

## Campaigns and protests of the Women's Liberation Movement

From protest marches to strikes, smashing windows of pornography shops, flour-bombing beauty (1) **PAGEANTS**, letter-writing campaigns and 'die-ins' in Downing Street, campaigns about issues central to women's lives have taken many forms. From legal and illegal action, to quiet (2) **SUBVERSION** and huge spectacle, feminists of the Women's Liberation Movement employed various methods in order to make their point and demand social and (3) **LEGISLATIVE** change.

### Campaigns around reproductive rights and abortion rights

The politics of reproduction – fertility, childbirth and child-rearing – lie at the heart of feminist campaigns across the world. Here we will address only one, that of abortion, because it was such a visible and prominent campaign for the Women's Liberation Movement of the '70s. 'Free (4) **CONTRACEPTION** and abortion on demand' was one of the UK Women's Liberation Movement's initial four demands, agreed at the first national conference in 1970.

The beginnings of abortion legislation can be found in the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act, which stated that any abortion, even if performed for medical reasons, was a criminal act. In 1929 the Infant Life Preservation Act was passed, allowing abortions to be carried out up to the 28th week of pregnancy, if the mother's life was endangered by the pregnancy. In the 1930s the Abortion Law Reform Society was set up, and a (5) **LANDMARK** case was won, after which abortion could be carried out if the mental health of the mother was at risk. Wealthy women could often afford to see a psychiatrist who could approve them for a safe abortion on grounds of mental health. Poorer women did not have access to this (6) **PROVISION** and the number of (7) **BACKSTREET**, illegal abortions was high, with many women dying as a result of inadequate medical attention.

Abortion was legalised in the UK in 1967 so long as consent had been given by two doctors and the woman was less than 24 weeks pregnant. The act was put forward by David Steel, a Liberal MP, but it was (8) **BACKED** by the long-standing Abortion Law Reform Association of 25 national groups. These included traditional women's groups as well as the National Council for Civil Liberties. As soon as the act was passed there was opposition, led by far-right Christian groups and the Catholic Church. The 1967 Abortion Act did not and still does not apply to Northern Ireland, where Nationalists and Unionists have joined together repeatedly to block abortion rights being (9) **EXTENDED** to women. Ann Rossiter, author of *Ireland's Hidden Diaspora: The 'Abortion Trail' and the Making of a London-Irish Underground, 1980–2000* (IASC Publications, 2009), testified to the long campaigns that have followed from this in a Witness Workshop at The Women's Library in 2009

Throughout the 1970s and '80s there were various attempts to (10) **AMEND** the 1967 Abortion Act. These included restricting the grounds on which a woman could request an abortion or the number of doctors who were licensed to perform one. The National Abortion Campaign (NAC) was founded in 1975 in order to defend women's abortion rights. Political theorist Elizabeth Meehan suggests that in some ways the campaign for abortion rights reflected feminists' general sense that the legal equality they had won was (11) **FRAGILE** and immediately under threat. She states that the NAC activated a feminist network in the British Labour movement by drawing attention to the difficulties in securing abortions even within a legal framework.

Currently nearly 200,000 women have legal abortions each year in Britain and there is a general all-party consensus that there is no political (12) **APPETITE** to change the law. Nevertheless abortion's place as a central element of women's rights remains a highly challenging and challenged idea.

Both pro- and anti-abortion campaigners have used and continue to use protest marches to state their opinions and (13) **RAISE** public awareness for their campaigns.

### **Campaigns against violence against women**

Campaigns against violence against women form another central theme of WLM activism. Making violence against women socially unacceptable is seen as one of the movement's great successes, internationally as well as in Britain. Campaigns took many forms, from public demonstrations and meetings, to the setting up of (14) **REFUGE**, to offering free legal advice to women.

Campaigns against violence against women achieved success on a national and international level. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women (CEDAW) was adopted by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in 1979. CEDAW defines what (15) **CONSTITUTES** discrimination against women and sets up an agenda for national action to end such discrimination. In 1993 a UN World Conference on Human Rights was held in Vienna. At this assembly it was declared that 'The human rights of women and of the girl-child are an (16) **INALIENABLE**, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights'. This was an important step forward for women's rights on the international stage. It explicitly identified sexual violence and abuse as a human rights violation, and drew attention to the relationship between these violations and gender.

Women's Aid, a major national charity working to end domestic violence against women and children, was a (17) **FLAGSHIP** campaign of the WLM. The first Women's Aid federation was set up in 1974. It campaigned hard to raise awareness of domestic abuse and challenged the division between public and private life, and the perception of the family as a safe and positive institution.

In 1980 Women Against Violence Against Women was established in Leeds. This radical feminist campaign grew as a response to the 'Yorkshire Ripper' murders when 13 women were killed between 1975 and 1980 in the north of England. Feminist academics Joni Lovenduski and Vicky Randall state in their book *Contemporary Feminist Politics: Women And Power In Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) that

Actions included the occupation of the Sun newspaper offices to protest at the use of rape stories for (18) **TITILLATION**, the formation of local anti-pornography groups, demonstrations outside cinemas showing 'Dressed to Kill', smashing the windows of strip clubs and putting glue in the locks of sex shops. In Leeds a woman campaigner drove her car through the front of a sex shop as an act of protest and anger.

The first Rape Crisis centre opened in 1973 and the charity now covers the UK. It is a feminist organisation that wants 'all women and girls to be free from the fear and experience of sexual violence'. During the 1970s and '80s domestic and sexual violence shelters, and advisory services specifically targeted at the most under-represented sections of the community also began to open. These included Southall Black Sisters in London, Shakti Women's Aid in Edinburgh and Sahara Women's Refuge in Leeds, all of which were led and used by women from minority ethnic communities.

### **Consciousness raising**

Consciousness-raising groups allowed women to discuss their feelings, needs and desires. These included feelings perceived as private, taboo or shameful. In women-only spaces, women explored experiences of sex, abortion, relationships and families, often for the first time.

## Consciousness-raising and campaigning

Feminists who engaged in consciousness-raising (C-R) usually combined this with other campaigning work. Many women active in the Women's Liberation Movement have emphasised that the point of C-R was to politicise the personal, rather than to personalise the political.

Consciousness-raising was a way of discovering how and what women thought, and building individual and collective (19) **RESILIENCE**: what was meant, at least at first, by 'sisterhood'. Many women in the early days of the WLM felt (20) **BEWILDERED** about what it meant to be a woman, what they were doing with their lives and why. However, they strongly recognised political and economic inequalities between women and men, and among women themselves. More practically C-R was a way of ensuring that all women in a group meeting spoke, not just the most vocal, articulate or (21) **BOLD**. Democracy was a living principle of the WLM, however difficult and inadequate it proved in practice, and C-R was one way this democracy was put into practice.

Small-group democracy has been a characteristic practice in democratic and utopian movements since the civil war sects in the 17th century, and the late 18th-century political reform movements in Britain, Europe and the USA. C-R also had (22) **AFFINITIES** with the Maoist practice of 'speaking bitterness', when (23) **AGGRIEVED** people were encouraged to talk about their problems at meetings. However, the UK practice was primarily influenced by the American feminist and student movements, where C-R was regularly employed as a method of political activism.

## Criticism of consciousness-raising

Some left-wing activists and some feminists criticised consciousness-raising as 'navel-gazing'. They argued that time would be better spent tackling wider social problems than discussing personal issues. Supporters of C-R believed, however, that wider social problems are discovered when individual experience is shared. There was a general suspicion among black women activists about the more individualised forms of consciousness-raising, particularly when they focused on love and sex, which seemed at times to be a white woman's (24) **SELF-INDULGENCE**. Activists were constantly (25) **JUGGLING** priorities but, in the long run, personal forms of change have been part of all women's movements, though not always in the same way.

## Sharing personal experience today

In contemporary society the mass media and digital media deal with issues, particularly concerning sex and relationships, through advice columns, chat shows and online social networks to a far greater extent than ever before. In the 1960s this would have been socially very shocking. Do you think that this form of sexual and emotional conversation, arguably a greater freedom to talk openly about such things in the public arena, can be seen as a form of consciousness-raising? Do you think there is any value in sharing personal experiences in this way? How important is context to confession?

## Exercise

Complete the article using the words provided below. You might need to change the form of some of them.

resilience	bold	titillation	aggrieved	refuge	bewildered	constitute
provision	flagship	back	contraception	raise	landmark	affinity
subversion	appetite	extend	juggle	inalienable	amend	backstreet
legislation	fragile	raise	self-indulgence			