La mujer y el estado. Parte 1

Women and the State. Part 1

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On Top: Mountains as spaces of gendered power and democracy.

Martina Gugglberger
(Austria):

Resumen: El artículo presente examina entrevistas de historia oral con escaladores, que han emprendido expediciones al Himalaya y de hecho en equipos todo-mujeres. El montañismo en el Himalaya era y todavía es un dominio de los hombres. Por lo tanto, desde 1955 las mujeres se han organizado en equipos femeninos. Los primeros equipos llegaron de Gran Bretaña, donde muchos de sus propios clubes de mujeres existían para las montañeras. Las montañeras de esta época se presentan modesta en su propia representación respectivamente no se notan inusual y niegan reivindicaciones políticas o feministas. En la mayoría de los casos avistaron en efecto montañas que todavía no han escalado, pero en el ámbito de 6000 metros. Desde la década de 1970 las montañeras en expediciones de las mujeres pisaban mas fuerte y representaban reivindicaciones políticas para ser tratados igual en las montañas más altas. Desde 1993 las escaladoras de montaña de Nepal organizan expediciones de mujeres, por ejemplo para llegar al Monte Everest. En los últimos años las mujeres nepaleses especialmente los más jóvenes utilizan esta estrategia no sólo de escalar altas montañas sino también para transmitir los temas sociales y políticos, y no menos importante ampliar el ámbito de aplicación personal.

Abstract: The History of mountain climbing is a gender biased history. In the beginnings of mountaineering in the 18th and 19th century the ideal climber was constructed along stereotyped masculine values and linked to heroic and nationalised discourses. In countries like Great Britain the new founded alpine clubs in the second half of the 19th century were considered as man-only associations. Even if women were not clearly excluded from membership as in many other national alpine clubs their places and roles remained marginalised until the end of the 20th century. This paper investigates former strategies of women climbers to follow their passion for high-altitude mountain climbing despite social and cultural gender-limits. After WWII female climbers in Europe and the US picked up a practice already established by British women in the 1920s and 1930s: all-women-rope teams and expeditions. With the opening of Nepal to foreigners since 1949 new efforts were made to reach the summits of the highest peaks of the world and to discover new areas in the Himalaya region. Even though female climbers were successful for example in the Alps and the Andes, women rarely were among those who headed for the unclimbed 8000m high Himalayan peaks. The phenomenon of women’s-only-expeditions is illustrated from 1955 to the present and as a case study. Oral History interviews with female British and Nepalese climbers are discussed to illustrate motivations and gender-arrangements in the field of mountain sports.
The social and cultural implications of mountaineering and high altitude climbing have been an important aspect since the first ascent of Mont Blanc, the highest peak in Europe, in 1786. Historically mountaineering and high altitude climbing are spaces of power in multiple ways. Extremely exposed to natural power, mountain areas, especially those in the Himalayas above 8000 meter are also a terrain of contested social orders.

OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER
In this paper I want to concentrate on issues of gender arrangements and gendered power in the field of high altitude mountaineering in the Himalayas in the last 60 years. After an overview on the development of the history of "Himalayism"¹ I want to discuss the participation of women with a special focus on all-women’s expeditions. Within sport history of high-altitude climbing hardly any of these all-female-expeditions is recognised for extraordinary achievements and therefore these expeditions are mostly only a footnote within the history of Himalayan mountaineering. I use them as lenses through which I try to demonstrate shifts in motivations, goals and circumstances between 1955 and the present. In the last year I conducted a series of oral history interviews with female climbers from Austria, Great Britain and Nepal, who were involved in high-altitude climbing with all-women’s groups. The interviews are a sort of database for my book-project on the history of women’s-expedition which I am still exploring.

For this paper I focus on two life stories with a very different social, cultural and political background. The first interviewee, Monica Jackson, from Edinburgh, Scotland, is a representative of the very first group of women who went to the Himalayas in entire female parties in the 1950s. The second life story presented is the one of Saraswati BK, a young Nepalese climber from Pokhara who participated in a women’s-expedition in 2011.

THE BEGINNINGS: HISTORY OF WOMEN CLIMBERS IN THE HIMALAYAS
The history of mountaineering has always been a strongly gender biased history. In the 18th and 19th centuries the ideal climber was constructed along stereotyped masculine values and linked to heroic and nationalised discourses. In European countries like Great Britain the new founded Alpine Club in the second half of the 19th century was considered as men-only association. Even if women were not explicitly excluded from membership in most of the other national alpine clubs their places and roles remained marginalised until the end of the 20th century.

In the first period of Himalayan expeditions mainly British parties tried to explore the region with the main target to find a route to the summit of Mount Everest. In these early periods of Himalayan expedition only very few women were part of some teams, and if so, they were mostly in company of their husbands. Fanny Bullock Workman for example, organised eight Himalaya expeditions between 1898 and 1914 together with her husband. She reached an altitude of 6930 meter and found herself in competition for the title of the "highest woman of the world" with Annie Peck, who was climbing in South America. Both climbers were active in the first feminist movement and used their mountain-activities to fight for women’s votes.²

Less feminist in her outlook, Hettie Dyhrenfurth considered herself mainly the assistant and companion for her husband Günther. She was part of two Himalaya expeditions in the 1930s, reached Sia Kangri [or Queen Mary’s peak] in the Karakoram in 1934 and held the new female altitude record of 7422m until the mid-fifties.³

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¹ This term is used by the French sociologist Michel Raspaud in his book about Himalayan mountaineering and nationalism: Michel Raspaud (2003), L’aventure himalayenne. Les enjeux des expéditions sur les plus hautes montagnes du monde 1880-2000, Grenoble.
³ Hettie Dyhrenfurth [1931]: Memsaheb im Himalaja, Leipzig.
CROSSING BOUNDARIES: WOMEN’S EXPEDITIONS

The third period of "Himalayism" started with the opening of Nepal to foreigners in 1949. The fourteen 8000 meter peaks situated in Nepal, China and Pakistan became a central target for international alpinists. The competition for the fourteen highest peaks of the world was opened in 1950 with the ascent of the Annapurna by a French team led by Maurice Herzog. By 1964 all the peaks over 8000 meter were "conquered" and successfully "attacked", respectively, all by male mountaineers. In this "golden age of Himalayan Climbing" most female climbers saw for themselves no possibility to be included in teams for serious high altitude expedition in the Himalayas.

To think of Himalayan climbing is to think of all one’s own climbing experience magnified ten times and exalted to the realms of the impossible. Many times in my life I wished that I was a man of strong physique and outstanding climbing ability who would be an acceptable member of a Himalayan Expedition. [...] But I am a woman, fifty-three years of age, tied by household tasks and social duties so the idea remained among the lumber at the back of my mind to which it rightly belonged. Himalayan Expeditions, I told myself, were only for men, and for that small percentage of men who have outstanding physical strength combined with that steadfastness of purpose and determination which extends their powers and carries them even beyond the limits of human endurance.5

In the foreword to “Mountain and Memsahibs”, an expedition report on the second all-women’s expedition (Abinger Himalayan Expedition) in 1956, Joyce Dunsheath, a British mountaineer and traveller, describes the attraction and glory that the Himalayas represented for European climbers. The general stereotype of women being physically weak and not as skilful in difficult and dangerous situations also influenced female climbers’ attitudes towards themselves. The physical strength and capacities of male expedition members were considered to be extraordinary and stressed as heroic. The limit that was pushed by male climbers even seemed to be a supernatural event "beyond the limits of human endurance."

It was the fact of not being considered equal, in terms of capacities and physical strength, and hence being deprived of the leadership which prompted the idea of separate women teams for expeditions. In Great Britain the separate women’s alpine and climbing clubs (Ladies Alpine Club, Pinnacle Club, and Ladies Scottish Climbing Club) were in favour of this strategy. In 1921, when the Pinnacle Club, a special rock climbing club for women was founded, the attainment of self-responsible leadership skills of female members was propagated: „They had come to feel that a rock-climbing club for women only would provide training in the responsibilities of leadership and mountaineering in general and they felt very strongly that this could only be gained if they climbed by themselves.”6

Especially in the 1930s, the idea of women climbing on their own had some followers within British, but also American and French climbers.7 These first women-only climbers did not want to compromise the male community of alpinists and remained modest in the description of their performances. They were not concerned about emancipation and "took their place among the climbing fraternity as mountaineers rather than as women who happened to be climbers”.8

For these early women Himalayan mountaineers the fact that they were crossing gender boundaries when they travelled on a land rover on their own from Great Britain to India9, or when they climbed unclimbed

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7 Proponents of these rope teams without men were for example the American climber Miriam Underhill (married O’Brian), the Swiss alpinist Loulou Boulaz or Nea Morin. Morin, Micheline (1936): En cordées. Paris, Neuchatel; Underhill, Miriam: Give me the hills. London; Morin, Nea (1968): A woman’s reach. Mountaineering memoirs. London.
8 See Angell, Pinnacle Club, p. 121f.
9 Several female parties travelled to India in a cross-country car trip lasting for weeks. See e.g. expedition report: Scarr, Josephine (1966): Four miles high. London.
6000m peaks in untrodden Himalayan valleys was not in the foreground. In their life stories they describe themselves as innocent in terms of political consciousness on gender equality.

**MONICA JACKSON: THE VERY FIRST WOMEN’S EXPEDITION**

Monica Jackson was a member of the first party of women heading for Jugal Himal, a part of the Nepalese Himalayas where they hoped to climb 6000 meter peaks. In the oral history interview she describes herself as “innocent” in terms of being aware of doing something extraordinary and crossing gender boundaries. She remembers a lot of help for the preparation of the expedition, from her husband, her family, alpine institutions and also male colleagues. The only one who doubted the female party to lead a successful expedition was the Ladies Scottish Climbing Club, to which Monika Jackson and the other two members Evelyn Camrass and Barbara Stark belonged.

The funny thing was, we never met any men who said ‘don’t go’. But our own club didn’t trust us. They didn’t allow us to take the name of the club, because they thought we would bring dishonour on the club, but nobody else thought that. Even not the Nepales government, we had no problem to get permission, but our own club, they were afraid to be ashamed by us. They wouldn’t let us to take the name, because we wanted to call it the ladies Scottish climbing club expedition and they said ‘no’ you can’t, so we called it the Scottish women’s expedition.11

She joined the Ladies Scottish Climbing Club after she had moved from India to Scotland with her husband and two children in the year 1953. Born in South India in 1920 as one of three daughters of a British coffee plantation owner, she grew up in colonial India. She remembers her family as a place where girls and women were treated as equals and encouraged to go for all kinds of outdoor activities.

Several times in her life story she repeats her motivation for the expedition: “We just wanted to go, and that’s why we went.” Talking about her motherhood of two children she comments: “It was very selfish of me, but I went!” Her children were eleven and twelve years old at the time and stayed with friends and their father during the three months that Monica was abroad for the expedition. Monica Jackson was 93 when I interviewed her in her house in Edinburgh. Despite her age she showed a very clear memory about her mountaineering experiences and likes to talk about it. Compared to the expedition report that was published a year after the women’s expedition in 1956 it is striking that any “bad experiences” with prejudices against a women’s-only party, which are at least indicated in the book, are denied in the interview. In her retrospective Monica focuses on the success and the luck of the whole endeavour: they found a path to enter untrodden valleys and glaciers of the Jugal Himal, climbed a 6000 meter peak for the first time, and did surveying work which brought new informations for mapping the area.12

The idea for the all-women’s expedition to the Himalaya came up after a meeting of the Ladies Scottish Climbing Club, where Monica had presented a talk and pictures on her first Himalayan adventure a couple of years earlier. In October 1952 she had already participated in a four-member party to climb two peaks in the Sikkim. With the American climber RHT Dondson and an Australian climber she attempted the so called Sugar Loaf Peak in the southern area of Kanchenjunga.13

In the interview she did not mention the institutional barriers the three Scottish women had to overcome to get the permission for the expedition. In the written record the fact that they were all female climbers was described as ambiguous, bringing both advantages and disadvantages. The Royal Geographic Society, the Mount Everest Foundation, and the Foreign Ministry had to confirm their support of the expedition in order to convince the Nepalese Foreign Ministry to issue the permission. One concern mentioned in the book was the fact that a ladies’ team would have to deal with mostly male porters and Sherpa. Monica remembers the relationship with the Sherpa as a very cooperative and helpful one. As acknowledgement

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10 Interview Monica Jackson, Edinburgh, 28.08.2013, p. 1.
11 Interview Monica Jackson, Edinburgh, 28.08.2013, p. 3.
12 See also: Jackson, Monica; Stark, Elizabeth (2000): Tents in the clouds. The first women’s Himalayan expedition. Seattle, p. 17-18.
she and her colleagues named the first-climbed peak “Gyalgen” after their sirdar\textsuperscript{14} Mingma Gyalgen. After the expedition she was invited for lots of talks, radio interviews and wrote articles herself about the expedition.

Asked if she was ever interested in doing another expedition and climbing even an 8000 meter peak she admitted that she had thought about it, when she was invited by the French climber Claude Kogan to join her “expédition féminine” to Cho Oyu.

\begin{quote}
Did you ever think of climbing an 8000 meter peak?

No because, we once we settled down..., anyway I never thought. I just thought of it once or twice, you know, with Claude, I really would have loved to climb Cho Oyu with her. She had made the attempt before, so she really wanted to go. But after that I never thought of it.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

Talking about the Cho Oyu expedition of Claude Kogan in 1959 Monica Jackson expressed regret at not having participated in a high-altitude expedition. But in another passage she showed awareness that if she had participated she could have been the one who was killed in an avalanche with Claude Kogan on their way to the summit.

Claude and I wanted to go together, but I don’t know for some reason I couldn’t. I said; but you must be the leader you are more experienced. And she said; but we will do the summit together... But then she had someone else with her and they were swept by an avalanche and were killed.\textsuperscript{15}

\section*{ON TOP: WOMEN’S EXPEDITIONS TO 8000 METER PEAKS}

The French Claude Kogan, the only woman-climber in the 1950s, who had participated in an 8000 meter peak expedition in a Swiss team, was the first to plan an all-women’s team for the Cho Oyu, the world’s sixth highest mountain (8189m), which she had already tried to climb in a mixed -team in 1954. She and the Swiss Raymond Lambert had have to turn back on their summit attempt, but reaching the height of 7700m broke the female high-altitude record of Hettie Dyhrenfurth in 1934 and Kogan was titled in the media reports “la femme la plus haute du monde”.

Claude Kogan was the first mountaineer who planned to organize a pure women’s team to climb a 8000 meter peak. The idea was first discussed in 1956, when she was invited for a talk in London, on the occasion of the 50\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the Ladies Alpine Club in Great Britain. The final team of the expedition consisted of leading female climbers of Great Britain, Switzerland, Belgium, France, and of three Indian women, two daughters and one niece of Tensing Norgay (the first man on the top of Everest with Edmund Hillary in 1953), who together with Raymond Lambert, functioned as patrons of the expedition.

In the “organizational details” she expressed the reasons for an exclusive female team: She emphasized that mountain climbing like any other sport, was exercised by women and men and that women too were attracted to discovering new routes to unclimbed peaks, and wanted to realise “les grandes voies”- the “big routes” in the Himalayas.

\begin{quote}
Until now, these expeditions extra-territorial were mostly reserved for men. Few women had the pleasure to attend and discover the joys of exploration. [...] Hence it is quite natural that among female alpinists, whatever country they are from, this great desire to approach the highest mountains, the range of the Himalayas, is growing.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{14} A ‘sirdar’ is the local leader of the porters and high-altitude assistants (often Sherpas) during an expedition.

\textsuperscript{15} Interview Monica Jackson, Edinburgh, 28.08.2013, p.7.

\textsuperscript{16} Interview Monica Jackson, Edinburgh, 28.08.2013, p.9.

Kogan and the members of the group denied – as it was done before by the Scottish ladies Himalayan expedition - any feminist background and motivation of the planned adventure. In contrary, the motivation is described to be solely sportive, hence she emphasised that the desire for mountaineering in the Himalayas, which is growing within the female climbing community as well, was the main reason for her plans.

After the death of the leader Claude Kogan and the Belgian climber Claudine van Stratten, the expedition was subject to controversial comments in the press, blaming Claude Kogan to be obsessive in her idea of women’s equal capacity to climb the highest peaks.

Until the beginnings of the 1970s no women-expeditions targeted a 8000 meter peak, and finally Japanese all-women’s teams reached Manaslu in 1974 and Mount Everest in 1975 (Junko Tabei was the first women on Mount Everest). Nevertheless women still remained an absolute minority within Himalayism in the 1970s. The few women that joined mixed teams often suffered from direct or indirect discrimination concerning team-positions, leadership or the question who is elected to be in a possible summit team.

Besides the Japanese, Wanda Rutkiewicz a Polish climber and Arlen Blum, an American became the central figures of all-women’s Himalayan mountaineering in the 1970s. The Western generation of female climbers in the 1970s was born around the early 1940s and was significantly more influenced by political feminist movement than the generation before. One example is the American climber Arlen Blum, who had experienced direct discrimination and organised the American Women’s Himalayan Expedition in 1978. Arlene Blum gathered a team of highly-qualified, mostly American female mountaineers. As Julie Rak points out in her paper about high altitude narratives, liberal feminist movement ideas functioned as a guideline for Blum’s Expedition. But the American participants believed in a universality of gender inequality and they ignored cultural differences at the same time. Originally the American women’s expedition followed the plan to accomplish the whole expedition without any male support, and to hire female porters only, called Sherpani. Blum and her team were disappointed to find only a few Sherpani and to realise that these women preferred to work as cooks in the Base Camp instead of climbing with the Western women higher up the mountain.

1990S TO THE PRESENT: NEPALESE WOMEN’S EXPEDITIONS

Fifteen years later things had changed: Nepalese women did enter the field and the business of extreme mountaineering. In 1993 the first female Nepalese climber, Pasang Lhamu Sherpa reached the top of Mount Everest in the context of an all-women’s expedition. She had attempted Everest two times before and organised sponsorship by an international beer brewery for the first Nepalese all-women’s party consisting of three climbers. Finally she achieved the summit with a group of Sherpas, but died on the way down. After her body was recovered her death provoked national mourning. Celebrated as a heroine for her achievement, she was constructed a symbol for female Nepalese identity. In the same year the Pasang Lhamu Mountaineering Foundation in Kathmandu was founded with the goal to support Nepalese women in the field of education, economy and technology.

In the 1990s high-altitude mountaineering but also trekking in lower areas had become an increasing factor in tourism and Nepalese economy. Nevertheless, very few women participated in this business of mountaineering. Only recently the tourism sector is debated as a space of career chances especially for women and certain programs and trainings are raised.
For the male predominated field of high altitude climbing Nepalese women are still a rare exception, but it seems that regarding the publicity and media response in Nepal a high level of interest has been drawn towards female climbers, especially women’s expeditions in the last fifteen years.\textsuperscript{22} The second Nepalese woman who summited Mount Everest was Lhakpa Sherpa, who was part of the Nepalese Women’s Millennium Everest Expedition in 2000. This time, five Nepalese women were part of the team. In local media reports Lhakpa Sherpa was represented as a symbol of the ‘new’ Nepalese ‘millennium-women’, coming from a rural area and entering the global scene of international mountaineering.\textsuperscript{23}

Since then women’s expeditions have been used for demonstrating empowerment and gender equality programs.

\textbf{SARASWATI BK: FROM A PORTER TO A HIGH ALTITUDE CLIMBER}

Pokhara is the second important trekking and mountaineering area of Nepal, besides the Everest region. In 1998 the three Nepalese sisters Lucky, Dicky and Nicky Chhetri founded the travel and trekking agency Three Sisters in Pokhara with the goals to train female trekking guides and porters. In addition Lucky Chhreti raised a non-profit organisation, Empower Women of Nepal (EWN) to start various projects to support local women and girls including training courses for trekking and tourist guides. From 2007 to 2010 together with the Polish organisation Magic Mountain Foundation (MMF), EWN organised several trainings in ice climbing and high altitude mountaineering in Nepal and Europe. Finally, in 2011 four of the trainees took part in the Nepalese Women Annapurna Expedition with the goal to bring the first Nepalese women to the top of Annapurna IV (7525 m).

Saraswati BK, born 1983 in Pokhara, was a member of the four-woman’s team. She started to work for Three Sisters Trekking Agency as a porter, carrying loads for foreign trekking tourists. She had to leave school at the age of fourteen because of family problems. Being a member of the lower cast and without any school certificate she had difficulties to find a job and was happy to get the chance to participate in trainings in the trekking business and to work as a trainee guide before she became a full trekking guide.

\begin{quote}
Now I feel proud of myself, but being a lower cast people, when I was 14-15 years old, it was hard. I really needed money for my family, and I was looking for a job. I went to 10 to 20 places to get a job, but they didn’t give me a job because I am from a lower cast, and all the business is run by higher cast people.\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}

Saraswati has two brothers and a sister and had to support her family with a further income from a very young age. This responsibility challenged her vision of the future and she describes her development in the trekking tourism and later in mountaineering as something that was just happening to her.

\begin{quote}
I never expected to be on an expedition or to climb in the mountains when I was a child, but the time has changed. People said that men can go wherever they want, but women cannot do that. I asked myself why women shouldn’t do that. So one of a sudden things were happening all together; I became a female trekking guide, had a job, and then I started rock climbing, and this was also by luck; I challenged myself for new things, and there were also opportunities offered from the company I worked for. I did not want to become an expedition climber like that; I always wanted to do something
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{23} See also Frohlick, Lhakpa Sherpa; p. 197.
\textsuperscript{22} See also Frohlick, Lhakpa Sherpa; p. 199-203.
\textsuperscript{24} Interview Saraswati Bk, 2.10.2013, Pokhara, p. 6.
challenging, but not this mountain, it was happening like that, you know, in a very good way everything was working by luck.25

In 2005 she was chosen, together with eleven other young women, to take part in a special rock climbing course performed by American climbing teachers. This was the start of her mountaineering and climbing formation during the next years. After two special ice-climbing courses with attempts to climb 6000m peaks in the Annapurna region a group of five girls was selected to leave for Europe, where they attended supplement climbing and technical training in Poland and Italy. During this stay Saraswati and her climbing partners had the chance to climb Mont Blanc.

In 2011 Nepal celebrated the Year of Tourism with special programs proposed by the Ministry of Tourism to promote tourism in Nepal. In this year the two organisations EWN from Nepal and MMF from Poland could obtain sponsors and support for a women’s expedition to Annapurna IV. Saraswati Bk together with three other female trekking guides of the Three Sisters Agency prepared for months, and all four reached the summit. She was the only member of the team who did not grow up in a mountain area on a high altitude level and had to face doubts about her capabilities to reach the summit.

The most exciting moment in the expedition was to be on the top! Because two girls were from the Everest region, one girl from Manang, and they all were used to the snow and the height. Before the Annapurna IV expedition we had a training for five months. During that training the local people in the village kept saying to me, that I could not manage to be on the top, because I grew up in Pokhara, which lies on a very low elevation. I might get altitude sickness, I might have problems or I might have to come back from half way, that’s what they were saying. But I feel myself inside, oh, but inside me I felt they really make me strong. [laughs] As long as I was not on the summit I was a bit scared myself. In Nepal there are six million lower caste people, and I was the first women of my caste to attempt Annapurna IV. So I felt inside, if I am on the top, at least everybody will see that my caste can also do it, I felt like that, you know.26

For the young Nepalese women Saraswati, who at the moment works as a hotel manager in Pokhara the women’s expedition was more than a mountain adventure and a proof of her climbing skills. It was a possibility to transmit a range of messages concerning her identity as a women and a member of a lower chaste within Nepalese society. The expedition was accompanied by lot of local and also nation-wide media interest and Saraswati also mentioned the effect that mountaineering had on her personal development as an activity but also as a job, and that she was overwhelmed by the public reception in Pokhara after the team’s return of the expedition.

The job as a mountaineering woman made me more confident and stronger. And after the expedition - before people only knew me as female trekking guide - now they know me as an Annapurna climber, yes [laughs].27

**FINAL REMARKS**

The two life-stories presented in this paper illustrate two very different voices of oral history; they represent two ends in the timeline of women’s expeditions in the Himalayas. In the 1950s European female mountaineer followed their passion and went off for an adventure to discover unknown areas and peaks. They chose to climb in women’s team to avoid male domination and discrimination. Most of the women were organised in alpine clubs and had been active in mountaineering and climbing for years. For Monica Jackson the three-woman party allowed her to plan her own expedition, to take full responsibility for decisions and to exercise leadership on the mountain. When she came back to Great Britain she was

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25 Interview Saraswati Bk, 2.10.2013, Pokhara, p. 4.
26 Interview Saraswati Bk, 2.10.2013, Pokhara, p. 8.
27 Interview Saraswati Bk, 2.10.2013, Pokhara, p. 6.
invited for talks and media interviews and her book on the expedition was even translated into German and Swedish.

Saraswati Bk became a mountaineer and a high-altitude climber "by luck", as she expressed it. Her mountaineering experiences, climbing capabilities and especially the expedition to Annapurna IV opened up new opportunities for her future professional life. The organization of the women’s expedition was part of an internationally supported program to foster women in Nepal. Mountaineering and expeditions are linked with social objectives, for the organisers but also very personally for the members of the group, as Saraswati considers her successful ascent an important contribution to more equality for the underprivileged lower caste people in Nepal.

In both life stories the women’s expedition play a central part, however a tremendous shift in the meaning of women’s expeditions is revealed. Although western participants of women’s expeditions in the 1950s had to overcome several difficulties and gender norms, they were in the privileged situation to realise their plans of a Himalayan expedition. In the contrary the Nepalese female climbers needed the occasion of the expedition to get an opportunity to leave their underprivileged status. Oral history interviews with women climbers are a valuable contribution in the reconstruction of the history of women’s expedition. They allow a close view on personal motivations, on organizational networks and also on the perception of power structures in the field of mountaineering.
Fear and how to cope with it.

Zorica Mrsevic
(Servial):

Resumen: Narrar las historias es un medio de sobrevivencia, acostumbrado y conocido en todas partes como típicamente femenino, un medicamento contra la desesperación y el desamparo en condiciones impuestas, lo que ha sido la principal e inicial hipótesis de este proyecto. Las historias femeninas son mucho más que esto, ya que la esencia de la narración oral femenina es con frecuencia una verdadera colección de vidas femeninas. A causa de todo esto y con este conocimiento, la intención principal ha sido de no permitir que esta guerra (se entiende la guerra que la OTAN ha llevado contra la R.F.Yugoslavia/Serbia en 1999) solo se recuerde a través de una la documentación oficial masculina sobre las actividades oficiales políticas y militares. Solo algunos meses, después de terminar dicha guerra, en el Instituto de Ciencias Sociales en Belgrado hemos entrevistado 110 mujeres, en el proceso de recoger las historias femeninas que contenían los recuerdos y las experiencias femeninas durante esta guerra. De tal manera ha sido recogida una colección de recuerdos femeninos, como un documento autentico y excepcional sobre dicha guerra, observada desde el ángulo femenino con ojos femeninos. Recogiendo estas historias cumplíamos con nuestro objetivo principal de investigación que era el de dar importancia y legitimidad a las recuerdos femeninos, a la existencia femenina, a las vidas de las mujeres en esta guerra. La guerra les imponía con frecuencia unos forzosos cambios dolorosos, pero también la posibilidad de aprender. Eso era un tiempo en el cual vivían entre traumas, pero también entre nuevos conocimientos. Cuando son las mujeres las que crean la paz, se vuelve aparente una verdad muy simple, que los gastos de una guerra son siempre más altos que todos los posibles beneficios de ella. En nombre de la vida para la cual las mujeres siempre se comprometen, es fácil rechazar la idea misma de la llamada „defensa de derechos humanos” con matando gente y destrucciones de guerra. „Nosotros” son en esta historia, las mujeres de Serbia y nuestros/suyos recuerdos del bombardeo de la OTAN que ocurrió en 1999, mientras que „ellos” son los hombres y su historia oficial. El presente proyecto no niega, ni ignora los hechos históricos. Lo más preciso seria decir que han sido enriquecidos con los recuerdos de las mujeres de sus vidas privadas y cuotidianas, de sus miedos y actividades durante este periodo.

Abstract: The main hypothesis of the project is that story-telling is usual and everywhere known typical women’s survival tool against despair and helplessness in the given and imposed surroundings. Moreover, the essence of women’s oral histories is no more than the sum of women’s lives. Thus the main intention was not to let this War (NATO - Serbian War) to be remembered only through men’s official records documenting main stream political and military activities. Only few months after the War was over, in Belgrade based Institute of Social Science we have interviewed 110 women, collecting women’s stories, containing women’s memories and experiences during the War as an authentic, excellent document of the War watching from the women’s point of view, by the women’s eyes. With collecting them we pursued our main aim that was to justify and legitimize the women’s lives lived in the War. The War was for women painful paths of changes and learning, where they lived between stresses and perception. But when women are those who create peace the simple truth becomes apparent, that the costs of war are always higher than its benefits. It is easier in the name of life to reject the term of defense of human rights by killing and war
destruction. “Us” here are women in Serbia and our/their memories on NATO air campaign in 1999, while, “them” are men and their official history. Historical facts are nor denied neither ignored, but rather, added with women’s memories on their private, everyday lives, problems, fears and activities of that period.

Key words: women’s War memories, NATO bombing, fear, activities, story telling against silence.
PREFACE

One of the political divisions, on traitors and patriots originated in nineties as a decade of violent disintegration of Yugoslavia, provides us bitter taste of impossibility to accept and to legitimize differences. Making step outside is followed by dangerous label of subversion of patriotic aims and interests. In the context women’s, non-violent discourses are always dangerous, just because the environmental impulses to violence. It is particularly difficult in times when violence prevails. This is time when many are ready to say that there are no other but violent ways. Just in that time it is particularly important to show the other way by keeping the living experience of rejecting violence keeping the memory for the time when we all shall heal our war wounds and when the whole community will want to regain different value systems. “Us” here are women in Serbia and our/their memories on NATO air campaign in 1999, while, “them” are men and their official history. Historical facts are nor denied neither ignored, but rather, added with women’s memories on their private, everyday lives, problems, fears and activities of that period.

It was too easy to be desperate, it is too easy to find ourselves in blind streets and not to see the way out, it is too easy being exhausted. This is the time for women’s survival capabilities. As violence, fear, destruction, mistrust and apathy are everywhere around us and when good is overlapping with evil, this is the time for women’s capabilities. As it was said in Voznesenskaya’s book, “Women’s Decameron”, the way of fighting for survival in violent and imposed surroundings is to tell personal stories about various events. This storytelling is usual and everywhere known typical women’s tool against despair and helplessness.

Women’s War memories express our mutual female refusal to stay speechless any longer. That was the way both migrant and host women were creating a new history, using own voices and experiences. That was the way both groups of women were challenging the traditional concept of history, of what is historically important, affirming that their everyday life was history. Using oral history, women were reconstructing not only their own past but also their future. War generation of women was the generation of the new self generating priorities, different of priorities accepted by generation of their mothers, not to mention their grandmothers.

HISTORICAL FACT ON NATO AIR CAMPAIGNE AGAINST FRY IN 1999.

The NATO bombing of Yugoslavia was NATO’s military operation against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The strikes lasted from March 24, 1999 to June 10, 1999. The NATO bombing marked the second major combat operation in its history, following the 1995 NATO bombing campaign in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

According to the data of the Commissariat for Refugees of the Republic of Serbia, more than 700,000 people from war affected territories of former Yugoslavia have found shelter in Serbia. They make up almost 10 percent of the country’s population. A total of 65,000 of these people still have refugee status, while others have in the meantime obtained Serbian citizenship and IDs. About 210,000 displaced people from Kosovo-Metohija have been registered. The biggest problem of refugees in Serbia, is the solving of their housing and other vital needs, which is supposed to be regulated by law. Over 73,000 refugees live below the poverty line in four regional countries.

WAR WOMEN’S MEMORIES PROJECT

The idea of collecting of NATO War women’s memories was born in Budapest in winter and early spring months of 1999, during the NATO air campaign against Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The project design resulted from formal and informal fierce discussions led at the Central European University among Serbian women scholars who temporarily, intentionally or not, found themselves there. What was at the beginning just an internal political discussion, eventually included the regional and western colleagues inevitably leading to conclusion of necessity to have War women’s experiences and memories recorded.

1 „Network of women’s solidarity against war”, in Women for peace, [Beograd: Žene u crnom, 1988], 79-106.
The main intention was not to let this War to be remembered only through men’s official records documenting main stream political and military activities. The strong determination was to collect women’s experiences during the War as an authentic document of the War watching from the women’s point of view, by the women’s eyes. The essence of women’s oral histories as always, is no more than the sum of women’s lives. With collecting them the aim was to justify and legitimize the women’s lives lived in the War.

This women’s stories collection was meant to serve in present and future for women’s studies scholars as important database of authentic women’s experiences with the War. It will provide written records of women’s histories as no less important for the historical moment of the War. With this collection women’s experiences with the War will not be left to stay invisible, forgotten, erased from collective memories as not exiting at all, as it was the case in previous wars. This will also serve as the collection of typical women’s wisdom, women’s survival strategies and strategies of overcoming problems imposed by reality of the War. This collection was also meant to serve as a database also for women writers, poets, historians, art historians, journalist and all interested for this aspect of the war. The project comprises the oral histories/stories of hundred and ten women. The stories were grouped in ten thematic groups: Anger, Fear and how to cope with, Activities, Shortages, Being informed, Opinions, Increase of violence and intolerance, Children, Consequences, Funny moments. Main emotions caused by bombing (interviewed persons were instructed to choose three options from the offered list) were: feeling of injustice 45.6%, fear 28.2%, hope in improvement 24.6%, resignation & hopelessness 23.6%, anger & bitterness 22.7%, hatred & aggression 8.2%. As ways of expressing fear are mentioned permanent & intensive fear 13.5%, low intensity & temporary fear 55.6%, no fear at all 30.9%. As activities during bombing were mostly mentioned (interviewed persons were instructed to choose three options from the offered list): socializing, social games, activities in various antiwar organizations 52.7%, increase intensity of domestic chores 38.2%, following media presentations of war events 28.2%, intensified working and professional duties 27.3%, reading books 19.1%. Shortages during bombing (interviewed persons were instructed to choose three options from the offered list): electricity 59.1%, food 47.3%, money 36.4%, water 27.3%, cigarettes 18.2%. Sources of information (interviewed persons were instructed to choose three options from the offered list): domestic media 24.5%, all sources combined 16.4%, foreign media 12.7%, permanent or temporary ignoring media, 12.7%.

WOMEN TALK ON FEAR

When the bombing started I was completely out of myself. I couldn’t do anything. My friend sent me some idiotic books and I couldn’t read, even those. Not until the end of the war I was able to read. I couldn’t think, speak, and communicate. Friends tried to announce to come to see my baby, and I was screaming on them ”NO WAY”. I wasn’t afraid only of the things that were happening, I was also afraid of the things that would happen, for how long those things would go on, what would be destroyed of our poor possessions. We had been on the edge of existence before. It was normal to ask, “What are we going to eat, of what are we going to live?” No answer was usual in that time.” (Mother of a small child, having a delivery 2 months before the start of the war, 31 years old, employed as civil servant in health department)

The worst night was the night the Chinese embassy got hit. It is very near and when it was hit, our apartment was heavily shaken, and we ran to the other end of our room. The children woke up in the hallway. My two-year-old daughter started to rant: “boom, boom, NATO is not good, boom, boom.” It continued long after the bombing stopped. (Civil servant, 40 years old, married with two children, Macedonian, living in Belgrade)

It hurt me terribly; I ate myself out because I didn’t have enough milk. I was in postnatal depression, they call it so, and when I was supposed to come out of it those bastards started to bomb us. And the

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3 Expressions of fear: Permanent & intensive fear 13.5%, Low intensity & temporary fear 55.6%, No fear at all 30.9%.
depression was a very strong one, if you would look at me, I would cry, if you wouldn’t look at me, I would cry more. That’s the way it was. I was just about to start going out and I came to be calmer about the fact that my baby would not be nourished entirely on her mother’s milk, when those bastards started to drop bombs on us. I couldn’t have a drop of milk anymore.” (A mother of a month old baby, 26 years old, on maternity leave during bombing, nurse by education, married, living in Belgrade, Montenegro by nationality)

We were shocked in a way, but not as shocked as others. My husband is from Croatia and we hardly survived previous wars. We have been in similar situations for 10 years and the bombing was just a logical event in the row of events and we were not very surprised, resentful and we hadn’t have thoughts like “How do they dare to do this to us?” Unlike our friends, we didn’t feel outraged. In fact, the bombing diminished the feeling of guilt that we had had before. Earlier we had been eating ourselves out because horrible things were happening to other nations and we were asking ourselves why we were “better”, how did we deserve to be exempted? And when those things started to happen to us we didn’t think it was absurd like people around us did. During the bombing the worst thing for me was not what is happening, but what will happen after the war. The “afterwards” I imagined like a hole, black and bottomless. It is not as bad now as I thought it would be. I was afraid that the elementary goods would not be available at all, because I knew that the “plenty” of goods that were in the supermarkets during the war were all reserves that the state had and that it was only a façade for the people to keep the moral. And I wondered what would happen when those were spent.” (Master of political sciences, 37 years old, working in a library, married, mother of two, Serbian living in Belgrade)

The worst for me was when the power went down. I cried then, went to shelter, covered overhead and stayed in bed all day. I thought the power plants have been destroyed for good and that this country will not be able to build them for years to come and that we shall never have power that I shall never be able to turn on the computer or listen to the radio. It was simply the way I felt that my whole life will be a return to the Stone Age. It hit me and shook me.” (A student of sociology, 23 years old, unmarried, no children, Serbian living in Belgrade)

I know that they were selective and that they had high-technology-weapons with which they could realize the selective targeting. But I also knew the mistakes were possible. It was one of the roughest nights, the explosions were all around everything shattered and there were hits very near us. We went to beds, but before that I heard what had been bombed in Belgrade. I realized that they could bomb the barrack that is just 200 yards away from us and that they could level us to the ground along with the barrack. It seemed as a very stupid way to end one’s life. Why do I need that in my life – the roof, the house to fall on my head? You realized that it is the matter of fate in those moments.” (Serbian, unmarried, a lawyer working in Attorney’s office, no children).

I didn’t think about the future, I was only afraid something was going to fall on my head, like an awful pressure and wheezing. I felt that way during the bombings and air raids. Otherwise I didn’t think about anything else except my chores, my kids and that were soothing me. I didn’t sleep enough, I couldn’t sleep in the nights because of the bombs and I can’t sleep during day anyway. (Master of law, child of parents of different nationalities, working in a research institute, 40 years old, married to Muslim, mother of two, living in Belgrade)

I shall never forget May 23rd, the rain was falling all day long, and the day was bleak and dark and it went to night like there was no dawn at all. I wondered if there was anything horrible that hadn’t happened to us already. Also I experienced the most squalling feeling during the war on the night of May 1st when power was gone, because power station had been hit. The power came next day, the damage has been repaired, but from than on, power supply was not regular anymore. (A civil servant, 50 years old, mother of a child, on leave of absence, Serbian, high school graduate).
WOMEN TALK ON ANGER

I remember the most about the feeling of rage because of the helplessness to change anything, because of injustice that was happening to us and because the great force attacked us – poor, weak, small us. There is no excuse for something like that, I can’t say there us even theoretical reason to vindicate such barbarism. (Age 53, working at Women Studies, living in Mladenovac, a widow, mother of a grownup daughter).

I am especially angry with politicians, their politicians. We take care of our politicians and they don’t have to show us by bombing theirs care of our democracy. Well, these shit western politicians talk about human rights, but they don’t respect human rights at all. All of their minorities are fucked, their women are battered, and they come to hear to sell us human rights for peanuts, fuck them all. Like they are defending refugees, hold on, there were not so many refugees until the bombing started. It is like someone has a headache, and someone comes to help and shoots him in the head and kills him. Yes, the headache will go away, but his life will also go away. Or, I have a headache and someone shoots me in a stomach, because stomach will hurt me more than head. And they call it a solution. Politicians are shitheads and creeps and scumbags and I should not talk about them. (Married, mother of a month old baby, coordinator of a woman’s group, 37 years old, working in a home for retired people, on maternity leave during bombing.)

Why didn’t they use the money to send a special team to assassinate Him and couple of his buddies? Instead, they bomb the park that I had spent my youth in and that has nothing to do with Sloba. Even three months after the war I was not able to come and see the debris, I was so hurt. The night they killed RTS TV we didn’t go to a shelter, we wanted to relax a bit. We didn’t sleep all night, I was watching the news on TV on the hour and I was crying constantly. We watched Studio B for most of the times, we actually watched only Studio B and they were airing good news on the hour about what has been bombed and what was happening on political side. (A member of oppositional party, former feminist and pacifist activist, unemployed journalist, 35)

We are a heavy opposition to the Serbian government. I am and everybody I know is. For me the bombing was a great injustice to the people that was not guilty and has done nothing at all. Then they were dispersing leaflets and I was in particular mad because of that. Then I strongly decided to vote for Sloba although I have been protesting against him for years. I spent three months in 1996–7 winters on the streets and I got flu because of that and after I again went to protest against Sloba. But now they wanted to come and teach me whom and how I am suppose to overthrown. On those leaflets they wrote ”no power, no water, no this and that and Sloba is guilty for all of that”. I am not as stupid as Americans and I don’t believe them. I know Sloba is guilty for lot of things but for shortages of power and water you are the guilty party because you bombed water and power plants. It was a good luck that the elections were not organized immediately after the war, because we would all vote for Sloba, we would forgive him everything. You are not going to tell me when I am to overthrown him I’ll do that when I please and you are not going to reason me with bombs. I was on the pills all the time. I wouldn’t make it without the pills. (A woman living with her partner, no children, 39 years old, working with invalids, Serbian living in Belgrade).

During the bombing I was mad and furious. In fact I was very furious. I was mad at our government and at those who were bombing us and I was mad at our people who were abiding everything. Simply I was mad and furious. I was sick of the whole world. I felt that it was a great injustice. I really felt that was the great injustice. I feel that way still. I really don’t care what had happened in Kosovo, everybody knows about that and everybody knows that it had been the case from long ago, even before Milosevic. And they say Milosevic is the only to blame. We all know who is guilty, but it is not human for someone outside to come and to judge in such a way. I lost respect for the world. What about their moral, I ask? For me they haven’t moral or ethics, or scruples. It is just a brute force bulling those who are weak and small, like we are. I felt horrible, because I believed in western culture, because I read western writers, I learned by heart poems by western poets. I wanted western political institutions to be accepted in out country. (A married woman with 2 children, 51 years old, working in a research institute sociologist).
WOMEN TALK ON INCREASE OF VIOLENCE AND INTOLERANCE AROUND THEM

I think every war has an impact on men that they become more aggressive and the final result is increase of violence against women and children. It’s the same for those who fought and with those who has never been drafted. Simply the state of war creates a specific perplexed psychic condition in them and that makes them aggressive and, I’d say, dangerous. So, my husband became horribly unpleasant, brutal, and violent and he also became a great patriot. Patriotism came after the first seizure of panic. He held patriotic speeches all day long and he chided us because we didn’t share his emotions. A couple of times he beat me because of something I had said or had done or simply because he didn’t like the ton of my voice. I admit I was also very nervous and I didn’t pander him as I had used to before in order to avoid fights. I openly spoke my thoughts. He was not used to that and had seizures of anger. Like everything else was ok and he should do his fudge. He was “stuffed” with propaganda and he talked to other men and so he would scream in the house “We are not surrendering Kosovo, Kosovo is Serbia!” I would say to him “Oh yes you will surrender Kosovo” and he would get mad and start to break things and beat me. (A woman 39 years old, married, mother of two, Gypsy, unemployed lawyer, living in Vojvodina)

And I got sick of my husband’s family. His parents were against Albanians all the time. It was inhuman. When they would hear on the news that Pristina has been bombed, they would holler, “That what they deserve!” They were astonished when I cried, cared and was sad. They said, “So what, they are Albanians, what do you care, why are you crying?” And I asked them, “What if they are Albanians, there are women and little children, are you aware of that? Why should they be bombed?” Or when the group of refugees had been hit I saw on TV a boy, blond one, he was 12 to 13 years old and he was crying by the road. I started to cry too and my parents in law were laughing, “Good, they killed Albanians”. Fuck you, are you normal? Horrible! The intolerance toward Albanians increased during the war and Sloba off course managed to manipulate the public. Like, we are being bombed because of Albanians, they called NATO, and they are guilty. And the people felt so and hate Albanians more than anybody else. That’s what they think even now, 90% of population. (Serbian, 33 years old, unemployed, BA, mother of a three months old baby, living in Belgrade)

Children from neighbourhood became violent, they were screaming war cries and they were playing war games against NATO enemies. I didn’t want my children to learn that behavior, and on the other hand I didn’t want my children to be isolated because they were not participating, shouting and hating the common enemy. I afraid those neighbor kids wouldn’t play with my children anymore. I didn’t want my children to develop the aggressive behavior. (An acting coach, married with two children, 38 years old, Serbian living in Belgrade).

In my neighborhood there was air of intolerance, especially from the people that were intolerant before. Many nationalities live in our building. They took keys of the cellar from the girl whose parents are from Croatia and they stole everything that was in the cellar. We were silent but we felt bitterness and we were afraid we could be next. There were talks about my mother because she is not Serbian. They wanted to know who were her friends etc. I heard stories how the people got more close together because of the situation, but bases on my own experiences I have to say that it had been the case just for the first couple of days. Afterwards everything went down and we all were more nervous and intolerant. (A psychologist, Muslim, married, mother of a child, working in a high school, 39 years old, living in Belgrade).

WOMEN TALK ON THEIR ACTIVITIES AS THEIR WAYS TO COPE WITH THE SITUATION

Since I was totally disappointed with people and in that time in fact rarely saw any, I have to admit I became friendly with goats. One of the goats was not mine, but my neighbor’s, but she joined us – the goat, not the neighbor. Her owners were some city people who didn’t know how to take care of her.” (Retired civil engineer, 55, mother of one adult child, feminist activist from Belgrade, spent the War in her country house in western Serbia, in Zlatibor with daughter in law, grandson and two goats).

The sex was great. Usually during the siren I managed to come twice! All my ex boyfriends called me during the war asking me to have sex with them. I was regularly meeting my loves in the afternoons. We
have had great sex during the war and afterwards. Nothing has changed in my love life during the war, except the time of our meetings and except everything was more beautiful and exciting. There were more talks on sex and love in the city. Men were courting more than ever. One guy was intensively wooing me only during the war and he did it only to reduce his fear. We went out a couple of times, I was sorry for him because nobody wanted to date him. Sex was more then satisfactory with them, although there were no deeper emotions from either side. [Single, no children, living with parents, working in export trade firm, B.Sc., from Belgrade).

I turned into a real housewife and it wasn’t unpleasant. I cooked, cleaned, washed and ironed all day long and it didn’t fall hard on me. I had no time to be creative. I can’t believe people who say that those times were inspiring. I was not inspired at all. But I was completely concentrated on family and I tried to soften everything that was threatening for them. Anyway, I think creativity is not just a mind work but also bodywork and it can be used in everyday work concerning children’s needs. For me it was drawing with children, sewing, I made clothes for my daughter’s doll. The children behaved unlike while they are in Belgrade, they became more serious, very careful and very responsive. They immediately knew what they couldn’t do and they took good care not to annoy or make us angry. It was their contribution. [Serbian, living in Belgrade, married with two children, lawyer, employed]

To my friends and me it was a fun during bombing to translate some Serbian classics to English language. We wanted to show by doing this that we have a culture that has existed for centuries, that we are not a nation without roots and spirit. So, it is noted in my notebook that on April the 24th we translated a poem by Djura Jaksic.” [A student of English language, 20 years old, not married, no children, Serbian form Kragujevac, studying in Belgrade].

I needed somebody, I was scared to be alone and I considered being with family is normal, because family is a resort. But I couldn’t get along with them. I slept a couple of night with them and then I returned. Then my family from Nis had started to panic, my mother especially. She told me to come at once. My final in the school was finished and the first version of my essay was with my professor. The theme is “Rolls’ Theory of justice, the methodological aspect”. [A woman, 26 years old, BA in philosophy, from Nis, unmarried, no children, working in Belgrade]

After a couple of first bombing days, we started to call each other on a phone and to settle what to do. So for first time we had gathered together at my place for a cup of coffee, then we met at chairwomen, then at the House of Youth where we usually meet and where we got a term. It was a problem, because public gatherings were forbidden, and the manager of House of Youth had to explain to authorities who were we, why did we meet, was it really necessary during the war and were we suspicious to him regarding public safety. But he considered it was stupid the whole building to be empty and if any of previous users wanted to organize any activities, why not let them, they would be responsible and so he let us in, before he got an official permission. We hold a couple of meetings, not knowing, actually, were we to hide or were we cleared. Those meetings were opportunities for us to simply speak about our feelings, were we afraid and what our problems were. Then, following our steps, I guess, others also started to hold meetings in the House of Youth. We found the psychologists the most interesting, so according the agreement with them we started to attend their workshops.” [A woman, 38 years old, employed but not working, holds a university degree, Slovakian, divorced, mother of a child].

My family and me we acted as if nothing was happening those days. My husband and me, we both went to work, full time and children went to kindergarten. In the evenings we would go visiting friends or friends would come visiting us, as usual. I didn’t listen to the news, nor foreign, neither Serbian, nor satellite channels, so I tried to as isolated as I could. I was chagrined by the situation and I could not see the aim of the troubles that were imposed on the people and only on the people. Some of my acquaintances got killed, some of my close friends ran away abroad, or moved to the country and I wanted only to understand why, for how long and what after. [A clerk spent two years at Law School, employed, mother of two, married, Serbian living in Belgrade].

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It was not a diary and I didn’t write regularly. I used writing as a vent. Here, I shall read you something in no particular order: Tonight was one of the worst nights in Belgrade, since the beginning of the war. Detonations were hard. And the pictures of TV building toppled were horrible. Yes, we wanted to topple that building eight years ago. But WE wanted. Our Bastille – we should topple. Theatre “Dusko Radovic” is damaged. Also St Mark’s church and surrounding buildings. Rescue teams were uncovering debris and saving wounded and dead people. What pictures! People were hanging from the debris with their heads down, the blood was dripping from their faces and parts of skin and flash were hanging from their heads. They aired those pictures at 3am on Studio B. Afterwards, for some reasons they haven’t aired that anymore. Serbs hide their wounds and their dead. The toxic fog hovers above the black city and passengers and newspaper salesmen talks quietly.” [Translator, unmarried, no children, member of Association of professional translators].

We decided to buy tomato seeds, paprika and leek and start to cultivate again our derelict and weeded garden in Tresnja. We took 20 kilos of potatoes and went to Tresnja. We brought all the provisions and put it in front of my pleased Mrs. Mother. The day was overcast, but pleasant anyway, and guys from our neighborhood worked on regulation of water in a dike by the road. They were digging, we were watching and offering help and the planes above us were wheezing and hooting. Anti aircraft defense was firing and than we heard a strong detonation. We saw a dark gray pillar of smoke on the other side of the road. We concluded it was Makis or Baric. The clouds came in soon, everybody went to their homes, just like the pilots above us but we agreed that we would meet tomorrow. In between the two rains my mother and I have planted the seeds of tomato. I think that it was the fastest planting that I ever have participated. Neighbors told us that it was the bad land, just clay and no water and that it wouldn’t do. I thought that so many things in life were useless, and if people would always think that way they would never try anything. If one of the hundred attempts succeeds, it was worth it. I can tell you now that everything we have planted yielded crops.” [High school teacher, 33 years old, unmarried, mother of a child].

CONCLUSION

In Serbia little attention is always paid to discussions of contemporary political problems led by women, mostly because social relationship between genders is only formally set up as symmetry but this false symmetry is supported by the symbiotic asymmetry [in power, in minds, in language]. Manhood and politics “naturally” go hand in hand, therefore everything that stands in contrast to and opposed to the mainstream political life and political virtues has been represented by women, is perceived as natural to their sex and their capacitates. Among the greatest wrongs done to women has been their exclusion from taking part as full members and citizens in political debate, deliberation and contest. The classic theorists, and the construction of the academic canon and political theory, have been instrumental in achieving and maintaining this exclusion. Dominant model of political subject thus is a member of majority nation, white man, younger middle age, socially successful, able bodied and healthy who does not want to accept responsibility for social injustices and therefore does not have interest for them. All what is female appears in relation with the dominant model as second, second ranged, weaker and lower, just a copy. Her opinion about anything important for nation survival is simply rejected, ignored, diminished. Historically dominant subject is male subject what reflects specially in wartime.

Therefore the issue of female subject is important because through it reflects all patriarchal prejudices hardly noticeable in philosophy, boasting with its neutrality and its universal mission. Recognizing women’s memories and experiences, women’s say and women’s emotions is the first step towards this

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5 A village near Belgrade, known as popular weekend resort, a place of hundreds weekend houses.
6 A village near Belgrade, know as a site of Belgrade’s main water plant.
7 A village near Belgrade, know as a site of chemical industry.
Possibilities for stepping out of civilization of power and violence are primarily in establishing different relationships between men and women. This is the source of future expecting and privileging “soft”, “weak” non-dominant, “decent” subject, and very likely female subject as more adequate to anticipated needs of the near future than actual reality. By collecting and presenting women’s War memories we wanted to encourage others to join in reinterpreting and in reconstruction the history.

12 Biljana Kašić, Žene i politika mira, (Zagreb: Centar za ženske studije, 1997), 27.
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The long fuse of the Women’s Liberation Movement; women’s experiences in 1960s Britain.

Sue Bruley
(UK):

Resumen: No cabe duda que el Movimiento de Liberación de las Mujeres (MLM) generó un impacto profundo en la Gran Bretaña de finales del siglo XX. Si bien los orígenes políticos del movimiento entre 1968 y 1969 son bien conocidos, se sabe muy poco de lo que se ha denominado las “fuentes más profundas” de la liberación de la mujer en la Gran Bretaña de la década de 1960. Este artículo utiliza la historia oral para demostrar los orígenes sociales y culturales del MLM en la Gran Bretaña de la década de 1960, mediante la exploración de las experiencias durante este período de un grupo de mujeres que llegó a participar activamente en el movimiento, aproximadamente entre 1968 y 1982.

Este estudio emplea cuarenta y ocho entrevistas de dos colecciones diferentes de historia oral, las cuales representan una muestra diversa en cuanto a su distribución geográfica, clase social, origen étnico y orientación sexual. Esta valiosa base de datos nos permite reconstruir las vidas de mujeres activistas en sus años de formación. Contrariamente a la creencia popular de que el MLM fue un movimiento de la clase media, cerca de la mitad de estas mujeres provenía de familias obreras. Para una minoría significativa, la participación activa en el MLM supuso una progresión respecto a lo que ya conocían, dados sus antecedentes de izquierdas. En las representaciones que las hijas hacen de sus madres, queda patente el sentimiento de frustración y ambiciones malogradas. Las experiencias escolares de todas estas niñas, en particular en presencia de una férrea disciplina, crearon a menudo un sentimiento de solidaridad femenina.

A pesar de lo variado de sus orígenes, la gran mayoría de las mujeres en este estudio han disfrutado de una carrera profesional y se encontraban en un estado de “serenidad” en el momento de la entrevista. Al reflexionar de nuevo sobre sus vidas, buscaban encontrar un sentido del orden y enmarcar sus vidas en una narrativa histórica más amplia, como es el crecimiento de la conciencia femenina.

Abstract: There is little doubt that the women’s liberation movement (WLM) had profound impact on Britain in the late twentieth century. Whilst the political origins of the movement 1968-9 are well known we know little of what has referred to as the ‘deeper springs’ of women’s liberation in 1960s Britain. This paper uses oral history to demonstrate the social and cultural origins of the WLM in 1960s Britain by exploring the 1960s experiences of a group of women who went on to become active in the movement c1968-82.

This study makes use of forty eight interviews from two different oral history collections, representing a diverse sample in terms of geographic spread, class, ethnicity and sexual orientation. This significant data base which enables us to reconstruct the lives of women activists in their formative years. Contrary to the popular belief that the WLM was a middle class movement almost half of these women came from working class backgrounds. For a significant minority becoming active in the WLM was a progression from what they already knew as they came from left wing backgrounds. A sense of frustration and thwarted ambition is apparent in these daughter’s depictions of their mothers. Experiences of all girls’ schooling, particularly where strong discipline was in force, often created a sense of female solidarity.
Despite their varied origins, the great majority of the women in this study had professional careers and were in a position of ‘composure’ at the time of the interview. In reflecting back on their lives they sought to find a sense of order and to place their lives in a wider historical narrative of growing female consciousness.
INTRODUCTION

There is little doubt that the women’s liberation movement (WLM) had profound impact on Britain in the late twentieth century. There are numerous personal testimonies which refer to the ‘tidal wave’ of women’s liberation which erupted into British society at the end of the sixties.¹ The WLM has to be viewed from the context of European post war social democracy and emergence of social and political movements advancing a progressive agenda from the late 1950s.² Specifically, the WLM is widely seen as emerging directly from the late 1960s movements around the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (VSC) and the student movement when women activists were marginalised and treated with contempt by their male comrades.³ Also significant was the upsurge in women’s trade union militancy in 1968-9, particularly the grading dispute at Fords in Dagenham which rapidly became about women’s access to skilled work and equal pay. Transnational influences were important too as feminist texts such as Kate Millet’s Sexual Politics (1969) were imported from the USA and rapidly disseminated. 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. The early years of the WLM are well known: local women’s groups spontaneously forming from 1968-9; the Ruskin Conference of February 1970 and the adoption of the four basic demands; the growth of women’s groups in all the major cities.⁴ Whilst the political origins of the movement 1968-9 are well known we know little of what Elizabeth Wilson has referred to as the ‘deeper springs’ of women’s liberation in 1960s Britain.⁵ What was happening to women’s lives at this time and who were the women of 1970s women’s liberation who were teenagers or young adults during the 1960s? This article seeks to investigate the social origins of the WLM in 1960s Britain examining the 1960s experiences of a group of women who became active in the movement c1968-82.⁶ This article seeks to challenge the view, often seen in the media, that the WLM consisted largely of middle class intellectual feminists based in London.⁷

Through oral history we can see this group of 1960s women in their own terms. This study will explore family backgrounds, particularly relationships with mothers, experiences of school, college and the beginnings of working life and sexual relationships. What did it feel like to be a woman in 1960s Britain? To what extent could the interviewees think through women’s oppression before the WLM existed? How and at what point in their lives did they create a feminist identity? Can we identify a ‘protofeminist’ spirit in the individual subjectivities of these women?⁸

This study makes use of two different oral history collections. The twenty semi structured interviews conducted by myself form part of a larger study of the WLM and personal life.⁹ These interviews were mainly but not exclusively conducted in southern England. I have also made use of twenty eight interviews from the Feminist Archive South at Bristol University.¹⁰ Together these forty eight interviews represent a diverse sample in terms of geographic spread, class, ethnicity and sexual orientation. All of the women were still deeply committed to feminism (in some form) and wanted very much to tell their stories.¹¹ What

² Miriam E.David Personal and Political, Feminisms, Sociology and Family Lives (Stoke on Trent, 2003) 20.
³ For example, Sheila Rowbotham, Promise of a Dream, Remembering the Sixties (New York, 2001) 160-161.
⁶ Feminist activity is here broadly defined. The respondents offered very diverse experiences and varying levels of engagement with the WLM.
⁷ This view has been inadvertently fostered by the autobiographical work of Sheila Rowbotham, see above. See also Lynne Segal, Making Trouble, Life and Politics (London, 2007); Michèle Roberts Paper Houses, A Memoir of the ’70s and Beyond (London, 2007); Wandor Once; Amanda Sebestyen (ed) 68, 78 ’89 From Women’s Liberation to Feminism (Bridport, 1988). According to Wilson ‘there have been persistent attempts from all sides to reduce feminism to the mouthpiece of a small elite group’; Only, 204.
⁹ Almost all the Bruley interviewees have agreed that their testimony can be placed in a suitable archive at the end of this project.
¹⁰ Full transcripts of the Bristol interviews were not made, but detailed summaries were written, see below, 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, 15.
¹¹ Six of the Bruley interviewees and one Bristol interviewee chose to be anonymous.
follows is a very brief overview of women in 1960s Britain by way of context and then an analysis of the interviews – in reduced form as this is from a larger study.

AN BRIEF OVERVIEW OF WOMEN IN 1960S BRITAIN

The new welfare state gave people unprecedented financial and psychological security. The post war 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. Rising affluence created a massive expansion of the housing stock and a consumer boom in clothes, music and household goods such as televisions and record players. The strong assertive images of women in the media in the 1940s gave way in the 1950s to a new emphasis on women on more submissive roles. The American domination of British popular culture was challenged by advent of the ‘Swinging 60s’ in 1964 led by the Mersey beat sound of the Beatles and newly affluent teenagers who could afford records and the new ‘mod’ fashions. The sixties witnessed an increasing preoccupation with personal freedom and pleasure, supported by the widespread introduction of the contraception pill and a series of progressive legal reforms from the late 1950s decriminalising homosexuality, reforming the divorce laws reform and giving women limited right to abortion. Regarding the family, sociologists such as Fletcher and others were arguing that the family had become more ‘symmetrical’ as fathers played an increasingly important role in the home and mothers were more likely to work. This view can be challenged, particularly from the perspective of working class women. Girls were socialized into the idea that their primary role in life was to be a wife and mother with little thought for working lives outside the home. The average age of marriage for women fell to twenty two and often by the age of thirty the family was complete. For some historians the trend towards liberalisation and greater freedom in sexual relations has been termed a ‘sexual revolution’ in which the introduction of the pill played a significant role, but there is also evidence from memoirs for this period which point to a darker side to this new permissive culture; that there was constant pressure on young women to have sex, that it was thought selfish to refuse sex and that ‘open’ relationships and ‘fucks’ devoid of emotional commitment were often damaging to the women concerned.

There is no doubt that the sixties was a confusing time for young women who were struggling to forge a new identity in the rapidly changing social and cultural landscape. The commercialisation of sex meant that images of women’s bodies were increasingly on public display in newspapers, advertising, films and television. Girls should not be portrayed as mere victims of these trends. In her recent work Dyhouse writes that 1960s girls were beginning to answer back. Grieg has written of the new ‘arrogant cool’ of girls in the 60s – was this a kind of proto feminism?

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13 See Sue Bruley Women in Britain Since 1900 (Basingstoke, 1999) chapter5.
14 Mark Donnelly Sixties Britain, Culture, Society and Politics (Harlow 2005), 35.
15 Lesley Hall, Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain Since 1880, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke, 2013), chapters 9 and 10.
THE INTERVIEWS
Bristol interviews – I had to work from detailed summaries so no audio clips available, but I have provided a couple of clips from my own interviews.

Despite many modernising trends in British society in the 1960s gender divisions remained fundamental and women’s position in relation to men was inferior in almost all respects. This does not, of itself, create a movement for change. It is the interaction between human agency and social, cultural and economic forces which creates social movements and historical change. Here we need to 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 in the years from 1968 to the early 1980s. The interviews were loosely based on the ‘life history’ method with only a semi structured approach as each woman was treated as an individual with her own story to tell. Nevertheless it is possible to draw out some useful conclusions from the collection as a whole. The average year of birth was 1948. The overall proportion of working class respondents (44%) 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 except for four who were children of Jewish immigrants, and four other who otherwise were not ‘white British’.

Family circumstances – has been largely cut suffice to say here that they were very diverse, ranging from comfortable and secure middle class families to very insecure and poor backgrounds.

It is significant that around 20% of the women in these two collections had left leaning parents. It is also interesting that many of the women interviewed were keen to speak of mothers as strong, forceful and capable characters. As a miners’ wife with five sons and a daughter in county Durham Marie McNay’s mother was completely tied to the home all her adult life. Marie was keen to depict her positively as ‘a fantastic role model in terms of managing…she was extremely assertive and clear thinking and a confident woman’. Jilly Rosser was also middle class and grew up in Sussex. She 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’. Mother’s frustration is another noticeable trend in this testimony. Annabel McClaren, who came from Irish Catholic parents in south London described her mother as a ‘feisty’ woman who got depressed by her enforced domesticity. Julia South was the middle child of Australian intellectual parents living in London. Whilst her father ran an adult education college Julia described her mother as having ‘massive energy and drive… that hadn’t got an outlet’. Observing her mother take excessive interest in her children and the house made Julia realise at a ‘subliminal’ level that her mother was deeply frustrated.

In relation to child rearing the traditional gender relations were played out with boys reared to be providers and girls filled with the expectation that being a wife and mother was the ‘natural role’ for them. Mothers expected daughters to help out and were often dependent on their assistance.

Where the secondary school is known around half went to grammar school, ie academically selective. The remainder were divided between independent schools (including boarders) and convents with two younger respondents attending state comprehensives. Jenny who won a scholarship to a very prestigious girls’ private school and was encouraged to develop her aptitude for maths. She described the school in positive terms as having ‘all women teachers’ and ‘fantastic science labs’. She was shocked therefore at the leavers’ assembly when the head told the girls ‘you are going to be wives of important men, doctors and

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21 I am taking the early 1980s as a cut off point as the WLM is widely seen as more fragmented and less dynamic from then.
22 Although Bristol interviewees were not asked date of birth, it has been possible to select those in teenage or young adulthood in the 1960s.
24 Jilly Rosser, Personal 2, 139.
Surprisingly none of the interviewees had a tale to tell of a particular woman teacher who was a role model and mentor for them. In fact they were more likely to talk of being rebellious at school and disregarding the authority of the teaching staff. Celia Burgess-Macey attended a grammar school in Warwickshire where she had her prefect’s badge removed as she was not willing to discipline younger pupils for not picking up litter and other offences. Several girls spoke of school as giving them a sense of female solidarity. Margaret Beetham described being ‘sustained’ by her friendship with the other girls when she was at boarding school so far from her missionary parents and not able to see them for years. Sue Laurence hated her time at a convent where she found the nuns ‘deeply oppressive’. In being ‘united against the enemy’ the girls found that they had a commitment to each other.

With regards to higher education a range of views is represented. When it came to higher education parents were often very supportive and encouraged daughters to take up the new opportunities to attend University, particularly middle class parents. There are however numerous examples of parents who were either disinterested or outwardly hostile to girls proceeding to higher education.

All of the women interviewed had some sort of higher/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. Only three women (out of the 48) can be identified as doing maths or science degrees. A minority went into nursing, midwifery or teacher training and three students attended art college. The university attended cannot always be identified, but from those that can we can discern that four of the women interviewed studied at Oxford or Cambridge in the 1960s. Caroline New went to New Hall Cambridge where she felt she benefitted from ‘a kind of 1920s feminism which emphasised that women should have the best in education’. There were considerable downsides to 1960s university life for women. As the age of majority was twenty one and not eighteen as now the university was legally ‘in loco parentis’ which meant all kinds of petty rules and restrictions were imposed on women students. Dorothy Sheridan agonised about getting married in 1968 and losing her independence but she wanted to live with her boyfriend which was not permitted. She was also aware that as a radical student she was already likely to attract the censure of the University, ‘I didn’t want to be a radical student and have the University punish me for living with a man, which I really wouldn’t have been allowed to do’.

There was also outright sexism from fellow students and staff to contend with. Jenny began 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’.

Motherhood was not thought to be compatible with higher education at this time. Ellen Malos came to Bristol from Australia with a small child in 1962 to do a PhD and found a complete lack of support for student parents. The departmental professor said it was ‘preposterous’ for her to study for a PhD at the same time as caring for her son. Eventually lack of suitable childcare forced her to abandon the PhD. In her interview in she cites this experience as feeding directly into her later involvement in the women’s movement, ‘when the women’s movement started I was certainly ready for it’. Celia Burgess-Macey moved from Bedford College to LSE in 1966 where she undertook a post graduate diploma in Social...
Science. The course exposed her to the full extent of social inequality in sixties Britain. This and the radical atmosphere at LSE at this time politicised her and she quickly became heavily involved in left wing politics and joined the International Socialists (IS).\(^{26}\) Less than half the women interviewed started full time employment before 1970, nevertheless we can make some interesting observations. A sizable number were launched into professional careers. Many of the interviewees became teachers, lecturers, nurses, midwives, social workers, and probation officers. Here also women recalled stories of sexism and discrimination. Margaret Beetham worked as a teacher Manchester in the early 1960s after reading English at Oxford. Pregnant with her first child in 1967 she was forced to give up work, ‘I left when I was pregnant because you had to really…it was assumed that once you had a child you stayed at home’.\(^{27}\) 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. Sarah began 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’.\(^{28}\)

Of the working class women in the study, mostly they were more likely to provide narratives of class than sexism. They commonly worked in some sort of secretarial job. Karla, from the East End of London, became a secretary which she described as a ‘shit awful job ... for lousy wages’.\(^{39}\) As a member of a left wing group which ran a commercial press she was able to negotiate a move into the traditionally masculine world of the print industry where the pay was higher, although the work was physically demanding. There are numerous examples of social mobility, which is really a side line to this story.

Several of the working class women had children very young. By the age of nineteen Jackie Barron was married and at twenty five she had four children. Her husband worked long hours and was often away at weekend, ‘I really was quite stuck with the children’. She resented the assumption that ‘you were responsible for the children and the cooking and the house and everything else (and that) if your husband did anything it was for you’.\(^{40}\) Some women consciously decided not to settle for a traditional wife role. Marie McNay had a steady boyfriend in Durham for three years who wanted to marry her. Both families were very set on the match. Marie decided that ‘he definitely wasn’t for me’. She broke off the relationship and the following year moved to London to start a new life.\(^{41}\) Others, such as Susanne Coysh, did marry but felt a little uneasy as she was keen to keep a degree of independence. Pressured by her husband’s parents into marriage rather than moving in together they opted for a very low key wedding ‘I felt a bit like I was selling out by getting married....I was still my own person, I didn’t want to be subsumed into this, into this twosome bit.’\(^{42}\)

In general the interviewees did not offer detailed information about relationships, emotional feelings and sexuality. In my own interviews I did not press women for such information as it felt intrusive to do so, leaving it up to them as to how much they would reveal of their ‘interior’ lives.\(^{43}\) Nevertheless some useful observations can be made. The most obvious being that it is necessary to be wary of ascribing any fixed categories regarding sexuality as relationships were sometimes more fluid than was first apparent. For example, Karla and her girlfriend lived as a lesbian couple for three years in the late 1960s. As this was pre Gay Liberation they were not ‘out’ as lesbian. They both had affairs with men as well and regarded

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\(^{26}\) Burgess-Macey Interview 15-17.

\(^{27}\) Margaret Beetham interview Manchester 8 July 2013 2-3.

\(^{28}\) ‘Sarah’ First interview 10 October 2011 15-16.

\(^{29}\) ‘Karla’ interview 6 July 2001 7.

\(^{30}\) Jackie Barron, Personal 2 60

\(^{31}\) Marie McNay interview 6.

\(^{32}\) Sue Coysh Interview south west London 20 October 2011 44.

themselves as bisexual.44 The pressing need for safe contraception was also apparent. Sarah began having serious boyfriends and enjoying sex from the age of seventeen whilst doing A levels. She told me that she was ‘terrified of pregnancy…I’ve never wanted to have children’. As a result of this her life revolved around avoiding pregnancy, ‘the most important thing in my life has always been contraception’.45 Two of the women in the Bristol interviews, Monica Sjóó and Betty Underwood, recounted painful experiences as a result of unwanted pregnancies. 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’.

There is certainly evidence here of liberal attitudes towards sex. This is not surprising bearing in mind that many of these women were involved in left wing/student circles in the late 1960s where a more permissive culture did exist. Dorothy, for example, indulged in heavy petting to the point of orgasm from the age of seventeen and penetrative sex from eighteen whilst still at school in Yorkshire. Her progressively minded mother took her to the GP and asked for the pill. The regulations were that it was only to be prescribed for married women, but the GP helpfully got round this by prescribing the pill for ‘menstrual regulation’. On the impact of the pill and the loosening of sexual mores it is clear that both views of ‘sex in the sixties’ described above are represented here. Jenny had an older sister who had a teenage pregnancy. The baby was adopted. It was a traumatic experience for the whole family. Jenny was keen to have sex and avoid pregnancy. On arriving in London Jenny made an early visit to the student health centre and went on the pill. As she said to me in the interview she was very happy that ‘all problems were solved’. By Christmas she had moved out of her hall of residence and moved in with her boyfriend and was enjoying ‘the first good sex with him’.46 The pill made it easier for women such as Jenny, Dorothy and others in the Bruley interviews to engage in multiple or ‘open’ relationships without fear of the consequences. An alternative and darker view was put forward by Celia Burgess-Macey. Whilst at LSE she met the man who was to become her husband. After a couple of years he wanted to have affairs and wanted Celia to consent to an ‘open relationship’. Initially Celia agreed with this, but ‘in the end I felt quite manipulated by him. I felt very manipulated by him. I felt as he’d…been running the show and it was all really about his needs not mine’. I asked her if she felt that the pill gave some men the idea that they could have several sexual partners at once, to which she replied ‘absolutely….I mean he hid behind a lot of rhetoric of equality’. Celia made it clear that she thought the pill had allowed men to ‘basically have their way with whoever they wanted to have their way with!’47 Pen Dalton also had a more cynical view of the ‘swinging sixties’ for women. In her interview in Bristol she stated,

‘... the pill was hard to get...you had to go to a special doctor and pretend you were married or at least in a stable relationship. It was Ok for the blokes...they had as much sex as they wanted. Although we were supposed to be streetwise, swinging London art students...most of the time we were worried frantic about getting pregnant. Of course a lot of women did, and women were having illegal back street abortions left, right and centre.’48

One of the aims of this research was to ascertain when women who identified as feminists first came to some sort of feminist consciousness. Within the two collections of oral testimony it is evident that many of women observed the inferior status of women from an early age and were resentful of this. As a tom boy Gerry Holloway was often told ‘...no, girls don’t do that’. I felt constantly that it was much better to be a man or a boy’.49 Rosie Dean grew up in a ‘very snobby’ dairy farming family in Kent as a middle child with two brothers. If she needed help her mother would always ask Rosie first which she resented. She told me that she became a feminist by the age of eight or nine as she always had a sense that ‘it wasn’t fair that

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44 Karla Interview 8.
45 Sarah Interview 10.
46 Jenny Interview 12.
47 Burgess-Macey Interview 18-26
48 Pen Dalton Personal 276.
49 Holloway Interview Brighton 15 September 2011 13.
boys had a better deal than girls’. Sarah remembered a particular ‘Damascus moment’ which had an enormous impact on her,

‘I was on top of a bus, seven years old, and 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 obvious 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!’

Sarah Braun, in her Bristol interview spoke of having a feminist upbringing. Her maternal grandmother was a suffragette. She has an early recollection of being taken to see the statue of Emmeline Pankhurst near Parliament and being told about the campaign for the women’s vote. She says that she grew up with a feeling that women were ‘embattled...in a sense I was born a feminist, it was all there in my background so when feminism emerged then it seemed to be waiting for me’. Growing up with an absent father Heather Pudner learned early on practical tasks such as banging in nails, mending things and changing plugs. She remembered feeling that it was ‘stupid’ for her friends to wait around for their fathers to do such tasks. In her interview Heather said she felt that her feminism ‘grew from a lot of threads’ and was present well before the women’s movement which she said ‘didn’t just come out of nowhere did it?’

Feminist texts also contributed to growing feminist consciousness before 1968 amongst some of the older interviewees. Simone De Beauvoir’s Second Sex (1949) and Betty Friedan’s Feminine Mystique (1963) in particular, were mentioned by a number of women. Feminist fiction was also important, especially the works of Doris Lessing. These texts were not absorbed in abstract but instantly related to the women’s own experiences. Jackie Barron, an isolated housebound mother in the sixties, 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’. 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.’

A minority of women in this study came to feminist consciousness as adults, often whilst involved in socialist politics where they reacted against the aggressively masculine stance of many of the men. Here the oral testimony corresponds to other contemporary accounts of women’s encounters with left wing masculinity at the time. Dorothy Sheridan started studying for a Sociology degree at Sussex in 1967. As an active member of the Socialist Society she soon noticed that,

‘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.'

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50 Dean Interview 3.
51 Sarah Braun, Personal 1 8.
52 Jackie Barron Personal 3 9.
53 Helen Taylor, Personal 1 41.
54 Sheridan Interview 22-3.
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 realised early on the confines of their gender and consequently many developed an early form of feminist identity. They were particularly influenced by the frustration and resentment of their mothers whose lives were artificially bounded by domesticity. Many of the interviewees felt that by the end of the decade they were ‘more than ready’ for women’s liberation. It has also been shown that the WLM was broadly based in terms of class, with a significant minority of working class women involved. Although London was a very important centre the women respondents also confirm that the WLM was a truly national movement. In addition the oral testimony indicates a strong sense of class consciousness. Most of the women in this study were very aware of class divisions and identified with working class movements. Upward social mobility was a significant background factor. The interviewees benefitted directly from the 1944 Education Act providing free secondary education for all. The majority of the sample went to 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. By examining the early adult lives of forty eight women this study has uncovered stories which provide human flesh to illustrate the historical trends and conflicts which frame 1960s women’s historiography. Ultimately this oral testimony has proved to be a valuable source in reconstructing 1960s womanhood and the ‘deeper springs’ of women’s liberation.