for having political activist roots or a nebulous library/archive status.

Hildenbrand (1986) quoted an old WCWA brochure that holds significance for this sentiment: "During the past fifty years women have fought for the right to work and achieve in every field of endeavor. But without the records, there will be no history of this achievement" (7).

Note: In 2018, the Feminist Library still exists at the same general location, Multipurpose Resource Centre, 5a Westminster Bridge Road, London (<https://feministlibrary.co.uk/>).

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