

## **‘It didn’t just come out of nowhere did it?’ The origins of the Women’s Liberation Movement in 1960s Britain.<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

This article uses oral testimony to examine the social origins of the women’s liberation movement (WLM) in Britain c1968-1982. Whilst we have a well established narrative for the political origins of the movement, little work has been done on the background to the women of the ‘baby boomer’ generation who became second wave feminists. Examining life histories, particularly from the perspective of routes to feminist thinking, identifies such factors as family background, education and everyday sexism to create a picture of the women who made a movement which helped change the face of Britain. This article also seeks to demonstrate that the WLM was broadly based, with a substantial presence of working class women, and was truly national in character.

**Key words - sexism feminism mothers class empowerment**

### **Introduction**

There is little doubt that the women’s liberation movement (WLM) had a profound impact on Britain in the late twentieth century. Numerous personal testimonies refer to the ‘tidal wave’ of women’s liberation which erupted into British society at the end of the sixties.<sup>2</sup> The WLM has to be viewed in the context of European post war social democracy and emergence of new social and political movements advancing a progressive agenda from the late 1950s.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, the WLM is widely seen as emerging directly from the late 1960s movements around the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (VSC) and the student movement which were closely interlinked and strongly influenced by the recent rise of the ‘new left’.<sup>4</sup> The peak of both the student movement and VSC, 1968-9, brought

together radical students under the umbrella of the Revolutionary Socialist Students Federation and a large collection of left wing groups, the neo-Trotskyist International Socialists probably being most prominent.<sup>5</sup> Women who participated in these movements learned valuable political and organising skills but found themselves treated with contempt by their male comrades.<sup>6</sup> They were also influenced by the rise of the WLM in the US as texts such as Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1969) were rapidly imported and disseminated. Also significant was the upsurge in women's trade union militancy from 1968 into the early 1970s.<sup>7</sup> Second wave feminist activists from the new left who sought to identify with militant women industrial workers at this time soon learned that striking women primarily identified in class terms, albeit inflected with gender, indicating tensions within the movement from the start<sup>8</sup>. The contradiction between the hope and promise of late sixties radicalism and the reality of women's continued second class status has been seen as the catalyst for the new movement.<sup>9</sup> The early years of the WLM are well known: the spontaneous formation of numerous women's liberation groups in London and other British cities 1968-9, a series of national conferences starting with the first WLM conference at Ruskin Conference, Oxford, in February 1970 and the adoption of the four basic demands.<sup>10</sup> Whilst the political origins of the movement are well known, little has been written of the social origins of the movement. Who were the women of 1970s women's liberation who were teenagers or young adults during the 1960s and what made them feminists? This article seeks to contribute to the growing historiography on the WLM in Britain by using oral testimony to examine influences such as family background, education and everyday experiences of sexism to create a picture of the women who made 'second wave feminism' in the years c1968-82.<sup>11</sup> It also seeks to challenge the cultural memory, often perpetuated by the media, that the WLM consisted largely of middle class intellectual feminists based in London.<sup>12</sup>

As Kalwant Bhopal writes, the aim of feminist research is to 'capture women's lived experience in a respectful manner that legitimates women's voices as a source of power'.<sup>13</sup> The emphasis on 'history from below' in oral history, as it developed from the 1960s in the UK, makes it a very useful

methodology for feminist history. This study investigates the WLM's origins in the individual lives of a range of self identified feminists from diverse backgrounds. It aims to bring women's individual subjective accounts into our understanding of the origins of the WLM. I make no claim for the women interviewees to occupy any 'special' place in the history of the movement; rather the aim was to be as representative as possible.<sup>14</sup> Whilst intellectual women are represented here, I was particularly keen to avoid undue emphasis on women who have already written accounts which are in the public domain. Instead I sought to find oral testimony from women who do not write memoirs or leave other literary footprints. Through oral history we can see this group of 1960s young women in their own terms.

This study makes use of two different oral history collections. The twenty-one semi-structured interviews conducted by the author form part of a larger study of the WLM and personal life which is referred in the text as the Bruley study. I have attempted to locate a broad range of women with regard to sexuality, class and ethnic origin and geographic spread. As a veteran feminist I could readily tap into ex activist networks, and it was very easy to establish a rapport with interviewees, but this also posed problems. Whilst our shared history and proximity of age, plus the physical closeness of the interview situation over several hours, were very conducive to a productive interview, it could also easily drift into nostalgic chat.<sup>15</sup> I have also made use of twenty-eight interviews from the Feminist Archive South at Bristol University.<sup>16</sup> Internal (and also external) migration is an important factor here, with significant numbers of women interviewed not originating from the Bristol area (this is true also of the Bruley interviews: mainly located in southern England although many respondents originated elsewhere). Together these forty-nine interviews represent a reasonable sample in terms of geographic spread across the UK, class, ethnicity and sexual orientation. I am aware that other oral testimony is available from other WLM projects in the UK. I have chosen however to keep the focus on the Bruley and Bristol interviews in order to keep the project to manageable proportions and to foreground my own interviews in order to underline the originality of this project. All of the women have endeavoured to lead feminist lives and were

still deeply committed to feminism (in some form) and wanted very much to tell their stories.<sup>17</sup> In this sense they were in a state of 'composure', wanting to reconnect with their earlier selves and pleased that the interview would give them an opportunity to validate their experiences and life choices.<sup>18</sup>

Before analysing the testimony it is necessary to briefly put the respondents into some sort of historical context beyond the immediate events of 1968-9. Post-war welfare reforms gave people unprecedented financial and psychological security.<sup>19</sup> The post-1945 settlement was very much predicated on the notion that a return to 'normality' meant the restoration of the male 'breadwinner' norm and the dependent housewife/mother, enveloping women in a new era of domesticity.<sup>20</sup> Rising affluence created massive expansion of the housing stock and a consumer boom in clothes, music and household goods such as televisions and record players. The rise of the teenage market was particularly important. The strong assertive images of women in the media in the 1940s gave way in the 1950s to a new emphasis on women in more submissive roles. Girls were socialized into the idea that their primary role in life was as wife and mother, with little thought for working lives outside the home.<sup>21</sup> There are signs however that young women were seeking more independence, as Carol Dyhouse puts it, 'girls were getting somewhat uppity'.<sup>22</sup> The 1960s also witnessed an increasing preoccupation with personal freedom and pleasure, supported by the widespread introduction of the contraceptive pill and a series of progressive legal reforms from the late 1950s decriminalising homosexuality, reforming the divorce laws and giving women limited right to abortion.<sup>23</sup> The trend towards liberalisation and greater freedom in sexual relations has been termed a 'sexual revolution' in which the introduction of the contraceptive pill played a significant role.<sup>24</sup> There is also evidence from memoirs for this period which point to women experiencing a darker side to this new permissive culture.<sup>25</sup> The commercialisation of sex meant that images of women's bodies were increasingly on public display in newspapers, advertising, films and television.<sup>26</sup>

## The interviews

Despite many modernising trends in British society, in the 1960s gender divisions remained fundamental and women's position in relation to men was subordinate in almost all respects. This realisation did not, of itself, create a movement for change by women. We have to acknowledge here that other contemporaneous factors were at work changing women's lives, such as the enormous growth of higher education and the increase in women's paid employment, both of which benefitted women hugely.<sup>27</sup> What I want to focus on is the growing sense among women during the 1960s of empowerment and a realisation that through collective action they could produce meaningful change. Women began to imagine new feminist identities. Here we turn to our data base of interviewees who were either teenagers or young adults in the 1960s and who became active in varying degrees and times in the WLM between 1968 and the early 1980s.<sup>28</sup> The interviews were loosely based on the 'life history' method as each woman was treated as an individual with her own story to tell. The material was then analyzed thematically. These women were born between 1939 and 1955, with a median birth year of 1947.<sup>29</sup> Middle class respondents outnumbered working class respondents, but not overwhelmingly so. In fact the ratio of middle class to working class respondents, five to four, somewhat dispels the popular myth that the women's liberation movement was almost entirely middle class. In terms of nationality/ethnicity, most were born to 'white British' parents. Five were children or grandchildren of Jewish immigrants. There were also four other women who otherwise were not 'white British', including 'Cristel' who was mixed race with a Nigerian father.<sup>30</sup> Sexuality was more problematic as often this information was often not offered. Overall these women appear to be mainly heterosexual, but caution is necessary as these categories should not be seen as fixed but rather more fluid.

The first factor to be considered is the family context. Many of the women's narratives spoke of spirited or 'feisty' mothers who encouraged their daughters to be independent and pursue careers.

Jilly Rosser, for example, from a middle class family in Sussex, talked about her mother being a 'strong competent role model'. Jilly said that, although her mother would not regard herself as a feminist, 'she always set an example... that women are academically and in the workplace absolutely as competent as men'.<sup>31</sup> In describing their family background several women sought to place themselves within a continuing feminist tradition dating to the early suffrage movement. This can be most clearly seen in the testimony of Sarah Braun. In her interview in Bristol she talked about feminism being a strong feature of her upbringing via both her mother and grandmother, describing her grandmother as a 'weekend suffragette' due to family commitments. Sarah has an early memory of being taken to see the statue of Emmeline Pankhurst in Westminster, who was clearly much revered in her family. Steeped in this feminist tradition Sarah grew up with a sense of women being 'embattled'. This feminist orientation also encompassed family fantasies. Sarah recalled that the women in her family spoke of 'the island' which was a mythical feminist utopia where no men were present.<sup>32</sup>

This feminist background led Sarah to the view that she was always destined to be a feminist, 'in a sense I was born to be a feminist, it was all there in my background so when feminism emerged then it seemed to be waiting for me'.<sup>33</sup> Jilly Rosser also felt that she had a childhood feminist consciousness, '...always inherently a feminist really. As a child I hated being sent in to help in the kitchen while the boys worked outside with Dad. I always thought it was extremely unfair I was meant to do more than the boys and I also thought it was very unfair that...they were really encouraged and helped to fulfil their sporting potential whereas any sporting potential I might have had was incidental and not really nurtured.'<sup>34</sup> Jackie Barron grew up in Watford and also resisted the family view that girls were inferior, '...even when I was a little child I was always determined that I was not going to be any different to boys...I definitely felt I was second class because I was female even when I was a child'.<sup>35</sup> The testimony of 'Sarah' is interesting because she has both a class and feminist interpretation of her childhood. She described one particular incident in vivid detail,

'I mean I had a sort of Damascus moment from the top of a bus when I was about six years old, seven years old... I was with my mother and I saw this – I come from a very grotty area of (Midland town) it was grotty then and it's worse now – and I looked down and I saw this woman who was obviously pregnant... And she'd got a baby in the pram and then another one at foot...there was a look of absolutely unmitigated misery on this women's face and I remember thinking, and it was like a bolt from the blue, that I've got to get out of here!' ...And not do that. This is not me. I have to get out of here...there was this incredible need for escape ... I saw what women's life was like and it was just sheer, unmitigating labour and the men had all the fun and the women had all the misery and hard work!'<sup>36</sup>

The rejection of the lives of their mothers is a noticeable feature of the testimony. Marie McNay is one of the older women in the collection. She was born in 1942 into a mining household in the north east where life revolved around a fairly extreme version of the male breadwinner / full time housewife model, made more severe by the very hard life of miners and their wives. She described her mother with pride as a 'strong assertive woman', recounting that she was a 'fantastic role model' in terms of managing the household and an 'authority figure in her own right'.<sup>37</sup> Marie had five brothers, creating a very heavy workload for her mother. She needed help but only Marie was expected to assist, 'that was my first understanding that something was unfair somewhere'.<sup>38</sup> Like about half the women in this study Marie went to grammar school. After leaving school at sixteen she became a civil servant in Durham. At the age of seventeen she acquired a steady boyfriend and for the next three years the two families became close and the expectation was that they would marry, 'I started to get really worried about it'... 'he wanted to get married and I didn't and I knew that very fundamentally...I knew that he definitely wasn't for me...so I split up with him.'<sup>39</sup> Marie made a conscious decision to reject not only her long standing boyfriend but also the whole idea of a traditional family life. Instead she chose to leave the north east and start a new life as a single independent woman in London.

Janet Brewer made a similar decision, although her circumstances differed as she grew up in a middle class family in Exeter. Her mother trained as a nurse, but became a full time housewife. Janet described her parent's marriage as 'a very traditional fifties division of labour....my mother was always there... always ready with his meal by the time he came home'.<sup>40</sup> Janet first began to think about gender difference when her father chose to send her two brothers to boarding school, but not her or her sister. Observing that her father placed more value on the education of her brothers, 'that was something which led me to think life was different as a woman'.<sup>41</sup> Observing her mother's life, Janet 'grew up thinking that I didn't want to have that sort of life with just a home role.'<sup>42</sup> After grammar school Janet went on to Cambridge University in 1963. A number of other women expressed similar views, often using the term 'frustration' when describing their mother's lives. Helen Taylor was raised in Birmingham, but later settled in Bristol where she was interviewed. The summary of the interview describes the impact that her mother's life had on Helen, particularly the deep regret her mother had about not being able to go to college, 'seeing her own mother being frustrated and stifled in her own life is one of the main reasons why she became attracted to the Women's Movement'.<sup>43</sup> Annabel McLaren, born of working class Irish Catholic parents in south London and one of the younger women in the study, described her mother as a 'feisty' woman who got depressed by her enforced domesticity.<sup>44</sup> Rosie Dean grew up in a Kent middle class farming family. Her mother had worked during the war in what Rosie described as a very challenging and responsible job in a bank, but found adjustment to full time motherhood on a farm difficult. Rosie emphasised the word 'frustration' twice when referring to her mother's life.<sup>45</sup> Rosie also told me that she felt she had been a feminist from about the age of eight or nine. Clearly, the lives of their mothers formed a deep impression on these women and led them to create a sense of self which involved a conscious and deliberate distancing from what was seen then as 'women's role' and in many cases this questioning of their early life was a key factor in leading them into the women's movement.



One fundamental feature of the women's liberation movement was its insistence that 'the personal is political'.<sup>46</sup> Women came to feminist consciousness on the basis of their own keenly felt experiences of sexual discrimination and sex role stereotyping. This testimony reveals deep and searing insights into the nature of sexism in 1960s Britain. We have already heard of discriminatory practices against daughters in the home. We now examine other areas of life. Jenny was born into a Leeds working class family, with three sisters. Encouraged and tutored by her father she developed accomplishment in maths. This led to a scholarship at a very prestigious girls' private school in Leeds where Jenny excelled at maths. Within this highly academic environment Jenny was shocked at her final leavers' assembly when the head told the girls that, 'you are going to be wives of important men, doctors and lawyers'. Margaret Beetham was born in Edinburgh to parents of missionaries who moved to India when she was a baby. At thirteen she was sent back to England to a 'posh' single sex boarding school in Kent. Although thought to be very good academically, the school had no science laboratories; consequently opportunities to study science were very limited. Margaret had little emotional support from adults at this time. She did not see her mother at all for five years and described the school as 'not warm – in fact it was literally cold'.<sup>47</sup> In the interview Margaret reflected on this, 'looking back...that maybe the roots of (my) feminism...were to do with that, although I didn't recognise it at all, because I think what certainly sustained me through that period was my friendship with the other girls.'<sup>48</sup> This feeling of female solidarity at school was apparent in other interviews. Sue Laurence, for example, grew up in a London professional family and was sent to a convent school in Twickenham from the age of eleven to sixteen. Sue told me that she 'hated' the convent, 'but what it did inculcate was a sense of female solidarity because we all had something to rally against which was the oppressive nuns, who were deeply oppressive. And I think there was a tremendous sense of commitment towards other girls ...I don't really know how to express it, but a sense that we were united against the enemy.'<sup>49</sup>

All the respondents had some experience of higher or at least further education, with the largest group going to university more or less from school to read for social studies or humanities degrees, particularly English or Sociology. Here also they had stories to tell of sexism. Jenny went on to study a 'hard science' degree at London University in 1968. The transition from an all girls' school to an overwhelmingly male environment was very difficult. She was continually subjected to unwanted attention including touching as the men found her 'cute'. She felt trivialised by the staff, 'I felt they weren't taking me seriously'.<sup>50</sup> Pen Dalton's experience was even more alarming. After grammar school in Streatham, south London, she became a student at Goldsmiths Art College in 1962. In her interview in Bristol, Pen recalled the lecturers who would '...pick off the prettiest girls...to have affairs with...we were considered 'dolly birds': fair game'.<sup>51</sup> At this time it was extremely difficult for women with dependent children to study in higher education. When Ellen Malos came to Bristol from Australia in 1962 with her husband and two year old son she attempted to embark on a PhD. She was unable to secure child care and got no support from her supervisor who thought it was 'preposterous' that she should register for a PhD with a small child.<sup>52</sup> In the absence of any nursery provision and unable to find suitable child care Ellen was forced to give up the PhD. In her interview in Bristol Ellen directly linked this experience to her growing feminist consciousness, 'so when the women's movement started I was certainly ready for it'.<sup>53</sup>

Many of the interviewees went on to become teachers, lecturers, nurses, midwives, social workers, and probation officers. They found that the world of work was also deeply imbued with sexist practices and culture. Marian Leiberman was the child of German Jewish refugees who had fled from the Nazis. Encouraged by her parents, both scientists, she read physics at University but was plagued by a chronic lack of confidence due to the fact that her tutors told her that 'women couldn't do physics'.<sup>54</sup> Eventually she changed direction and joined the probation service. Her testimony makes it clear that Marion was keen to place on record how shocked she was at the institutional sexism that she found in the probation service at this time, 'many of her colleagues made sexist jokes and

treated female colleagues and clients in a condescending and harassing manner'.<sup>55</sup> She attempted to challenge this behaviour. One colleague told her, "Right I'll never open a door for you again". It was just so tiresome. As far as I was concerned anyone can open doors for anyone else, man or woman, but I don't particularly want doors opened for me as a woman if the other side of the coin means that I don't qualify for other more important things.<sup>56</sup> When the women's liberation movement started Marion, like many women in this study, felt that this was at last confirmation of the views that she already had, 'that women should have equal rights to men and they should have all their achievements valued'.<sup>57</sup>

There were also very serious problems in trying to combine motherhood with work at this time. When Margaret Beetham completed her A levels in 1958 she won a place at Oxford to read English. After graduating she became a teacher and also married in 1963. Margaret loved being a teacher but was forced to leave in 1967 when she was pregnant with her first child. She told me, 'I left because you had to really. I was teaching at a school in Wythenshawe but I left, and it was kind of assumed that I would stay at home and look after the kids.'<sup>58</sup> She later added: 'I felt very bereft at leaving the job, but that's just what you did'.<sup>59</sup> Margaret later became a university lecturer. The rapid expansion of higher education at this time meant that there were many opportunities for bright graduates to become academics in the new universities and other HE providers. Here there was also an endemic sexist culture. Sarah escaped from 'rock bottom poverty' in the midlands to university and eventually into teaching in higher education, beginning lecturing in southern England in 1968. She described her department as being run by a 'sexist mafia'. She found the head of department particularly problematic, recalling that whilst he was both very impressive intellectually and charismatic he was at the same time also 'unbelievably sexist and exploitative...he would operate a kind of sexual fiefdom among staff and students...and he would get them to sleep with him, students, I mean outrageous, you wouldn't get away with it now, thank God'.<sup>60</sup>

A very strong thread running through this testimony is that of upward social mobility via education.<sup>61</sup> There were, however, a small number of working class respondents who did not progress into the middle class. Siri Lowe was from a poor working class Jewish family in the East End of London. Despite attending a very academic grammar school where she was encouraged to go on to higher education, it was not anticipated that she would become a middle class professional. Siri went on to the newly opened Sussex University to read French and English in 1964. Despite being able to cope academically she felt emotionally insecure at university and dropped out in the second term following a break down. In her interview she said, 'I couldn't imagine being a middle class professional. I couldn't imagine that I could make that jump.'<sup>62</sup> I asked her whether she felt this was to do with class, to which she responded 'yeah, I think it was a class thing and a gender thing mixed together. But it was class...and the gender bit was reinforced with those expectations at school that you couldn't really be a career woman because you couldn't be a real woman who had a family.'<sup>63</sup> Siri eventually trained as a secretary, which she found menial and degrading. When she first came into contact with the WLM through one of the very early consciousness raising (CR) groups in south-east London she did not feel a connection with the women, 'I felt out of sympathy with that group of women because as far as I could see they all lived in very nice houses on Peckham Rye, none of them doing shit awful jobs like I was for lousy wages...they had a very nice middle class standards of living 'thanks'.<sup>64</sup> It is interesting though that Siri went on to say that within three or four years she reconnected with the WLM and joined a CR group because she 'started to see and feel the things which joined me to other women'.<sup>65</sup> Class divisions within the WLM are also evident in the testimony of Mary Chamberlain who was a member of the collective of young professional women that combined CR with producing the feminist magazine *Women's Report*. She recalled one particular incident, 'there was one woman who came who was a secretary who came for about two meetings and then disappeared and it took us three about meetings afterwards to notice that she'd gone. And then there was a great kind of heart searching... about how we have discriminated against her because of class and ...in fact I think she may have even written us some letters saying that she felt

completely intimidated by us all. But I mean it does actually indicate the ...kind of arrogance we had and I think now deeply naïve assumptions that sisterhood was everything and sisterhood could override all the divisions of class and race and everything else.<sup>66</sup>

Women who left paid employment and became full time mothers often became isolated, lonely and resentful. Jackie Barron was brought up in Watford where she left school at sixteen and became a library assistant. She married at nineteen and by the age of twenty five in 1968 she was housebound in Luton with four small children. Her husband worked long hours and sometimes had to stay away from home. In her interview in Bristol she went to some length to say how isolated she was, 'I was really quite stuck with the children'.<sup>67</sup> This experience made Jackie begin to question the ideas behind the way she lived her life, 'I found that I didn't like the assumptions...that you were responsible for the children and the children and the house and everything else (and that) if your husband did anything it was for you'.<sup>68</sup> After her first child was born, Margaret Beetham and her husband bought their first house, '...I was very isolated. All my friends were still working. I was in an area where I didn't know anybody.'<sup>69</sup> Margaret made friends with a woman whose child was the same age as hers. She also met other mums through a local church. Together they formed a pre-school play group in 1968 which met in the church hall. Margaret told me with some pride that they were 'right at the beginning of the pre-school movement'.<sup>70</sup> These and similar experiences fed into the demand for nurseries which was a major plank of the women's movement.

During the 1960s there were many other areas of life which women began to question. Dale Wakefield became a single mother with two small children when she separated from her husband. Without money and needing a new buggy she found she could not buy one on 'hire purchase' (credit) without her husband's signature. Meg Wright had to forge her husband's signature in order to go on the pill. Women increasingly resented their lack of equality in law rendering them second class citizens. Rape in marriage was still legal and domestic violence was common. Sexual

harassment, which was endemic, began to be challenged by women who were increasingly unwilling to be subjected to such humiliating practices. Jilly Rosser described an incident of sexual harassment which she felt was a key event in her feminist awakening,

'I remember sitting in a pub and being approached by a drunken man who wouldn't go away and it was the first time I realised that this was not a flattering episode, it was actually quite insulting and derogatory. It was one of those turning points. From then on I realised that...getting unwanted sexual attention from men was a very unpleasant experience and I no longer sought it.'<sup>71</sup>

Later at Manchester University Jilly made a friend who felt like her and together they joined a women's group. We have seen that women became feminists through their own lived experience. This is particularly so in the case of the desire for access to safe and free contraception and abortion. Two of the Bristol interviewees, Monica Sjóó and Betty Underwood, recounted emotionally painful experiences as a result of unwanted pregnancies and inability to obtain a legal abortion. In their testimony both women linked these experiences to their developing feminism and later involvement with the WLM when they campaigned specifically on the issue of 'a woman's right to choose'.<sup>72</sup> Judy Bury, from a London Jewish family, studied medicine in Cambridge in the 1960s and realised that she felt very strongly that women should have free access to abortion. In the early 1970s she became active in the National Abortion Campaign and also, together with a friend, set up an organisation called 'Doctors for a Woman's Choice on Abortion'.<sup>73</sup>

Around one fifth of the women involved in this study had left-wing parents, most usually associated with the Communist Party. Many were class conscious before they thought about gender inequality. Susanne Coysh was a teenager in the 1960s raised by her staunch Labour Party activist parents in South London. She found her girls' grammar school stifling and left at sixteen for a clerical job with the Bank of England. Her political views became apparent at work when Churchill's funeral was to process past the Bank in January 1965, 'we were all told that we could leave our posts and go and

look out of the window so...I deliberately went in the other direction...'<sup>74</sup> Many of these women born into socialist/communist families were drawn into 'new social movements' as teenagers: CND, Anti-Apartheid, VSC etc. Jane Bell spent her teenage years in Ipswich with her communist father and step mother. She told me how she was drawn into CND in the late fifties whilst doing A levels, 'I got to hear about this Aldermaston march...and I went...I kind of instinctively went on it. I hadn't thought about it deeply...I just did it...I thought that was a fantastic experience.'<sup>75</sup> At university in Newcastle (then a branch of Durham University) Jane joined CND and through this activism was drawn into the Communist Students Group in the early 1960s. Dorothy Sheridan described her Irish parents as 'socialist Bohemian types'. Coming from Galway to post war London they eventually settled in north Yorkshire. Through her parents Dorothy became a CND activist whilst a sixth former in the mid sixties, 'I used to sell the CND magazine *Sanity* outside the public library in Harrowgate. In fact, in the Cuban missile crisis I really had nightmares. I really thought we were going to be annihilated.'<sup>76</sup> Many women who had working class backgrounds, often raised in circumstances of considerable hardship, became acutely aware of class inequality and social injustice through their own lived experience. In contrast Celia Burgess-Macey, from a middle class family Warwickshire, became politicised as a post graduate student in social policy at LSE 1966-7, where she was taught by radical lecturers to put poverty into a Marxist theoretical context. This experience had a profound impact, 'I was just absolutely gobsmacked'.<sup>77</sup> This led Celia to join the International Socialists. She also agitated for David Steel's abortion bill. Interestingly this was not considered feminist activism, as 1966 was pre women's liberation and the only context for this activism was via the Humanist Society which she also joined.

The general rise in activism on the left in the late 1960s drew many women into left groups. Sexist behaviour towards women in left-wing circles was an endemic part of the culture at this time. Pen Dalton left art college in 1967 and went on to teacher training at Sussex University. She married in the same year and the couple's home in Brighton became a centre for left wing debate. Pen was

outside of these discussions, listening 'to the men talking about equality and liberation'. She told her interviewer in Bristol that she was 'reduced to making the tea'.<sup>78</sup> Gradually left-wing women began to question their position in the movement and the aggressive predatory stance of many of the men. Celia Burgess-Macey was involved in student occupations whilst at LSE, 'there was a lot of sexist behaviour on the part of the men. I mean in the sit-in half the men just wanted to sleep with the women who were sitting in, because we slept in you see...'.<sup>79</sup> Dorothy Sheridan started studying for a Sociology degree at Sussex in 1967. She joined the Socialist Society with her friend Helen and they were asked to run the book stall. She found it hard to speak at meetings;

'It was really then, when I was nineteen, that I started to feel put down, intimidated. There were some very confident men around who ran things, quite scary some of them actually...I think what I started to realise was the deep socialisation about only mattering if you had a statusful boyfriend... that was part of...seeing yourself through men's eyes much more. And I think up until then I had not really had that...I think it really hit me at Sussex.'<sup>80</sup>

For ease of analysis I have examined the factors which fed into the rise of women's liberation separately. In reality women became feminists because they were exposed to a multitude of factors. Heather Pudner told me 'it didn't just come out of nowhere did it...it actually grew from a lot of threads'.<sup>81</sup> In Heather's case she remembers particularly how much she used to look forward to reading *New Society* whilst studying 'O' and 'A' level Sociology in the late 1960s in Sussex, 'you can't underestimate how exciting that used to be'.<sup>82</sup> Many women have referred to feminism as just erupting, as Mary Chamberlain recalled, it was 'in the ether'.<sup>83</sup> Whilst feminist articles in *New Society* inspired Heather Pudner, some of the older interviewees mentioned feminist texts which predated the rise of women's liberation. Simone De Beauvoir's *Second Sex* (1949) and Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* (1963), in particular, were referred to by a number of women. Feminist fiction was also important, especially the works of Doris Lessing.<sup>84</sup> These texts were not absorbed in abstract but related to the women's own experiences. Jackie Barron, as an isolated full time mother,



identified strongly with Friedan, 'it was very middle class and of course it was American, but it did actually chime in with my experience and so at last there was someone else saying the things I was thinking'.<sup>85</sup> As a single, graduate student Helen Taylor had a very different life from Jackie, nevertheless Friedan had an equally big impact on her. She spoke movingly in her Bristol interview of reading *The Feminine Mystique* as one of the pivotal moments of her life,

'There are very few books I've read right through the night. I like my sleep, but I read that right through the night and I remember weeping solidly for about three hours after I had read it with complete recognition of everything she had said about the ways in which I had internalised being female, being feminine, second class, the ways in which my horizons had been limited by being born a woman.'<sup>86</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This article has shown that the torch paper which lit the modern women's liberation movement had a much longer fuse than 1968-9. The women of the baby boomer generation who became active feminists experienced rising living standards and rising expectations, but many realised the confines of their gender early. They were particularly influenced by the frustration and resentment of their mothers, whose lives were artificially bounded by domesticity, and wanted to lead different lives. They also experienced sexism in all areas of life and many of the interviewees felt that they had arrived at some sort of early feminist consciousness before women's liberation. Significant proportions of the interviewees had left-wing backgrounds and were also imbued with a strong awareness of class injustice. This corresponds with the fact that the early stages of the WLM were dominated by socialism-feminism.<sup>87</sup> The range of interview material across the UK indicates that that, although London was a very important centre, the WLM was a truly national movement. It has been shown that although middle class women dominated the WLM it was broadly based in terms of class, with a significant presence of working class women. We have also seen that class divisions within the WLM were evident, creating tensions which were never resolved within the simplistic

‘second wave’ concept of universal sisterhood. More recent feminism based on notions of ‘intersubjectivity’ has recognised that women’s inequalities were (and often still are) based on multiple subjectivities and that class, race and gender are inextricably interlinked.<sup>88</sup>

Upward social mobility was a very significant background factor to this project. The interviewees benefitted directly from the 1944 Education Act providing universal free secondary education. The majority of the sample attended grammar school and university, regardless of class origin, and benefitted from free higher education and maintenance grants. Almost all the interviewees had successful professional careers. It must be recognised therefore that the 1960s experiences of these women were mostly remembered from the perspectives of middle class professionals. These women were conscious of the historical importance of the WLM and wanted the movement to be recognised as part of the ‘official narrative’ of post-war Britain, and in many cases their own roles to be recorded. Through individual lives we can assert the ‘cultural memory’ of women’s liberation and the role of women’s agency in contributing to progressive social change for women and society as a whole.<sup>89</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Quote from interview with Heather Pudner, born in Edinburgh, 1951, recorded by author, 14 July 2012 in Swansea, unpublished transcript (NB hereafter TS) p 8. The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers from *Oral History* for their constructive feedback.

<sup>2</sup> Michelene Wandor (ed), *Once a Feminist, Stories of a Generation*, London: Virago, 1990, p 115.

<sup>3</sup> Miriam E. David, *Feminism, Gender and Universities, Politics, Passion and Pedagogies*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2014, p 1; Caroline Hoefferle, 'A Web of Interconnections: Student Peace Movements in Britain and the United States, 1960-1975', in *Peace Movements in Western Europe, Japan and the USA During the Cold War*, Benjamin Ziemann (ed), Essen: Klartext, 2007, pp 131-47; Caroline Hoefferle, *British Student Activism in the Long Sixties*, London: Routledge 2013; Celia Hughes, *The Socio-Cultural Milieux of the Left in Post-war Britain*, PhD Thesis University of Warwick 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Nick Thomas, 'Challenging Myths of the 1960s: the Case of Student Protest in Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, vol. 13, no 3, 2002, pp 277-297, p 297.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas, 2002, p 287.

<sup>6</sup> Sheila Rowbotham, *Promise of a Dream, Remembering the Sixties*, London: Verso 2001, pp 160-161; Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet Freedom, The Struggle for Women's Liberation*, London: Pan Books, 1982, p 13. Mark Donnelly has used this reference, which can be taken as acceptance of this view, *Sixties Britain, Culture, Society and Politics*, Harlow: Pearson Education, 2005, p 161.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathon Moss, 'We didn't realise how brave we were at the time': the 1968 Ford sewing machinist's strike in public and personal memory', *Oral History*, 2015, vol.43, no 1, pp 40-51. Also useful is Jane Lewis 'From equality to liberation: contextualising the emergence of the Women's Liberation Movement', in Bart Moore-Gilbert and John Seed (eds) *Cultural Revolution? The Challenge of the Arts in the 1960s*, London: Routledge, 1992, pp 96-117; George Stephenson, 'The Women's Movement and 'Class Struggle': gender, class formation and political identity in women's strikes, 1968-78', in *Women's History Review*, special issue on women's liberation edited by Laurel Forster and Sue Bruley, forthcoming December 2016, available in advance online.

<sup>8</sup> Stephenson, *The Women's Movement*, forthcoming.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain since 1914*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, London: Palgrave, 2015, pp 261-263.

<sup>10</sup> Coote and Campbell, 1982; Sheila Rowbotham, *The Past is Before Us, Feminism in Action Since the 1960s*, London: Pandora, 1989; David Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge, The Movement for Women's Liberation in Britain and the United States*, London: Macmillan, 1983; Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014. Eve Setch, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Britain 1969-79, Origin, Creativity and Debate*, PhD Thesis, University of London, Royal Holloway, 2001. The first four WLM demands of 1970 were: equal pay; equal educational and job opportunities; free contraception and abortion on demand; free 24 hour nurseries, see Feminist Archive North website: <http://www.feministarchivenorth.org.uk/chronology/appendixi.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> Feminist activity is here broadly defined. The respondents offered very diverse experiences and varying levels of engagement with the WLM.

<sup>12</sup> The BBC Radio 4 programme 'The Reunion', broadcast September 5, 2010 on the disruption of the Miss World competition in 1970 is an example of this as it focused on London activists. This view has also been reinforced, albeit inadvertently, by the autobiographical work of Rowbotham, 2001. See also Lynne Segal, *Making Trouble, Life and Politics*, London: Serpent's Tail, 2007; Michèle Roberts, *Paper Houses, A Memoir of the '70s and Beyond*, London: Virago, 2007; Wandor, 1990; Amanda Sebestyen (ed), '68,'78 '88 *From Women's Liberation to Feminism*, Bridport: Prism Press, 1988. According to Wilson 'there have been persistent attempts from all sides to reduce feminism to the mouthpiece of a small elite group', Elizabeth Wilson, *Only half way to paradise, Women in Post-war Britain: 1945-68*, London: Tavistock, 1980, p 204.

<sup>13</sup> Kalwant Bhopal, 'Gender, Identity and Experience: researching marginalised groups', *Women's Studies International Forum* (thereafter *WSIF*), no 33, 2010, p 189.

<sup>14</sup> The oral history project 'Sisterhood and After', funded by the Leverhulme Trust in 2010 focused on 'core activists', Margaretta Jolly and Sasha Roseneil, 'Researching women's movements: An Introduction to FEMCIT and Sisterhood and After', *WSIF*, no 35, 2012, p 127. This has been picked up by the media as 'leaders' of the WLM. This does not in any way correspond with how these women see themselves.

<sup>15</sup> Valerie Yow, "'Do I like them too much?' Effects of the oral history interview on the interviewer and vice-versa', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Abingdon: Routledge, 2006, pp 54-72.

<sup>16</sup> Full transcripts of the Bristol interviews were not made, but detailed summaries were written which include direct quotes; *Personal Histories of Second Wave Feminism* Vol. 1&2, Summarised from interviews by Viv Honeybourne and Iona Singer, Feminist Archive South, Bristol University Special Collections, available at <http://feministarchivesouth.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Personal-Histories-of-the-Second-Wave-of-Feminism.pdf>, p 15. Accessed online 12 August 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Six of the Bruley interviewees and one Bristol interviewee chose to be anonymous.

<sup>18</sup> Alistair Thomson, 'The Anzac legend, exploring national myth and memory in Australia', in Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson (eds), *The Myths We Live By*, Abingdon: Routledge, 1990, p 78.

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Roberts, *Women and Families 1940-70, An Oral History*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1995, p 9.

<sup>20</sup> See Sue Bruley, *Women in Britain Since 1900*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999, chapter 5.

<sup>21</sup> Donnelly, 2005, pp 160-161.

<sup>22</sup> Carol Dyhouse, *Girl Trouble, Panic and Progress in the History of Young Women*, London: Zed Books, 2013, p 150.

<sup>23</sup> Lesley Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain Since 1880*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013, chapters 9 and 10.

<sup>24</sup> Sheila Rowbotham, 'Cinderella Organizes Buttons', in David Widgery (ed), *The Left in Britain 1956-1968*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976, p 417.

<sup>25</sup> Sue O'Sullivan quoted in Gerard DeGroot, *The Sixties Unplugged*, London: Pan Books, 2009 p 218; Jenny Diski, *The Sixties*, London: Profile Books, 2009, p 60; Asphodel in Sebestyen, 1988, p 10; Sara Maitland, *Very Heaven Looking Back at the Sixties*, London: Virago, 1988, p 3.

<sup>26</sup> Dyhouse, 2013, pp 164-165; Rowbotham, 1976, p 417.

<sup>27</sup> Jane Lewis, *Women in Britain since 1945*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, p 65 and p 87.

<sup>28</sup> I am taking the early 1980s as a cut off point as the WLM is widely seen as more diffuse and taking different forms from then.

<sup>29</sup> Although Bristol interviewees were not asked date of birth, it has been possible to select those in teenage or young adulthood in the 1960s.

<sup>30</sup> Numerous attempts were made to recruit more 'women of colour' without success. These refusals are likely to be because many black/Asian women did not identify with the WLM in these years. Black feminism did not really emerge until the very late 1970s and developed more fully in the 1980s, with black women developing their own agendas and networks, under the impact of post colonial redefinitions of feminism. The key works are: Hazel Carby, 'White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood', in Centre for Contemporary Studies University of Birmingham, *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain*, London: Hutchinson, 1982, pp 211-234; Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar, 'Challenging Imperial Feminism', *Feminist Review*, vol 17, 1984, pp 3-19.

<sup>31</sup> Jilly Rosser, *Personal Histories*, p 139.

<sup>32</sup> Sarah Braun, *Personal Histories*, p 7.

<sup>33</sup> Sarah Braun, *Personal Histories*, p 7.

<sup>34</sup> Jilly Rosser, *Personal Histories*, p 139.

<sup>35</sup> Jackie Barron, *Personal Histories*, p 59.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with 'Sarah' 25<sup>th</sup> September 2011 and 10<sup>th</sup> October 2011, born in Midlands 1944, recorded by author in southern England, TS p 4.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Marie McNay, born county Durham 1942, recorded by author in London, 17<sup>th</sup> July 2001, TS p 3.

<sup>38</sup> Marie McNay, TS, p 2.

<sup>39</sup> Marie McNay, TS, p 6.

<sup>40</sup> Janet Brewer, *Personal Histories*, p 65.

<sup>41</sup> Janet Brewer, *Personal Histories*, p 65.

<sup>42</sup> Janet Brewer, *Personal Histories*, p 65.

<sup>43</sup> Helen Taylor, *Personal Histories*, p 40.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Annabel McLaren, born 1952 in London, recorded by author 31<sup>st</sup> July 2011 in London, TS pp 2-3.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Rosie Dean born in Kent 1950, recorded by author 5 July 2011 in Portsmouth, TS pp 2-3.

<sup>46</sup> Coote and Campbell, 1982, p14. Miriam E. David *Personal and Political, Feminisms, Sociology and Family Lives*, Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books, 2003, chap 2.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Margaret Beetham, born 1939, in Edinburgh, recorded by author 8<sup>th</sup> July 2013 in Manchester, TS p 11.

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- <sup>48</sup> Margaret Beetham, TS p 11.
- <sup>49</sup> Interview with Sue Laurence, born 1951, recorded by author in London, 19<sup>th</sup> July 2001, TS pp 1-2.
- <sup>50</sup> Interview with 'Jenny', born 1950 in Leeds, recorded by author 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> April 2011 in Europe, TS pp 9-10.
- <sup>51</sup> Pen Dalton, *Personal Histories*, pp 75-6.
- <sup>52</sup> Ellen Malos, *Personal Histories*, p 24.
- <sup>53</sup> Ellen Malos, *Personal Histories*, p 24.
- <sup>54</sup> Marion Lieberman, *Personal Histories*, p 21.
- <sup>55</sup> Marion Lieberman, *Personal Histories*, p 21.
- <sup>56</sup> Marion Lieberman, *Personal Histories*, p 21.
- <sup>57</sup> Marion Lieberman, *Personal Histories*, p 21.
- <sup>58</sup> Margaret Beetham, TS pp 2-3.
- <sup>59</sup> Margaret Beetham, TS p 16.
- <sup>60</sup> 'Sarah', TS p 16.
- <sup>61</sup> This notion is reinforced by the recent work of Miriam E. David, 2003, p 31.
- <sup>62</sup> Interview with Siri Lowe, born 1946 in London, recorded by author 6<sup>th</sup> July 2001 and 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2011 in London, TS p 6. Siri has since died. Obituary *Guardian* 27 May 2015.
- <sup>63</sup> Siri Lowe, TS p 6.
- <sup>64</sup> Siri Lowe, TS p 7. Three women from the Peckham Rye WLM group wrote a paper for the first WLM conference in Oxford 1970 which was reproduced as Jan Williams, Hazel Twort and Ann Bachelli, 'Women and the Family', in Michelene Wandor (ed), *The Body Politic, Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement in Britain 1969-1972*, London: Stage 1, 1972, pp 31-44.
- <sup>65</sup> Siri Lowe, TS p 7.
- <sup>66</sup> Interview with Mary Chamberlain, born in Surrey 1947, recorded by the author, 27<sup>th</sup> July 2001, in London, TS pp 17-18.
- <sup>67</sup> Jackie Barron, *Personal Histories*, p 60.
- <sup>68</sup> Jackie Barron, *Personal Histories*, p 60.
- <sup>69</sup> Margaret Beetham, TS p 2.
- <sup>70</sup> Margaret Beetham, TS p 3.
- <sup>71</sup> Jilly Rosser, *Personal Stories*, p 139.
- <sup>72</sup> Monica, *Personal Histories*, p 34. Monica has since died. Betty Underwood, *Personal Histories*, p 44.
- <sup>73</sup> Interview with Judy Bury, born 1946 in London, recorded 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2014 in Edinburgh, TS p 12. Judy has since died. Obituary, *Guardian*, December 15 2015.
- <sup>74</sup> Susanne Coysh, TS p 13.
- <sup>75</sup> Interview with Jane Bell, born 1940 in Cambridge, recorded by author 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2012, London, TS p 8.
- <sup>76</sup> Interview with Dorothy Sheridan, born 1948 in Galway, Ireland. Recorded by author 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2011 and 18<sup>th</sup> September 2011 in Brighton, TS p 18.
- <sup>77</sup> Interview with Celia Burgess-Macey, born 1945 in Warwickshire, recorded by author 19<sup>th</sup> April 2012 in London, TS p 16.
- <sup>78</sup> Pen Dalton, *Personal Histories*, p 76.
- <sup>79</sup> Celia Burgess-Macey, TS p 18.
- <sup>80</sup> Sheridan, TS pp 22-3.
- <sup>81</sup> Heather Pudner, TS p 8.
- <sup>82</sup> Heather Pudner, TS p 12.
- <sup>83</sup> Mary Chamberlain, TS p 8.
- <sup>84</sup> Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, 1962, is often cited as being a very influential text for feminists.
- <sup>85</sup> Barron, *Personal Histories*, p 59.
- <sup>86</sup> Helen Taylor, *Personal Histories*, p 41.
- <sup>87</sup> Coote and Campbell, 1982, pp 17-18. Martin Pugh, 2015, p 264.
- <sup>88</sup> Lela Fernandes, 'Unsettling "Third Wave Feminism"', *Feminist Waves, Intersectionality, and Identity Politics in Retrospect*, in Nancy A. Hewitt (ed.), *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of US Feminism*, New Jersey, USA: Rutgers University Press, 2010, chapter 5, pp 98 – 118.
- <sup>89</sup> The work of Margaretta Jolly has been helpful in this regard, see for example, 'Assessing the impact of women's movements: sisterhood and after', *WSIF*, no 35, 2012, pp 150-152.