

## **Collecting Women's Lives:**

### **The challenge of feminism in UK Youth Work in the 1970s and 80s.**

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#### ***Abstract***

The history of a distinctively feminist approach to youth work which flourished between the mid 1970s and the late 1980s has been increasingly submerged by changing organisational practices. The feminist political critique which encouraged agency amongst young women has been replaced by equal opportunities policies and problem-based interventions. It is possible that, like the girls club organisations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, whose history was overwritten by the move towards mixed sex work, so too the history of the feminist youth work movement will be obscured by contemporary organisational and policy concerns. The documentary evidence of feminist youth work is now scattered but the analysis in this article is informed by the evidence in a small archive, and by empirical research with women youth workers undertaken in North East England in 1988 and 1993. It is also shaped by the author's recollections of personal engagement with feminist youth work practice. The article documents how efforts to enhance the agency of working class young women and the autonomy of female youth workers were co-opted and destroyed in the drive towards centralised managerial control characteristic of public sector conditions after the election of the Conservative government in 1979 which became manifest in an fracturing of feminist collaboration.

## **The Development and Decline of Feminism in British Youth Work, 1975 -1990.**

### **Introduction**

During the 1970s an explicitly feminist movement for working with girls and young women emerged within British youth services, challenging masculine domination of informal youth provision across the voluntary and statutory sectors. For a decade the movement gathered pace, supported between 1978 and 1987 by a Girls' Work Unit established at the National Association of Youth Clubs (NAYC) headquarters in Leicester. Using a potent combination of feminist theory, personal identification and single sex organisation feminist workers questioned the masculine connotations of "youth," disputed the perception that feminism was relevant only to middle class women, and made connections with other structured inequalities, particularly of sexuality, race, disability and age.

Youth work was always a small, under-resourced profession, but the impact of feminist youth work resonated beyond its boundaries. In highlighting issues such as the sexual abuse of children and the marginalisation of young mothers, it raised questions relevant to and later picked up by other human services and by policy-makers. However, when such issues were adopted outside youth work, the feminist discourse was generally displaced by a depoliticised "professional" language such as that of "anti-oppressive practice" adopted in social work.<sup>1</sup> In the process, the agency accorded to young people, crucial to feminist youth work, was diminished. With the ascendancy of neo-liberalism in British politics, youth work with girls was itself to become more aligned with the perspectives of other professions through the targeting of policy and funding criteria in these areas.

The election of successive Conservative governments after 1979 precipitated a serious loss of resource for youth work which, as a service with no legislative base, was already poorly funded.<sup>2</sup> As youth work became more defensive, so its political discourses were increasingly repressed. Eventually, even the word "feminism" became unutterable, consigned to personal belief rather to public, professional knowledge and

understanding: “You can’t have an image as a radical or feminist organisation because of the risk you run of challenging people in power. You have to keep those beliefs to yourself and do it in ways that it’s not so obvious.”<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the deconstruction of “inefficient” industry impacted disproportionately upon working class young people. As feminist youth workers argued, unemployment was highest amongst girls but special initiatives prioritised unemployed boys with reference to traditional gender roles.<sup>4</sup> Funding for youth work was further skewed towards control and away from agency with reference to the underclass theories of Charles Murray, which stressed problems of crime with reference to unemployed young men, and young motherhood with reference to working class young women.<sup>5</sup>

Budgetary cuts, targeted funding and increased managerial control closed down most of the ambiguous spaces in which feminist youth work had been able to progress. Even the equal opportunities agenda which had seemed conducive to feminist intentions was subjected to changed priorities, shifting from an informal process-orientated approach concerned with different practice “issues” to one concerned with formal equality in organisational systems and structures.<sup>6</sup> This encouraged greater professional formality within feminist youth work, undermining its personal-political value base, and at the same time it challenged the assumption of “sisterhood” between feminists as different identities led to different organisational alliances.

By the end of the 1980s, feminist youth work was struggling to survive. In 1987, the Girls Work Unit was closed and in its wake most of the women youth workers’ groups which feminist workers had relied on for support and collective organisation collapsed. Meanwhile, work with young mothers had become central to continued funding for youth work with girls and young women, but in compensatory rather than political terms. Hitherto, feminist practice was to be located almost entirely in the person of individual youth workers and by the end of the twentieth century, feminist youth work could no longer be said to exist in any meaningful sense.<sup>7</sup>

### **Forgetting feminist youth work**

Despite the production and publications of a wide variety of texts, including newsletters, reports, films, photographs, and posters, the creative energy of feminist youth work has been largely erased from the memory of contemporary youth work. The

textual evidence of face to face feminist practice is now widely scattered, mainly in personal collections and is largely inaccessible to a new generation of female youth workers operating in a different policy environment. Loss of the documentary evidence of everyday youth work is not unique to feminist approaches. It is partly a consequence of the shifting terms of reference facing an unstable professional group, exacerbated by the transitory nature of youth and by the working class dimensions of the practice field. Small organisations, with short term funding are born and die: their records disappear. Other organisations change focus, adapting to policy priorities to survive. Papers relating to past work are deemed no longer relevant, especially when there is pressure on storage space. However, the effect of the “dominance of the male agenda,” is to submerge even further the memories and evidence of work with girls and women.<sup>8</sup> This is particularly the case when there has been conflict relating to organisational politics and direction, such as that associated with the growth and decline of feminist youth work.

The “hidden from history” thesis encouraged some feminist workers during the 1970s and 1980s to seek evidence for a history of female work with girls.<sup>9</sup> The archives of NAYC, which started its life in 1911 as the National Organisation of Girls’ Clubs, began to reveal a history of Girls’ Club Work which had been submerged in the drive towards mixed club work in the interwar years. However, no sustained historical work was undertaken from within the professional youth work field either to apply a critical reading to these records or to access the memories of older youth workers who might have been involved in the processes of change. Consequently, the loss of the Girls’ Club Movement appeared to feminist practitioners to be a simple matter of “male colonisation” of resources which rightly belonged to women.<sup>10</sup> Subsequent accounts by historians reveal the extent to which girls and women themselves exercised agency in a process shaped by particular structural and cultural conditions, driving the changes themselves.<sup>11</sup> This reading is corroborated by a former chief executive of the NAYC who on the basis of his involvement in the organisation during the 1950s, stresses the determination of the women concerned to be responsive to the real conditions and interests of young people.<sup>12</sup> The simplistic recovery of “their” history was symptomatic of the underdevelopment of feminist youth work theory and was not ultimately helpful insofar as it encouraged a mechanistic determination to “reclaim” their organisations which heightened gender conflict in those organisations. Objectively, feminist workers were

never in a position to win such conflicts. Moreover, the emphasis upon the importance of single sex organisation in the historical records precluded a more nuanced analysis of the different values and politics of the girls' club movement and second wave feminism and so the opportunity was missed to sharpen through historical awareness, the central priorities and values of feminist youth work.

The analysis in this article is alert to these problems in the "reclamation" of the earlier history and pursues a more critical interrogation of the later movement. It is informed by my own participation between 1976 and 1983 as a practising feminist youth worker, and subsequently as a community and youth work tutor and researcher in which context there has been a continuing informal "feminist" conversation amongst a small network of women. In these conversations the problem of the "silencing" of "our" history has been a significant theme, prompting increased levels of historical research and activity.<sup>13</sup> The idea of "hidden from history" informed my own earliest approaches and persuaded me of the importance of collecting documents produced by women involved in the "Movement" for working with girls. These include the full run of the "Working with Girls Newsletter," produced by the Girls Work Unit between 1981 and 1987, numerous Annual Reports documenting the work of Girls and Young Women's Projects, and a variety of associated materials such as photographs, posters and minutes (mainly from Wear Working with Girls Development Group). This documentary evidence is supplemented by interviews undertaken in North East England with 40 female youth workers in 1988 and with 21 self-identified feminist youth workers in 1992.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Emergence of Feminist Youth Work**

At the start of the 1970s, girls and young women clearly had a problematic relationship with informal youth provision. The Albemarle Report had raised the issue as early as 1960.<sup>15</sup> In 1964, the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and the London Union of Youth Clubs (LUYC), set up a committee to "study the needs and interests of girls", to "provide training materials for leaders working with girls in mixed clubs" and to "discover why girls are not making use of the youth service." The subsequent research study, undertaken by Jalna Hanmer noted that girls, "...do not seem to be as highly regarded as boys in clubs;" that "...girls only' activities – no matter what they are – are highly valued...provided [the girls] do not feel that their wish to associate with boys is

being curtailed”; and that “...a mixed club should have both men and women staff...there are fewer women than men in the Youth Service and what is more serious, fewer women are being trained for the work.”<sup>16</sup>

This situation had arisen because of the systematic “mixing” of girls’ clubs begun in the inter-war years. After the First World War, idealised concepts of “youth” coincided with essentialist theories of adolescence, replacing discourses of poverty, class and gender in shaping youth organisations. Simultaneously, popular ideas about the “modern girl” challenged pre-war assumptions about the nature of femininity. Girls no longer expected to be separated from boys or chaperoned.<sup>17</sup> Youth work meanwhile was increasingly concerned with organising youth leisure, distinct from social work. Most new organisations such as the Youth Hostels Association created in 1928 integrated new perspectives from the outset, but the National Association of Boys Clubs (NABC), created in 1925 was founded upon ideals of masculinity and determined to maintain its single sex clubs. In contrast, local girls’ clubs increasingly admitted boys and in response the NOGC addressed the question of mixed clubs. Throughout the 1930s they pursued the possibility of partnership with NABC but meeting with recalcitrance, in the conditions of the second world war and after the establishment of the statutory youth service in 1939,<sup>18</sup> the girls club movement took independent action, becoming the National Association of Girls Clubs and Mixed Clubs in 1943.<sup>19</sup>

The process of mixing girls clubs was relentless, continuing throughout the 1950s and dovetailing with the conservative perspectives on gender roles re-asserted in post war policy. By the time of Albemarle, single sex girls’ work survived only within the uniformed organisations, such as the guides and in 1961 the former NOGC dropped any pretence to single sex girls’ work and became NAYC. In 1957, Josephine Macalister Brew, who supported mixed sex clubs, noted (ironically in their defence) that the process of admitting boys was accompanied by a tendency for female participation to decline.<sup>20</sup> The decline was such that the interests of girls almost disappeared from programmes. Professional wisdom maintained that female interests focused mainly upon finding a marriage partner and therefore the main reason for female attendance was “for the boys.” This view remained prevalent into the 1970s. It focused attention on boys and excused the need to make special provision for girls. Consequently efforts to address the “problem” of girls were sporadic and isolated.<sup>21</sup>

However gender relations and female expectations were shifting. Notably in response to the development of the contraceptive pill and improved access to educational and employment opportunities, by the 1970s the expectations of traditional feminine stereotypes were out of kilter with real female lives. The Women's Liberation Movement, emerging from the maelstrom of the late 1960s, expressed something of the extent of female dissatisfaction, but other types of female activism, located in traditional female roles associated with working class family and neighbourhood, were becoming increasingly politicised in the context of urban decay and renewal. Initiatives associated with Community Development Projects, particularly provided opportunities for mature working class women to become politicised.<sup>22</sup> Both traditions of female dissent and organisation coalesced in the hybrid conditions of youth work in the early 1970s. The statutory sector had expanded as a result of Albemarle, and a new voluntary sector was taking shape as a consequence of urban policy and community development including small scale locally based youth projects.<sup>23</sup> The 1969 publication of the hybrid report, "Youth and Community Work in the 70's" further opened professional youth work to the influence of community politics and amongst female youth workers, one of the consequences was a dynamic coalition between the insights of women's liberation and community politics.<sup>24</sup> As a consequence, offering opportunities for working class girls via youth work was to become a priority in feminist youth work.

Feminist initiatives in work with girls and young women began with revelations about the extent and nature of female invisibility in youth provision. Statistical evidence consistently demonstrated significant gender inequality in youth service allocation and the women's arguments focused on the pretensions of the Youth Service to offer "universal" provision for young people. Thus, in the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) in 1981, it was estimated that youth club membership of girls was only one third that of boys, (excluding the London Federation of Boys Clubs), and that some of the London boroughs were spending as much as five times on boys as on girls.<sup>25</sup> In 1982, a report for ILEA about Camden, suggested that the estimate of a 30 per cent female membership of clubs did not reflect reality: "A consensus was reached by all workers interviewed that within a mixed club situation, the ratio of boys to girls was at least 4:1 – in some cases it was actually 10:1."<sup>26</sup> Such figures were estimates, but it could not be disputed that all positions of power within the hierarchy of the Camden Youth Service

were male – including the Chair of the area youth committee, the acting senior youth officer, two youth officers and the administrative officer. Meanwhile, of 49 full time youth worker posts, 31 were male and 18 female of which in senior worker posts, 12 were held by men and 3 by women.<sup>27</sup> In the specialist and uniformed sector where single sex work survived, NAYC research revealed that in 1980-81, National Headquarters Grants to single sex male youth organisations totalled £291,700 compared with a female equivalent of £115,250. In 1981-82 the figures were worse, with the male sector achieving an increase of 9%, bringing the total grant to £318,100 compared with a 5.8% increase for the female sector to £121,950.<sup>28</sup> Gender inequity in resource allocation was formally recognised in the Thompson review of youth service provision in England and Wales in 1982. Thompson cautiously asserted that “in terms of membership of youth groups of all kinds, boys outnumbered girls by about 3:2, and that in terms of their participation in activities and the use of facilities, the boys are much more conspicuous than this proportion would suggest.”<sup>29</sup>

The bare figures say nothing of the reality encountered in practice. Female youth workers documented how activities, time and space in youth clubs were dominated by the interests and demands of boys, how girls were to be found in traditional spaces, helping behind the coffee bar, watching male activities or congregating in the female toilets. It was noted that in youth clubs girls were often harassed, threatened and intimidated by boys and that their attempts to participate in activities, encountered active resistance not only from boys, but also from male workers.<sup>30</sup>

Because conditions in youth clubs were so inimical to their interests, female youth workers were often attracted to employment in the detached and “experimental” projects created in the wake of Albemarle and via community development initiatives.<sup>31</sup> Yet even here there were gender difficulties. Detached work had a reputation for responding to the troublesome street presence of boys and its status within the profession was as the “raw edge” of youth work. Liz Macalister of the Islington project claimed in 1984, that “After years of struggle” to establish detached work with girls, “Pressure still exists to concentrate on ‘heavy end’ boys and act as troubleshooters.”<sup>32</sup> In other experimental projects, and in “special” activities designed to attract more girls into clubs, there was a continuing tendency to interpret girls’ needs with reference to their sexuality or their interest in boys and young men. The editorial of a special Health Issue



of the *Working with Girls Newsletter* explained, “When we started work on this edition...we were very conscious of the way health and (young) women all too often gets interpreted as being about heterosexual sex. The equation goes; young women + health = contraception/abortion/pregnancy/VD.”<sup>33</sup>

Confronted with institutionalised masculinity in their work environment, female workers were themselves constrained by gender stereotypes. In the first edition of the *Working With Girls Newsletter (WWGN)* in 1981, Val Marshall complained that:

“The major concern of Youth Service seems to be the preservation of a male dominated society, dependent for its continued existence on a constant supply of home loving wives and mothers, willing to cook, clean, copulate, and procreate on demand, and it will stay that way for as long as the men dominating our professional service refuse to volunteer a realistic partnership with women.”<sup>34</sup>

Feminists therefore linked the interests of girls and young women as service users with their own interests as female workers. They sought initially to increase female access and participation, and in so doing to create the circumstances in which their own autonomous practice might thrive. The claim for redistribution of resources in favour of girls implied no presumption to changed practices, although it inevitably encountered resistance in a climate of scarcity. However, when this was linked with a demand for single sex space in which different female-centred approaches to youth work might be explored, a different order of challenge was involved. Not only did it implicitly question prevailing methods and values, but it also subverted traditional assumptions about the control of space in which in which junior workers were supervised and in which the behaviour of girls was policed by boys.<sup>35</sup> As the feminist discourse became more assertive, the insistence on the interrelationship between the personal and the political brought into youth work a critique of the conditions under which girls and women lived which explicitly questioned gender relations in the youth work setting. At the same time, the interpersonal and collective dimensions of feminist youth work organisation undermined the values of individual skill and neutrality assumed within traditional notions of professionalism. Meanwhile, the success of feminist work in engaging young women in activities whilst focusing on questions of identity, identification and a critique of gender relations threatened to displace the comfortable work established by men and boys

around leisure activity whose metaphor was the ubiquitous pool table. The resulting gender-based conflict between youth workers described in the literature was probably inevitable, but the women who described such conflict and suffered from it, were seldom in a position to analyse its source and relevance. Mostly the accounts suggest that the women were simply hurt and confused by the strength of feeling provoked by their successful initiatives.

## **Feminist Practice**

The value of single sex organisation was learned from the wider women's movement and used by feminist youth workers to challenge the notion that girls were "only interested in boys." The earliest "girls only" event documented in my archive describes a successful Girls' Conference in Waltham Forest in 1976. Subsequently, high profile female-only events such as girls' days and activities weekends were used to present alternative role models of women acting in leadership, using a range of non-traditional skills and pursuing enthusiasms in their own terms. The activities included in the second Waltham Forest conference in 1978 are fairly representative of the type of programme associated with Girls' Days. The conference comprised a range of workshops each attended by about 30 girls, although it was estimated that about 50 attended the Rape Crisis workshop. A theatre production entitled *Our Way*, dealt with "Working life and opportunities for women at work and the problems involved regardless of a woman's place within the hierarchy." There were a Health Education display, a photographic exhibition showing women in a range of work and life situations, and stalls selling feminist literature and posters. Informal discussion areas were set aside to facilitate interaction. A group named *Clapperclaw* enabled participants to make their own music at the end of the day. The Report claimed that 200 girls and young women participated. Such occasions had an important advantage of demonstrating numerically that given appropriate conditions, girls really were not a problem.<sup>36</sup>

High profile events, frequently organised by women in addition to their contracted responsibilities, tended to incorporate and enhance smaller scale initiatives. The 1980 Girls Day in Sunderland involved a number of girls groups from local youth projects in providing the food and music for the day. For the workers, organising the Girls' Day offered an opportunity to meet, discuss their work, learn new skills, share resources and

significantly, to engage with women youth workers who did not necessarily identify as feminist but were interested in involving girls in their practice. Such productivity made a significant contribution to validating feminist practice, increasing the professional confidence of the women and offering legitimacy for their arguments for single sex space and time in local projects.<sup>37</sup>

Despite the documented success of such initiatives in addressing an acknowledged problem about levels of female participation, and despite funding derived partly from central organisational budgets, feminist youth workers persistently encountered hostility especially with regard to their insistence upon female only environments. The 1978 Waltham Forest Conference Report notes that, “The boys were a constant problem throughout the day.” They were never to cease to be so. “‘The boys hate girls night,’ said one Camden youth worker. ‘They usually try to break the door down. They think it’s a poxy club, but they’d rather be in it than not.’”<sup>38</sup> Resenting their exclusion from time and space normally claimed as their own, and to the activities and conversations of the girls which they normally controlled, boys constantly intruded. Women suggested that male colleagues could support female work by undertaking anti-sexist work with boys, and by providing back up whilst female-only sessions were underway but sympathetic support was sporadic. Youth work which centred the female perspective, rather than simply reproducing traditional ideas about gender roles and girls’ interests in beauty, cookery and boys, was met mostly with sustained opposition. Sometimes this erupted into major organisational struggles leading to the resignation or dismissal of “difficult” feminist workers.

In 1980, Val Marshall, the Area Field Officer for the London Union of Youth Clubs (LUYC), was “in effect instantly dismissed. And some time ago her innovative girls’ page in the union’s bulleting was banned by a senior officer.”<sup>39</sup> The first issue of *WWGN* seems to allude to this when it reported that the LUYC had

“...rejected suggestions that it should appoint a full time worker to support and develop work with girls...Following recent upheavals with LUYC, attention has focused on what many youth workers believe to be the lack of serious commitment to girls’ work within the union.”<sup>40</sup>

LUYC had started life as the London Union of Girls Clubs, founded by Maude Stanley, the pioneer of London girls' clubs in the late nineteenth century. Like the NOGC, it had responded to the demand for mixed gender clubs in the inter war years accepting organisational responsibility for such clubs in 1949. Attempts to re-establish girls work within such organisations perceived by feminist youth workers partly as a means of reclaiming control of women's resources, were met with personal as well as institutional resistance. As Marshall wrote, "...strong opposition exists to the re-creation of the girls' club movement to service the needs of girls. Such demands are labelled 'women's lib' or 'unhealthy'; the women making such demands are described as 'difficult', and in some cases dismissed from their employment."<sup>41</sup> Published references to Marshall's conflict with the LUYC are elliptical, possibly because there were conditions in a financial settlement which she achieved with the organisation which required that she should "go, keep quiet about it, and not resort to her legal rights."<sup>42</sup> Such conditions in themselves create silences in the historical account. I recall that the matter was central to discussions and decisions taken at the Women Youth Workers' conference in Nottingham University in 1981 even though this is not apparent in the texts.

Organisational disputes such as this illustrate the entrenched positions taken by some antagonists in this gender struggle. Yet the extent of resistance is undocumented because it was mainly expressed in low level, daily processes of attrition. One of the 1992 interviews offers an example of the pettiness of everyday struggles:

"...I had to wait until the male worker turned up with the keys to open the office and cupboards. I told him he was the man with the keys, with the power. I won the battle. I haven't the front door keys, but the office and the cupboard. I opened the cupboard and there was nothing there! *After I'd got the keys!* He said, 'I decided to have a change-around.'<sup>43</sup>

In spite of such antagonism, there was ambivalence at some levels around the technical achievement of access for girls. Feminist work helped fulfil the requirement to offer a "universal" service for young people and enabled youth work managers to claim that their organisations were successfully integrating girls and young women. It was the use of feminist analysis to pursue a wider political agenda for change which was problematic and encouragement was mainly offered in terms which did not acknowledge feminism.

Recognising the ambiguity, feminist workers often underplayed their feminist values and intentions in funding applications and in formal reports. Nevertheless, through the logic of their own position in connecting the personal and political, they constantly discovered the limits of the liberalism and tolerance of colleagues and managers.

### **Women Worker Groups**

A heightened emotional atmosphere of challenge and defence encouraged women to seek the support of female-only workers' groups. Again, the model derived from the women's movement. A group was meeting in the London Women's Centre in Earlham Street in early 1976. The notes from that group from June 1977 suggest that the women combined practice matters ( organising a "Girls' Bop"), with a determination to challenge traditional stereotypes, (discussing a response to a leaflet entitled "Getting Married," a Family Doctor Publication), and a desire to campaign about inequality on other fronts, (agreeing to take issue with the youth workers' union, the CYSA, which had published a homophobic letter in its newspaper by someone signing themselves "Sam Nutter.")<sup>44</sup> By the early 1980s, groups were established across the UK. In 1981 there were at least six active in the North Eastern region alone. These groups offered mutual support, facilitated the organisation of collaborative events, and promoted information, skills and resource sharing. They were a source of professional training, self education and consciousness-raising and they also offered opportunities for developing collective strategies in response to hostile conditions. One worker recollected a decade later:

"The Working With Girls Development Group in Newcastle, 1982-3, was really good. Supportive. West End Work With Girls became a sub-group of the Newcastle group. We campaigned and helped each other. We had strength and did positive work and made inroads into the Civic Centre. We got a budget. We were achieving things and could tap into things...

...We organised a massive Girls' Only Day in Otterburn. We contacted every single woman worker in the city...We had 200 on the day. Mams came too. Volunteers, full time and part time workers. Everyone was good together. It wasn't competitive. We ended the day with a massive barbeque. There was no violence or aggression. We sang songs.<sup>45</sup>

Yet even here, the ideal of involving a wide range of women or drawing down organisational funds meant that some groups were shy of advertising feminist credentials. Their declared emphasis remained with the development of youth work with girls. Nevertheless:

“The feminist analysis was quite important. Without it we wouldn’t have put in all that energy. It captured a sense of idealism and political purpose. It was self-exploitative but the passion was important and infectious and helped us have some successes.”<sup>46</sup>

Feminism was an ever-present but subterranean discourse which became unstable and vulnerable as organisational began to change. In May 1983, the Tyneside Working with Girls Development Group discussed the need to have a “positive structure” having worked in an “ad hoc way until now.” This meeting covered four main items: 1. Financial Report; 2. Formation of a WWGDG Management Group; 3. National Girls’ Work Network; and 4. National Association of Youth Clubs. The minutes refer to activities, conferences and skills but focus mainly on the question of democracy and representation within the group pursued under Item Two. It was noted that members had worked to “gain credibility and benefits for girls’ work;” that they had pressed the Newcastle Youth Service to employ a girls’ worker; and that a worker might be seconded from the Education Department for girls’ work.

The differences between Earlham Street in 1977 and Tyneside in 1983 suggest some inroads into organisational cultures and practices. Attendance at women workers’ group meetings had become more generally accepted as a part of paid work time and employers appeared to be responding to the call for more female workers at senior levels. In Newcastle, the local authority did eventually agree to appoint a youth officer with a remit to develop work with girls, although this was additional to taking responsibility for all youth work in the west end of the city. Meanwhile, also in 1983, ILEA appointed a Youth Officer with special responsibility for work with girls and women. Having begun using a fluid approach to organisation based on the feminist model of consciousness-raising and campaigning groups, the women workers’ groups of the 1980s began to adopt the conventions of public sector organisations. Increased

structuring and formalisation of groups enabled them to become more streamlined with reference to influencing organisational decision making. However, their very success at this level further diminished the practical usefulness of feminist language. As the groups became increasingly and narrowly focused upon sustaining and progressing work with girls and young women, their developmental purposes subsided and a feminist critique of formal organisational power became increasingly irrelevant.

As public expenditure cuts bit into worker time during the 1980s, it became difficult for youth workers to justify attending meetings except those which were organisationally accountable and had discernable outcomes. The survival of women workers groups began to depend upon the support of sympathetic managers:

“A woman worker’s forum was set up... There were 30 odd women there... It had the support of [a female officer]. We organised a very successful Girls’ Day which we got the money for because of [the officer]. We had a women’s social – about 100 women in the community centre. We got funds for a Body Workshop and Beauty therapy equipment. We were asking questions about the body and the beauty industry and real feminist questions. Then [the female officer] left and we were left with all male officers. They liked to brag about our work but they did nothing to support it practically or financially and it fell on me and [M] (the full time workers), plus some part timers. When the part time workers had their sessions cut, there was less and less participation from them and it kind of dwindled. It doesn’t meet now because I’ve left and [M] is overworked.”<sup>47</sup>

In the north east of England, only two women youth workers groups survived the 1980s, both because they were protected by female youth officers and because they had become incorporated into the structure of the youth service in question. During the 1990s they were replaced by one group, co-ordinated by the Regional Youth Work Unit, formally open to men and with publicly circulated minutes. This was symptomatic of the picture across the UK. By 1990, organised feminist agendas, if not completely silent, were retreating rapidly.

### **The causes of decline**

A heady dynamic period of growth in the early 1980s had seemed to be leading towards a period of consolidation in which it was hoped that girls' work (and with it feminist perspectives) would "come in from the margins."<sup>48</sup> This was not to materialise. An incremental shift of power towards centralised state control of professional interventions through organisational management and systems revealed the shallowness of the concessions to feminist practice and the fragility of the ambiguous spaces in which it has grown. Changing conditions in turn irritated the fissiparous tendencies of feminism wherein sisterhood had always been challenged by other structural inequalities in differences. Feminist youth work began to fracture both horizontally and vertically.

Central control was exerted mainly through financial management during the 1980s but not just in youth services. For example, feminist youth work was significantly undermined by changes in the rules of the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC). The EOC gave £3,326.42 between April 1978 and August 1980 to support "one-off" youth work initiatives to encourage the participation of girls and young women. Mostly the grants were for single sex activities for girls, but they also supported explicitly feminist events such as the national conference of 1980 entitled "Women's Liberation in Youth Work – A Feminist Perspective." Val Carpenter, the NAYC Girls' Work Officer claimed that

"...the EOC has been responsible for the very beginnings of work which could change the face of the Youth Service. In every locality where EOC funding has been granted there have been positive effects felt by girls, individual youth workers and the Youth Service generally."<sup>49</sup>

Encouraged by the EOC's interpretation of single sex work with girls as a contribution to "achieving real equality of opportunity for women,"<sup>50</sup> feminist workers began to rely on the support. Then in April 1982, the Durham Girls' Work Group applied for funding for half the cost of a Girls' Day. Two days before the event, they were told verbally that their grant was to be refused because of a reinterpretation of the Sex Discrimination Act. New rules required any single sex work with girls in a mixed project to be matched by parallel and equal arrangements for boys. Applications were required to be explicit about



the educational content of the event which in turn needed to be consonant with the mainstream work of the project, and this required verification from external referees.<sup>51</sup>

This rule change was indicative of formalisation of control of the allocation of grants and expressed a reaction against the idea of “positive discrimination” as organisational compensation for the consequences of personal “oppression.” Positive discrimination in employment practices and intervention methods was henceforth to be replaced by formal and legalised systems-based approaches to equality of access to and participation in organisations. This implied an inversion feminist understanding. If organisations were equal and accessible, then failure to access them or thrive within them could be blamed on deficits in individuals rather than structures. Politicised interventions would be irrelevant. Feminist youth worker support for the development equal opportunities policies was in this sense inimical to their intentions.

Progressing feminist youth work had to some extent relied upon the liberalism of a public sector which offered some autonomy to professional workers. In this, there was room for different inflections of meaning to co-exist. As the 1980s progressed, organisational meanings were to become more absolute and fixed in favour of managerial expectations. The instability of working with ambiguity was signalled early in the fate of the national NAYC Experimental Project for Work With Girls funded between 1978 and 1981 by the Department of Education and Science (DES) through NAYC. Much of the documentation from this project remains closed to public access, and a report for the DES, written by the consultant, Josephine Klein, is labelled “Confidential.” Nevertheless, sufficient information is in the public domain to give some account of events.<sup>52</sup> The project employed three workers for three years to undertake action research in order to assess the value of detached youth work for young people defined as “at risk.” NAYC originally defined “risk” as “prostitution” and with reference to “black or asian (*sic*) girls, young unmarried mothers, girls excluded from school and regular users of cafes, clubs, discos etc.”<sup>53</sup> However the workers argued that their research and practice revealed that girls considered themselves at risk as a consequence of their social and personal positioning. In a project pamphlet entitled *Feeling Scared and Being Powerful*, major section headings included: “It surprises you the sort of men who bother you- they’re so ordinary, could be your mate’s dad, or your uncle!” Objecting to the notion that Black and Asian young women were at risk by virtue of race or ethnicity, one

of the workers pursued a different perspective on the lives of young black women, published in 1980 as, *Hamari Rangily Zindagi (Our Colourful Lives)*.<sup>54</sup> In keeping with feminist analyses of the silencing of working class female voices, the workers were keen to let the words of the girls speak about “risk” for themselves. This was a fundamental threat to the balance of ambiguous meaning. Its linguistic power is apparent in a number of publications derived from the project. The front page of one pamphlet relating to menstruation contains the word, “Periods” (written in a way to suggest blood) surrounded by words such as “on the rag,” “dripping,” “Jam.” Such language, represented as the “authentic” voice of working class girls mediated through feminist youth work, transgressed tacitly accepted professional boundaries and was experienced as a serious challenge to the “respectability” of the sponsoring and participating organisations. The response involved banning the workers from all public buildings in the local authority area and invoked legalistic and bureaucratic authority to interrogate the validity of the research, the professional competence and the personal attributes of the workers. The last year of this project, which seemed to have achieved some success both in feminist terms, and technically met the original terms of the funding, was characterised by disillusionment, conflict and disarray because it had uncovered the limits of organisational liberalism by forcing the ambiguous to become unambiguous.

As structural and discursive spaces for manoeuvre closed down, the personal vulnerability of feminist workers increased. It therefore appeared to be a rational strategy to turn attention to possibilities for influencing organisational decision-making. Mainly this translated into engagement with organisational policy development, specifically with reference to the delineation of equal opportunities policies.<sup>55</sup> This strategy persuaded some women to seek management positions in the belief that they would thereby gain more influence in policy decisions. Yet in 1986, referring to the energy spent by women workers in one local authority, an HMI report into youth service responses to the needs of young women noted that, “In this authority, the conscious decision to attempt to change policies had left little energy for work on the ground”.<sup>56</sup> As the HMIs observed, feminist workers now found themselves forced to make choices about “whether their job was to work to improve policies authority-wide or through example in face to face practice.” The movement of some women into policy and management demanded a shift away from identification with girls and young women towards professional organisational processes which in other circumstances were experienced as in conflict with feminist

values. Despite personal good will, this resituated young women as the objects of practice interventions and dented trust between women in different positions of power. Horizontal cracks began to open in their support systems. At the same time other difficulties, also associated with the personal-political spectrum of feminist youth work and mainly relating to the identity politics of class, race, sexuality, disability and age were intruding upon relationships between women workers, causing vertical rifts.

Willingness to address manifestations of structural inequality across a range of personal and institutional boundaries had been integral to the feminist project.<sup>57</sup> “You learn about institutional racism...It’s given me lots to think about. It’s forced me to do things like anti-racist training which I think if I hadn’t been doing this work I wouldn’t have taken on board so much.”<sup>58</sup> Personal dimensions demanded both that individuals organise for social change, and also seek to change their own attitudes. However, this positive attribute contained a potential for tension between women which threatened to become strategically and emotionally debilitating. Differences between women easily became disputes in a climate of political reaction and diminishing resources. Suspensions about endemic prejudice and discrimination within the feminist project, particularly in relation to racism and heterosexism led to demands for separate work with young black and Asian women and young lesbians which were irresistible in view of the logic of separate work with girls. Some disputes spilled out on the public stage. Thus, when a collective group set up to compile a book about girls’ work under the aegis of the NAYC disintegrated between 1981 and 1983 amid accusations of racism, acrimonious letters were widely circulated.<sup>59</sup> Personal identities were conflated with structural inequalities creating a volatile emotional environment which seriously destabilised feminist youth work.

Nevertheless, the critical blow was managerial. In 1987 on the appointment of Jan Holt the new chief executive of NAYC, the Girls Work Unit was closed and its workers made redundant with 24 hours notice. The unit had been the hub of feminist youth work organisation and communication and the closure was described at the time by a campaigner as “knocking away –or, even worse, stealing – one of the cornerstones of this work.”<sup>60</sup> The background story of the Girls’ Work Unit closure remains undocumented. Officially, a budget deficit of over £100,000 demanded a reorganisation of, “all aspects of the Association’s work.”<sup>61</sup> Holt maintained that the commitment of

NAYC to girls' work had not diminished but would now be integral to the organisation.<sup>62</sup> This rationale was in keeping with the recommendations in the 1983 Thompson Report that single sex work was valid but only as a temporary expedient until organisations had achieved equality of opportunity.<sup>63</sup> The affected workers meanwhile were convinced that closure was a response to the success of feminist work. Val Carpenter suggested that:

“We are not just talking about single sex work but about working with young women in a mixed setting. I think this is where the association has been unable to live with our work. We are talking about mainstream issues, and they either had to axe the unit or start taking the implications seriously.”<sup>64</sup>

It is recorded that Holt explained that, “There was now enough enlightenment about Girls Work to be included as part of the mainstream, and for the work to be developed in a more constructive way.”<sup>65</sup> Here we perhaps glimpse a hint of the real problem – that feminism was experienced as “unconstructive” or perhaps just “difficult.”

## **Conclusion**

Despite some remarkable successes, feminist youth work ultimately failed to achieve equality for girls and women within youth organisations or to establish anti-sexist approaches as mainstream.<sup>66</sup> When its ideas were acknowledged as valid, the price of adoption was incorporation which either stressed girls' issues, or pursued a managerial approach to equal opportunities. At best, the issues raised by feminist youth workers contributed knowledge and subject matter gained from close identification with working class young women which informed service agendas. The pursuit of feminist ideals was always limited by the diminishing resources of youth work and the centralising systems of accountability imposed on public services. The personal-political agenda which was so productive in an open climate of worker autonomy, became a destructive force in the context of retrenchment and reaction. Feminist energies were effectively co-opted and subverted as women attempted to manage the new conditions and integrate their approaches into mainstream practice.

Nevertheless there were real gains associated with the empowerment of the girls and young women who were touched by feminist work, and by those women workers whose confidence, skill and understanding grew in the context of feminist support. At its

heart, the movement was deeply concerned to offer to girls and young women opportunities otherwise denied, investigating approaches which might enable them to develop their potential. The attention to enhancing the agency of girls and young women who suffered multiple exclusions, particularly those of class, race and sexuality, but also disability and age, was hugely valued by those who benefited. There are glimpses of this in the texts produced by the movement in which the voice of girls and young women as well as workers, from different backgrounds and owning different identities could be articulated (albeit within respectable boundaries). Perhaps a movement whose principals were dominated by ideals of “liberation” could ask for little more except that its successes and struggles be remembered and its insights be developed. In these terms, perhaps it is fitting to end with the appreciative words of a member of the Manor House Girls Group in 1980:

#### Girls Night

Have you heard of this place,  
Where you get kids of many race,  
On Monday night is girls night,  
We have fun together and never fight.  
You will never be pushed around,  
Even if you act the clown.  
If you don't believe what I say,  
Come on down to Islington way.  
On girls night no boys allowed,  
Then you get a lesser crowd.  
You can play football or pool  
As long as you obey the rule.  
Monday nights are for girls,  
When it's like living in a woman's world.  
We play tennis, and do some cooking,  
Don't worry no boys will be looking.  
We have this place for our own,  
On Monday nights no boys will Roam.  
Girls Night, girls Night,  
Isn't it a beautiful sight.<sup>67</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The *Working With Girls Newsletter*, (WWGN) 1981 to 1987 contains numerous examples of feminist youth workers making connections with campaigns around issues such as sexual abuse which were later incorporated into other approaches. See M. Nava (1984) Drawing the Line, in eds. A. McRobbie and M. Nava, *Gender and Generation*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan) pp. 85-111. Anti-oppressive practice was adopted within social work to describe aspects of practice which had been named within feminist youth work as eg. 'anti-racism; anti-heterosexism; anti-disablism.

<sup>2</sup> The only legal responsibility for youth services, in the 1944 Education Act, was that local authorities should ensure that 'sufficient' provision was made for the leisure and further education of young people.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in J. Spence (1996) Feminism in Work with Girls and Young Women, *Youth and Policy*, 52 p.42.

<sup>4</sup> For example, M. Kendall, (1981) Out of Work...Out of Sight? *WWGN*, 4 (July/Aug) pp4-6; K. Campbell, H. Miller and M. Jardine (1984) Woman to Woman, *WWGN*, 20, (March/April) pp.12-13.

<sup>5</sup> C. Murray (1984) *Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950-1980* (New York, Basic Books).

<sup>6</sup> B. Davies, (1999) *From Thatcherism to New Labour: A History of the Youth Service in England*, (Leicester, NYA). p 93.

<sup>7</sup> Spence (1996) Feminism in Work with Girls, pp. 38-53.

<sup>8</sup> M. Sawbridge and J. Spence (1990) *The Dominance of the Male Agenda in Community and Youth Work*, (Durham University).

<sup>9</sup> S. Rowbotham (1973) *Hidden from History* (London, Pluto).

<sup>10</sup> J. Spence, (2006) Working with girls and young women: a broken history, in R. Gilchrist, T. Jeffs and J. Spence (eds.) *Drawing on the Past*, (Leicester, NYA) pp. 242-261.

<sup>11</sup> M. Collins, (2003) *Modern Love* (London, Atlantic), pp59-89; P. Tinkler (2000) Girlhood in Transition? Preparing English Girls for Adulthood in Reconstructed Britain, in C. Duchén and I. Bandhauer-Scöffmann (eds.), *When the War is Over*, (Leicester University Press) pp. 59-70.

<sup>12</sup> M. Butterfield and J. Spence (forthcoming) The transition from Girls' Clubs to Girls' Clubs and Mixed Clubs: UK Youth 1934-1944 in R. Gilchrist, T. Jeffs, J. Spence and J. Walker (eds.) *Discovering the Past* (Leicester, NYA).

<sup>13</sup> A new collaborative inter-generational initiative entitled 'Feminist Webs' is recording oral histories of older feminist youth workers in North West England ([www.nwrywu.org.uk](http://www.nwrywu.org.uk)).

<sup>14</sup> Sawbridge and Spence *The Male Agenda*; J. Spence (1996) Feminism in Work with Girls and Women, in *Youth and Policy*, 52, pp.38-53.

<sup>15</sup> Ministry of Education (1960) *The Youth Service in England and Wales*, (The Albemarle Report).

<sup>16</sup> Jalna Hanmer, (1964) *Girls at Leisure*, London:LUYC/LYWCA pp. 68;70;72.

<sup>17</sup> P. Tinkler (2003) Cause for concern: young women and leisure, 1930-50, *Women's History Review*, 12 (2) pp. 233-260.

<sup>18</sup> Board of Education Circular 1486, *The Service of Youth*.

<sup>19</sup> Butterfield and Spence, *The Transition*

<sup>20</sup> J. Macalister Brew (1957) *Youth and Youth Groups*, (London, Faber and Faber) p.157.

<sup>21</sup> Collins, *Modern Love*

<sup>22</sup> M. Loney (1983) *Community Against Government: The British Community Development Project, 1968-78*, (London, Heinemann).

<sup>23</sup> One such project employed specifically to "work with girls" in 1979.

<sup>24</sup> DES (1969) *Youth and Community Work in the 1970's* (Fairbairn/Milson Report) (London, HMSO).

<sup>25</sup> ILEA (1981) *Youth Service Provision for Girls*. .

- <sup>26</sup> V. Marshall (1982, April) *"Out of Sight": Work With Girls in Camden*. Report on a four month study carried out on behalf of the Camden Area Youth Committee, presented to the London Youth Committee of ILEA, 12<sup>th</sup> July 1982. Item CEC.1 45/8. p.2. Attached cover comments by the Principal Youth Officer who presented the report indicated that such figures were always contested: "...the exclusion of the uniformed organisations and youth centres (which together with specialist clubs and projects constitute 54% of registered organisations), automatically omits such work being undertaken with girls."
- <sup>27</sup> Marshall, *Out of Sight*, p.40.
- <sup>28</sup> V. Carpenter (1981) *WWGN* 4, (July/August) p1; N. Smith, (ud; c.1983) *Youth Service Provision for Girls and Young Women*, (Leicester, NAYC).
- <sup>29</sup> DES (1982) *Experience and Participation. Report of the Review Group on the Youth Service in England* (The Thompson Report) (London:HMSO) p. 63
- <sup>30</sup> Examples in B. Campbell (1980) Sugar 'n Spice 'n Nice 'n Angry in *Time Out*, (25-31 Jul) p.8.
- <sup>31</sup> J. Holmes (1986) Women Students in Youth and Community Work Courses, *Youth and Policy*, 17, pp.13-16.
- <sup>32</sup> L. Macalister, (1984) Re-examining a street work approach, in *WWGN* 19, (Jan/Feb) p6.
- <sup>33</sup> Editorial (1984) *WWGN*, 24 (Nov/Dec) p.1.
- <sup>34</sup> V. Marshall (1981) Girls Are People Too! *WWGN* 1 (Jan/Feb) pp8-10.
- <sup>35</sup> M. Nava (1984) Youth Service Provision, Social Order and the Question of Girls in McRobbie and Nava, *Gender and Generation* pp1-30.
- <sup>36</sup> Report of the Waltham Forest Girls' Conference, Leyton Youth Centre, 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1978.
- <sup>37</sup> Sunderland Girls Day Report, 1980, (Leicester, NAYC).
- <sup>38</sup> Quoted in Campbell, *Sugar 'n Spice*.
- <sup>39</sup> *ibid*.
- <sup>40</sup> *WWGN*, 1 (Jan/Feb,1981)) p1.
- <sup>41</sup> Marshall, *Girls are People Too!*
- <sup>42</sup> Campbell, *Sugar 'n spice*.
- <sup>43</sup> Quoted in Spence, *Feminism in Work With Girls* p. 51
- <sup>44</sup> Minutes of meeting, August 1977.
- <sup>45</sup> Interview with feminist worker 1992.
- <sup>46</sup> Interview with feminist worker, 1992
- <sup>47</sup> Interview with feminist worker, 1992
- <sup>48</sup> V. Carpenter and K. Young, (1985) *Coming In From the Margins: Youth Work With Girls and Young Women*, (Leicester: NAYC).
- <sup>49</sup> Quoted in *EOC News*, October/November, 1980. p5.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>51</sup> V. Simpson (1982) Letter to *WWGN*, 11 (Sept/Oct) pp1-2.
- <sup>52</sup> Papers in the Women's Library in London. Klein's "Confidential" report for the DES, was widely circulated amongst youth workers. L. Jamdagni (1980) *Hamari Rangily Zindagi*, (Leicester, NAYC). Some publications appeared after the project closed with financial assistance from the EOC and the Gulbenkian Foundation. These include L. Thorne (ed) (1982) *Some Girls* (Birmingham).
- <sup>53</sup> NAYC (1977) *Experimental Project – Work with Girls*. (Leicester:NAYC) (Information for job applicants).
- <sup>54</sup> L. Jamdagni (1980) *Hamari Rangily..*
- <sup>55</sup> For example, Wear Working With Girls Development Group (1984) *Work With Girls Policy Document*. (Sunderland)
- <sup>56</sup> DES (1986) *Report by HM Inspectors on Youth Service Responses to the Needs of Young Women in Selected LEA's*. (Stanmore:DES Publications) p.11.
- <sup>57</sup> For example, Z. Choudary (1980) Young Asians – A Case for Separate Clubs? In *Youth Service Scene*, 55 (May); P. Parmar (1988) Gender, Race and Power: The Challenge to Youth Work Practice, in (eds) P. Cohen and H. S. Bains *Multi-Racist Britain*, (London:Macmillan).
- <sup>58</sup> Quoted in Spence, *Feminism in Work with Girls*, p.49. See also M. Nava (1982) 'Everybody's views were just broadened' A Girls Project and Some Responses to Lesbianism, *Feminist Review*, 10, pp37-60.

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- <sup>59</sup> Notes of meetings held 9<sup>th</sup> June 1981, 27<sup>th</sup> October 1981, 2<sup>nd</sup> December, 1982 (Leicester.) Notes of meetings held 29th April, 1983 and undated letter sent from London c. October 1983.
- <sup>60</sup> *Girls Work Unit Support Campaign Bulletin*, 1987
- <sup>61</sup> Letter from Jan Holt to M. Issitt, J. Spence and F. Booton, 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1987.
- <sup>62</sup> *The Guardian*, Feb. 14<sup>th</sup> 1987; p4; March 4<sup>th</sup> 1987, p13; *Girls Work Unit Support Campaign Bulletin*, 1987; *WWGN*, Campaign Issue, March 1987 published by Community and Youth Workers Union Women's Caucus.
- <sup>63</sup> *DES Experience and Participation*.
- <sup>64</sup> *The Guardian*, Feb. 14<sup>th</sup> 1987, p.4.
- <sup>65</sup> Notes of a meeting with Jan Holt, 5<sup>th</sup> March 1987, taken by J. Holmes of the Training Agencies Group.
- <sup>66</sup> DES (1986) *Report by HM Inspectors*. See also Sawbridge and Spence (1991) *The Dominance of the Male Agenda*.
- <sup>67</sup> *Girls Talk*, Summer 1980 (London).