

Britain: Forty years of women's liberation

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In 1970, a handful of students organised a national conference on women's issues - it proved to be one of the biggest landmarks in women's history. Kira Cochrane on the event that helped a generation find its voice - and its legacy today

The hour was 5.30am; the date, sometime in the late 1960s; the place, London; and Lois Graessle could be found - as she was many mornings - riding the escalators at stops along the District Line, surreptitiously sticking the message "this ad degrades women" on offensive posters. That was the early shift. Come evening rush hour the stickers and targets would change. Men in suits, umbrella tucked under the arm, briefcase swinging, would suddenly feel the touch of a woman's hand on their back. A sticker was left behind. "This man exploits women."

These were the early days of the second-wave feminist movement in Britain (the first wave was the suffrage campaign). It was a time, says Graessle, of enormous innocence, enthusiasm and creative power, when small groups of women were forming across the country, talking about their circumstances, and feeling the rush of recognition as they realised they weren't alone in their frustrations. Sally Alexander, for instance, was a member of a women's group in Oxford, and says that the talk would focus on "the fact that women were very low paid. That we were expected to become either a nurse or a secretary. That most women were cleaners. Women were the poor. We were picking our way through, exploring the issues." A generation was finding its voice.

That period, in which thousands of feminists experienced the first glimmers of consciousness, reached a turning point 40 years ago this weekend. This was the occasion of the first ever National Women's Liberation Conference, which took place at Ruskin College, Oxford, between 27 February and 1 March 1970. In the definitive history of the event - Michelene Wandor's collection of interviews, *Once a Feminist* - the historian, Sheila Rowbotham, says that this was the moment from which "a movement could be said to exist". It was therefore one of the biggest landmarks in British women's history.

Not that the planning for the event got off to an auspicious start. Accounts of the story differ, but in the late 1960s, when Rowbotham, then in her 20s, stood up at a gathering for the Ruskin History Workshop - a popular academic conference - and suggested that there should be a meeting about - women, she was met with gales of laughter from the predominantly male crowd. Alexander was studying at Ruskin at the time and says that "I remember sitting on a table, and thinking, 'How odd.' I joined in the smiles, but then walked off and thought, 'Why did they laugh?' We talked about it, and Sheila said: 'Well, women just aren't taken seriously.'"

Planning began in earnest for what was initially to be a straightforward female history conference. Then, says Rowbotham, they realised that hardly any women's history had actually been written (and that which had was yet to be unearthed) so decided to focus on the contemporary position of women instead.

As Graessle's sticker campaign showed, feminist organising was already under way - there had been

the highly influential 1968 strike for equal pay by female machinists at Ford's Dagenham plant; and a 1969 women's issue of the revolutionary newspaper, *Black Dwarf*. But the activity was disparate, disconnected, and it was therefore unclear how many people would turn up at Ruskin. Rowbotham says that they were expecting "perhaps a hundred or two hundred people". Five hundred showed up. "Everybody arrived with their sleeping bags on Friday night," she says, "which was turmoil, and then they managed to extend the conference into the Oxford Union, an extraordinarily stiff environment that was meant to produce male orators who would become prime ministers. I remember being really scared of speaking in that room."

In *Once a Feminist*, Wandor writes that papers were given on "the family, motherhood, delinquency, women and the economy, the concept of 'women's work', [and] equal pay", among others. Mary Kennedy, who was also at the conference, says that "there was a real buzz of excitement. As a child I had been very angry about being a girl, in terms of the way that I was treated, because the boys and the men had all the power. Then, here came this turning point, and we were all able to speak out."

The conference was organised by Alexander, with another young woman at Ruskin, Arielle Aberson, who would sadly die in a car accident a few months later. Alexander remembers the conference as - exciting, and hugely hard work. There were many distinct leftwing groups in attendance, including Marxist-Leninists "who were most forthcoming to volunteer to take minutes," says Graessle, "then rewrote them to suit their view of history". There was also a small group who caused a dramatic confrontation when they painted slogans such as "Down with penis envy" over Ruskin and beyond. "Arielle and I had to negotiate between the police and them, between the student body and them, between the conference and them," says Alexander. "We got the brunt of it. They were a very small group, and they were very disruptive."

Still, the general mood was unbridled optimism. Catherine Hall, who was involved with a women's group in Birmingham and had come to feminist consciousness after having her first child, describes it as a "utopian moment . . . It's hard to convey now the excitement of discovering what it meant to be a woman, and to have a language to talk about that, and not conceiving of it as an individual issue, but a collective and social issue. That was what was most important. The recognition that we shared a feeling and experiences that had a name."

What followed was years of intense activity. Alexander came down to London after finishing at Ruskin that summer, and became involved with her local women's group, the women's liberation workshop office, and the night cleaners' campaign - "You name it," she says. Hall began a women's liberation playgroup, and Wandor compiled *The Body Politic*, a collection of feminist writing, including a number of papers from the conference.

"It was a time when you could be a 29-hour-a-day activist," says Wandor, partly because of economic conditions. "We could manage to live on fairly small amounts of money and be flexible," says Rowbotham, "and we all lived in shared houses."

There were many more conferences, building on the demands that had been made at the end of that first get-together. Ruskin had finished with a session called "Where are we going?", facilitated by Graessle, where all those in attendance voted unanimously on four demands: equal pay; equal - education and opportunity; 24-hour nurseries; free contraception and abortion on demand. (The list of the movement's demands would swell over the years.)

Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* and Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* were both published in 1970, and there was a major demonstration at the Miss World contest that year, in which feminist activists flour-bombed the stage, in protest at women's objectification. (The reaction of the host, Bob Hope? "Pretty girls don't have these problems.") In 1971 there was the first National Women's

Liberation Movement march – an event immortalised in Sue Crockford’s film, *A Woman’s Place*, in which groups of women sarcastically sing the ditty *Keep Young and Beautiful* as they stride forth. In 1975, the *Times* reported that there were “more than 1,500 groups of women around the country meeting fairly regularly”; that same year, the Equal Pay Act came into force. There was a huge amount of activism around rape and male violence – in 1979, for instance, the Southall Black Sisters began their work against domestic violence and legal injustice.

But by the end of the decade, the tumult was dying down. It was partly exhaustion, says Alexander. It simply isn’t possible to work at such a clip for ever. Then there were internal divisions – a chart produced in 1979 defined 13 distinct types of British feminist, including “eurocommunists”, “humanists” and “redstockings”. There was the fact that those who had been in their early to mid-20s in 1970 were now building careers and families, and so their personal circumstances were changing. And then there were the social conditions. When Margaret Thatcher became prime minister in 1979, the political tenor of the country shifted radically.

Feminism continued – the activism surrounding violence against women, for instance, has never died away – but that defining moment was gone. And in recent years, the outlook has been that young women aren’t interested in the movement, that feminism is now, at best, slightly embarrassing – associated with flaming bras and battered dungarees – and at worst, completely dead. Which is a shame, since there’s still so much to do. Just take that first women’s liberation demand: equal pay. There has been improvement on this in the past four decades, but as Ceri Goddard, chief executive of the women’s campaign group, the Fawcett Society, points out, women are still paid 16.4% less than men for full-time work. “And I think one of the reasons that the pay gap is still so stark,” she says, “is to do with a lack of progress on some of the other asks of the women’s movement – particularly nurseries.”

But in fact, in recent years, young women do seem to have been rising again. The women of the 1970 conference have noticed this. Rowbotham, Hall and Alexander all went on to become academics, and Rowbotham says that for a long time her students seemed uneasy about feminism, “but in the last two years, there seems to have been this reawakening of interest”.

When you start to look at the levels of activity, they’re actually fairly startling. This morning, the feminist campaign group, Object, is carrying out a protest against lads’ magazines being displayed at child’s height in supermarkets; this evening, there is a Reclaim the Night march in Bristol. Next month, feminist activist, Kat Banyard, publishes her first book, *The Equality Illusion*, and starts a new organisation called UK Feminista, which “aims to give a platform to all the fantastic activism which is taking place across the country and really support it,” she says.

March also sees the third annual Million Women Rise march in London, which will bring thousands of women together to demonstrate against male violence. Suswati Basu, a young student, has been involved with Million Women Rise over the years, and when I ask about other activism that she has taken part in recently, she mentions a project to support Rape Crisis Centres, Reclaim the Night marches, a boycott of the Playboy store in London. The FEM conferences, which Banyard has been organising since 2004, are hugely popular. “The top capacity for the last one was 500 people,” she says, “but there was a really long waiting list, so we couldn’t quite cope with the demand for it”. And for young feminists today, there’s a sense of being part of a worldwide movement, which wasn’t so true in 1970. As Zohra Moosa, women’s rights adviser at ActionAid, says, there are grassroots women’s rights campaigns now across the globe: in Central and South America, “there’s lots of work around political representation. In certain parts of Africa it’s around leadership, and reforms to the law around violence against women. A huge amount of activity.”

Four decades later, the movement seems revitalised, born anew, that sense of optimism suddenly

recaptured. And it's not as if you have to look far to see the signs. Just this morning, on my way into work, I saw a sticker on a sexist poster. The slogan? "This ad degrades women."

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