

Enriching public understanding of the British Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s/1980s



The Sisterhood and After project documents the emergence, development and structure of the Women's Liberation Movement, revealing a greater range of networks, political positions and campaigns than was previously known. Image © Betsy Warrior.

Sisterhood and After: The Women's Liberation Oral History Project, a joint venture led by Sussex's Margaretta Jolly in partnership with the British Library, has led to the launch of the first national oral history archive charting the development of the post-1968 Women's Liberation Movement in Britain. This permanent public resource preserves the voices of 1970s/1980s feminists, has achieved national prominence and has been used to facilitate curatorial, educational and cultural activities that have had significant impact on public perceptions of the Women's Liberation Movement, bringing it to life for new audiences.

Overview

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word 'feminist' simply as 'an advocate or supporter of the rights and equality of women'. Yet for well over a century of striving for equal rights, 'feminism' and 'feminist' have been words that are frequently used to derogate women, to the degree that many women hesitate to use the term in reference to themselves. A re-examination of the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM), has challenged stereotypes and presents a new appraisal of past role models who pursued gender equality. Sisterhood and After (SAA), a three-year Leverhulme-funded research partnership led by Dr Margaretta Jolly (Director of the Centre for Life History and Life Writing Research, University of Sussex) in partnership with the British Library, was conceived in response to the fact that there was no general oral history of the post-1968 WLM in Britain. A key motive for the

project was to provide a permanent, accessible and professional oral history collection of the WLM that would match the oral history collections of suffrage activists, now recognised to have world heritage value.

As most activists are now in their 60s or 70s, the project was motivated by a sense of urgency to capture and preserve the voices and memories of Britain's WLM. This was done through oral history interviews (on average seven hours long) with 60 activists and the creation of a professionally sustained and accessible archive collection and subsequent monograph. The goal was to reach as wide as possible an audience and reveal the conditions of gender relations in the late 20th century and the strategies women used to improve them. Interviewees were questioned about their roles in campaigns, their ideas, their own experiments with political and personal relationships, experiences of adolescence, bodily life and identity, views on diversity of movements across and within the four nations of the UK, and how their lives compared with those of their mothers.

Jolly, a leading specialist in feminist history, and research fellow Dr Rachel Cohen, conducted the interviews and worked closely with Dr Polly Russell, curator at the British Library, to conceptualise the collection and presentation of the material, and to plan outreach activities. A doctoral student, Freya Johnson-Ross, also supported the interviewing process and has interpreted materials for a study on feminists in local government. The SAA archive includes 10 short films, produced by Lizzie Thynne (Senior Lecturer in Film at Sussex), that are based on audio interview

research and dramatise particular campaigns of the era. Individually, the interviews constitute in-depth biographies that spotlight the circumstances and consequences of a person's activism in the context of their personal lives. Collectively, as a history, SAA documents the emergence, development and structure of the WLM, revealing a greater range of networks, political positions and campaigns than was previously known. The archive captures the everyday life and sensibility of a radical generation of women, contributing to cultural and social knowledge of the postwar period as well as the surprising and various meanings of feminism in practice.

The research identified 10 core narratives about the 1970/80s WLM and sourced further archival materials to support and illustrate them. SAA has also contributed to cultural memory research including the methodology of oral history.

Achieving impact

SAA has had significant impact by enriching the public's appreciation and understanding of post-1968 feminism through the production of a valuable new public archive that has been used to inform national exhibitions and workshops and produce public and educational outreach programmes.

The archive itself provides a digital, searchable resource of personal voices from the WLM. It is held at the British Library Sound Archive with two public entry points to the archive (the Learning Programme website, which provides resources for schools, and access to the interview catalogue for researchers).

The extensive schools-facing website is permanently hosted by the British Library's Learning Programme, and provides access to the 10 detailed narratives allowing visitors to trace the campaigns and debates of the Movement. The site also contains the 10 short films by Thynne, 120 audio clips, supporting images, animations and a detailed timeline. These materials are framed with questions and teachers' notes. This SAA portal on the British Library's Learning Programme site also links to the Sound Archive Catalogue where each individual's oral history is supported by a detailed summary of interview contents.

In its first 18 days, the SAA page on the Learning Programme site attracted more than 12,000 visitors and nearly 30,000 page views, while total page views between March 2013 and February 2014 numbered over 80,000.

Research material has been used in exhibitions and workshops such as the Propaganda: Power and Persuasion Exhibition at the British Library (May to September 2013), featuring extracts from and workshops about SAA, and The Long March to Equality exhibition at The Women's Library (October 2012 to March 2013). Materials have also been used in a British Library Teachers' Forum in London (July 2013) for secondary-school English teachers.

The launch of SAA attracted prominent news and social media coverage, including the BBC World Service *World News* programme, the *Telegraph*, *Guardian* and *Times* newspapers, and a link to the SAA page on the Learning Programme site being tweeted on launch date by journalists Caitlin Moran and Zoe Williams, who have just under 500,000 Twitter followers between them.

The SAA research has also been used many times by curators, community historians, teachers and pupils, writers, broadcasters and artists in projects that challenge stereotypes, offer new role models in the pursuit of equal rights and gender justice, and bring feminism to life for new audiences. One work placement trainee at the British Library, wrote: 'As a young woman, I am not old enough to recall some of the key aspects of the WLM ... Nonetheless, I feel a wholehearted appreciation for the liberation movement [and] a genuine appreciation for the project of SAA which has documented the movement through dedicated and uncompromising research'.

Future impact

'Voices in Movement', a sound-led creative work using the oral history (created and directed by Lizzie Thynne with music by Ed Hughes, and produced by Margaretta Jolly), has been presented as an installation and single screen piece. The latter was shown as part of the group show 'Family Ties Re-framing Memory' at the Peltz Gallery, Birkbeck in July 2014. Jolly has now gathered evidence of the impact of this exhibition, including visitor feedback that has described the



3 July – 25 July 2014
Free Entry

The Peltz Gallery, Birkbeck School of Arts,
43 Gordon Square, London WC1H 0PD
Monday-Friday, 10-7pm

Flyer for 'Family Ties Re-framing Memory' group exhibition: cover image from 'Acts of Reparation' by Rosy Martin with Kay Goodridge.

exhibit as 'excellent and evocative' and 'moving, tantalising and mesmerising'. The Open University has requested inclusion of material from SAA in their forthcoming law degree, and Jolly is now leading a follow-on project examining all interviewees' personal papers in preparation for possible donation to public archives across the UK.

SAA is now cited as a resource on several feminist sites, including Feminist Memory, and will be part of a community discussion on feminist archives at the Feminism in London annual conference (October 2014).

Funding and partnership

The project received £325,000 from the Leverhulme Trust.

Working with us

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