

# Working with Girls and Young Women: A broken history

Jean Spence

**H**ISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE makes a crucial contribution to our understanding of contemporary questions and the recovery of the history of youth work is no exception. It is tempting therefore to read the past through contemporary sensibilities and with a view to making a case for specific approaches to professional practice. Whilst this can be strategically useful and informative, the history of single sex youth work with girls and young women suggests that it is necessary to exercise caution in the process. This chapter argues that in the history of work with girls and young women the continuities of method and form obscure a deeper disjuncture in political philosophy and purpose. The interventions of women youth workers in the Victorian and Edwardian period were influenced by an essentialist approach to gender which would have been anathema to those feminists who promoted work with girls and young women in the late twentieth century. In order to fully utilise and build constructively upon historical understanding, it is necessary to interrogate the evidence critically. A search for historical 'ancestors' can be misleading.

## The Movement For Working With Girls And Young Women

The intellectual and political radicalism which characterised the late 1960s began to impact significantly upon the perspectives and activities of public sector workers during the 1970s. A critical, politicised approach to inherited assumptions followed a period of expansion in which the commitment of the state to universal social welfare provision seemed assured (Green and Chapman, 1992; Robson, 2000). Within youth work, a new generation of professional workers, influenced by the cultural and political youth and student movements, was ushered into place by a combination of the post war expansion in Higher Education (HMSO, 1963) and by the opportunities opening up in youth work following the Albemarle Report of 1960 (HMSO, 1960).

The years immediately following Albemarle had witnessed not only the expansion of traditional, centre based work with young people but also increased opportunities for the development of 'experimental' projects. The Fairburn-Milson Report (DES, 1969) reflected the mood of the times. Although the marriage between community and youth work within that report was not altogether an easy one (Davies, 1999), it nevertheless precipitated an amalgamation of community and youth services across much of the statutory sector and the door was thus opened for the direct influence of community activism upon youth work in general (Thomas, 1983).

Community work practice in this period was directly influenced by the experiences and critical analyses of the research and action of the Community Development Projects set up in 1969 by the Home Office to tackle poverty and deprivation (Green and Chapman, 1992). In youth work, the new locally managed, neighbourhood youth projects which were created in the context of the Urban Aid Programme (1968) tended to work with young people directly within similar community development terms, under the auspices of planning rather than educational or leisure departments of local government. As such, they had very specific ideas about space and place which contextualised work with young people (Robson, 2000), targeting particular groups and thereby moving away from the more tightly age-defined and universalist notion of youth and adolescence which had characterised the development of the statutory youth service.

Spatial targeting broadened conceptual understanding and involved a sharpened awareness of the political significance of class divisions and inequalities in youth work. This implied a shift in perspective away from the old model of 'character building' through healthy leisure pursuits, towards 'consciousness raising' based upon local and class identity. The social educational traditions of youth work (Davies and Gibson, 1967) offered fertile ground for the incorporation of the more overtly politicised informal educational trends of community work, exemplified particularly in the educational theory of Paulo Freire explored in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972) and *Education: The Practice of Freedom* (1974). The intention of 'radical' youth work was to raise political consciousness through educational methods grounded in the realities of the everyday lives of mainly working class young people. The changes in perspective in the youth work of this period were captured in the model offered by Butters and Newell in their 1978 report into volunteer training which suggested a more or less linear progression in the history of youth work from a liberal, character building approach, through the social education paradigm into a (yet to be achieved) radical paradigm (1978, 40-46).

It was in this context that new female-centred and explicitly feminist approaches to youth work began to take root. By the middle of the 1970s, increased activism amongst local working class women within the context of community projects (NAYC, 1982; Thomas, 1983) was dovetailing with a growing awareness of gender inequality amongst newly qualified professional workers in the public sector. Expanding employment opportunities in youth work offered access for women workers to a profession which since the First World War had become increasingly masculine in shape and content (Hanmer, 1964; NAYC, 1967; DES, 1969; Dixon, 1981; Spence, 2001). Concern about gender inequality in practice was legitimated by legal improvements in the status of women. The Sex Discrimination Act (1970) and the Equal Pay Act (1970) came into force in 1975. One year later, the 'Movement for Working with Girls and Young Women' emerged in a youth service dominated by men and by traditional views about gender relations. The new movement of female workers, inspired by the feminist ideal of 'sisterhood', was informed by the thinking associated with community education and activism on the one hand, and liberation politics and consciousness on the other (Carpenter, 1981a; NAYC, 1982).

Outside the traditionally organised single sex voluntary organisations, most youth work in the early 1970s made little effort to cater specifically for young women. Youth clubs were effectively dominated by boys and male workers (NAYC, 1967; Carpenter, 1980; Nava, 1984), the youth (and community) service was managed by male officers (Sawbridge and Spence, 1989) and gender inequality was not a priority for action. Most youth workers simply thought that girls were not interested in what youth work had to offer. Moreover, the masculine domination of the work was reinforced by funding arrangements

which singularly disadvantaged young women (ILEA, 1981; HMSO, 1982; Nava, 1984; Smith, 1984). Periodically, it had been noticed that girls and young women were not 'taking advantage' of the resources of youth work. Despite occasional efforts to understand and address this (eg. Hanmer, 1964; NAYC, 1967) and the recognition in Fairbairn-Milson that work with young women was more likely to be developed in a community context, those with vested interests in maintaining the status quo also held decision making power within youth organisations and no significant structural changes had ensued.

Although statutory youth work, developing within the welfare state, had adopted a universalist conception of youth, in practice its growth had been predicated upon issues related to working class boys and young men. Time and again, feminist workers noted that ostensibly 'mixed' youth provision catered only for boys (eg. see discussions in the *Working with Girls (WWG) Newsletter*, 1981-87). A similar situation pertained in the growing field of 'youth studies' in sociology and significantly in the influential studies of youth culture pursued in the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Willis, 1977; 1978; Hall and Jefferson, 1976; Hebdige, 1979; McRobbie, 1991). It was also inscribed within policy. One of the key factors influencing the formation of the Albemarle Committee had been the ending of National Service for young men. Another had been concern about male violence and street crime, expressed directly in racist attacks in the late 1950s and articulated in terms of anxiety about teddy boys and teenage affluence (Frith, 1978; Jeffs, 1979; Davies, 1999). It was not for nothing that the young people who benefited directly from Albemarle were identified as Lady Albemarle's Boys (Gosling, 1962).

To encourage girls and young women to participate in youth service organisations, women workers in the 1970s and 80s started organising and campaigning for female only time and space, from an explicitly feminist perspective (eg. Jamdagni, 1980; Klein, 1981; Parmar, 1988). The earliest recorded meeting of 'feminist' women youth workers was in the Earham Street Women's Centre in London in the spring of 1976 (Carpenter, 1980). However, there had been some stirring prior to that as individual women embarked independently upon single sex work (eg. Waltham Forest Girls Conference Report, Feb. 1976).

Feminist youth work received a significant boost when the National Association of Youth Clubs (NAYC), remembering its historical origins as the National Organisation of Girls Clubs (NOGC), and under pressure to respond to growing demands from the field for resources relating to working with girls, employed 'the first girls' work officer for over 20 years' (Carpenter, 1980). This had been achieved partly as a result of the influence of older women involved in the NAYC who remembered the female history of their organisation (private conversation with Michael Butterfield, Chief Executive of NAYC at the time). The new officer (Val Carpenter) had been a founder member of the Earham Street Group. Her appointment thus forged a direct link between a major national youth organisation with a female history and the feminist London youth workers' group. Subsequently the NAYC became associated with, and promoted from 1978, a series of annual national 'Feminist Women Youth Workers Conferences' organised by a 'Women Working with Young People Group' (*WWG Newsletter*, May/June, 1981).

These conferences stimulated national and regional organisation and informed strategy and alliances. As the demand for resources from the NAYC continued to increase, a Girls' Work Unit was created at its Leicester headquarters which, from 1981 until its sudden closure in 1987, produced the bi-monthly *Working With Girls Newsletter*. The *Newsletter* became a crucial forum, offering individual women

and the rapidly developing regional women workers groups information, ideas and encouragement. Meanwhile, the National Youth Bureau (NYB) employed its own worker, Kerry Young, with a brief for developing female youth work.

From the start, specifically targeted youth work with girls and young women was required to justify its approach. Feminist interventions were experienced not only as an assault upon entrenched and traditional male dominated approaches, but also as in competition with the new class-based perspectives on youth. Feminism was widely perceived as a middle class conceit and therefore as irrelevant or a threat. For example, women youth workers in Liverpool reported after a week of activities for girls in 1980 that:

*There has inevitably been questioning within the youth service about the need for and the exclusiveness of the Girls' Week, including the assumption that the women involved were 'ardent feminists' (Liverpool Youth Service, 1980).*

Describing colleagues as 'ardent feminists' was clearly thought to be self-evidently insulting and the 'inevitability' of the questioning betrays the extent to which women workers were forced to constantly justify single sex work with girls at the time. Most of the documentary evidence from the period indicates that there was struggle involved in establishing single sex work with girls and young women.

For example:

*The issue of work with girls attracts a degree of hostility from others connected with youth work. This comes in a variety of forms, ranging from seemingly 'harmless' jokes, which are often difficult to respond to, to snide remarks, non-response and overt derision. It is often hard not to feel either baited, or undermined, or both (Fulham Girls Project Annual Report, 1980, 3).*

*It is important to be clear about your aims in order to fight for girls work because it is threatening and meets with a lot of opposition. It is important to talk to other workers and women in the community and to give each other support, and also to raise issues at management committees if you have them in order to fight for girls' share of the facilities. It was pointed out that you always have to ask for permission to work with girls but not with boys (The Planning Group, N.E. Work With Girls Conference, 1981, 18).*

The case for the work was often made in defensive circumstances and therefore publicly articulated within the discourses of youth work rather than within those of feminism (Spence, 1996). Discussion referred repeatedly to inequality of access. Failure to equally include young women was highlighted as a distortion of the universal principle of traditional youth work. It was necessary to counter the notion that the failure of girls to participate fully was due to their lack of interest in activities. Feminist workers argued instead that lack of female participation was organisational rather than pathological, that 'girls are not getting a fair deal from the youth service' (NAYC Girls' Work, 1981, 1) and that organisations should be 'committed to developing realistic provision that is relevant and accessible to girls' (ibid).

The justification for single sex work with girls and young women, used mainly to win access to space and resources, was thus based upon an 'equal rights' perspective. Building upon gains made at this

level, feminist workers pursued an 'anti-essentialist' approach to the nature of being female. Against the prevailing notion that girls were only interested in 'the boys', they asserted that 'Girls can do anything!' (NAYC poster, ud.) and set about demonstrating this in practice. As the work developed successfully, practitioners began to note the correspondence between the social and informal educational approaches of community and youth work and the confidence-building processes of feminist consciousness-raising. But the explicitly feminist argument here was seldom taken further as professional youth work discourses remained dominant (Spence, 1996).

The feminism in the work involved providing girls and young women the space and time to explore their interests in their own terms, away from male interference and the 'male gaze'. Increasing female participation could encompass the provision of non-traditional activities for girls and young women, such as motor bike riding and woodwork, which contained within them an implicit critique of the feminine role. Meanwhile consciousness-raising could take place under the rubric of confidence-building as girls and women identified pertinent issues for discussion and development in single sex-settings.

This vibrant and enthusiastic movement which resulted from feminist interventions managed to make huge strides in opening up access for girls and women within the context of youth work. However, it was also a movement based primarily upon trial and error in practice. Its theory and politics, though relating to feminist and youth work principles, were largely underdeveloped, perpetually restrained by the necessity of continuing to work at the level of access and numbers to gain space in organisations dominated by the male presence and by the subterfuge practised in exploring feminist inspired practice (Spence, 1996). It was therefore largely with reference to equality of access to resources that female workers began to make an appeal to the history of work with girls in support of their ongoing case.

History was a minority interest amongst those engaged in work which was practical, active and concerned with contemporary challenges. Nevertheless some feminist workers were interested in adding an extra dimension to their case for single sex work with girls by referring to historical evidence. Others hoped to improve their own practice, and to utilise historical research in their project work with girls and young women. There was therefore by the late 1970s a small but growing interest in the discovery of a feminist youth work tradition and feminist ancestors.

## Taking a feminist perspective on history

At the start of the 1970s there were very few contemporary feminist texts available and the earliest publications had an enormous influence on those women beginning to identify themselves as feminist. Sheila Rowbotham's popular book, *Hidden from History* (1974) which attempted to recover a hidden story of activist women from a feminist and socialist perspective set the tone for an 'archaeological' approach to women's history. There followed in its wake a wave of general historical writing and republication of original texts which situated women as agents of history, and feminist youth workers were provoked to suspect that their own history might also have been 'hidden'.

It was fortuitous that the history of the NAYC was within living memory and that in addition, Val Carpenter had direct access to the organisation's archives. Carpenter publicised the fact that the NAYC had once been the National Organisation of Girls' Clubs (NOGC), formed at the close of the Edwardian

period (Carpenter, 1980; NAYC, 1981). Further details were provided in *Coming in From the Margins* (Carpenter and Young, 1986). Here it was indicated that 'girls' clubs and local and regional federations and Unions had existed since 1861' (p15) and that the NOGC had begun its life as the result of a merger between the National Union of Women Workers and the Clubs Industrial Association.

This information which touched only briefly on the evidence hidden in the archives of NAYC made it clear that there was a secular history of separate work with girls and young women, not bound to uniformed youth movements such as the Guides. To be informed that the NAYC had begun its life as the NOGC was a revelation to the new generation of women workers. Indeed, it almost seemed unnecessary to undertake an in-depth reading of the archives as it became apparent that just to trace the changes of name and constitution of this organisation offered a classic example of the 'hidden from history' thesis:

*When we look at our history, we see that the NAYC grew out of the girls' movement – in 1911 we were known as the National Organisation of Girls' Clubs; in 1944 we became the National Association of Girls' Clubs, and in 1953 we became the National Association of Mixed Clubs and Girls' Clubs, and finally in 1961 we became the NAYC. In effect the girls' club movement has been swallowed while the boys' club movement flourishes! (Carpenter and Young, 1986, 1)*

Nevertheless, Carpenter and Young moved beyond the schematic. They also noted that:

*Girls clubs were set up by upper middle class women, who of course did not (and were often prevented from) taking up paid employment. The clubs were for girls who were 'less fortunate' than oneself – working class young women. All the women were volunteers and, although a humanitarian sense of duty prevailed throughout the work, there were many women involved who were working to create change within the Suffragette movement, the Women's Social and Political Union and other women's organisations (ibid).*

This extract indicates a desire to make connections with first wave feminism, emphasising a feminist political tradition associated with suffrage organisations. Making the necessary allowances for the unabashed 'upper middle class' perspective of the pioneers, it suggests that those women too were suffering from the oppression of not being allowed to take 'paid employment'. Thus links are implied with the contemporary movement for which equal access to employment opportunity was a key feature. This theme was pursued as it is revealed that:

*It was from a Working Girls' club that the demand came for legislation regarding the working conditions of underground workrooms. The resulting Underground Workrooms bill sought to obtain the same standards of ventilation, warmth, daylight and absence of drain openings for underground workrooms as those required for rooms in which people slept. Girls' clubs also petitioned for an increase in the number of women factory inspectors (ibid, 1-2).*

Despite class differences, feminist work in the past, like that of the late 20th century was apparently concerned with the conditions of working class young people. The historical evidence seemed to prove that there was no necessary contradiction between feminist work and socialist approaches which helped answer some of the criticisms that feminist youth work was not relevant to working class girls and young women.

Such tantalising glimpses of a 'forgotten history' thus began to address 'issues' which were familiar to feminist youth workers of the early 1980s, emphasising continuity of outlook and approach. However, the historical analysis remained superficial within the context of youth work. The emphasis within practice remained with the needs of the present, history was visited to provide ammunition to maintain a defensive position and to reassure feminist workers that their approach had legitimacy.

Working entirely within that mould, seeking a 'hidden' history of feminist youth work, in 1977 I had found Lily Montagu's chapter, 'The Girl in the Background' in Urwick's (1904) *Studies of Boy Life In Our Cities*. The title of this one chapter in a book about boys appeared, like the listing of NAYC name changes, to be indicative of the manner in which the female voice was marginalised: girls' work in the past had apparently been forced into 'the background'. I was unaware at this point that Lily Montagu was the most influential individual in the creation of the National Organisation of Girls Clubs, and that the campaigns for underground workrooms and more factory inspectors reflected her influence as the original Chairwoman of that organisation which had emerged from the Women's Industrial Council (Spence, 1998, 2003). I was also unaware that she believed that 'in the background' was an appropriate description rather than a feminist issue.

At this point, historical understanding which was achieved by practitioners, seldom went beyond the necessity of demonstrating continuity of approach and loss of resources in order to make the case for the moment (Dixon, 1981; McCabe, McCabe and Bradley, 1982; Carpenter, 1981; Carpenter and Young, 1986).

## Continuities with the past

Seeking continuities for my own youth work practice, in 1977 I read 'The Girl in the Background' hungry for information about a socialist and feminist past. In that context, one particular passage stood out:

*Like other philanthropists, club workers are too easily satisfied with fringing the problems with which they should endeavour to grapple. They peep down the abyss into which the underfed, the ill-housed, and badly clothed work out their life's drama, and then they turn their energies to surface polishing. They try to make their girls conduct themselves well in the clubs, and interest them and amuse them as best they can during their evening's leisure. But they are inclined to ignore the industrial life; they like to forget the grim truth that if girls work for less than a living wage, in a vitiated atmosphere, they are not likely to become the strong, self-controlled women whom we desire the clubs to train (Montagu, 1904, 250)*

This extract suggested that not only did Montagu understand the relegation of girls' work to the margins ('the background'), but also that she understood the link between this and the conditions under which working class women laboured. Understanding that women needed a 'living wage' was also one of the socialist feminist demands of the 1970s. Lily Montagu was a true feminist ancestor!

Personal and professional identification with the work which Lily Montagu had undertaken was further emphasised with reference to another passage in this text where she describes an outing with a group of girls:

*It is recorded of an earnest club leader that she once took her girls out for an excursion, and was to her amazement and sorrow obliged to return alone, because the camp which they passed had offered so many engrossing attractions to her girls (ibid. 253).*

This spoke directly to debates about the interest of girls in 'boys' rather than 'activities' which were an everyday part of life for feminist youth workers in the 1970s and 1980s:

*Concern was expressed that girls would initially be unenthusiastic about having a 'girls only night' when so many of them seemed to want to hang around with boys (Planning Group, N.E. Working With Girls Conference, 1981,13).*

The dramas of and difficulties of practising youth work with young women echo down the years as universal in practice. If Lily Montagu's club leader lost her group of girls to boy campers, it was as nothing compared with the situation described by Maude Stanley, founder of the London Union of Youth Clubs, in *Clubs For Working Girls* (1890):

*We remember one sad night when two bigger girls who were sitting happily at work round a little table with a bright lamp, while a story was read to them, suddenly quarrelled about a thimble, and in a passion one girl threw the table over, the others mad with excitement, began to act in the wildest, utterly indescribable fashion. The unfortunate teacher seized the dangerous lamp, which went out in her hands and came downstairs to get help. Meanwhile the girls threw up the window, and hanging out of it, with loud shouts and rude laughter presently had a crowd underneath, with whom they exchanged chaff and abuse. Downstairs the crowded kitchen was too noisy in its play for any upstairs sound to be audible. They, however, were cautioned to be quiet while ladies went upstairs with a lamp to quell the disturbance and close the window. Coming down with the subdued and sulky girls, found hiding in corners and tolerably ashamed of themselves, as soon as the light came the horrified workers found the lower room in still worse confusion. Boys were banging at the shutters and door, the girls inside shouting and singing and even fighting, slates, books and sewing being used as missiles; and one or two girls were reading the books at the desk, and finding out who had paid the club money and who not, and other interesting details. One of the ladies went to speak to the lads outside, and one threw his cap in and getting his foot in the doorway prevented the door being closed. Remonstrances were of no use. They wished to come in and 'play with the lasses'. At last the cap was thrown out, and the door shut and locked, and the key removed for fear any girl might open it. An attempt was then made to get peace restored, but the boys had taken up the cellar grate outside, had dropped into the dark cellar, groped their way up the steps, and three grinning lads emerged through the cellar door into the kitchen, amid shrieks of terror from the girls... (Stanley in Booton, 1985, p108).*

Anyone who had attempted to undertake single sex work with girls in a 1970s youth club, to run a Girls' Day or a Girls' Night might have experienced a pang of recognition here. It includes universal qualities of practice relating to questions of authority and order, the sudden and dramatic changes of atmosphere which can be precipitated by minor incidences. Significantly, it describes how boys were forever waiting in the wings for an opportunity to claim the space (and the girls) for themselves, and the collusion of the girls in this. The struggle for the allegiance of the working class female reveals implicit and complex tensions of gender and class, order and disorder in the practice context. The extract from

Stanley speaks down the years because these same tensions remained implicit in youth work which defined itself as feminist. Historical evidence of the enduring problem of the boys in work with girls turned the tables on the belief that it was the girls who were the problem, and provided ammunition for arguments for an anti-sexist approach to youth work in which male workers could play a supporting role in working with the boys around issues raised by women and girls.

Texts about girls' work from the period prior to the First World War have been increasingly brought into view since the 1980s (Booton, 1985; Turnbull, 2000; 2001; Fabes and Skinner, 2001; Spence, 1998; 2003; 2005). All of them demonstrate that female youth work was an integral part of work with young people prior to the First World War but lost resources in the middle of the century. All offer evidence to support an understanding that the continuous history of the work was broken by the development of the mixed club and the diversion of resources to work with boys and young men which this entailed. In relation to the possibilities of continuity, a case can be made that the work of the past was characterised by an underlying feminism, a sympathetic appreciation of working class interests, a willingness to campaign on behalf of working class girls and women, and an approach to youth work in which participation and social education were at the forefront of the worker's skills.

## Continuity in Context

Montagu (1904, 1954), Stanley (1890), and other pioneers, including Emmeline Pethick (1898), Mary Neal (1910), Flora Freeman (1904) and the mainly anonymous authors who wrote for the *Girls Own Paper* (Spence, 2003), were concerned to extend and refine their 'social' work with girls, and in the absence of formal training they sought through their publications to provide models, case-studies and guidelines for others. Their emphasis was upon practice. Achieving successful practice required a moral purpose, knowledge of the social circumstances of the girls, and skills of intervention and organisation. Allowing for the changing social context, such concerns remain valid within youth work. Ironically, these texts, and others which might have been practically useful to the feminist youth workers of the 1970s and 80s have largely been studied as second wave feminism generally and its influence within youth work has declined.

However, beyond practice concerns, with the benefit of a wider range of (retrieved) texts a more complex picture begins to emerge of the historical antecedents of work with girls and young women. In particular, a critical reading indicates some fundamental discontinuities in philosophy and politics. Significantly, many of the continuities which link the feminisms of the two eras are related to a community rather than a youth work perspective. They are not intrinsic to working with girls and young women as young people *per se*, nor to the single sex approach to youth work. For example, it could be argued that the feminist politics which might be traced in the suffrage work of Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence and Mary Neal had their origins in the work of the West London Mission where they began their social work careers and that the Working Girls' Club which Neal founded there and which Pethick inherited was an aspect of a community approach. Speaking of Mrs Hughes, the founder of the Mission, Pethick-Lawrence was later to write:

*I never heard Mrs Hughes express any view upon the subject of women's equality and freedom. But she gave me my first experience of that emancipation of mental and practical powers which is to be*

*found by working as a free person in a community of equals...* (Pethick-Lawrence, 1938, 72-3).

Here the experience of living and working as a community of women in neighbourhoods where there were very clearly specific issues regarding the effects of poverty upon women and children might lead beyond narrow interventions into a broader field of political activism.

Middle and upper class female social activism responding to the gendered nature of poverty inhabits a particular political tradition which has been defined as maternalism rather than feminism (Koven and Michel, 1993). Social reformers such as Hannah More (1745-1833) associated with the Sunday School Movement, Margaret McMillan (1860-1931) who focused upon the welfare and education of children and Eleanor Rathbone (1872-1946) who campaigned for family allowances, all pursued women's rights in the political and community arena. Maternalist approaches are all in some senses forerunners of the campaigning work of second wave feminists but this was political action achieving a gendered dimension which did not necessarily question traditional gender roles in society. The Girls' Club Movement emerged from within this maternalist perspective. Meanwhile, the single sex nature of Working Girls Clubs was contingent upon historical circumstances and was of itself not understood at the time as having feminist significance.

## Discontinuities with the past

Victorian and Edwardian feminism is often equated with the suffrage campaign which obscures the gender politics of grassroots activists in the welfare field. This was sometimes pro-female and anti-suffrage such as in the case of Mary Ward (Koven and Michel, 1993; Vicinus, 1985). If 'feminist' politics in the early period were shaped by the question of suffrage, those of the later period were dominated by questions of power in every sphere of life. The ideal of 'sisterhood' in 1900 referred to acceptance of an ideal of femininity which justified the uncritical intervention of middle and upper class women into the lives of working class girls and women. In the 1970s it referred to a shared subjective experience of gender inequality around which all women could organise politically. Both positions encouraged single sex approaches. The meaning of 'equality' has also shifted over time with reference to gender. The slippage obscures the essentialism of the earlier period which assumed that differences between the roles of men and women were natural and God-given. To excel in the fields of maternity, caring and domesticity was perceived as the fulfilment of femininity. The problem of inequality was particularly acute for poor women because it prevented them achieving these virtues. It is only in this regard that it is possible to properly appreciate Montagu's title 'The Girl in the Background' and to understand its introductory words:

*It is one of the cherished principles underlying the national life of countries which boast of Western civilisation that the influence of the 'girl in the background' tends towards purity, temperance, righteousness and peace.*

*'O Woman, lovely woman! Nature made thee  
To temper man: we had been brutes without you:  
Angels are painted fair to look like you;  
There's in you all that we believe of heaven;*

*amazing brightness, purity, and truth,  
Eternal joy and everlasting love.* (Montagu, 1904: 233)

Belief in the correspondence between femininity and the female role, between sex and gender, influenced the pioneers of female youth work at every level. It was this which brought many upper and middle class women into the field of social work in the first place, in the belief that the work to be done with poor women was one which only they could satisfactorily accomplish. For:

*Who could deal better with the homes of the poor than women? Who could so thoroughly cleanse the slums? I would ever maintain that women in Parliament, if such a time should ever come, would deal with these questions from the mother's point of view, the point of view from which every right-minded woman, married or single, regards the whole of life.* (Lady Henry Somerset quoted in Chappell, ud. [c1926]:50)

This view influenced much of the educational content and the activities of the early girls' clubs. The programmes were designed to be attractive to the girls, to offer them rest and recreation after their hard day's work, and also to improve them in spirit, mind and body. For example, the ubiquitous plain sewing class helped the girls to make items of clothing for their own use but also taught them the habit of using some of their own time for such activity associated with homemaking. Religious instruction was designed to feed their souls and encourage them towards a solid faith which would lift them above the dreariness of their everyday worlds and provide them with the armoury and support needed for lives which had little material reward. Meanwhile, reading circles would introduce them to wholesome literature and divert their attention away from the Penny Dreadfuls and cheap novels of dubious provenance which were held to be corrupting of character. Various forms of physical exercise and musical drill were deemed to be 'simply valuable as a remedy for the narrow chests and bad carriage which we see in so many girls who have to be stooping all day over needlework or desk work. It is wonderful to see how their figures improve after a course of drill!' (Freeman, 1904: 45).

The desire to help working class and poor girls to achieve their full feminine potential, defined as their full human potential, also informed the reforming aspect of the work. 'Working Girls' Clubs' were aimed specifically at girls and young women who had left school, were unmarried and employed in local industries. The intention was that the girls' club would act as a counter balance to the deleterious effects of waged work. For those who sponsored and organised the clubs, the ideal was that women should not have to work for wages at all. Wage labour was seen as detrimental to their responsibilities for the home. However, the realities of poverty and of slum housing required a practical, rather than an idealistic response and in order to achieve ordered domesticity as a long term goal, the girls' club workers operated on three fronts. Firstly, they offered the club and its activities as a place of safety, friendship, recreation and personal development. Secondly, they worked to train the girls in domestic skill and management and to adopt what were commonly perceived as the finer virtues of femininity. Thirdly, they organised to influence the conditions of work for girls and young women. It is in this third category that continuity with the politics of feminism and class adopted by the later feminist movement is most likely to be found. Yet it is also in this category that the early work was most underdeveloped, and which caused Lily Montagu to proclaim that some club workers were only concerned with 'surface polishing'.

There is a wealth of evidence to indicate that Montagu, and other women associated with the Clubs' Industrial Union (CIU), (the forerunner of the NOGC), were keen that girls and young women should organise in trade unions as a means of advancing and improving their conditions of work. However, they seldom promoted this as a route to socialism or in order to imply that waged labour could be an alternative career to domesticity for women. Rather, they were concerned in the immediate sense to create conditions which would not undermine the moral or physical health of young women. Montagu's argument for equal pay for girls was related to her desire to improve their self-regard, to not consider themselves 'cheap' and therefore to be not in too much of a hurry to throw themselves at the first boy who came along promising marriage.

It is significant that Montagu herself remained aloof from party politics and from the labour movement, even though her father was Liberal MP for Whitechapel and her best friend, Margaret Potter who had introduced her to club work in the first place, married Ramsay Macdonald, leader of the Labour Party (Macdonald, 1913).

Moreover, there was little encouragement from the Labour movement for the efforts of club workers. Pethick-Lawrence recalled in relation to her own work with the Esperance Girls Club:

*There were people of some importance in the socialist movement who used to call on us in order to point out that what we were doing was quite worthless, since we were only extending to a handful of people some of the benefits that the capitalist regime had bestowed upon us, instead of throwing all our energy into an attempt to change the economic system. (Pethick-Lawrence, 1938:119)*

A split in thinking about political activism and social activism has been evident throughout the history of welfare interventions. This divide is related to essentialist thinking around gender and social role which mostly was unquestioned by the pioneers of girls' work. The women involved in early club work tended to separate social activism from political activism. Overt and public displays of political activism were normally excluded from their frame of reference. When they needed to access political power, they tended to prefer the more traditionally female approach of exerting 'private influence' on male politicians (Williams, 2000) or they became part of the management structure of civic organisations.

There is very little evidence for the proposition that women involved in girls' club work were also and simultaneously active in the suffrage movement as popularised by the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) led by the Pankhursts. It is true that for Pethick-Lawrence who became a leading light in the WSPU and for Mary Neal her colleague in the West London Mission and the Esperance Girls' Club, there was an overlap between their girls' work and their suffrage activity but their trajectory towards political activism reduced the time given to club and social work. Batsleer (2003) has made a case for the development of a friendship network which linked personal relations, women's settlement work and suffrage politics. This suggests that feminist and socialist inspired political action was related to the community and educational work of the settlements in general rather than to the specific case of work with girls and young women. Yet even here, the quotation which Batsleer uses from Stocks (1945:70) in support of her case, implies that political activism was subsequent to rather than simultaneous with 'social' work: 'Miss Alice Compton was destined to

march away from settlement work with the armies of liberation' (quoted in Batsleer, 2003: 78). There is no obvious evidence of any attempt in the Girls' Club Movement to encourage girls to participate in the WSPU, nor indeed any other political action. Lily Montagu encouraged girls to debate the issues surrounding suffrage in her club, but without taking an explicit position herself. Feminism as understood in relation to suffrage politics was simply not part of the perception of these workers in relation to the purposes of their work and the girls' club workers did not think of themselves primarily as 'feminist'. Often it was quite the contrary.

Social activism was more often informed by a religious rather than a political ideology. Flora Freeman was explicit. Her 1904 book was entitled 'Religious and Social Work amongst Girls' and its first chapter is entitled 'Religious Teaching'. The guiding philosophy of her work was her desire to bring Christianity to working girls. Judaism lay at the core of Lily Montagu's motivation and it was later claimed by Nelly Levy, who had been a member of Montagu's first club and who was later employed as a club worker, that her work with poor Jewish girls was inspired by a religious vision (Levy *ud*). Maud Stanley meanwhile summed up her position thus:

*If we are convinced that through religion alone we obtain perfect happiness and have a secure basis for a good life, we will wish that on the foundation of religion our girls' clubs should be built* (Stanley in Booton, 1985: 93).

In all three cases cited, the workers were inspired by their own faith, but each was also concerned about the loss of faith specifically amongst the working classes, and in Montagu's case, amongst immigrant Jewish girls and women. The centrality of religion to this early work can hardly be over-estimated. Nor can it be separated from the class and gender dimensions of practice. For it was believed that religious faith was a key to saving not only the souls but also the bodies of girls, providing an armoury against the temptations and sins which working class girls in particular were subject to in their work, on the streets, in their leisure and as a result of their poverty.

*With the arm of the Lord we will fight against this evil, these sorrows, this poverty, which is making our cities into hotbeds of corruption, and with help from above we must use the weapons of foresight and judgement, and we must turn to and provide for the girls that which their parents say they truly cannot provide – healthy and safe recreations, amusements and occupation for their leisure hours.* (Stanley in Booton, 1985: 53)

It was not through political association, through working class activism, or through feminist political organisation that the lives of poor working class girls and women were to be improved, but with the guiding hand of religious faith. The primary emphasis was not upon identification with each other in terms of gender oppression, or any other structural location of inequality. Instead, the religious motivation stressed the bonds of a common and fundamentally equal humanity in which men and women, rich and poor were different in class, status and position, but equal in humanity and before God. Inequality could be addressed by individual endeavour but only transcended in heaven. The principles of work with girls and young women from this perspective need not necessarily extend to arguments for equality in social and material life. For some workers there might have been a correspondence, but it wasn't necessarily so and in many cases, it seems not to have been so.



**Shepherd's Aye**

## **Class and Gender Politics**

In writing about their work, the pioneers of girls' club work took their readership for granted. Social work was undertaken by other upper or upper middle class women like themselves:

*I have written this little book chiefly with the hope that it may fall into the hands of girls belonging to the upper and leisured classes and perhaps create in their minds a desire to work amongst their poorer sisters. (Freeman, 1904:138)*

Although the members of the club were expected to participate in decision-making and management through their club committees, there was never any expectation that working class women would make any greater contribution to the provision other than as 'caretakers' or 'superintendents' in the buildings, or as 'hosts' for the recuperative country holidays organised for town girls and women. The virtues required of this supporting cast were those of respectability, domestic skill and cleanliness, motherliness and an ability to enforce club rules and principles. These working class women undoubtedly undertook much of what would be recognised in a later age as face to face youth work, but theirs is a seriously silenced and hidden history (Spence, 2005). What has been inherited as the prototype of girls' work is that presented by upper and middle class organisers and activists. They set the value base, defined and refined the methods and undertook the ideological and intellectual labour of the work. In this, they used their own lives as the model and worked to share the benefits of their own knowledge and understanding with working class girls as a route to an improved society.

Theirs was a work of acculturation using informal educational methods supplemented by training which related to skills for domesticity and in relation to employment. There were of course other features to which the social capital of leisured women could be brought to improve circumstances and opportunity for working class young women. These included advice and information, research and development and the benefits of a supporting organisational network which facilitated social and political influence (Williams, 2000).

The quintessentially feminine, upper middle class, religious outlook which characterised the girls' club movement was also at the heart of its decline in the inter-war period. For it was a movement separated from the working class community and politics which framed the lives of working girls. It was also a movement, whose single sex approach was associated with Victorian prudery and puritanism rather than with the freedoms and liberties which had been glimpsed by women engaging with the public world during the First World War. It was this which left it vulnerable to 'mixing' which in turn is associated with its decline, as the later women's movement noted (Dixon, 1981; Carpenter, 1981b). However it was not only the process of mixing which was problematic. Decline was also related to underlying trends such as changes in the social conditions and expectations of middle class women, the growing influence of the state in welfare provision, the separation of youth work from community work and the tendency in youth work towards pathologising the problems associated with adolescence and in perceiving youth issues not primarily in terms of working class employment and social circumstances but in terms of social order and delinquency. In this process, the more liberal wing of the girls' club movement, that concerned with the 'industrial life' of 'working girls,' could find no more of a place than could the conservative.

## Conclusion

The retrieval and reclamation of the historical antecedents of girls' work indicates a continuity of form and content which is complicated by discontinuities of philosophy in single sex work with girls and young women. Clubs for Working Girls before the First World War were neither feminist nor socialist in terms that would have been understood by those involved in the Movement for Working with Girls and Young Women of the 1970s and 80s. The historical discontinuities in conceptual understanding of the meaning and relevance of the intervention are profound.

Those discontinuities relate to the very basic principles which motivated work with girls and young women in the different periods in question. The second wave movement was concerned with equality of access and the redistribution of resources on the grounds of the inalienable rights of girls and women to participate on equal terms in public life. Beyond this there was an intention towards 'empowerment' and 'liberation'. The earlier movement was principally concerned to pursue and enhance the possibilities of working class girls gaining access to a respectable and ordered private life in which maternity and domestic skill were seen as the sublime fulfilment of a God-given femininity. Through this, working class women might influence working class men and thus contribute to social order.

Whilst the second wave movement wished to increase the political awareness of working class girls and women in relation to structural inequalities associated not only with gender and class, but also with race, sexuality, ability and age, the earlier movement encouraged working class girls to emulate and

adopt middle class values and culture. In the case of Lily Montagu, immigrant Jewish girls were to be encouraged to learn 'English' ways of being in the context of Judaism, as the route to a better future for the Jewish community. Whilst the later movement focused upon material issues and sexual liberation, the first stressed spirituality and sexual purity.

Ironically, as feminism in work with girls and young women declined from the late 1980s onwards, what was formally retained within youth work was an approach to work with girls and young women which was more akin to the values espoused in the early girls' club movement. Contemporary work which targets young women pursues moral and educational interventions in which the emphasis is upon consensual values set outside the realities and belief systems of the young women in question. It emphasises skills for girls which will enable them to become more effective as young mothers and workers and does so without reference to the politics of gender or class. In the contemporary climate, greater emphasis is given to skills for employment than hitherto, but improving domestic virtue remains important. What has been lost is the ability of women workers, in dialogue with each other and with the girls and young women using youth work facilities, to define the nature of the work themselves and with reference to the wider canvas linked with community. A political perspective, and certainly one which involves feminism or socialism is deemed to be outside the range of ethical, professional youth work practice.

On the central questions of essentialism, and of the political meaning and implications of youth work, feminist workers of the 1970s and 1980s singularly failed to influence generic practice. What they did achieve, was an extension of the scope of youth work to acknowledge that there was some specialist work needed to work with particular groups of girls and also a simple recognition that it was legitimate to undertake some specific work, for example with young mothers, in a single sex environment. Such gains are of dubious provenance in relation to the grand hopes of second wave feminism and are much closer to the maternalist and moralistic interventions of the early years of the century.

Ultimately, a failure to sustain historical analysis and to comprehend the detail of their claimed historical antecedents left feminist women youth workers open to collusion with policies which were antithetical to their declared interests. A more rigorous engagement with the past would have highlighted the specificities of the new feminist approach and facilitated greater clarity in relation to the fundamental principles of the movement for working with girls and young women. It might also have identified the community context as crucial to the expression of political activism for women. As it is, feminist youth work, expressed as a political movement with implications for other social divisions and inequalities has been stripped of its vigour. Work with girls and young women is once again marginal to youth work theory and practice and feminist approaches are in the process of being hidden from history.

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