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WOMEN ACTIVISTS OF EAST LONDON

RADICAL WOMEN IN TOWER HAMLETS, HACKNEY AND WALTHAM FOREST 1880–PRESENT

Edition 2b – August 2021

Introduction

On an unusually cold afternoon in early July 1888, several women were sacked from the Bryant & May factory in Bow. They were accused of being the *"ringleaders"* of an article detailing terrible working conditions. By the end of the day, approximately 1400 women had walked out in solidarity. They were shortly followed by hundreds more, bringing the entire place to a standstill.

The story of the match women is well known, however, like a lot of women's history it is shrouded in both class and gender bias. Until recently, the working-class leaders of this revolt were nameless young women who stared glumly at the camera in one of the few pictures we have of them. Their success was, and still often is, attributed to leading socialist Annie Besant, despite the fact she did not initially even support the strike[1]. And while it broke the mould for industrial action in that era, its importance is often downplayed, particularly by male historians, despite evidence to the contrary[2].

The match women belonged to a community defined by poverty and hardship. From these challenging circumstances a number of movements rose up, creating significant social change. As John Marriott states[3]:

> *"... politically, culturally and socially East London has [...] played a major part in the history of the metropolis and nation."*

Amongst this hotbed of activism, women's contribution has been significant. However, their efforts are often eclipsed by their male counterparts. Where their stories do exist, they focus on well-known individuals, like Sylvia Pankhurst or Annie Besant, presenting them as the exception rather than the rule.

Our research shows that women from all walks of life have campaigned in East London for generations. They've played a crucial role in shaping labour rights and housing policy; fighting fascism, racism and imperialism; battling violence and harassment of women and girls; improving education, disability and LGBTQ+ rights; campaigning for peace and the environment; and laying the foundations of the welfare state. This report explores some of their stories. It shines a light on forgotten heroes, puts names to the nameless, and reflects on both the challenges women have faced and the impact they have made.

This report is divided into four *"generations"*, spanning the period 1880 to the present. I've used this term because, although the periods roughly correlate with the different waves of feminism, they don't exactly match. In addition, some of the women do not, or did not, call themselves feminists. Their reasons can be complex: from seeing feminism as mostly a white woman's movement; to finding the term too limited in what was also a class struggle; or simply not identifying with it personally. It would do them a disservice to shoe-horn them into a movement in which they did not feel they belonged.

An attempt has been made to break each generation into themed sub-sections, for ease of comprehension. However, it is important to note that while women today may define their activism by a theme, this was certainly not the case in previous generations. Victorian and Edwardian pioneers in particular were tackling a range of issues, because each was so wrapped up in their own experience of poverty and hardship.

The term East London has meant different things at different times. Indeed, even the area names have changed over time. For the purposes of this report we have defined the East End as the current boroughs of Tower Hamlets, Hackney, Waltham Forest and Newham. All these areas have their different characteristics and economic fortunes, yet each has been shaped socially by the actions of women.

1 Louise Raw, Striking A Light, Continuum (2011)
2 See p4 of this report
3 John Marriott, Beyond The Tower: A History of East London, Yale University Press (2012), p4

Generation 1: The early pioneers (1880–1918)

Throughout the Victorian era, and well into Edwardian times, the area now known as Tower Hamlets was defined by overcrowding, sweated labour, disease and high infant mortality. Social researcher Charles Booth demonstrated, through his London Poverty Maps, that a third of the population was living below the breadline, describing some areas as *"semi-criminal"*. Immigration swelled the population considerably, with Jews fleeing persecution in Russia a significant factor. These immigrants were often illiterate, low-skilled and desperate.

Labour rights

East London was dominated by silk weaving, shipbuilding and the docks, but from the mid 19th century onwards sweated trades, such as tailoring, shoe making and furniture building, began to emerge. These new industries were driven by a new mass market for less expensive luxury items, made possible by new technologies and lower production costs.

In the late 19th century domestic service was still the most common employment for women. Increasingly, however, manufacturing was providing an alternative. Single women and the wives of casual labourers could supplement the family income producing cheap household items, such as matches and matchboxes, brushes and artificial flowers, both at home and in factories. While the hours were long and poorly paid, it was a welcome escape from domestic service, which could be backbreaking work and even worse pay.

Jessie Stephens, Domestic Workers' Union organiser[4]

One of the biggest challenges for women domestic workers was their limited ability to organise. That's not to say they didn't try.

Born in 1893, Jessie Stephens was from a family of 11 children in Glasgow. They got by but having *"something nice for the weekend"* meant a trip to the pawn broker with her mother's wedding ring.

Jessie's father was a member of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and she was sent to socialist Sunday school. The rise of the women's movement further radicalised her, and she joined the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in Glasgow. In 1910 she took a trip down to London to join a protest, which became known as Black Friday due to its brutal put down. Jessie said she had her hat ripped off her head and her hair pulled. Many other women would charge the police with sexual assault during the demonstration.

Jessie left school at 15 and went into domestic service. She tried to organise fellow workers against their poor working conditions but found it difficult. Eventually she was sacked for being an agitator. She developed a reputation in Glasgow for *"trouble making"* and found it hard to secure any other work so she moved to London. There were more opportunities there and workplaces were unionised meaning that conditions were better. She joined the Domestic Workers' Union and spoke at rallies in both Hyde Park and Finsbury Park.

During this time she continued her activity with the WSPU, until 1914 when they *"went all patriotic"*. She agreed with Sylvia Pankhurst that the group was *"not fully engaged with the fight for women's rights"*. When Sylvia was expelled from the WSPU, Jessie went with her to Bow.

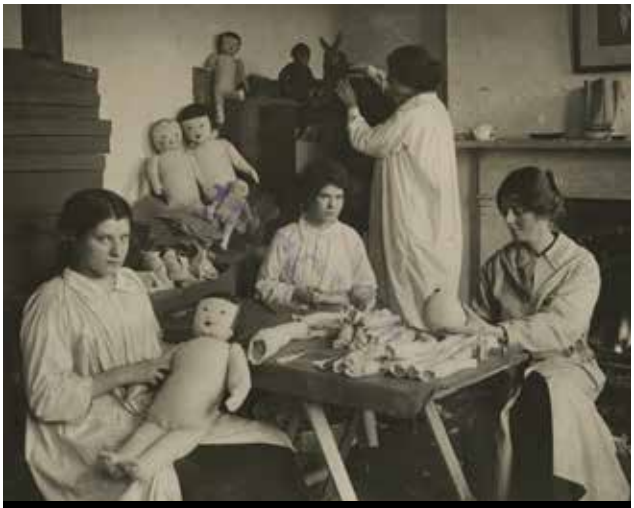
Jessie was appointed a full-time national organiser with the East London Federation of Suffragettes and set up branches in Yorkshire and Lancashire. She sold the Women's Dreadnought, the organisation's newspaper. She wasn't much of a fan of Sylvia Pankhurst though. She thought her *"a bit autocratic like her mother"* but said the *"factory girls worshiped her ... they admired her for her spirit."*

Jessie put up with Sylvia until 1917 when she left to join the ILP in Bermondsey as an organiser.[5] She stayed there until 1924. She continued to be involved in union work throughout her life, both as a union member and organiser, including organising in the General Strike of 1926. She would also stand as a Labour Party Prospective Parliamentary Candidate a number of times, although never succeeded in being elected. She did become a Labour/Co-operative councillor later in life. In 1955 she received the Women's Gold Badge from the Trades Union Congress (TUC).

4 Oral history interview with Jessie Stephens, Women's Library archives and special collections ref: 85UF/B/157

5 Miss Stephens is mentioned in Minnie Lansbury: Suffragette, Socialist and Rebel Councillor (Janine Booth, Five Leaves Publications, 2018, p118) as someone whose "expenses were large & returns small" and rather uncharacteristically Minnie Lansbury suggested she might find other work, a euphemism for sacking her.

East London Federation of Suffragettes



Toy factory established by the ELFS to provide work to local women

On 20th June 1914, six women walked into 10 Downing Street. All were from London's east end; all suffragettes.

This was not the first deputation of suffragettes to meet Prime Minister Herbert Asquith, but it was the first time working women made up the deputation. The six told of their hard lives and tough working conditions: Jessie Payne was a bootmaker; Daisy Parsons was a cigarette packer; and Jane Savoy was a brush maker, all working long hours for little pay. Mrs Ford talked about sexual harassment at the clothing factory where she worked.; and Julia Scurr was a member of the Poplar Board of Poor Law Guardians.[6]

The meeting was organised by Sylvia Pankhurst, who had formed the East London Federation of Suffragettes (ELFS) early that year, after her expulsion from the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). Sylvia had long been at odds with her mother Emmeline and sister Christabel on the method and direction of the women's suffrage movement. Sylvia saw the vote as a tool for working women to free themselves from poverty and improve their working rights. She drew on labour movement tactics and put working women at the heart of the action. As early as 1906, when acting as honorary secretary of the WSPU, Sylvia organised a meeting at Caxton Hall to coincide with the opening of parliament. Hundreds of east end women marched from the station, waving red banners and singing The Red Flag. East London WSPU members were also encouraged to join the Independent Labour Party (ILP) with whom they had strong ties[7]

Emmeline and Christabel had different ideas. They believed in campaigning for the vote as a single issue; anything else was a distraction. Christabel was not interested in working class involvement in the movement, calling for only the *"strongest and most intelligent"*[8]. Finally, they only campaigned for the vote on the same terms as men, which excluded a large percentage of working class women. Soon Sylvia was relieved of her role as secretary; the red flags were replaced with purple, green and white banners; the socialist songs were swept away in favour of The March of the Woman by Ethel Smyth; and in 1907 the Canning Town branch of the WSPU closed.

For the next few years Sylvia kept a lower profile. Despite this, tensions continued to rise within the family and in 1914 Sylvia was expelled from the WSPU. Sylvia went immediately back to the east end, setting up the first branch of the ELFS in Bow. Still committed to the wider struggles of working women, Sylvia employed a wide range of tactics to improve people's lives. As well as the deputation, there were demonstrations in Victoria Park; campaigns for equal pay; a nursery where women could leave their children while at work; and the Women's Hall, which provided everything from a space for political meetings to a cost-price canteen.

Following the meeting with the East London suffragettes, Asquith is said to have been *"uncharacteristically moved"* by the delegation[9] and the New Statesmen suggested the PM's response marked a *"distinct step forward in the suffragette agitation"*. Asquith himself said: *"If the change [women's suffrage] has got to come we must face it boldly and make it thoroughly democratic in its basis."*[10] Despite WSPU insistence on the greater strength of rich women, Asquith was forced to negotiate by working class women from East London. [11]

6 Mrs Bird, remains a mystery following her refusal to complete the 1911 census as part of the wider suffragette protest!
7 Katherine Connnelly, Sylvia Pankhurst: Suffragette, socialist and scourge of the empire, Pluto Press (2013), p21
8 Ibid, p58-59
9 Sarah Jackson and Rosemary Taylor, East London Suffragettes, The History Press (2014), p77
10 David Rosenberg, Rebel Footprints: a guide to uncovering London's Radical History (2015)
11 Katherine Connnelly, Sylvia Pankhurst: Suffragette, socialist and scourge of the empire, Pluto Press (2013), p66

Helen Bowden Pease, Women's Trade Union organiser[12]

Helen Bowden Pease was born two years after Jessie, but was from quite a different background. Her father was a Liberal parliamentary candidate, who gave her a private income to study at Newham College, Cambridge. Her family had proletarian sympathies though, with both her mother and grandmother supporting striking miners and Irish home rule.

In 1916 she began working under Mary McArthur, Margaret Bondfield and Susan Lawrence, all leading figures in the Labour Party's growing women's movement.[13] She was given a position in the Women's Trade Union and sent to East London to organise women in factories.

She was warmly welcomed in the East End, saying of the local women: *"They liked us speaking on their behalf"* and they used to like seeing middle class educated women coming to their neighbourhood.[14] She said they were difficult to organise though, and it was hard to motivate them to fight for better wages because they were earning so much more than they had previously. Instead she focused on working conditions, which continued to be a source of concern, with long hours and unsanitary environments.

Despite complaining about how difficult it was to organise the women, she claims they had a lot of impact. By the end of the war conditions had greatly improved. In that typically understated way that Edwardian women talk, she said: *"the union did a very good job."*

Helen decided that organising was not for her. She didn't like London and *"didn't feel like [union work] was my line"* so left to work on the land.

Sarah Chapman, match woman and trade unionist

Of all the labour rights activists in East London, the match women are probably the most famous, despite most people not knowing their actual names.

The Bryant & May factory in Bow was particularly notable for its poor treatment of workers, who were mostly young Irish women. As well as working 14-hour days, and facing excessive fines for workplace misconduct, the women endured appalling health risks associated with handling white phosphorous.

When socialist activist Annie Besant wrote an article in radical newspaper The Link, detailing conditions in the factory, the owners responded by sacking one of the informants. This sparked a strike, which by the end of the first day saw 1400 women walk out. Within the next few days this number had grown to 2000, bringing the entire factory to a standstill. In just two weeks their employers agreed to almost all of their demands, and within a generation there was an act of parliament prohibiting the use of white phosphorous in match making.

While Annie Besant is often cited as leading the women out on strike, credit is also due to 26-year-old Sarah Chapman as at least one of the strike leaders. Sarah was born in 1862 in Mile End. Unlike many of her East End neighbours she could read and write. At the age of 19 she began working with her mother in the Bryant & May Factory in Bow.

It is not known what sparked Sarah's political awakening, but it was perhaps derived from her education. Dr Louise Raw argues that the match women were known for being strong characters who stuck together like a big family; their solidarity was legendary.[15] So a crime against one, was a crime against all. Either way, the other women appointed Sarah as one of three representatives who went to seek help from Annie Besant following the walk out. It's believed that Sarah could've been the author of the anonymous *"Dear Lady"* letter, which requested the meeting with Annie.[16]

Annie was not in favour of a strike, fearing it would be unsuccessful as the women would quickly be replaced by others desperate for work. She favoured instead a boycott of Bryant & May matches. Despite this, she agreed to help. Public meetings were organised to rally support, and a deputation of 56 match women went to parliament to speak to MPs. Although records do not state the names of any of the women, the fact that Sarah Chapman was one of the eight members of the strike committee (along with Mary Naulls, Mary Cummings, Alice Francis, Kate Slater, Mary Driscoll, Jane Wakeling and Eliza Martin) suggests it is highly likely she was there.

12 Oral history interview with Helen Bowen Pease, Imperial War Museum, catalogue number 821
13 Nan Sloane, Women in the Room: Labour's Forgotten History, I B Tauris (2018)
14 This view is contradicted in other sources, including the oral history interview with Stephen Warren, Nellie Creswell's great nephew. See appendix
15 Louise Raw, Striking A Light, Continuum (2011)
16 Sarah Chapman exhibition at Tower Hamlets Local Library and Archive, March 2019

Match women, with Sarah Chapman top left *(photo courtesy of TUC Library Collections at London Metropolitan University)*

Following successful conclusion of the strike, Bryant & May agreed to a union being formed. Sarah was one of 12 women elected to the union committee. She twice attended the TUC annual conference, where she seconded a motion on the Truck Act to prevent employers charging their workforce for equipment needed to do their job.

Sarah went on to witness many key events in East End history, including the Votes for Women campaign led by Sylvia Pankhurst. She died in November 1945 aged 83, having lived all her life in East London.

The 1919 dockers' strike has often been cited as the start of the New Unionism movement, ignoring the match women's strike the year before. Some historians like John Marriott, have gone as far as saying the importance of the match women's strike has been blown out of proportion. However, dock strike leaders never denied the importance of the women's strike. Ben Tillett (the British socialist, trade union leader and politician) was clear that he saw it as beginning the movement, and was among those who contacted Annie Besant and the match women for advice in the aftermath of the victory at Bryant & May.[17] The dockers perhaps started the fire, but it was the Bryant & May women who struck the first match.

17 Louise Raw, Striking A Light, Continuum (2011) p171

Peace movement

Milly Witkop, Jewish anti-war campaigner

In 1914 many East London labour rights activists turned their attention to the impact of the war on the local community. This included Ukrainian-born Milly Witkop who found herself unaccompanied in London at age 18, having fled the Russian pogroms, a state-sponsored persecution of Jews. She found work in sweatshops, whose harsh conditions made her question her faith and influenced her politics.

In 1895 she met and fell in love with German-born anarchist, Rudolph Rocker. In 1914 they began their opposition to the war, including distributing anti-war leaflets and opening a soup kitchen to alleviate the hunger it caused through spiralling food prices. When Rudolph was interned as an enemy alien, Milly continued alone. In 1916 she was imprisoned for anti-war activities.

After the war, Milly and Rudolph moved to Berlin where she developed the concept of socialist-feminism: proletariat women were exploited both by capitalism and their male colleagues. She became concerned with anti-semitism in the labour movement. By 1933, after the Reichstag fires, anti-semitism became more than an organising concern, and the couple fled to America.

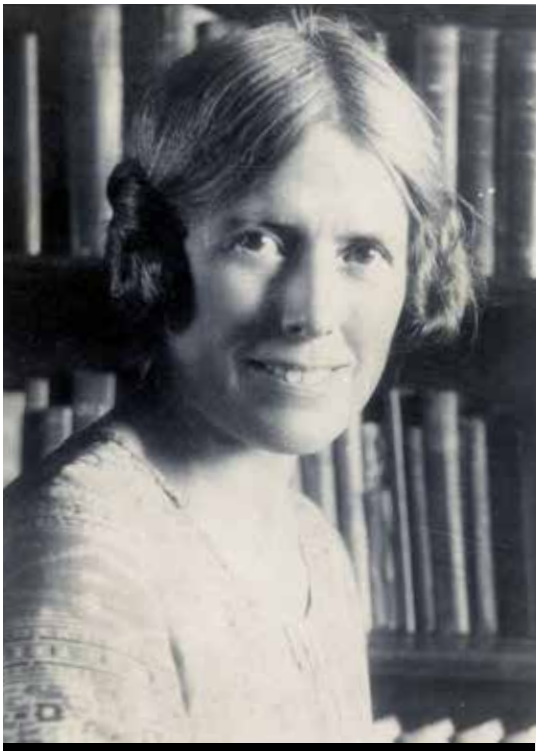
Milly Witkop

Muriel Lester, the 'Mother of World Peace'

Muriel Lester was born in 1883 in Leytonstone, at the time a prosperous suburb in Essex (now Waltham Forest). Inspired by Annie Besant's social work, Muriel later moved to Bromley-By-Bow with her younger siblings, Doris and Kingsley[18]. Tragedy struck in 1914, when Kingsley died at only 26 years old. Leaving funds in his will for *"education, recreation and social"* purposes, his sisters used the money to buy a disused church in Bow, converting it into a community centre named in his honour.

Kingsley Hall still stands and has been used for many purposes over the years, including as an adult education centre, a soup kitchen during the war, and a concert space. Controversially, members of Kingsley Hall also adopted a German child during the war, paying for her to stay with a family for two years.

Both Doris and Muriel were committed pacifists, although as the more outspoken of the two Muriel has become better known. At the end of the war she organised a march to Parliament demanding milk be sent to starving people in Germany. She also hosted talks at Kingsley Hall by other notable peace campaigners, including Vera Britten. During World War Two (WW2) she continued her pacifism, embarking on a worldwide speaking tour. On her return in 1941 she was arrested and detained in Holloway prison for the remainder of the war. Winston Churchill did not like this woman meddling in his affairs!



Muriel Lester

Undeterred, Muriel continued campaigning during the Spanish Civil War. She was twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, and is recognised as one of the world's leading pacifists. On a visit to Japan she was dubbed the *"Mother of World Peace"*.

18 Rachel Kolsky Women's London: A tour guide to great lives, IMM Lifestyle Books (2018), p58

Welfare

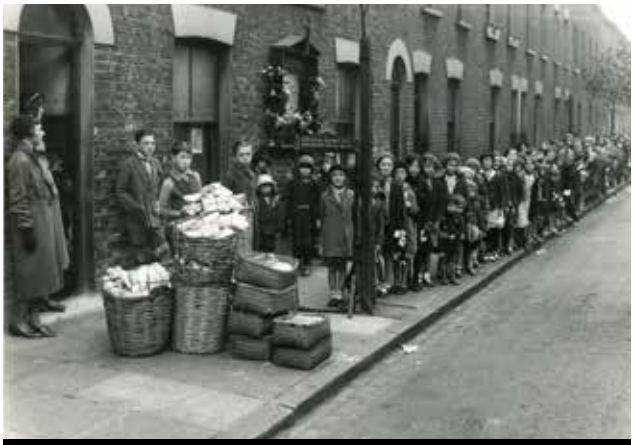
Doris Lester

Doris Lester, with her sister Muriel

Muriel's younger sister Doris is less well known but also had a significant impact on the local community. Having trained as a teacher her focus was on children and she persuaded Muriel they should establish a purpose-built nursery. It had a flat roof (which incorporated an open-air playground), assembly halls, kitchen and dining room. There were toys for the children to play with, and books they could borrow for a week if they had none at home. They taught the children about Greek myths, put on performances and ran excursions to Epping Forest, allowing a break from the city's dirt and squalor and the chance to explore nature.

The nursery also provided free medical support, including a doctor who came every Friday. They gave the children regular *"sunlight treatment"*, presumably to prevent rickets.[19]

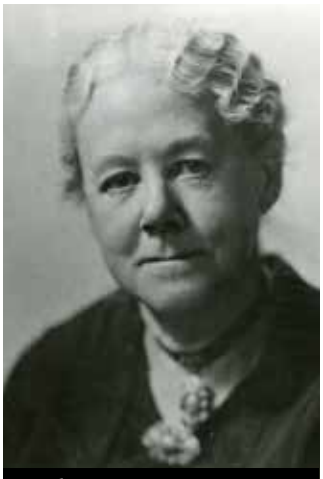
Clara Grant, the *"farthing bundle lady"*



Children queue up for their farthing bundles

Born in 1867 in a small village in Wiltshire, Clara Grant's greatest ambition was to further her education and become a teacher. At age 13 she was already part way there when she became a pupil-teacher[20]. Her ambitions had to be put on hold when she joined the Universities' Mission to Central Africa. Her trip was met with tragedy, however, when *"the only man I could have ever married"*[21] died, and she decided to return home.

Back in England she completed her teacher training, and by the age of 20 was already a headteacher at a small school in Wiltshire. In 1900 she moved to London and began working at the Devons Road Infant School in Bow. Shocked by the levels of poverty in the area, and in particular the destitution of the children at her school, she implemented a radical social welfare programme. This included a hot meal for the children (very possibly the only one they may have had in a day); a supply of clothes and shoes donated by her friends; and the first nurse in a London school.



Clara Grant

Clara was influenced by educational reformists, like Friederich Froebel and Maria Montessori and placed health and welfare at the heart of her school. She spent a short time at Toynbee Hall (see page 10), which undoubtedly influenced her thinking.

In 1905 she turned her home into a *"settlement house"*, providing pensioners with day care, lunch clubs and a place for adult education classes.

She is best known, for her *"farthing bundles"*. Children with a farthing could walk under a 48" (121cm) arch imprinted with the words: Enter All Ye Children Small, None Can Come Who Are Too Tall. The children would then be given their newspaper bundle, which they would sit on the kerb and unwrap. The bundles contained broken toys, coloured paper, pencils, odds and ends of materials and other *"very human things such as children love."*[22]

The farthing bundles continued throughout WW1, into the *"hungry 30s"* and the following war. In fact, despite her death in 1949, the tradition persisted into the 1980s.

Clara Grant was awarded an OBE in 1949 and Clara Grant Primary School (formerly Devons Road Infant School) still exists in Tower Hamlets today.

19 Oral history interview with Sylvia Bishop, Kingsley Hall archives
20 East London Advertiser, 14th October 1949
21 East End News, 2nd May 1947
22 http://the-east-end.co.uk/clara-ellen-grant/ accessed 12th November 2019

Henrietta Barnett and Toynbee Hall

Henrietta Barnett was the youngest of eight children. Orphaned at 18, her father's legacy allowed for a comfortable living in West London. She was always aware of her social privilege, and even as a school girl would visit workhouses. Henrietta met and married the vicar Samuel Barnett and they moved to Whitechapel and adopted an orphan, who sadly died from diphtheria in 1901. Henrietta became a Poor Law Guardian, organised mothers' meetings and founded the Children's Fresh Air Mission.[23]

In 1884, Henrietta established Toynbee Hall with her husband Samuel. The centre aimed to support the education of working class people, and reduce social divides. Future leaders would volunteer at the hall, bringing them face-to-face with poverty, providing them with practical ideas and solutions to take into their political life. Social reformers Clement Atlee and William Beveridge both volunteered at the hall.

Toynbee Hall isn't without its critics however. It has been accused of paternalism, encouraging residents to act on behalf of the community, rather than encouraging them to liberate themselves.[24]

Education

The 1870 Elementary Education Act was a turning point in the British education system. Previously, schooling was a patchwork affair provided mostly by private bodies and religious institutions. The act brought the state into education as never before.

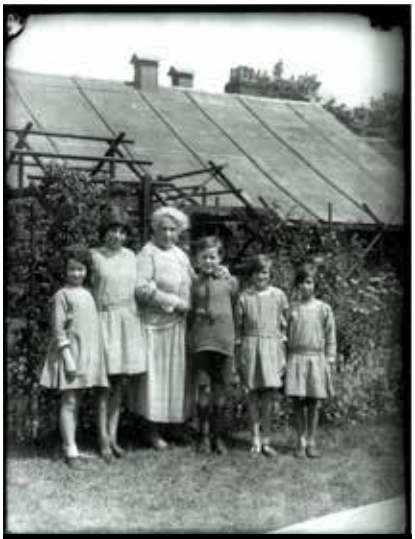
It introduced school boards, which oversaw the running of schools in the area, bringing them under local government control. Board members were elected by the public, and it was the one place where women could stand for election and hold influence. While the boards tended to be dominated by men, in East London a number of progressive women were elected, including Ruth Homan, Florence Fenwick Miller and Annie Besant.

Women also found other ways to make their presence felt in education. It is notable that while men's interest was in educating a workforce for factories and offices, women tended to focus on children's welfare.

Margaret and Rachel McMillan

In 1902 Margaret and Rachel McMillan joined the recently formed Labour Party. Margaret began to write books on health and education and became convinced it was impossible to educate a tired, dirty, infested, diseased and hungry child[25]. With their old friend Katherine Glasier, who was raised in Walthamstow, the sisters lobbied parliament to pass the 1906 Provision of Meals Act. This encouraged all education authorities to provide free school meals for children. McMillan argued that since schooling had been made compulsory (since 1880) then the state should be providing children with the nourishment to be able to learn.[26]

In 1908 Rachel and Margaret opened The School Clinic on Devons Road in Bow. They had gathered a team around them, including Clara Grant (see page 9), Nurse Pearse and Drs Eder and Tribe. The clinic attracted a lot of attention, and hundreds of cases were treated, cured and improved. Most were cases of the ears, eyes and skin. They also weighed the children each week. Teachers could refer children who were struggling academically because of ailments.



Margaret McMillan

In 1931, Dr Tribe wrote: *"When we started we had nothing to guide us but the consciousness of an enormous amount of unattended disease amongst school children, and a passion to do something to cure it as far as we could."*[27]

And improve it they did. In a paper to the 3rd International Conference on School Hygiene in Paris, Dr Edler wrote: *"All the teachers gave us gratifying accounts of improvements in the children's habits, manners and school work ...".*

23 Rachel Kolsky, Women's London: a tour guide to great lives, IMM Lifestyle Books (2018)
24 David Rosenberg, Rebel Footprints: A Guide to Uncovering London's Radical History, Pluto Press (2015), P96
25 http://tactyc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Reflection-Jarvis.pdf
26 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education_(Provision_of_Meals)_Act_1906 accessed 12th November 2019
27 Albert Mansbridge, Margaret McMillan, prophet and pioneer: her life's work, J.M Dent & Sons (1932) p50-58

There were limitations, however. They could not deal with dental problems, a pressing need. They were also only serving one school, so the costs were too high. Margaret, with her *"big vision and practical genius"* decided they needed new premises with better functions. On 7th June 1910 they closed operations in Bow and moved to Deptford, opening a new clinic just a few weeks later.

The sisters would continue their education innovations for many years, including opening the Deptford Open Air Nursery to provide slum children with outdoor learning opportunities. In 1917 Rachel died, leaving Margaret devastated. In 1930 she opened a training college for teachers and nurses, calling it the Rachel McMillan College in her sister's memory.

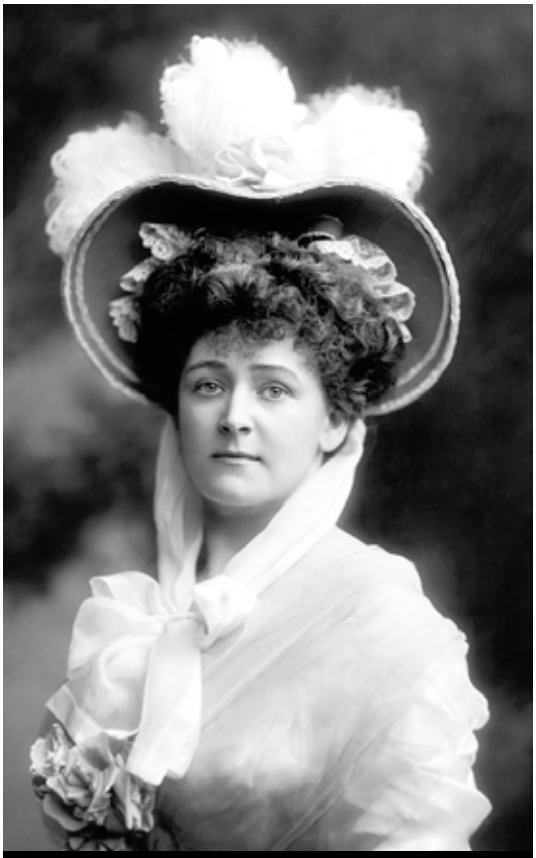
Daisy Greville, countess of socialism

The life of Frances Evelyn Daisy Greville is about as far removed from the children of Bow and Deptford as you can be. As a member of the Essex landed elite (now Waltham Forest) she was lined up to marry Queen Victoria's son, before Daisy thwarted those plans and married the the 5th Earl of Warwick instead.[28] She is the inspiration for the popular music hall song, Daisy, Daisy.

Daisy knew she was lucky to be born into her position in society and sought to help those less fortunate. In 1904 she discovered socialism and joined the Social Democratic Federation, Britain's first socialist political party. Other members included William Morris, George Lansbury and Eleanor Marx. Daisy threw vast sums of money at the organisation, and particularly supported its campaign for free school meals.[29]

Daisy also invested heavily in women's education, including a needlework school and agricultural college. Both were designed to improve employment opportunities for women. For ten years she financed Bigod's Technical School for disadvantaged rural children in Essex.

Daisy opposed WW1 and supported the 1917 Russian revolution. After 1923 she joined the ILP, and stood as a parliamentary candidate in 1923. She lost by 10,000 votes to Anthony Eden, who would go on to become Prime Minister. In later life she withdrew from socialism altogether and focused on animal welfare. She died in 1938 aged 76.



Daisy Greville, Countess of Warwick

Ethel Froud, teacher and trade unionist

Teaching at the turn of the century could be a form of radicalism in itself, often emancipating women by offering intellectual professionalism on a par with men. It could also be an opportunity for the working class *"gifted girl"* to rise out of poverty.[30] Despite professional equality with men, women still lagged behind in pay and other working rights.

Ethel Froud was a teacher in West Ham who cut her radical teeth with the WSPU. She campaigned within the National Union of Teachers (NUT) for the union to support women's suffrage, unsuccessfully. In 1913 she joined the National Federation of Women Teachers and became its honorary secretary. In 1917 she led its break-away from the NUT following their repeated failure to address women's rights. She was known as a brilliant organiser, unifier and speaker, addressing demonstrations of teachers campaigning for equal pay in Trafalgar Square on several occasions.

Ethel compared the treatment of women teachers in the NUT with the treatment of suffragettes in parliament – the suffragettes were *"ruthlessly flung out of cabinet meetings"* in the same way women teachers were *"ruthlessly gagged"* in union meetings.[31]

28 https://www.warwick-castle.com/blog/daisy-greville-i-did-it-my-way.aspx, accessed 12th November 2019
29 https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Daisy_Greville,_Countess_of_Warwick&oldid=866669880, accessed 12th November 2019
30 Alison Oram, Women Teachers and Feminist Politics 1900-1939, Manchester University Press (1996)
31 Ibid p197

Disability

At the turn of the last century disability had a completely different language and culture to it than today. Words such as *"cripple"* and *"imbecile"* were in everyday use, and a person's disability did not usually form part of their political identity.

Adelaide Knight, disabled suffragette

Suffragette Adelaide Knight used crutches or a stick following a childhood injury, and was in constant poor health. Yet as far as we know she did not define her activism by this. As the first secretary of the Canning Town branch of the WSPU, we can speculate that she might have described herself as a suffragette or socialist. In 1907 she left the WSPU, outraged by the lack of democracy in the organisation. The following year she was elected to the West Ham Board of Poor Law Guardians, where she served until 1910. In 1920 she became a founding member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, which maybe changed her political identity again.

From the evidence available, Adelaide, like other disabled women activists, campaigned despite of their disability not because of it. It would take many more generations before a disability movement emerged to which people could attach their political identities.

Adelaide Knight with her husband Donald Adolphus Brown

Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, physician

Despite the lack of disability activism, some feminist historians have argued that the emergence of the *"new woman"*, with her demands for education and personal freedoms, was a form of direct action against psychiatry.

By 1870 the growing strength of the scientific establishment saw thousands of women struck down with a diagnosis of hysteria, and frequently sent to asylums. Medical professionals warned women that pursuit of opportunities would lead to sickness and sterility. As the century progressed these warnings became deafening.[32]

Elizabeth Garrett Anderson

Elizabeth Garrett Anderson ignored those warnings. She was born in 1836 in Whitechapel. Her father was a one-time pawn broker turned successful entrepreneur, making enough money to send his children to good schools. After school she was expected to marry and start a family, but a meeting with Dr Elizabeth Blackwell, the first female doctor to graduate in the US, set her on a different course.

Elizabeth was unable to get into any medical school due to her gender, so enrolled as a nursing student at Middlesex Hospital. She attended classes intended for male students until she was barred following complaints. As the Society of Apothecaries did not specifically forbid women from taking their examinations, Elizabeth sat and passed their exams in 1865, gaining a certificate that enabled her to become a doctor. The society then changed its rules to prevent other women entering the profession this way.[33]

Although her father did not initially support Elizabeth's ambitions, she talked him round. With his approval she became one of the first visiting physicians at the East London Hospital for Children in Hackney. She was also the first woman to be appointed to a medical post.

In 1872, British psychiatrist Henry Maudsley's article on Sex and Mind in Education argued that education for women caused *"nervous and mental disorders"* and reduced their reproductive capacities.[34] Elizabeth responded to Maudsley pointing out that, as a mother of three children, she was living proof that education did not hinder reproductive capabilities. She argued that a far greater danger to women was boredom, in that *"thousands of young women, strong and blooming at 18, become languid and feeble under the depressing influence of dullness."*[35]

32 Lisa Appignanesi, Mad, Bad and Sad: A history of women and the mind doctors from 1800 to the present , Virago (2009) p120
33 http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/garrett_anderson_elizabeth.shtml accessed 12th November 2019
34 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_Garrett_Anderson accessed 12th November 2019
35 Lisa Appignanesi, Mad, Bad and Sad: A history of women and the mind doctors from 1800 to the present , Virago (2009) p45

LGBTQ+ rights

First wave feminism is often viewed only as the fight for equal suffrage, yet there was much more to it than that. The suffragettes were also challenging social norms and expectations of women's behaviour. East London suffragette Annie Barnes said of seeing her first suffragette protest on the Roman Road:

> *"I'd been very quietly brought up. I'd never had to go out to work because we'd been comfortably off. Then, one day, something happened which really woke me up. I'd been shopping with my mother in Aldgate ... there's an open space just there where someone was holding a meeting. All sorts of people used to have meetings there. But on this occasion there were four women on a cart speaking. That was unusual to see women speaking ... The men in the crowd were just awful. They wouldn't listen and they just shouted at the women ... At one point a city clerk came right through the crowd up to the front and shouted at the woman trying to speak, 'Go home and get on with the housework. Go and wash your dirty kids. You women are inferior to men anyway.'"*[36]

The suffragettes, more than any other group, represented the new woman movement that sought financial independence, expanded social roles and rejected marriage and motherhood in return for supportive relationships with women. Many new women formed female residential communities, which provided alternative domestic structures. Love may have been encouraged by the all-female environment and anti-male ethos, and they certainly had a more fluid attitude to female friendships.[37]

Our current definition of lesbianism is historically specific. At the turn of the last century there wasn't a vocabulary or clear definition for women to define themselves; if indeed they wanted to define themselves. As Martha Vicinus says in the Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader: *"We must accept a confusing and fragmented history."*[38]

While evidence rarely exists to definitively state whether female couples in this era were lesbians, we can say that they were living alternative lifestyles; rejecting the heteronormative values of marriage and motherhood. In doing so they were liberated from the chains of patriarchy.

Dr Louisa Martindale, surgical pioneer

Born in Leytonstone in 1872, Louisa Martindale grew up in a highly political family. Her mother was an active suffragist sitting on the executive committee of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Society (NUWSS). Louisa knew from a early age that she wanted to be a doctor, and in 1893 she entered the London School of Medicine for Women. After qualifying she was instrumental in setting up her own general practice and the New Sussex Hospital for Women in Brighton. During WW1 she served with the Scottish Women's Hospital providing life saving care to wounded soldiers.

Having inherited her mother's strong personality, Martindale was outspoken on many taboo subjects, including prostitution and venereal disease. She discusses these quite openly in her 1909 booklet, Under the Surface. She was also interested in the use of x-rays to cure cancer, with a particular interest in cervical, rectal and breast cancer.

Louisa never married and lived for three decades with Ismay FitzGerald. Louisa writes in her 1951 autobiography quite openly (although not explicitly) about her love for Ismay, saying: *"I have had my full share of love and happiness."* There is not enough evidence to specifically label the relationship as lesbian, but Louisa clearly made a decision to live outside of hetrosexual norms.

36 Annie Barnes, Tough Annie: from suffragette to Stepney councillor, Stepney Books (1980) p12
37 Rebecca Jennings, A Lesbian History of Britain: love and sex between women since 1500, Greenwood World publishing (2007)
38 Martha Vicinus "They wonder to which sex I belong" The Historical Roots of the Modern Lesbian Identity, Lesbian & Gay Studies Reader (1993)

Eva Slawson, Christian socialist

Eva Slawson was born in West Ham in 1882, and moved to Leyton 20 years later. In 1907 she became interested in Christian socialism, looking to religion for both spiritual comfort and intellectual stimulation.

In 1908 Eva joined the Leyton branch of the ILP, which she would leave shortly after for reasons that are not clear. She retained a connection with the labour movement through the Women's Labour League, which she described as a *"splendid little league"*.[39] She also joined the Women's Freedom League (WFL), a break-away from the autocratic WSPU run by the Pankhursts. After attending one of its meetings she declared: *"The moment I entered the room I had a sensation of being among my own people."*[40]

Eva was a single, childless woman who lived with her aunt. She was deeply interested in feminist issues, especially the nature of relationships between men and women. She found Edward Carpenter's Love's Coming of Age (a series of essays on gender and sexual identities) *"full of suggestion and as I read my mind wanders off along various lines"*. She also declares in a letter to her friend Ruth Slate that: *"my views on marriage are altering to an alarming extent – I really believe some people would call my opinions immoral!"* [41]

Despite these radical ideas about relationships, Eva still appeared to believe that marriage and motherhood was the ideal for women. She seemed plagued by a sense of loss and complained: *"single women are 'outside the heart of things', our friendship with happily married men and women after all only touches the fringes of their lives."*[42]

Eva Slawson

39 Eva Slawson diary, 1/5/14
40 Eva Slawson diary 10/07/13
41 Eva Slawson letter to her friend Ruth Slate, 23/11/09
42 Eva Slawson diary, 19/6/13https://rcogheritage.wordpress.com/2017/06/08/pioneers-louisa-martindale-1873-1966-frcog-1933/

In 1911 Eva met Minna Simmons, an older married women. There was immediate attraction and a close friendship would develop that would have a huge impact on Eva's life. While she did not describe their relationship in explicitly sexual terms, the relationship was clearly profound.

After Minna's husband died, Eva moved into her home in Walthamstow. The relationship soon acquired a new dimension through physical proximity. In her diary Eva describes sleeping in Minna's arms. There is clearly an erotic dimension to this physical intimacy, as Eva recorded in her diary: *"Such waves of love pass through me at times. I quiver with feeling"*[43] and *"(t)onight in bed it seems our very souls and bodies mingled in love and sympathy."*[44] Although not an explicit reference to sexual interaction, that would not be an unreasonable interpretation.

Minna's letters to Ruth also suggest that she saw their relationship in sexual terms. Writing to Ruth a year after Eva's death, she says: *"How I pray dear earnestly for God to take away my intense longing for her, sometimes it seems just too much to bear ... I will tell you of my thoughts on the intermediate sex another time."*[45] and a few weeks later: *"I am going to be daring and write and speak on the sex questions. I will. I will."*[46] Sadly there are no extant letters containing Minna's thoughts.

There is much evidence in Eva's diaries and Minna's letter to suggest their relationship was much more than a close friendship. It certainly challenged gender norms, even if it struggled to articulate a clear alternative to heterosexuality.

Mary Leigh, suffragette

Mary Leigh was born in Manchester in 1885 and was from a working class background. She joined the WSPU in 1906 aged 20 or 21. She was unquestionably on the militant side of the campaign, setting fire to the Theatre Royal in Dublin during a packed lunchtime matinee; hurling a hatchet at Asquith and narrowly missing him; and throwing roof slates from Bingley Hall in Birmingham. She was arrested and imprisoned a number of times, went on hunger strike and wrote graphic accounts of force feeding. Even within the WSPU she was considered quite uncontrollable.[47] They were relieved when in 1914 she joined the ELFS. She would continue her campaigning in East London long after the WSPU called a halt to their activities.

It's unsurprising that this passionate woman had passionate relationships. She is listed as one of several women fellow suffragette Emily Davidson had an intense friendship with, although its exact nature is inconclusive. Much of the evidence that their relationship was more than just friends centres on a copy of abridged poems by Walt Whitman inscribed *"from Comrade Davison to Comrade Leigh"*. The inscription is headed *"the dear love of comrades"*, which was widely interpreted at the time as a public acknowledgement and celebration of physical love between people of the same sex. It is not known whether Emily Davidson was aware of these interpretations, although moving in the feminist and socialist circles that she did, it seems unlikely she wasn't. There is also a question of whether the gift was ever given to Mary, as it remained in Emily's personal papers, which were planned for archive. Mary Leigh was an intensely private person and it seems unlikely she would have returned the gift for public display. If the gift was not given then this may change the meaning.

Mary was a chief mourner at Emily's funeral. She led an annual pilgrimage to Morpeth, where Emily is buried, and tended her grave until her own death in 1960s. It is clear their relationship was intense, but evidence that it was queer is limited.

43 Eva Slawson diary, 18/2/14
44 Eva Slawson diary, 19/2/14
45 Minna Simmons letter to Ruth Slate, 28/1/17
46 Minna Simmons letter to Ruth Slate, 26/2/17
47 Liz Stanley, Romantic Friendship? Some Issues in Researching Lesbian History and Biography: Women's History Review: Vol 1, No 2 (2016) p199

Generation 2: The interwar years (1918–1925)

The 1920s and 1930s were a time of enormous change. Some women now had the vote, but their struggle had not ended. The Great Depression saw hardship across the country, but it was particularly bad in East London. There was greater social liberation for women, but growing understanding of lesbianism caused moral panics. Meanwhile, fascism had begun its menacing march across Europe. Women responded to all these threats with their usual passion, creativity and determination.

Labour rights

Sarah Wesker, trade unionist

The interwar years saw a period of industrial growth, however the male dominated unions were reluctant to support women's work. In fact in some instances they mobilised against women. Now the war had ended there was pressure for women to return to the home and not steal men's jobs. Women who attempted to unionise faced two oppressors: their employers and their male trade union counterparts. This didn't stop Sarah Wesker.

Sarah grew up in the Rothschild Buildings, a block of flats in Spitalfields, tenanted by mainly Jewish families. Despite being under five feet tall, she was a formidable figure.

Sarah Wesker

In 1929 she co-founded the United Clothing Workers' Union. She was the only female member of its executive committee and later became the full time women's organiser[48]. She is quoted recalling:

> *"The first strike I remember, in the 1920s, was at a firm where the employer was so bad he wouldn't even let me go out of the shop to get a doctor for a girl who was having a fit. ... We had this strike for a farthing on the price of a pair of trousers and he never forgave me for that, even though he won, not us. I used to stand outside the factory and collect the girls' contributions. He would call me all the names under the sun and call the police to me, but the policeman would say 'She isn't doing anything wrong [...] But it was difficult, and eventually the girls decided they didn't want to be in the union any more. After the strike he wouldn't take me back, or my sisters.'*[49]

Sarah continued to be an active union organiser, leading strikes at several major textiles factories. She combined communist politics with the tradition of 'Yiddishkeit' or *"Jewishness"*, which Eastern European immigrants had brought to the Eastend.

In 1928, Sarah organised 600 young women at the Rego factory on Bethnal Green Road. The workers were on strike for 12 weeks, spurred on by morale-raising singing marches orchestrated by Sarah. They won at Christmas. The following year she led two further strikes: at the Polikoff factory and at the Simpson factory in Hackney.

Sarah made considerable progress organising women workers which, in an era of single earner families, took immense foresight. Her actions paved the way for the Dagenham workers in the late 1960s, and the Equal Pay Act of 1970.

48 A Kershen Uniting the tailors: trade unionism among the tailoring workers of London and Leeds 1870-1939 Ilford: Cass. (1995)
49 R Leeson Strike:A live history 1887-1971 London: Allen and Unwin (1973)

Hackney bus girls strike

In 1918, 27,000 women worked as bus conductors. That year at the Wilsden depot they walked out on strike over a 5s war bonus that was paid to men, but not women. They protested under the slogan *"the same work for the same money"* and the protest spread around the country. Women in Hackney were some of the first to join their colleagues in Wilsden. Within a week, 18,000 women from bus, train and tram depots had stopped work. Within a few days, the strike was settled, and within the month the women got their bonus. It would take much longer for them to get equal pay.

Housing

The Women of Quinn Square

Mass unemployment caused a housing crisis in the 1930s. East London saw high levels of over-crowding in slum conditions. There could be as many as 30 people sharing meagre amenities, including several families using one tap and toilet. Coupled with illegal overcharging by unscrupulous landlords, the situation was untenable.

As women's authority was still concentrated on the home, they found themselves on the frontline of the tenant struggles. While the men were at work, women were spearheading resistance against exploitative housing practices. This was particularly notable in Quinn Square in Hackney.

In August 1938 a woman was evicted from Quinn Square, after the landlord alleged she owed arrears. After an investigation it became clear she was being illegally overcharged.

The 1915 Rent Act had introduced controls following a successful strike in Glasgow. However, the post war Tory government had been slowly dismantling these protections. This meant in places like Quinn Square, some tenants had controlled rents, and other did not. Landlords exploited this confusion by introducing exorbitant rents across the board. A survey later revealed that 70 out of 90 of the tenants in Quinn Square were being illegally overcharged.

Other women living on the square organised a rent strike in solidarity. Pickets were deployed, posters were nailed to broomsticks and there were female-led impromptu demos. When the Hackney Gazette labelled the strike as *"ill-advised"*, the women responded by bombarding the newspaper with 200 protest postcards, and a delegation was sent to visit the editor.

The rent strike was opposed by the leader of the British Union of Fascists, Oswald Mosley, who was a big property owner. As a result, the women often found themselves harassed by fascists who would appear at tenant meetings. But the women were not intimidated, and the strike held solid. Within two weeks the landlords were forced into a humiliating defeat, agreeing to maximum rents for uncontrolled areas, regular repairs, and recognition of the Tenants' Association.

The strike generated local and national coverage. When tenants in similar circumstances saw their victory, it opened the floodgates. A wave of strikes spread through the East End and beyond[50].

Langdale and Brady Street Mansions

Not all rent strikes in the 1930s were won so swiftly. In 1939 a strike at the Langdale and Brady Street Mansion went on for five months. The properties were owned by common landlords, clothing manufacturers called Craps and Gold. Residents were mostly Jewish, a number were communists. Hetty Donnelly chaired the joint tenants committee, made up entirely of women. She would later recall the all-women's committee as *"a brilliant idea"*, since *"we women did most of it"*.

To prevent bailiffs from entering, the women erected barricades and barbed wire around the building, and guards patrolled the entrance. Even the milkman had to secure a permit to enter. Nonetheless, police officers eventually broke through the barricades at Langdale Mansions, and a fierce struggle ensued. Women were subject to particularly high levels of brutality, yet resisted, arming themselves with sticks, shovels and saucepans. [51]

50 David Rosenberg. Battle For The East End. Nottingham: Five Leaves (2011) p160-161

51 Henry Srebrnik, Class, ethnicity and gender intertwined: Jewish women and the East London rent strikes, 1935-1940 Women's History Review (1995) p288-289

Sarah Schlesinger, occupation listed as 'housewife', was one of those evicted by force.

> *"An inspector attempted to drag me out of the house, and when he failed, he ordered two of the twelve policemen who were in my house with truncheons drawn to remove me."*

That same evening, a mass demonstration of 15,000 people took place, including rabbis, church dignitaries and the mayor of Stepney, resulting in further confrontation with the police. But it prompted two Stepney councillors to take up the tenants' cause, and a few days later the matter was discussed in the Commons. Under extreme pressure, Craps and Gold reached an agreement, granting a clear victory to the tenants.

Ella Donovan, Stepney Tenants Defence League organiser

In 1937 the Stepney Tenants Defence League (SDTL) was formed, which was a federation of tenants' committees. To deal with the problems of rent and repairs, the STDL taught tenants how to organise, how to determine their legal rights, and how to fight landlords in a collective, disciplined way.

Ella Donovan became one of the STDL's full time organisers. She was described by her Communist Party comrade Phil Piratin as a typical example of one of those working class women, only too often overlooked as being shy and lacking in confidence, who become speakers, writers and organisers during times of crisis.[52]

The STDL organised marches through the streets and demonstrations outside the homes of landlords in their wealthy suburbs. If there was no response from the landlord, they organised a rent strike. The strikers would alert tenants to the arrival of a landlord by ringing bells, and everyone would come out together in force. Street by street the rent strike movement spread.

By the end of February 1939, the STDL has recovered £10,000 in overcharged rents and won rent reductions totally £18,000. They also forced landlords to carry out numerous repairs.[53]

Historian Sarah Glynn highlights the importance of these strikes which: *"proved the determination of the women, who bore the brunt of these struggles and sometimes found themselves picketing through weeks of winter cold."* [54] While Noreen Branson notes: *"It was the women who did the picketing, women who often dominated the committees making up the Stepney Tenants' Defence League, women who came out on demonstrations. It was, of course, partly because the men were at work, and the women were at home where the action was taking place."*

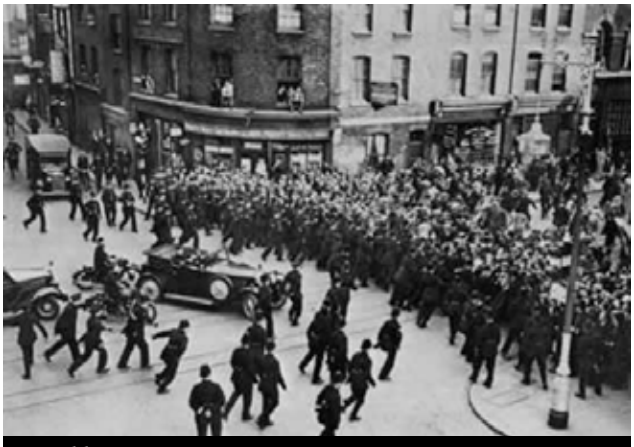
Ella Donavan herself said: *"For the first time many women have lost their fear of the landlord and learnt their own organised power".* [55]

Anti-facism

Battle of Cable Street – a woman's perspective

In October 1936, thousands of local people, from Jews to communists and Irish dockers, flooded the streets, blocking a march by the British Union of Fascists. Led by Oswald Mosley, the fascists deliberately plotted their path through Spitalfields to antagonise the large Jewish population. Alice Hitchen, just 17 at the time, reflects the reaction of many:

> *"I was aware of what was going on in Germany and the resentment here to the Jews. I wanted to be part of the resistance to that ... As soon as we knew the fascists were marching, we organised to stop them. We chalked the streets at night with slogans such as "No Pasaran!" "They shall not pass!"*[56]



Cable Street

52 Ibid p283-299

53 https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ella_Donovan&oldid=823044778 accessed 13th November 2019

54 Reynolds News, 26 February 1939, p. 3; Daily Worker, 28 February 1939, p5.

55 Henry Srebrnik, Class, ethnicity and gender intertwined: Jewish women and the East London rent strikes, 1935-1940 Women's History Review (1995) p283-299

56 Socialist Worker (Britain) Eyewitnesses To The Battle Of Cable Street: 'Fascists Did Not Pass'. (2010)

There were an estimated 10,000 protestors, compared to 2000-3000 fascists. Although police outnumbered fascists more than two-to-one, and their attempts to clear the crowds were brutal, they were not able hold back the protestors. A young activist recalls:

> *"Eventually, after some hours, the word went round that the fascists had been turned back. Everyone was cheering. Where I was people were dancing and singing and throwing their arms around one another. I think it is essential to fight. You've got to stand up to them, you have to be prepared to stop them from marching."*

The Battle of Cable Street is a legend in East End history, however it is often told from a male perspective. Women like Alice Hitchen are written out of many contemporary accounts. Of course, not all the women activists took to the streets, as Joyce Goodman, then just 12 years old, explains:

> *"For too many girls it was an absolute terror. The police were just hitting anyone indiscriminately. We never saw a fascist all that day. We were fighting the police."*

Yet many women were active from the windows of the tenement buildings. Charlie Goodman recalled women throwing down on the police *"everything they could lay hands on"*. When the police ran into the sheds for cover, *"the women came down from the tenements and bashed the doors in and the police came out with their hands up."*[57]

Despite the dangers, women made their presence felt that day. And their commitment to the cause can be seen in the arrest records. Out of the 79 anti-fascist protestors arrested, eight were women. [58]

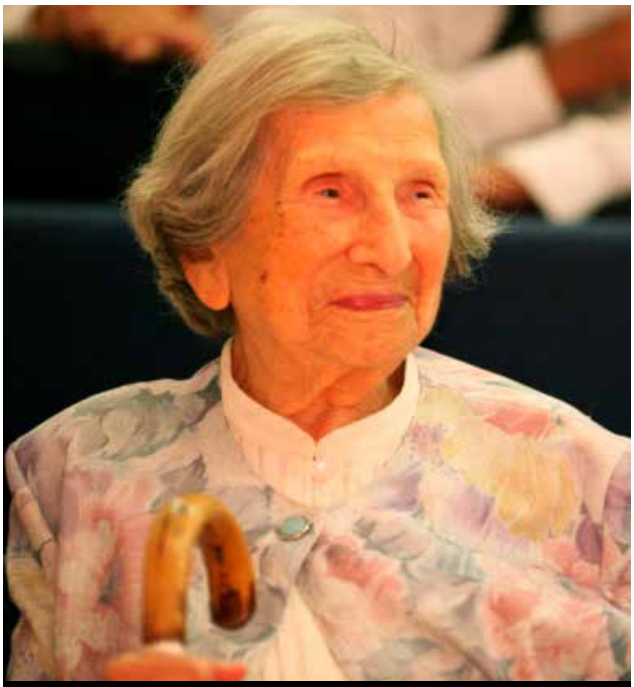
Peace

Hetty Bower, peace campaigner

Hetty Bower was born Esther Rimmel in 1905. She was part of a large, working class Orthodox Jewish family in Dalston. At only ten years old she became a staunch opponent of the war, after seeing injured returning servicemen. She recalled:

> *"I was very patriotic and waved to the men as they set off... but it didn't take long before we saw those men coming back. They were missing legs and missing arms, totally blind, and war was no longer fun. I think I was 10 years old when my hatred of war began."*

During WW2, Hetty ran a hostel for Czech refugees. She sheltered *"trade unionists, socialists, communists, Jews and anyone else they could get out of Czechoslovakia."* She went on to become a founding member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), and was at the first march to Aldermaston. She summed up her philosophy as:
"We may not win by protesting, but if we don't protest we will lose. If we stand up to them, there is always a chance we will win."



***Hetty Bower** (Credit: Isabel Cortes)*

Her campaigning continued well beyond her 100th year. In 2011 she spoke at the Hiroshima Commemoration Day in London, and in 2013 she received a standing ovation at the Labour Party conference for her passionate speech, which declared: *"What I have to campaign about in the short time still left to me is peace on our planet and improvement of living conditions."* She died a few months later, and her daughter said her almost final words were: *"ban the bomb, forever more."*

57 David Rosenberg, Battle For The East End Five Leaves (2011). p206-7
58 Ibid. p 207

Welfare

Poplar Rebel Women Councillors

In the 1920s councils funded their own local poor relief through the rate system. The high level of unemployment in Poplar meant the council had to charge over twice as much as rich boroughs like Kensington. On top of this, they were expected to collect a 'precept' which funded cross-London bodies, such as police and water.

In 1921 Poplar elected a Labour council – for the first time the councillors looked like the electorate. Mayor George Lansbury described them as *"class conscious socialists working together"*. They immediately drew up schemes for slum clearance, health schemes (especially maternity and child welfare), free services for the unemployed and a minimum wage for council employees.[59] When they looked at the formula for the precept, however, they decided it was just unfair. They didn't feel their poorer residents should have to pay for centralised services given they were paying disproportionately more for local services. So they refused it. They were told by London County Council (LCC) to pay the precept or face prison.

Five of the councillors had been part of the ELFS, and wouldn't be intimidated easily. Drawing on their experiences, Minnie Lansbury, Susan Lawrence, Julia Scurr, Nellie Cressall and Jennie Mackay planned their strategy and moblised the local community. When it was clear neither side would back down, Julia Scurr said: *"We will go (to prison). That is all."* [60]

In 1921 the women councillors were sent to Holloway prison. A crowd of 10,000 supporters tried to prevent them from entering, but they insisted on standing with their male colleagues. Susan Lawrence told the crowd: *"We are here representing a principle which we have to defend as well as the men. If you prevent us from going, you do us the worst turn you can."*[61]

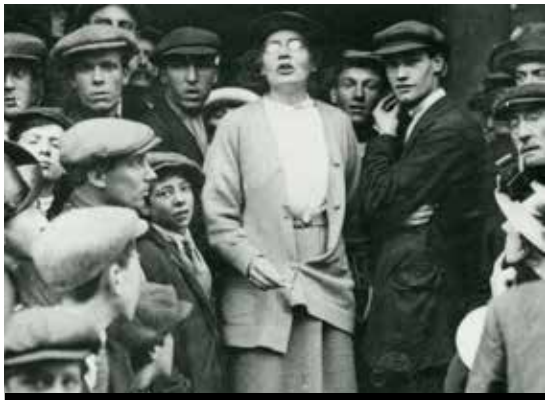
According to her great nephew, Stephen Warren, there was great concern about Nellie Cressall going to prison as she was six months' pregnant at the time. Nellie was a quiet but confident woman, and she insisted on sticking by her comrades.[62] But the authorities were also very worried – they knew if anything happened to her it would cause a real scandal. Initially she was transferred to the medical wing, and then granted early release. Upon leaving Holloway she publicised the awful conditions inside, including the screaming of women in padded cells.

Preparing to depart for Holloway prison

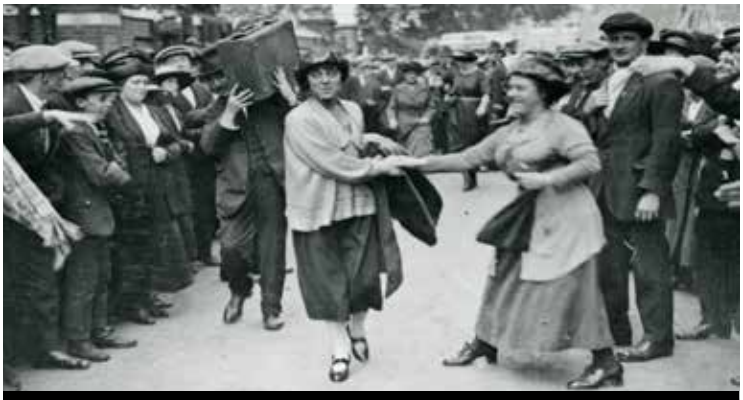
59 David Rosenberg, Rebel Footprints: a guide to uncovering London's Radical History (2015)
60 Janine Booth Minnie Lansbury: suffragette, socialist and rebel councillor Five Leaves (2018)
61 https://islandhistory.wordpress.com/2014/06/21/poplarism-aka-the-poplar-rates-rebellion/ accessed December 2015
62 Oral history interview with Stephen Warren, as part of the Women Activists of East London project, archived at the Bishopsgate Institute

Susan Lawrence, Mrs J Scurr and Mrs J Mackay

Nellie Cressall



Susan Lawrence



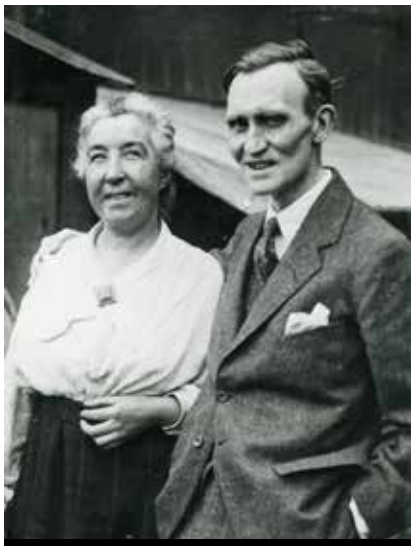
Minnie Lansbury

> *"We women councillors were kept isolated, with as many wardresses to look after the five of us as there were to look after the other thousand women in the prison. They were so afraid lest we should talk to those women, who were there for no fault of their own, but because of the rotten system".*

These terrible conditions resulted in Cllr Minnie Lansbury developing pneumonia while inside. She died shortly after being released. Thousands of mainly women mourners gathered outside her house to march to the funeral. Cllr Sam March said: *"No one could say Minnie's stature was large, but all could say her heart was large."* [63] Her great niece, Selina Gellart, says Minnie is remembered in the family as someone who was not scared of anything.[64] In the 1930s a memorial clock was erected in her honour at Electric House on Bow Road.

Julia Scurr also succumbed to an early death in 1927, aged only 57. Poplar Mayor George Lansbury attributed her premature demise to the terrible conditions during her imprisonment.

Meanwhile, Susan Lawrence became one of Labour's MPs when she was elected in East Ham in 1923. She maintained her commitment to working class women, threatening to resign in the face of unemployment benefit cuts. Her obituary in The Times describes her as, *"the most transparently honest and un-egotistical of politically minded women".*



Julia Scurr

63 Janine Booth Minnie Lansbury: suffragette, socialist and rebel councillor Five Leaves (2018) p208

64 Oral history interview with Selina Gellart, as part of the Women Activists of East London project, archived at the Bishopsgate Institute

Mary Hughes, social worker

Mary Hughes was born in 1860 and enjoyed a comfortable childhood in Mayfair. She devoted most of her adult life to helping those less fortunate by becoming a social worker in the East End. She lived for a while with Muriel and Doris Lester, but in 1926 she acquired an old pub in Whitechapel, which she turned into a refuge she called the Dewdrop Inn.

Mary slept in a little room near the front door, which she would often give up to homeless women. She would go without food for others and more than once ended up in hospital with bronchitis from sleeping on the cold stone floor.[65] When Ghandi came to stay at Kingsley Hall in 1931, he specifically asked to meet Mary.[66]

Miriam Moses, social reformer

Miriam Moses was born in 1884 in the East End, one of 11 children. In 1925 she co-founded the Brady Girls' Club as a parallel to the Brady Boys' Club, one of the first Jewish boys' clubs in the country. She was also a member of the Jewish League for Women's Suffrage, founder member of the League of Jewish Women and served on the executive of the Jewish Board of Guardians. In 1931 she became the first female mayor of Stepney and the UK's first Jewish female mayor.[67]

Education

When men returned from the war there was a big push to dislodge women teachers from their jobs. By 1926 three-quarters of all Local Education Authorities operated some kind of marriage bar, denying teachers the opportunity to work after they were married. The period up to WW2 also saw huge growth in adult education, providing women with more social and employment opportunities.

Winifred Holtby

Winifred Holtby was an interwar feminist, best known for her writing, journalism and close friendship with Vera Brittain. She also had close connections with education and teachers. Winifred was a school manager in Bethnal Green in the 1920s, spoke at National Union of Women Teachers' meetings, attended their events and wrote columns in The School Mistress, Time and Tide, and The Woman Teacher on the battle for equal pay and the marriage bar.[68]

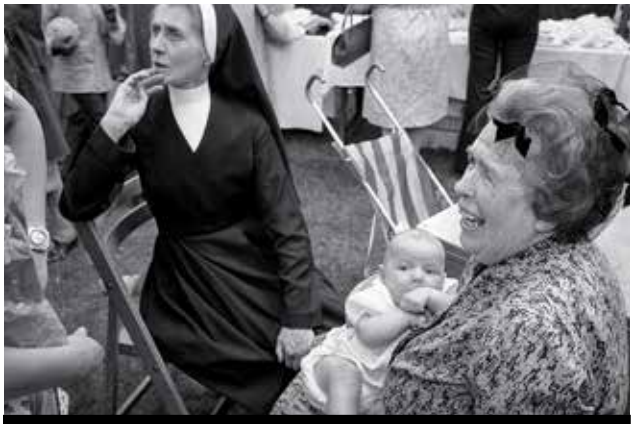
She began to suffer from high blood pressure, recurrent headaches and bouts of lassitude. In 1931 she was diagnosed with Bright's Disease and given two years to live. Aware of her impending death, Winifred put her remaining energy into South Riding, a novel about a woman headteacher, which explores the issues of spinsterhood, love, marriage and the loss of independence. It would go on to become widely regarded as her masterpiece, and was finally published six months after her death.[69]

Winifred was also involved with many other causes: she was a member of the equal rights Six Point group, a committed speaker for the League of Nations Union, and a pioneer in the development of black trade unionism in South Africa.[70]

In 1940 Vera Brittain immortalised her friendship with Winifred in the book, Testament of Friendship.

65 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Hughes_(social_worker) accessed 13th November 2019
66 https://www.quaker.org.uk/blog/8-badass-quaker-women accessed 13th November 2019
67 Rachel Kolsky, Women's London: a tour guide to great lives, IMM Lifestyle Books (2018) p24
68 Alison Oram, Women Teachers and Feminist Politics 1900-1939, Manchester University Press (1996), p204
69 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winifred_Holtby, accessed 13th November 2019
70 https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/feb/19/south-riding-winifred-holtby-rereading accessed 13th November 2019

Edith Ramsay, educator and community activist



Edith Ramsay at a garden fete in the Rectory garden of Christchurch, Spitalfields 1973
(Edith Ramsay 73/35/539-2 @Ron McCormick)

Edith Ramsay was dubbed *"Florence Nightingale of the Slums"* by the British press for her work tackling prostitution around Cable Street. While it was the campaign that brought her notoriety, it was her educational work that was most important to her, and of which she was most proud.[71]

In 1920 Edith arrived in Stepney and would end up staying there for the rest of her life. In 1931 she began working at the Evening Institute, for women students. Although adult education tended to be dominated by the middle classes, Edith firmly believed the Institute should represent the local community. So she set up language classes for immigrants and needlework classes so the women could make their own clothes and stretch their meagre incomes. She would walk the most deprived streets and recruit women to classes. She made no distinction in who she invited, and on more than one occasion encouraged street workers to join.[72]

The Institute provided instruction in subjects related to the home, including cookery, needlecraft, first aid and infant care. Although the curriculum seems limited, and arguably Edith had pretty conservative ideas about women's relationship to the home, the importance of the Institute lay in is ability to break loneliness and isolation. In her papers there are case studies of women who attended: an unmarried mother who'd had nine children removed from her care; a woman referred by her probation officer; a deaf woman whose *"world had crumbled"* when her husband died; and a woman unable to work because of her epilepsy. The Institute brought these women friendships, a sense of purpose and the *"opportunity to work together in harmony"*.[73]

Edith was also a local councillor, a member of Toynbee Hall and worked to improve the housing conditions of Somali seamen.

In 1977 Edith was 82 and retired but still a manager of a primary school, governor of five schools for the *"handicapped"*, trustee of the East London Nursery Society and active with her local church. She died in 1983 at Langthorne Hospital in Leytonstone, aged 88.

Disability rights

In the interwar period, disability still was not a political identity. In fact, it became one of the darkest periods in history for disabled people as the eugenics movement gained popularity.

The interwar period was typified by huge technological optimism. People thought eugenics was a scientific solution to many social problems, including many progressives such as Bertrand Russell, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, and William Beveridge. They believed eugenics could be a form of social care, building a fitter, healthier workforce.[74]

Playwright George Bernard Shaw wrote: *"The only fundamental and possible socialism is the socialisation of the selective breeding of man."*

In 1931 Labour MP Archibald Church proposed a bill for the compulsory sterilisation of certain *"mental patients"* on the grounds they were *"a burden to their parents, a misery to themselves and in my opinion, a menace to the social life of the community."*[75]

Liberals everywhere saw it as a rational and scientific way of dealing with social issues. On this Hitler agreed with them. It was only when the horrors of the Holocaust were exposed did it fall out of favour. Jonathan Freedland in the Guardian called eugenics one of the *"grisliest skeletons in the cupboard of the British intellectual elite."*[76]

71 Bertha Sokoloff, Edith and Stepney: the life of Edith Ramsay, Stepney Books (1987)
72 Ibid, p75
73 Edith Ramsay's papers, archived at Tower Hamlets Local Library and Archives
74 Roddy Slorach, A Very Capitalist Condition: a history of politics of disability, Bookmarks (2015) p98
75 Ibid, p98
76 https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/feb/17/eugenics-skeleton-rattles-loudest-closet-left June 2019

LGBTQ+ rights

During WW1 queer women experienced a period unprecedented liberation. Wearing uniforms was no longer seen as mannish, but patriotic. Women became *"mates"* in a way that was previously not possible as they took on roles in factories, dockyards and on public transport. The outcry occurred when the war ended and women were expected to take off the uniforms and return to their homes. Some simply didn't want to. From flappers to Radclyffe Hall's book about lesbian life, The Well of Loneliness, women's sexuality was forced into society's consciousness like never before. It caused a moral panic that saw Hall's very inexplicit book get charged with obscenity, and Frederick Macquisten MP propose a clause to the Criminal Law Act that extended gross indecency to women. It would fail, but on a technicality rather than morality.

In East London identities of queer women activists also began to emerge for the first time.

Naomi 'Mickey' Jacob, suffragette, actress and writer

Naomi Jacob was born in Ripon in 1884. Her father was the son of a German Jew. Although he rejected Judaism, it was a source of interest for Mickey throughout her life. The novels she would write later in life, and for which she would become most well known, often featured themes of anti-semitism.

Mickey loved the theatre and music halls. By going to the Stage Door she met the actress and singer Marguerite Broadfoote, who is widely regarded to have been her first lover. Although she was not 'out' in modern terms, she dressed in suits, wore a monocle, smoked cigars; answered to the name of Mickey, Jake or Jacob, and cut her hair short. Her sexuality was an open secret.[77]

She was sympathetic to the women's suffrage movement and joined the WSPU in 1912. She had been sent to London as a delegate, where she had heard Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst speak, but she was not overly impressed. She joined a few marches, but she didn't take part in any militant actions. She stood as a Labour Prospective Parliamentary Candidate in East Ham.[78]

Jacob's friends included Radclyffe Hall, and Hall's partner Una Troubridge. She would appear for the defence in the 1928 obscenity trail of Hall's novel, The Well of Loneliness.[79]

77 https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Naomi_Jacob&oldid=811776468 accessed 13th November 2019
78 https://womenshistorynetwork.org/remembering-naomi-jacob-1884-1964/ accessed 13th November 2019
79 Ibid

GENERATION 3: Liberation (1970–1990)

WW2 caused unprecedented disruption across the country, but especially in East London. The East End was a hub for imports, and used to store vital war goods. This made it a prime bombing target. In Bethnal Green alone, 80 tons of bombs fell, affecting 21,700 houses, killing 555 people and seriously injuring 400 more.[80] For Tower Hamlets as a whole, a total of 2,221 civilians were killed and 7,472 were injured, with 46,482 houses destroyed.[81] It is therefore unsurprising that this period saw little in the way of activism – people were focused on simple survival.

That's not to say nothing was happening. Edith Ramsay was organising the evacuation of children and managing bomb shelters; women in Stepney were still fighting for better housing; feminist teachers continued calling for equal pay, which they would finally win in 1955. The work of these women, and all those who came before, paved the way for the 1945 Labour government to usher in the welfare state.

The 1950s are often seen as a time of economic growth and optimism. In 1957 Prime Minister Harold MacMillan made his *"people have never had it so good"* speech. In hindsight, his words are considered fairly hollow as the 1960s saw a downturn in the economy and rising unemployment. Women also continued to face inequality, especially in the workplace, and homosexuality was still illegal for men and hidden for women. Another sharp rise in immigration in the 1970s brought with it tensions, conflict and hardships, particularly in East London.

However, the civil rights and anti-war movements in the US provided a source of inspiration and from the 1970s onwards women started to organise again. This time the voices were different as black, brown and queer women joined the chorus demanding change.

Housing

The Sumner House protest

In the 1970s housing once again became a big issue in East London. While rents and repairs remained a source of conflict, homelessness was the central issue.[82] There were simply too many people in need of council housing, and not enough places to go around.

In the spring of 1974, a group of women met at the Stepney Law Centre. They described themselves as *"four young mothers, plus a few additional people in similar circumstances"*. By living with relatives they had become ineligible for emergency housing, and could not register as homeless. They named themselves the Committee for the Faceless Homeless (CFH), and organised a public meeting demanding the council hand over an empty block of flats.

They secured a meeting with the council leader, who expressed sympathy. In response, *"one member of the CFH stood spontaneously to deliver an ultimatum: she thought the council might be sympathetic but wouldn't do anything. Either the council should agree in principle within three months or the CFH would take direct action. The council leader said that was no way to negotiate."*

The ultimatum ran out in the first week of August, and the women made their plan for direct action. They identified empty council buildings, and on the bank holiday weekend moved their families in. Within weeks, all 52 empty flats were filled.

This collective's self-help spirit reflects the Langdale and Brady Street Mansions protests a generation before, and more recent campaigns by Sisters Uncut in Hackney.

80 Bethnal Green: Building and Social Conditions from 1915 to 1945, A History of the County of Middlesex Volume 11: Stepney, Bethnal Green (1998) p132-135
81 Rosemary Taylor and Christopher Lloyd, The East End at War, Sutton Publishing (2007)
82 Mark Phillips, Homelessness and Tenants' Control Dame Colet House (1977)

Marina Lewycka, East London Big Flame activist[83]

Friends gathering for dinner at Swaton Road
(photo courtesy of Marina Lewycka)

After graduating from university in 1968, Marina Lewycka moved to London. She became friendly with a group of women, who all had big ideas about life, politics and how they would change the world. They formed East London Big Flame, which was part of a national movement, but the East London branch was particularly large and dynamic. As they began work, it quickly became clear that housing was a key issue for them, due to the dire lack of it.

Marina and her friends found an empty council house on Swaton Road in Bow scheduled for demolition. Struggling to find anywhere else to live, they took it over. Working together and learning new skills, they did it up, making it habitable again. Buoyed by their success they found another property, and did that up too, turning it into a nursery.

The group did not stop there. They set up numerous community initiatives, including a food co-operative, and providing free pregnancy testing kits and ran a campaign on child benefit. At that time it was given to the man, and the woman had to ask him for it. They got that reversed.

They were eventually evicted from their house. Once the council saw it was habitable again, they wanted to put a family in there. It was sad, but they were glad they had saved the house from demolition. It still stands today and Marina sometimes pops by to see it.

Mala Sen, anti-racism and housing campaigner

Mala Sen

In the 1970s, East London residents saw a huge rise in Bangladeshi residents. They replaced the Jews, who by now had mostly moved north or further east. The rise was in part due to the arrival from Bangladesh of wives and children joining their husbands, along with first wave refugees fleeing recession-hit northern towns. The community struggled to find housing, often dismissed as having made themselves *"intentionally homeless"*.[84] Families lucky enough to get housing were often placed on predominantly white estates. Many left, preferring the extreme discomfort of a squat to the constant threat of racist attacks.

Although most Bangladeshi women were not allowed to take part in activities outside the home, within the family they ruled. As a result they led the way in fighting the housing crisis. As historian John Marriot says:

> *"Far from the view that women are passive victims of a religiously based male oppression, Bangladeshi mothers are determinedly matriarchal, exercising firm control over their families. Women attended to the needs of their families and were determined to keep them, their homes and themselves safe from racism."*[85]

Within this movement, the Bengali Housing Action Group (BHAG) formed in 1976. It was co-founded by Mala Sen, who was born in India and came to England in the 1960s. Mala said:

"I remember how frightened we were when we came to Britain in the 1960s. I had never seen such hatred."[86]

As a result, Mala's first political activities were directed at fighting racism. Before her role in the collective, she was a leading member of the Indian Worker's Association. During this time she wrote radical pamphlets and proposed a mass demonstration against racism in Birmingham, which resulted in the mobilisation of 20,000 people.

83 Oral history interview with Marina Lewycka for the Women Activists of East London project, archived at the Bishopsgate Institute
84 'Just a part of the wall', Homeless Bengali Women in Tower Hamlets, 8
85 Marriott, John, Beyond The Tower, Yale University Press, 2011
86 http://saliltripathi.com/articles/May2001Tehelka.html, accessed 14th December 2015
87 https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305748804000659 accessed 14th December 2015

But it was with the BHAG that she would make her mark on East London. Their key demand was that all its members *"be given the option of housing in the safe area of E1"*, in order to provide a community for families in the face of high levels of racism. To achieve this, they sourced empty council flats for homeless Bangladeshis, and drew up a map for the Greater London Council (GLC), defining a safe living area for the community. This established Brick Lane as the Bangladeshi heartland of Britain.

Mala's role within the BHAG was *"crucial, especially when it came to building work or dealing with the authorities or the media."*[87] As her ex-husband said after her death: *"She was a leading light in the East End."*[88] Suman Bhuchar, who made a documentary of her work, commented:

> *"She was extraordinary in the sense that she was a very principled person and she … stuck to her principles, no matter how difficult it might be."*

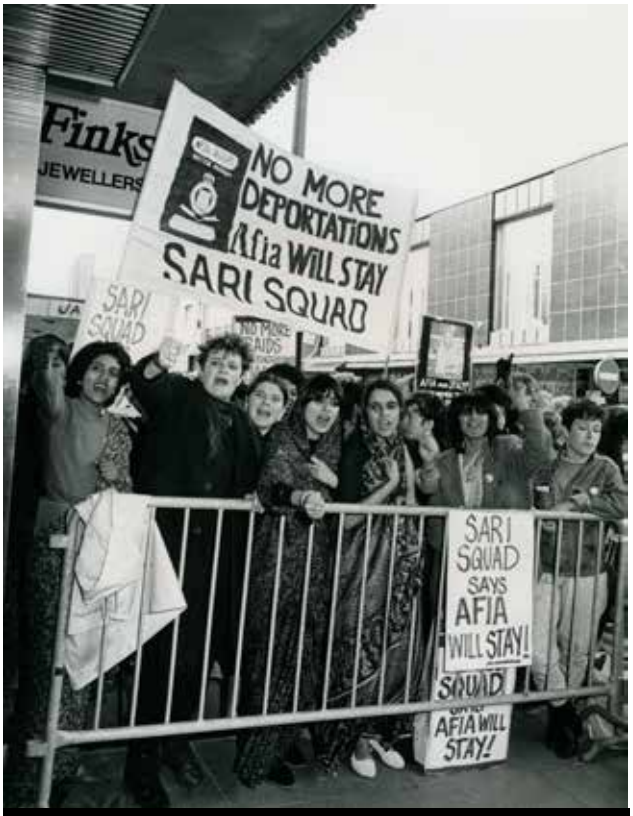
Racism

The Sari Squad

On an unusually chilly day in July 1981, Afia Begum's husband turned on their paraffin heater to warm their home on Brick Lane. Tower Hamlets Council had failed to provide them with proper housing with central heating, so this was their only way to keep warm. Something caught light and a fire ripped through the house, killing Afia's husband.

Afia's troubles did not to stop there. She had been given permission by the Home Office to come and live with her husband, but now that he was dead she and her one-year-old baby were threatened with deportation, despite there being no concrete justification. The Afia Begum Defence Campaign formed to deal with the legal side. Then the Sari Squad moved in to take direct action.

The Sari Squad was a group of Asian women formed in protest at the thousands of similar immigration cases around that time. In an edition of Spare Rib, they said: *"The focus of our campaign is the plight of Afia Begum but we believe she is not a special case. She is just one of thousands of victims of immigration controls. We don't want to change the racist Immigration and Nationality Acts but to abolish them completely."*[89]



Sari Squad in action

The Sari Squad engaged in many acts of civil disobedience, including chaining themselves to railings outside Conservative MP Leon Brittan's house. They were arrested and taken to the police station, forced to strip and searched in front of male police officers. When they complained, they were laughed and jeered at. They were denied bail and found themselves in court the next day. A prosecution witness – a neighbour of Leon Brittan's who had complained about the noise the protestors had made – said in court: *"If you don't like the laws of this land why don't you go back to your own country."* The judge sentenced them each to be bound over for £1000 for a year to keep the peace.

The Sari Squad did not give up. Leyton MP Harry Cohen condemned the deportation as a *"disgraceful action"*, and raised an Early Day Motion to put forward in parliament. The case was also taken to the European Court of Human Rights in 1984 but before the commission could rule, Afia was arrested in a dawn raid and deported.[90]

88 Farrukh Dhondy speaking in an interview for Last Words on BBC Radio 4 (2011) Web accessed 14th December 2015
89 Spare Rib, Dec 1983, No. 137 p10
90 http://www.spectacle.co.uk/spectacleblog/despite-tv/sari-squad-the-afia-begum-campaign/ accessed 14th November 2019

Diane Abbott, the UK's first black woman MP

In 1987 Diane Abbott was elected as the MP for Hackney North, making her the first black woman member of parliament. She said of her election: *"It was just the most extraordinary moment because you knew you were making history."* She went on to say: *"I was both exhilarated and it was also mind boggling … everyone said I couldn't win … it wasn't just that I was black, but I was young, a woman and radical too."*[91]

Diane was born in 1953 to first generation West Indian migrants. Her mother was a nurse and her father worked in a factory. They both came from the same small village in Jamaica and had left school at 14. Diane said: *"They believed in education, but the idea their daughter could enter parliament was way outside their expectations."*[92]

Diane went to a girls grammar school, then to Newham College, Cambridge before going on to the civil service. It was her activism however that took her into parliament.

She came of age during the black civil rights movement in America, and was involved in the black women's movement in the UK. She worked in a youth club and was heavily involved in the campaign against the police's stop and search policy, which is heavily biased towards young black men.[93]

During her time campaigning she noticed that all the MPs she talked to were white. Having joined the Labour Party, she asked why that was. She was told they couldn't find any black candidates, so she said: *"I'll do it!"*.[94]

She stood for selection in a number of constituencies but was unsuccessful. She was getting ground down by it all when Hackney North came up. She was unsure, especially as she would have to stand against the sitting Labour MP, but was persuaded by her secretary to give it a go. The Labour candidate selection meeting took place in Hackney town hall. As she was waiting to go in and deliver her speech, she was looking at pictures on the wall of past alderman and mayors. Many were Jewish. As she walked up and down in front of them *"it was almost as if they were whispering to me 'you're going to do it'"*. She felt buoyed up by the sense that many generations of migrants were by her side. She went in and delivered an impassioned speech to a crowd of around 100 people, who mostly said they would be voting for the sitting MP. By the end she had turned the room, and was selected as the Labour Prospective Parliamentary Candidate for Hackney North.[95]

Diane has spent most of her time on the back bench, but, in 2015 when Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader, she was promoted. She's held several positions in the shadow cabinet, including Shadow Home Secretary. She has been a leading voice in campaigns, including the Windrush scandal, educational attainment of black children and policing in the black community.

In 2012 she celebrated 25 years in Parliament and in 2017 became the first black MP at the dispatch box for Prime Minister's Questions.[96]

Some of Diane's success has come at quite a personal cost. She has received an unprecedented amount of sexist and racist abuse, especially online. In a survey by Amnesty International, it was revealed that Diane received half of all abusive tweets aimed at MPs.[97] She has said: *"racism is meant to tell me I don't belong in politics."*[98]

91 Witness History Podcast, BBC, October 2019 (interview recorded in 2015)
92 Ibid
93 Making Her Mark exhibition, Hackney Museum, 2018
94 Witness History Podcast, BBC, October 2019 (interview recorded in 2015)
95 Ibid
96 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diane_Abbott#cite_note-109 accessed 14th November 2019
97 https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/diane-abbott-abuse-female-mps-trolling-racism-sexism-almost-half-total-amnesty-poll-a7931126.html accessed 14th November 2019
98 https://www.theguardian.com/global/video/2019/feb/01/owen-jones-meets-diane-abbott-racism-is-meant-to-tell-me-i-dont-belong-in-politics accessed 14th November 2019

Welfare

The Jagonari Centre

In 1978 the murder of the garment worker Altab Ali marked a turning point in East End history. While the older generation had survived by keeping their heads down, a new young force broke through, determined to bring change. Although this movement was largely male dominated, it included some important female figures.

Shila Thakor first came to Tower Hamlets in 1978, and Mithu Ghosh a year later in 1979. Together with Alma Chowdhury and Pola Uddin, they set up the Jagonari Centre in 1987, providing a place for childcare and training. Jagonari took its name from a famous Bengali poem, Rise Up Women, by Nazrul Islam, which urges women to stand up against injustice. Jagonari aimed to challenge common representations of Bangladeshi women as submissive.

Shila Thakor, spoke about their aims in a 2006 interview for the Swadunata Trust:

> *"What we wanted to set up was something that involved child care with training. You can't have training without childcare. And that was something we knew back in the early 80s [...] So we set up a central place where there could be lots of different kinds of training, and a meeting place, somewhere you could go [...] We wanted to have this big open place where women could go and café-like kitchens."*[102]

Today, the centre continues to serve the local community. Yet despite its importance to local women and heritage, Jagonari faced closure in early 2015. Whilst it has survived, it highlights the ongoing gap between the needs of women and the direction of government funding.

Ama Gueye, East London Black Women's Organisation co-founder

Jagonari was not the first centre for black, asian and minority ethnic (BAME) women in East London. As early as 1979, Ama Gueye founded the East London Black Women's Organisation (ELBWO). Formed following the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent conference, it offered drop-ins, advice on family matters, counselling, advocacy and a free legal advice surgery. Later it developed a focus on domestic violence. Ama recalls:

> *"When ELBWO first started it was difficult to get women together because while there were a lot of women who were organised individually there was no real political organisation or tradition of black organising .... [but] our blackness is our strength because as a result of being black we have learnt the techniques of survival".*

99 Item footnotes relates to was deleted on 8th August 2021
100 Ibid
101 Ibid
102 Swadhinata.org.uk accessed 14th December 2015

Zenith Rahmen, Bromley-By-Bow Centre[103]

In the 1980s there were lots of Bangladeshi women who had moved to East London and quickly become isolated. In Bangladesh, they would have their mother-in-law for support. Here they had nobody; they were married young and left alone.

Zenith was working as an outreach worker at the time and wanted to do something about it. In 1987 she started the Bromley-By-Bow Centre, a multi-cultural community centre. She organised events and trips. They visited the seaside, celebrated Eid, Chinese New Year, and went fruit picking. The centre even organised trips to Bangladesh.

At first it was difficult to connect. Like Edith Ramsey a generation before, she walked the streets, going door to door. She took a bag of toys with her to engage children, and through them their mothers. She helped people one-by-one, whatever it took – tidying a house and helping with mental health problems. Eventually she gained respect from the community, and the centre grew. They created a sense of family.

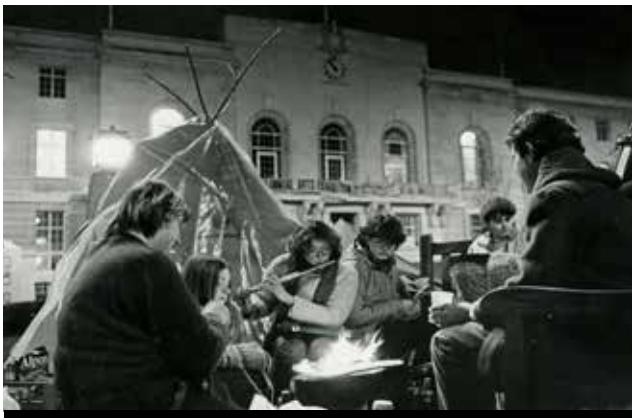
The centre has also run a lot of courses and training. Many women had never worked so Zenith would tap into their interests and skills to encourage them. If the women were good at cooking, she would encourage them to start a cafe; or if they knew how to sew they would teach this skill to others.

The work has had a big impact on the Bromley-By-Bow area. It's connected people inside the centre, but also outside. Now people know their neighbours more and are better connected.

Peace

Hackney Greenham Common Women

In September 1981, a group of 36 women chained themselves to the fence at RAF Greenham Common in Berkshire. They were opposing the British government's decision to allow cruise missiles to be based there. It was the start of a peace camp that would see tens of thousands of women engage in a protest that would last years. These women became known as the Greenham Common Women.



Hackney Greenham Common Women

The decision to make the camp women-only came in 1982. They felt the role of women as mothers legitimised their protest, their acts of civil disobedience performed for the safety for their children. It provided a unified presence in an arena normally reserved for men.

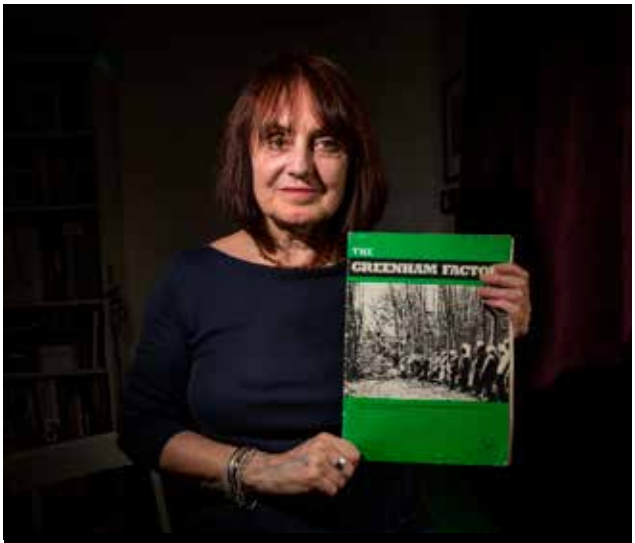
The impact of the protests in Greenham was felt in East London and, in February 1984, women supporters in Hackney set up their own camp outside the town hall. They put on an exhibition showing the horrors of nuclear destruction, and organised picnics, music and camp fires in the evening.

The camp generated a lot of support from the local community and membership of the Hackney Greenham group increased rapidly. In September that year, several coaches took the women from Hackney to Greenham Common.

In 1985 the Dalston Lane Peace Mural was painted, and remains an uplifting reminder to the peace movement in Hackney. The mural, created by Ray Walker and painted by Mike Jones and Anna Walker, depicts a parade through a Hackney streetscape, containing anti-nuclear, CND, anti-war, green, feminist, anti-racist, and pro-tolerance images. This is a well-loved local landmark, which reflects the diverse community of Hackney and its radical political past.

103 Oral history interview for the Women Activists of East London project, archived with the Bishopsgate Institute

Ellen Jones, Greenham Common campaigner[104]



Ellen Jones

Ellen Jones was very much a child of the 60s. She went to art college, had a long-haired boyfriend and joined CND. This was in sharp contrast to her parents – her father was in the RAF and her mother was a cleaner. They had no interest in politics at all. There was a big generational clash between them, and they were appalled by the friends she brought home.

Always the rebel, Ellen didn't let their opinions stop her. When someone from her CND group suggested they attend a vigil at Greenham Common, she jumped at the chance. When she arrived, there were far more people than she expected, and it was inspiring. She went to another vigil later, where they all linked hands around the nine mile radius of the base.

Her third trip to Greenham would be her longest, spending two years there. Life on the camp was hard. A lot of time was spent trying to keep warm and the water supplies maintained. The women would walk around the fence and get to know the people in the base. Ellen thought it might help when things heated up with the police.

Ellen faced a lot of hostility due to her involvement in the camp. When the women went to the local village to collect supplies, she was spat at. The police didn't know what to do with these women protesters. She was arrested numerous times and was marked as an *"urban terrorist"*.

A lot of what the Greenham Common Women did was bearing witness – monitoring the movement of trucks, and exposing other US bases that people weren't aware of. But she was also involved in the famous action that dramatically brought down the security fence at Greenham.

There was only so long you could maintain a life like that, so eventually Ellen decided to leave. It took her a while to merge back into everyday life, and for a while she lived in a caravan in Wales. Today she lives in Walthamstow and continues her art and making jewellery. She's not involved in protest much anymore. She feels Greenham was such a high point it's difficult to know where to go after that.

Labour rights

Women's struggles in the workplace were a key concern for the Hackney Flashers Collective. Formed in 1974 by photographer Jo Spence, they were a collective of photographers, cartoonists and writers, who used art as a form of protest.

In 1975 they staged a photography exhibition entitled Women and Work, which explored the hidden role that women play in the economy, arguing for equal pay. It was highly successful and toured many community venues and political events, including the 1977 Social Feminist Conference.

Their second exhibition focused on childcare provision in Hackney. It was on show at galleries from Centreprise in Dalston to the Hayward Gallery in central London. During the second exhibition, Maggie Murray often had her one-year-old son with her during audience discussions, *"to make a point"*.

Flashers member Sally Greenhill said recently:

> *"I'm really shocked that the issues that we raised forty years ago are still huge issues today. Nurseries and childcare, for example, are still expensive and remain one of the biggest concerns for working parents."*

104 Oral history interview, part of the Women Activists of East London project archived at the Bishopsgate Institute

Women workers in Walthamstow

Since the early 20th century Walthamstow has been synonymous with toy manufacturing, which at its height employed hundreds of local women. From the 1950s onwards there were increasing numbers of immigrant women working there too. While some seemed to forge good friendships within the factory, others complained about the pay and working conditions.

Ethel Atkins worked at Wells Brimtoy and said:

> *"It wasn't a good firm to work for though, slave drivers they really were. You couldn't move 'til the hooter went. I remember getting up one day and going out to the cloakroom and someone said 'that hooters not gone yet' and I thought, my goodness! You couldn't move until the hooter went dead on 6 0' clock. I thought it was a terrible firm, but there you are... it's all you could get in those days, and you didn't earn very much money."*[105]

Activists from East London Big Flame got to hear about conditions in the factories, especially Lesney Products who made the famous matchbox toys. In 1974 four activists got jobs there and described the conditions as like a sweatshop, and riddled with racism. They saw it as a microcosm of what happened at Ford Dagenham.[106]

They decided to try and organise the women so produced a newsletter and called a meeting, but nobody came. They put their failure down to being middle class and being seen as different. They also said the idea of a political group was completely alien to the lives of the women working there.

Strikes did happen however. Just down the road from Lesney Products was Britain's Toys, one of Walthamstow's most successful postwar companies. They employed a lot of women in the factory and as home workers. In 1983 a strike was organised and 200 workers walked out over working hours.[107]

Turkish clothing workers in Hackney[108]

In January 1975 four women were sacked from the Saadet Fashions factory in Hackney after refusing to back down on their union's demands. This included refusing to accept a pay cut being forced upon the workers after the management made a mistake on their payroll, leaving a huge amount of tax owing.

The workers at the factory were mostly Turkish women, and those striking were joined by workers from other factories in North London owned by the same company. At one point the picket line grew to around 250 people.

It was described as a *"lively and well-supported strike"*, with locals showing support in unusual ways. The rubbish collectors said they would refuse to collect the employer's bins, and neighbours to the factory offered strikers use of their toilets and other facilities.

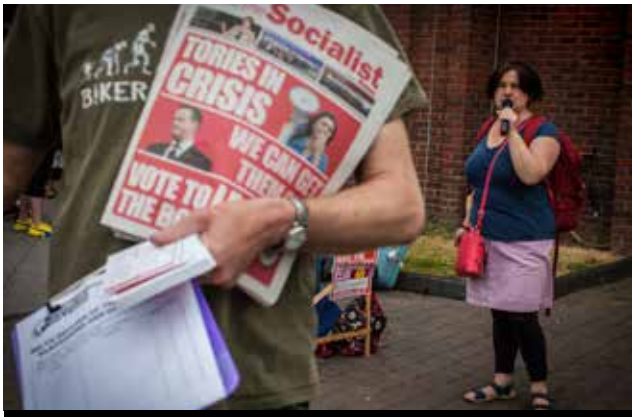
Like the match women 100 years before them, the Turkish clothing workers galvanised support from within their community. Members of the Turkish Women's Association met every fortnight to discuss the issues facing the community, from housing to language issues. This allowed the women to also discuss what was happening at Saadet Fashions.

105 http://www.wforalhistory.org.uk/projects/projects/toy-making.html accessed 14th November 2019
106 Organising in a women's factory: Lesneys, East London Big Flame (May Day Rooms archive)
107 James Diamond, A People's History of Walthamstow, The History Press (2018)
108 Spare Rib No. 133, 1975

Nancy Taaffe, youth organiser[109]

In 1983, the British government set up the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) for 16–17-year-olds on a voluntary basis. But many employers took advantage of the programme. They used young people as full-time workers, paying them less than £30 a week, and giving no guarantee of work at the end.

In 1985 the government threatened to make the scheme compulsory, withdrawing benefits from anyone refusing to participate. Students across the country organised a protest against the *"conscription"*, staging several walks outs and a national strike.



Nancy Taaffe

Nancy Taaffe, from Walthamstow, was one of 15 key organisers, leading her school out on strike. Born into a family of active socialists from Liverpool, she'd been involved in other labour struggles before, including supporting the miners' strike. However, this was the moment she moved from supporter to organiser.

In a rare moment for the working class during the Thatcher years, the students won. The government withdrew their plans. Unfortunately, three years later the scheme was made compulsory and in 1997 the Labour government introduced the Workfare programme for the unemployed.

Education

Shirley Murgraff, Holocaust awareness campaigner[110]

Shirley was born in Clapton in 1931 into a Jewish family, the seventh of eight children. Her parents were brought up in Poland and had come to the UK in 1910, escaping the pogroms and general hard life. They didn't talk much about it, and Shirley sensed the memories were painful.

They had a comfortable but modest life in Hackney. Her parents worked long hours, and ten of them squeezed into two bedrooms. There were certainly no luxuries like holidays, but they never went hungry.

She remembers hearing her brothers talk about Oswald Mosely and they went to anti-fascist meetings, so she was politicised through them from an early age. Her eldest brother joined the Communist Party and went to Spain to fight the fascists. They would write to each other while he was there and she would learn about his adventures.

After WW2 there was a rising youth movement that formed to prevent another fascist uprising. Shirley became involved in the International Union of Students, which organised international conferences in Europe. In 1953 she went to one in Bucharest with a theatre group. She also went to Prague and worked on a magazine called World Student News and for Prague Radio.

In 1956 she came back to the UK, and went on to train as a teacher. By the 1980s she was deputy head at a school in Tower Hamlets. At that time history classes taught about WW2 but did not include anything about the Holocaust. Shirley became part of a small group who developed the first ever teachers' pack about the Holocaust. They also organised an exhibition, which opened in 1983, despite some hostility. Due to Shirley's efforts, the Holocaust eventually became part of the national curriculum.

Shirley is now in her 80s but still fighting. Most recently she has been campaigning to save the NHS, which she describes as the most *"civilising institution this country has ever produced ... it's the jewel in the crown"*.

109 Oral history interview as part of the Women Activists of East London project, archived at the Bishopsgate Institute
110 Ibid

Jane Shallice, NUT organiser [111]

In 1964 Jane came down from Manchester to London. She'd trained as a teacher and found herself work in a school in Spitalfieds. Having come from a very political household, she immediately became active in her union.

Back then people joined a union as insurance, so they had someone to fight for them if they lost their job. But Jane wanted something different; for her it wasn't just about pay and conditions, but what was going on in the classroom. She knew things needed to change, and she was ready to fight for that.

The NUT at the time was not prepared for young women like Jane and her radical ideas. She and her friend Judy would turn up with resolutions, which would be ruled out of order by a committee run by a small group of rather old men.

One resolution they brought forward was about racism. There'd been no discussion about it, or how it could be tackled in education and by the union. The resolution said they should be tackling racism inside the classroom and amongst teachers. They were ruled out of order on the basis that they couldn't say teachers were racist.

The issue of race became increasingly problematic as the Asian community grew in the East End. The clear threat to Asian families was important to many of them, and they eventually organised as a union around anti-fascist marches.

Finally, in the 1980s, schools started devising anti-racist policies. Jane spent four years in Hackney and Tower Hamlets working with teachers to devise these.

Jane organised an unofficial strike against Thatcher's education policies in the late 1980s. The union was opposed, saying it would bring them in to disrepute. But Jane and her colleagues were determined. Despite being freezing cold and snow, huge numbers came out. They felt heroic.

The union suspended around 80 people involved in organising the strike, including Jane. There was a hearing, and they allowed all but ten back in. Jane was one of the ten excluded. It was a difficult year, but eventually they contested the decision and were readmitted.

Disability

By the 1960s, the treatment of mental illness was being questioned and criticised by patients and reformers as the self- serving creation of an ambitious profession. The book One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest sums up the feelings of the time. The anti-psychiatry movement grew out of this unease, highlighting the totalitarian power of the asylum, the dangers of unchecked medical experimentation and treatment fads.

A leading figure in the anti-psychiatry movement was RD Laing, who saw madness as a form of radical politics. Schizophrenia, he said, was a rational response to an insane world. He set up a practice at Kingsley Hall in Bow (see page 8) which became the heart of 1960s counter-culture, employing experimental techniques such as taking hallucinogens with patients and the deeply disturbing *"bed therapy"*, which involved sex with patients.

While Laing linked female oppression with female madness, he did not develop these gender theories further. It remained a male-dominated movement, which came perilously close to exploiting some of its female patients.[112]

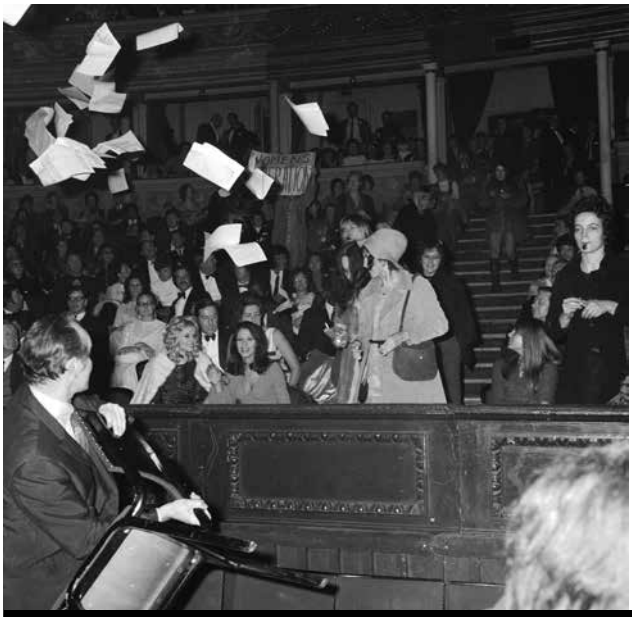
In 1971, Juliet Mitchell wrote Women's Estate, which looked at psychoanalysis from a political perspective. She developed the concept of consciousness raising – the process of transforming the hidden, individual fears of women into a shared awareness of them as social problems. She went on to develop that into women's group therapy.

The Women's Liberation Movement drew on those ideas, focusing particularly on the female body; how women treated their bodies as the object of male gaze, which could create a distorted sense of self. This became a key campaigning issue for feminists throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

111 Ibid

112 Elaine Showalter, The Female Malady: women, madness and the English culture 1930-1980 Virgo (1987)

Jo Robinson, Miss World protestor[113]



Women's Liberation protestors at the Miss World competition, Royal Albert Hall, 1970

Jo Robinson's mother was determined to turn her into a *"lady"*, so packed her off to boarding school to help her *"catch a man"*. But instead of seeking marriage after finishing school, Jo decided to go to art college. Then events would occur that would change the direction of her life forever.

Suddenly, and in quick succession, both her parents died. With no siblings or other family ties, Jo was all alone. Dazed with grief, she decided to pack her bags and head to London. It was the *"swinging sixties"*, with rock and pop music everywhere; her friends were experimenting with drugs; on the TV she saw Vietnam war protests taking place around the world. But Jo couldn't really engage with any of it; she was still trying to get over the death of her parents.

Unable to talk to anyone about what she was going through, she was desperately lonely. In a fit of desperation, she took an overdose. She was taken to a psychiatrist who wrote a letter that failed to mention the death of her parents and labelled her as on the *"psychopathic fringe"*. Jo was prescribed medication, which she was told she would need to be on for the rest of her life. She rejected the medication and decided to get out of treatment.

Around that same time, Jo was invited to an agitprop meeting, a political movement inspired by communism, which uses art and media to shape public opinion. At the time she had no idea what agitprop was but she went along anyway. She met people there who had just come back from Cuba or the boulevards in Paris where *"they had been throwing bricks"*. Most were students and they were talking about revolution and changing the system. It was language unfamiliar to Jo, but it resonated. She'd felt powerless and caught up in a system, especially with regard to mental health. It gave her hope she'd never felt before. She said: *"it opened a door and a light shone for me."*

Jo began reading about the Chartists and Tolpuddle Martyrs, and was absolutely fascinated. There was also a lot happening around her that she was learning about, including the striking by the Ford Dagenham workers. She began using her art skills to make political posters, including for an anti-war rally in Trafalgar Square. It was a huge political education in a short space of time.

In 1970 the first Women's Liberation National Conference was held at Ruskin College in Oxford. Some of Jo's friends were organising a van to travel down there together, so she decided to go with them. It was a life-changing moment. Afterwards, women began organising themselves in small groups all over the place. A movement had started.

For Jo and her friends, the Miss World beauty contest seemed an obvious event to organise around. Miss World was recorded live on TV and was widely watched, so they knew their protest would be seen by huge numbers of people. They planned their action and came up with a slogan: *"we're not beautiful, we're not ugly, we're angry!"*

Miss World was held at the Royal Albert Hall on 20 November 1970. Jo and her friends bought tickets and went in. When the signal went – a football rattle – they jumped out of their seats. They began handing out leaflets, hurled flour and smoke bombs, blew whistles, threw rotten vegetables – they caused complete chaos.

The group were arrested and stood trial, which involved a night in Holloway prison for contempt of court. They received a fine for their action, paid for by the Women's Liberation Movement.

Jo went on to train as a midwife in Newham. She feels hospitals are one of the few places you can see socialism at work. Later she became a teacher and worked at a school in Hackney. Today she lives in Walthamstow and is still fighting to try to make things better in many different ways.

113 Oral history interview as part of the Women Activists of East London project, archived with Bishopsgate Institute

LGBTQ+

In June 1969 the New York Police Department raided a popular gay haunt in Greenwich Village, the Stonewall Inn. This happened with some regularity, but this time something was different – the gay community fought back. A riot broke out, which lasted around five days. It was described as *"a spontaneous protest against the perpetual police harassment and social discrimination suffered by a variety of sexual minorities in the 1960s"*.[114] From the aftermath of Stonewall, the New York Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was born. Its transition to London took place in the autumn of 1970. Although the London GLF would last only three years, its impact would be considerable, including in East London.

Anny Brackx, GLF activist

Anny Brackx

The squatting movement in East London was exploding in the 1970s in response to the housing crisis, which saw thousands of homes standing empty waiting for demolition. People were taking direct action to address the injustice and the immediate practical problem of having nowhere to live.

The issue of housing was a particular problem within the queer community. They were more likely to be rejected by landlords, vilified or even beaten up in their quest for a home. Ideas around communal living began circulating – creating safe spaces for the gay community – and in East London the Bethnal Rouge commune was formed. It became home to the Radical Feminists, who were actually drag queens. From our research we could not find any evidence of women residing at Bethnal Rouge.

This reflected the general state of the London GLF. Although the manifesto group was composed of a significant number of women, they were greatly outnumbered within the organisation as a whole. Anny Brackx, involved in the London GLF from its earliest days, said of her first meeting:

> *"The room was dark, damp and dingy, packed with hundreds of smiling, kissing, chatting men, some very strangely dressed. I just knew I looked out of place in my Woolworth's skirt and tights, with my neatly tied back hair, and uptight face [...] there were no more than 20 women."*[115]

Despite not feeling like she fitted in, Anny was back less than a month later. She soon became a regular at the weekly meetings.

Anny was interested in the idea of communal living, where *"children are the shared responsibility of the group, no gender-role system would operate, and where all would be equal..."*. However, for her that ideal was not Bethnal Rouge but a women's squat in Hackney.

The collective action of changing the lock on a squat front door held especially symbolic significance to Anny, and there were always numerous Yale barrels and keys in circulation. Frequently the local Hackney residents told lesbians when a house was going to become empty – they didn't want a neglected property next door as it might become overrun with rats and contribute to the dereliction of the street. Lesbians were recognised as a group who repaired houses and got them back on their feet.[116]

By November 1971 an East London branch of the GLF had formed. It was a busy time with regular meetings, *"think-ins"* (day meetings on specific topics) and Gay Days, where a park would be liberated for the afternoon from heterosexual conformity. In July of that year Victoria Park got its first Gay Day.

The organisation had grown a lot too and as a result the meetings were becoming unmanageable. Anny describes them as an *"aimless merry-go-round, with much cosy chat, and a lot of male cruising."*[117] The women were still swamped by men, in terms of numbers and the types of issues discussed. Some older gay men didn't feel the women belonged at all as lesbian sexuality wasn't illegal. They argued lesbians weren't as oppressed as they were able to live without fear of criminal charges.

The women organised amongst themselves and Anny was part of a group that began publishing Come Together, a magazine for women in the GLF. Their next move was one described by Anny as *"predictable"* – they split from the men. Anny said of the decision: *"Amidst moans of 'don't leave us" sisters; what will we do without you' we walked out. It was sad, but the right thing to do."*[118]

114 https://www.britannica.com/event/Stonewall-riots accessed 15th November 2019
115 Spare Rib, No. 84 July 1979 p42-3
116 https://academic.oup.com/hwj/article/83/1/79/3862507 accessed 15th November 2019
117 Spare Rib, No. 84, July 1979 p44
118 Ibid

Many GLF women, including Anny, joined the Women's Liberation movement. However they did not find themselves any more welcome there. At the Skegness Conference in 1971, when they tried to get the subject of lesbianism on the agenda, they were charged with being *"red herrings"* and *"private problems"*.[119] It would take another five years, and much debate and antagonism, until lesbianism was *"no longer an issue that divided the movement."*[120]

Anny would go on to become part of the Spare Rib magazine collective, a national organiser for CND, and a director at Mind, the mental health charity. She is also the author of Mental Health in Crisis.[121]

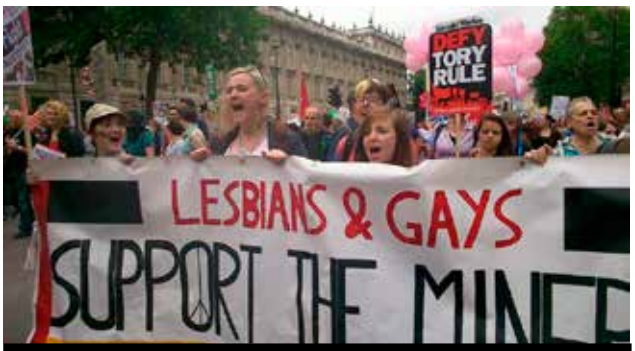
London Fields squatting scene

By the late 1970s, the area around London Fields and Broadway Market in Hackney had become a haven of lesbian communes. It is estimated that there were 50 women-only households *"scattered throughout the streets behind Broadway Market, including one terrace of seven women's squats on Lansdowne Drive."*[122] Although not all lesbian households, the majority were.

Squats could be a precarious place for lesbian mothers. One woman lost custody of her daughter to her male ex-partner. He based his case on the fact she lived in a communal lesbian squat as evidence of her being an unfit mother.[123]

Rights for Women, a London based charity, worked to improve the law for women by providing legal advice. In 1984 Lesbian Mothers on Trial and the Lesbian Mother's Handbook was published.

Jane Conor, Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners[124]



LGSM banner at anti-austerity demo, London June 2015

Jane's political awakening happened while still at school, thanks to a couple of teachers with feminist leanings. From 17 years old she got involved in a group called Revolution Youth, a revolutionary Marxist organisation, and youth CND. She went to one of the last national Women's Liberation conferences in London and felt it was quite patronising and out of touch with what young women were interested in. So Jane and other young women at the conference came together to produce Shocking Pink, a feminist publication that took it's influences from punk fanzines. They had strong support from some older feminists including from Spare Rib (Susan Hemmings) and the photographer Jo Spence.

Jane went to university but left without completing her degree because there were *"too many distractions"*. She ended up in Manchester. The miners' strikes were taking place at the time and she became involved with Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners (LGSM). The group was formed in 1984 due to the recognition that both miners and the gay community were both oppressed by a capitalist society. The core of LGSM was in London, but there was also a group in Manchester. The Manchester branch linked up with Bold Colliery in the Lancashire coalfield. Jane would go along regularly to support the picket line and fundraise for Women Against Pit Closures.

The miners welcomed the support of the LGSM. Jane remembers going to a miners' welfare disco and dancing closely with another girl and no-one turning a hair. LSGM's support for the strike led the National Union of Miners to support the rights of gay people and demand that lesbian and gay equality be adopted as Labour Party policy.

She moved back to London after the miners' strike, working in the voluntary sector then in local government. Jane became active in the trade union, and was Chair of Hackney NALGO (National and Local Government Officers' Association) and NALGO Women. She continues to work in local government in public health.

Jane re-joined the Labour Party after Jeremy Corbyn's election as leader. She is a member of the Walthamstow West branch and continues to offer practical support and help with fundraising to a number of local campaigns. She was also on the co-ordinating group of Waltham Forest Momentum, before having to step down due to caring responsibilities for her disabled son.

119 Come Together, 1971
120 Spare Rib, No. 84, July 1979 p46
121 https://www.abebooks.com/book-search/author/anny-brackx/ accessed 15th November 2019
122 C Wall, Sisterhood and Squatting in the 1970s: Feminism, Housing and Urban Change in Hackney, History Workshop Journal (2017) p86
123 Ibid p89
124 Oral history interview as part of the Women Activists of East London project, archived at the Bishopsgate Institute

GENERATION 4: Organising in the digital age (1990 to present)

In the 1990s popular culture was dominated by the Spice Girls and *"girl power"*. But while this was the age of perceived female emancipation, the period saw little in the way of women-led activism. Girl power emphasised individual empowerment, over mass mobilisation.

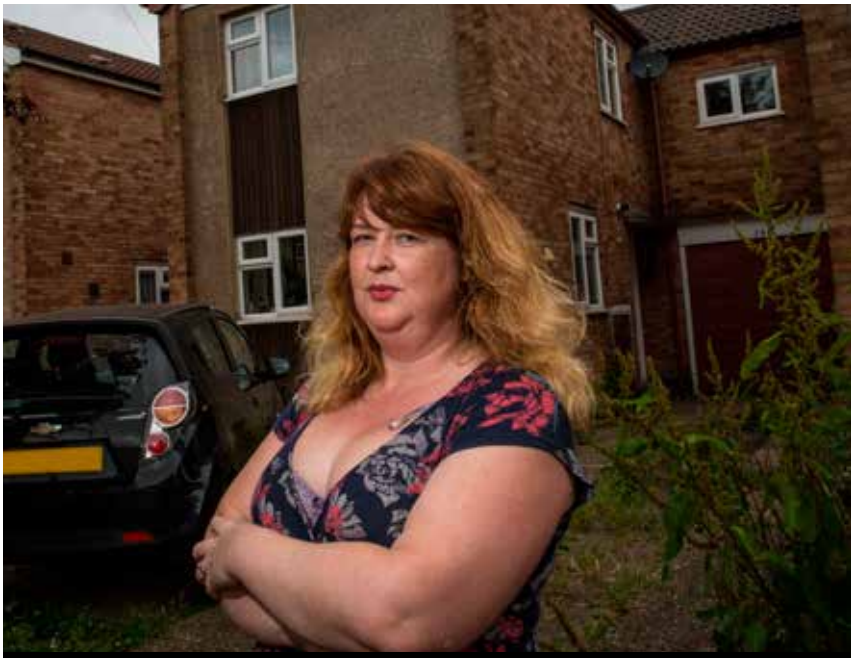
There were strong moments of activism in East London in the 1990s, including the M11 Link Road protests, which merged into Reclaim the Streets. Women were involved in spite of their gender, rather than because of it. This was a stark change to the previous generation, where women defined their activism by their femininity, and their roles in the home and wider society.

By and large, it would take the rise of the internet to break out of this rut. In what has become known as fourth-wave feminism, women have reclaimed the term feminist, going online to build communities of support. The rise of Corbynism[125] has also given socialism a rebirth, and in East London women are leading several local Momentum groups, the grassroots movement founded in support of Corbyn and the Labour Party.

Housing

Melanie Briggs, housing activist[126]

The 2010 coalition government heralded an age of austerity. This caused a resurgence in the social issues that had plagued East London in the past, particularly in housing. In spite of changing gender roles, women again took the lead organising against property developers. This is perhaps because they remain the primary care giver. Parental drive certainly is key to housing action group, Focus E15 in Newham, and also Melanie Briggs' campaign to save Marlowe Estate in Walthamstow.



Melanie Briggs

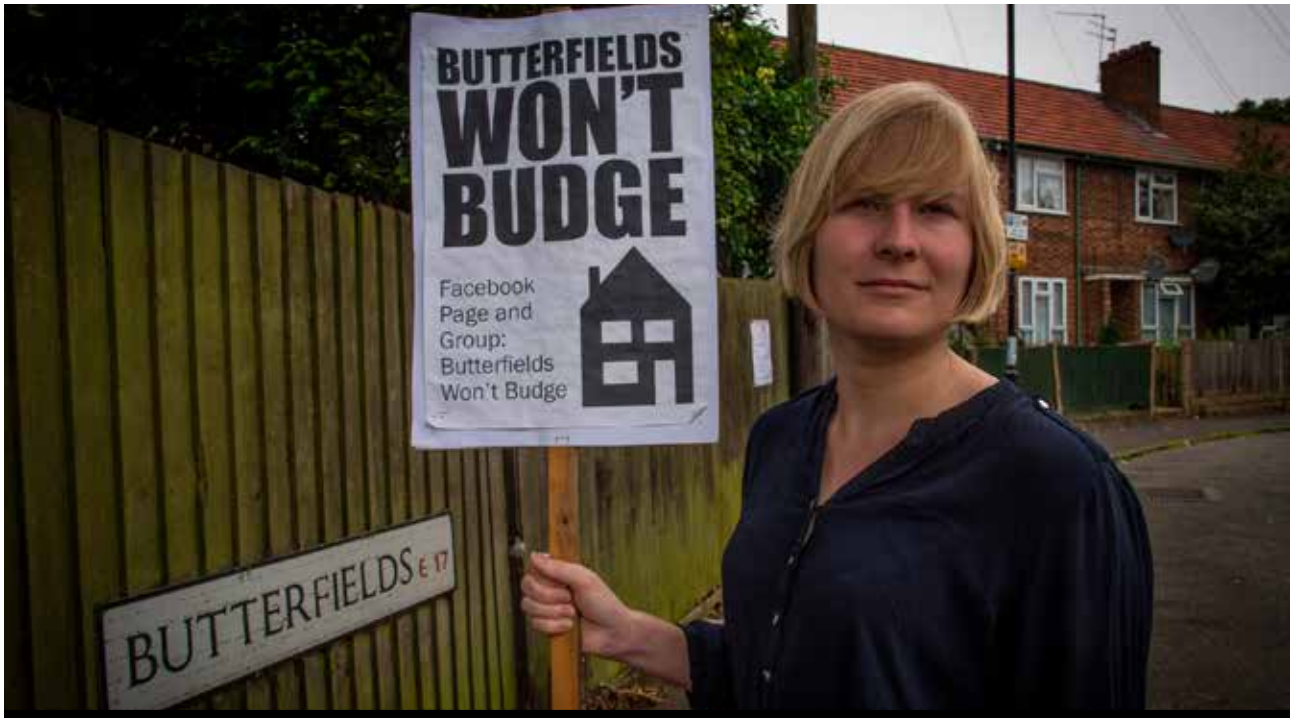
Almost a year to the day Melanie bought their property on the Marlowe Estate, she received a compulsory purchase order from the council. They were tearing down the whole estate to build new, high density, high rise flats. The money the council were offering wasn't enough to buy one of the new flats, or even stay in the local area.

Determined to fight, Melanie went door to door posting leaflets, but didn't get much response. So she took to social media. This prompted a huge outcry from the wider community, particularly amongst parents. She also started writing for the Huffington Post, which went viral. The attention she generated online forced both the council and MP Stella Creasy to publish a response.

Although the demolition of Marlowe Road estate was not stopped, property owners who stayed to fight have now been offered a fair price, enabling them to stay in the area. The council also agreed to install a temporary playground, to replace the one being lost.

Although the campaign was only a partial win, Melanie succeeded in forcing Marlowe Road onto the public agenda, and holding local politicians to account. Despite this, Melanie had never considered herself an activist until contributing to this project.

125 Corbynism refers to the growth of mass grassroots movements such as Momentum following the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party in 2015
126 Oral history interview as part of the Women Activists of East London project, archived at the Bishopsgate Institute



Nicole Holgate

Nicole Holgate and Anna Plikseke, Butterfields Won't Budge[127]

An over-inflated housing market has caused huge problems for renters in East London. Residents on the Butterfields Estate felt they were in safe hands, their low rents protected by Glasspool, a charity focused on alleviating poverty. But then Glasspool sold the estate to property developers, and eviction notices started arriving.

Neighbours who'd previously not spoken to each other gathered on the streets, shell-shocked. They decided to organise to oppose the evictions. When resident Nicole Holgate set up a Facebook page and online petition, wider support flooded in. The neighbours campaigned offline too, picketing the auctions where the properties were being sold off. They also organised a march through Walthamstow.

The protest generated a lot of media coverage. It became front page national news when MP Stella Creasy invited the chair of the Glasspool Trust to a meeting at the House of Commons. She had him *"thrown out"* for what she described as appalling behaviour. She later tweeted that she *"marched him to central lobby & then asked police to ensure he left the building as no longer welcome."*

Anna Plikseke

Although the Butterfields campaign group is mixed-gender, women have taken lead roles. Again, there's evidence that parental concerns may be a driving force. Many of the women have children at local schools, whose education will be disrupted if they have to move. Meanwhile, Anna Plikseke fears that having to move will mean she loses her place in the queue for IVF treatment.

In 2016 Dolphin Living, a charitable foundation dedicated to supporting affordable housing, stepped in. They purchased 49 of the long leases on the estate, allowing tenants to remain.[128] Although this came too late for some residents who had already packed up and left, it was a victory for the campaigners. In a statement on their Facebook page they said:

> *"On behalf of the Tenants, thank you to all involved and making us realise we were not powerless to resist. Those who guided us on the traction of our campaign and all parties who worked hard behind closed doors to bring this to the right conclusion for all."*

The Facebook group is still active, with nearly 600 followers. The group continue to encourage action against housing developments that fail to provide genuinely affordable housing to residents in Walthamstow. This includes Save Our Square's campaign against the mass housing development scheduled for Walthamstow Town Square, which the group describe as: *"no good for our environment and doesn't address people's housing needs."*[129]

127 Ibid

128 http://dolphinliving.com/2016/10/31/dolphin-living-completes-purchase-of-walthamstows-butterfields-estate/?fbclid=IwAR04NIuEw4IfGi58ffIiCkp2zQgJThi8iFEaJ3hrMogJVPSIrO6bt79m6bA accessed 15th November 2019

129 https://www.facebook.com/e17butterfields/posts/2816630111702387?__tn__=K-R accessed 15th November 2019

Labour rights

Jean Geldart, union organiser [130]

Having Phil Piritan as your father – the UK's first communist MP from Stepney – meant Jean's upbringing was unavoidably political. It was unsurprising therefore that she would become active in her trade union when she started work with Tower Hamlets Council.

Jean's union branch in Tower Hamlets was known for being militant, and the management was constantly wary of industrial action, which served to empower workers. The branch also campaigned actively on local issues in Tower Hamlets, such as garment workers' wages; and nationally, on issues such as anti-fascism and the British National Party (BNP). She was very active in the campaign against Derek Beackon, the first BNP councillor elected in Tower Hamlets in 1993. She wasn't *"running around with a banner"* but organising internally to co-ordinate mass industrial action at the council if the BNP should take the whole ward. She was also involved in canvassing against the BNP.

In the 1990s, Jean was involved in a campaign to get low paid women workers equal pay. Although technically they received the same as men, the men often got huge bonuses. This could result in them getting almost 50% more than women. There were also a number of women's manual jobs paid at a lower rate than men's manual jobs, because the women's jobs were seen as less important. The campaign succeeded in getting thousands of women workers large amounts of back pay in compensation, as well as a pay re-grading.

After she retired, Jean had more time to get involved in campaigns so started volunteering with Hope Not Hate. She helps with election campaigns, getting people on the electoral register and telling them not to vote for racist candidates, including UKIP.

Nicola Thorp, workplace dress code campaigner

In 2016 Nicola Thorp from Hackney signed up to work as a temporary receptionist through a recruitment agency. When she arrived on her first day she was told to go back home and change her shoes. They were flats and the office *"policy"* was that women wear 2-4" heels. Nicola said:

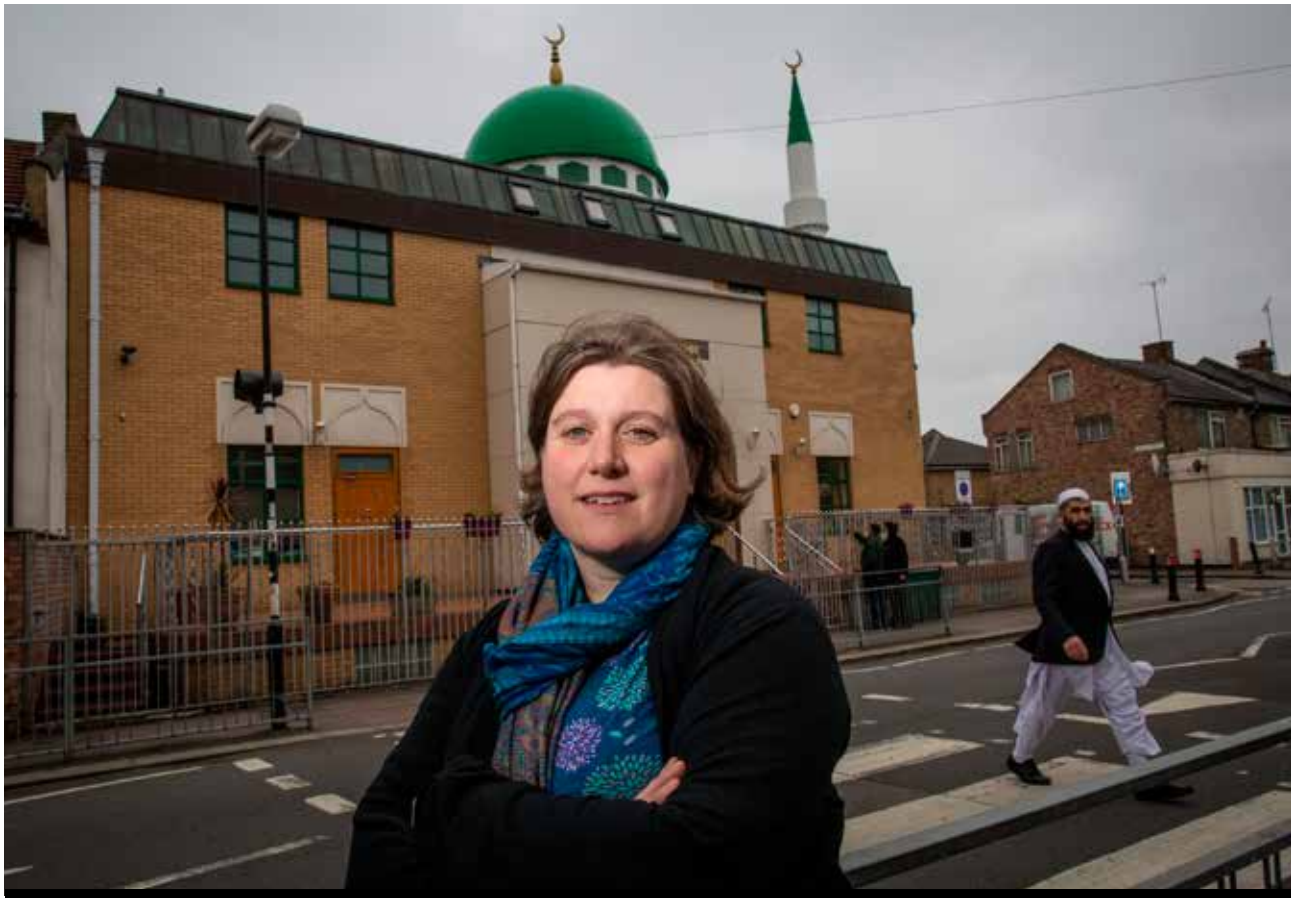
> *"If they could give me a reason why wearing flats would impair me to do my job, then fair enough, but they couldn't. I was just expected to do a nine-hour shift on my feet, escorting clients to meeting rooms. I said I just won't be able to do that in heels and was laughed at for challenging the policy and sent home without pay."*[131]

Under current law, a company could argue that women wearing high heels is reasonably justified in pursuit of an aim. That aim did not have to be specified. Nicola set up an online petition challenging this ruling, which gained 69,000 signatures in three days.

A parliamentary investigation followed, which found *"widespread discrimination"* against women. However the Conservative government rejected a new law banning companies from telling women to wear high heels, claiming the existing legislation was *"adequate"*. They only agreed to issue further guidance on dress codes in the workplace.[132]

Nicola said the decision to stop short of enforcing legal change was a *"cop-out."*

130 Oral history interview as part of the Women Activists of East London project, archived at the Bishopsgate Institute
131 Helen Pankhurst, Deeds Not Woods: the story of women's rights then and now, Hodder & Stoughton (2018), p272
132 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-39667912 accessed 15th November 2019



Rebecca Tully

Peace

Rebecca Tully, refugee and arms trade campaigner[133]

Just a few miles down the road from where Sylvia Pankhurst lived, Rebecca Tully continues the tradition of peace campaigning in East London. As a child she was taken to Greenham Common by her mother, which she describes as a *"big memory"*. After doing an MA in Refugee Studies, she learnt about the events that lead people to leave their homes, including war. This inspired her to become involved in refugee camps in France, where she cooks and helps out in the warehouse.

The other side of her activism is with Campaign Against the Arms Trade, where she has taken part in direct action against companies coming to London to sell their weapons. Many refugees in the French camps are from Afghanistan, so she's seen the direct impact of this trade.

One of Rebecca's most memorable campaigning moments was in December 2015, on the eve of a crucial Commons vote on air strikes in Syria. With her friend, Sue Wheat, she organised a peace vigil in Walthamstow. Their aim was to show MP Stella Creasy that local residents wanted her to vote against military action. They met at the mosque and led a candlelit vigil to Creasy's constituency office. There were speeches by community leaders, and activists used post-it notes to leave messages of peace on the office window. Rebecca describes it as one of the most diverse protests she's been on:

> *"When I arrived at the mosque there were old Muslim guys, there were young white British kids, there were so many people. I've never been part of something so diverse. People of all sorts of different faiths talked, and I thought whatever happens, I know people agree with me. I know I'm not alone."*

133 Oral history interview as part of the Women Activists of East London project, archived at the Bishopsgate Institute

Sophie Bolt, peace campaigner [134]

Sophie had a strong sense of injustice from an early age. She started her first petition when she was in primary school, over not being able to go outside and play when it was snowing. She got in a lot of trouble with the headteacher for it, and the other parents were also quite hostile to the idea. Her mother had suggested the petition, making it feel quite exciting. She had not expected the school to respond so aggressively.

University was a life-changing experience for Sophie, where she met other students who challenged her views around things like capitalism. She got elected on to the executive of the student union, which connected her with other political representatives around the country.

After finishing her degree, Sophie got very involved in campaigning around the peace process in Northern Ireland. She travelled over there, which was both shocking and an incredible experience. With others, she organised forums in London to explain what was going on in Northern Ireland because she felt the story we were being told in Britain was inaccurate. It also allowed people whose voices weren't being heard to speak out.

After that Sophie became involved in CND in response to the military campaign in Yugoslavia. She worked with a lot of women who had been at Greenham Common, and their attitudes were inspiring. She went to women's peace camps and learnt about non-violent direct action. Later she was involved in actions at military bases.

Sophie is still involved in CND, but not at the level she was. Now she is heavily involved in the Labour Party, and was excited when Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader. All the things she felt so strongly about, Jeremy Corbyn also supported. Hearing him apologise for the Iraq war was really validating for all her peace campaigning. She was chair of her local branch, and on the executive of Waltham Forest Momentum.

Sophie feels being a woman has had a massive impact on her politics. She came out quite late as a lesbian – in her 30s – so that had less impact in her earlier activism. Coming out deepened her political understanding. Sophie doesn't solely define her activism by her lesbianism, but it is part of her lived experience. She believes all oppressed people should be working together against discrimination.

Environment

Victoria Henry, climate change activist[135]

As the immediate threat of nuclear war died down, a new concern took over. As scientific consensus on climate change became clear, organisations like Greenpeace switched funds and energy to tackling this new risk, as its impact on the natural world hit home.

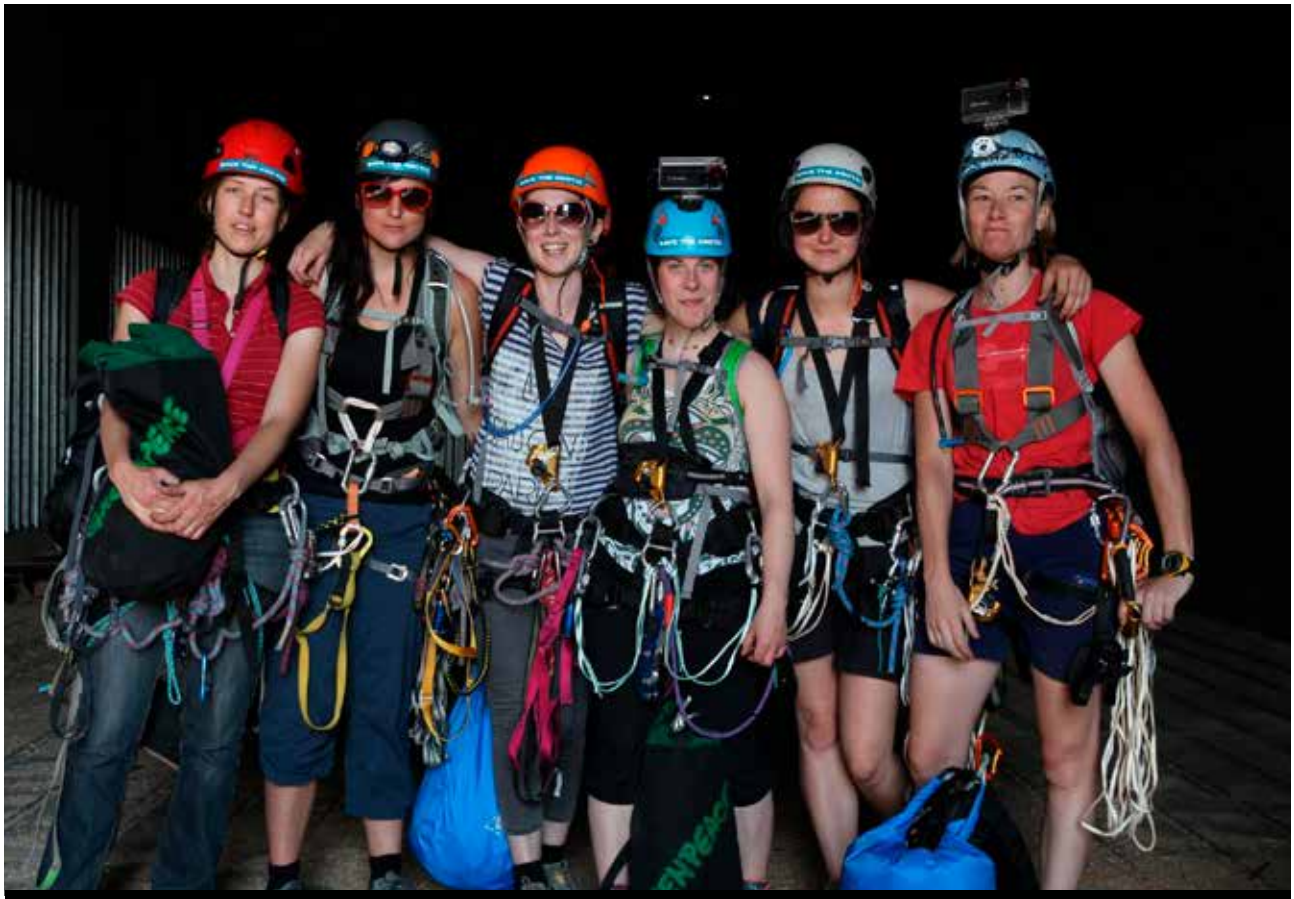
Despite close links with the peace movement, environmental activism has often lacked a female-led moment like Greenham Common. This is surprising, since a UN report revealed how women are disproportionately affected by climate change and, like Greenham, there are obvious links to protecting the planet for future generations.

That's not to say women haven't been in key roles in the recent environmental movement. In 2016, Greenpeace International appointed two women as joint executive directors – Bunny McDiarmid and Jennifer Morgan. Meanwhile, in East London, Melanie Strickland narrowly missed becoming one of the first climate protestors in Britain to serve jail time, for a direct action at Heathrow with Plane Stupid. Melanie describes the group as thoughtful and respectful of gender, yet like the road protests of the 1990s, they're involved in spite of their gender, not because of it.

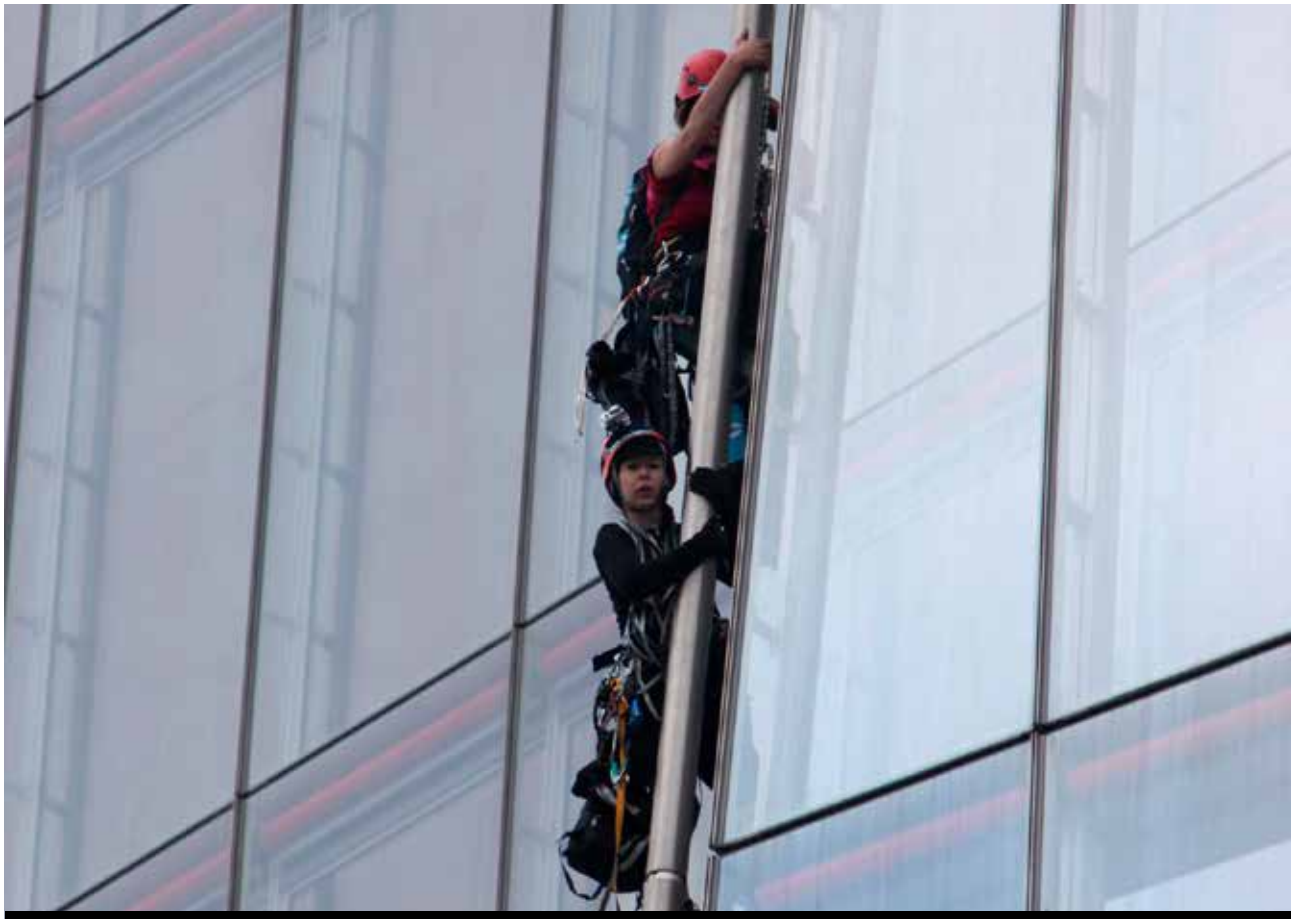
The one interesting exception is the group of six women from Greenpeace who climbed the Shard in 2013. Among them was Victoria Henry, from Hackney. Victoria is conscious of how much *"air time"* is given to young white men in the movement, and is critical of what she calls *"beardy boys in boats"*. Part of her involvement in the 2013 action was to show other women what is possible – that direct action doesn't have to be a macho act. In the immediate aftermath of the event, she received a lot of messages from women inspired by the event. Others approached her later, asking about getting involved in climbing.

Although Victoria feels there's been progress in female representation in the climate movement, there's still a long way to go. Women are less inclined to be physically active, and there aren't opportunities to enable them to do so.

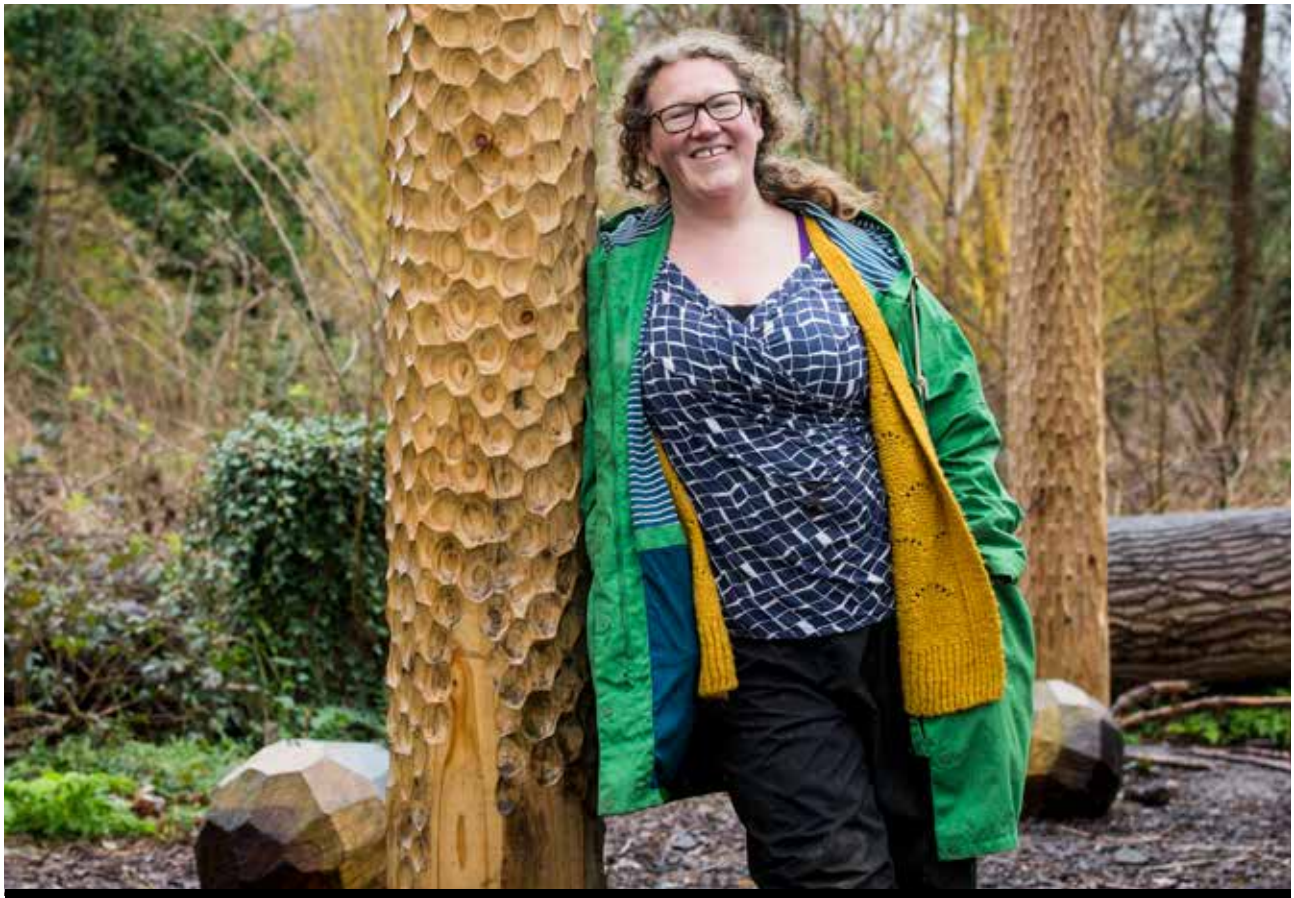
134 Ibid
135 Ibid



Shard climbers - Victoria Henry 3rd left (Credit: Greenpeace)



Victoria Henry climbs the Shard in climate change protest (Credit: Greenpeace)



Rachel Summers at the Low Hall Conservation Area

Rachel Summers, forest school leader[136]

While working in Chingford teaching excluded teenagers, Rachel noticed something was happening when they went outside – their behaviour massively improved. She researched what was going on, and stumbled upon the forest school pedagogy.

Rachel has always loved being outside. As a child she would take snails for a ride on her trike, and had a tank of pet woodlice. Now she decided to train as a forest school leader, and she knew exactly where she wanted to run it.

It didn't look like an awful lot of conservation was going on at the Low Hall Conservation Area in Walthamstow. It was covered in dog poo, needles and signs of rough sleepers. But Rachel was struck by the bird song and she could see its potential. She emailed the Council and asked them if she could use the space. After much pestering they eventually agreed and helped her clean it up.

Now it's not just Rachel using the space. Today it boasts art sculptures, seating, and local schools running their own outdoor learning sessions.

Rachel is also involved with Extinction Rebellion, which she sees as linked with her work. She talked to her children about the climate crisis, and people like Greta Thunberg. They decided they wanted to organise a local school strike, which Rachel helped them with. About 35 people turned up. She was concerned about her voice dominating, so she got the children a loud speaker and they passed it between them to say what they wanted on climate change.

As well as her environmental activism, Rachel is also a member of the Green Party, hosts refugees in her home, and is a donor to Phone Credit for Refugees, which has been attributed to saving the lives of refugees trapped in the back of lorries.

136 Ibid

Violence and harassment against women and girls

As early as the 1920s, MP Eleanor Rathbone and the Duchess of Atholl campaigned against Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). It received little attention due to sensitivities about cultural imperialism. The Women's Liberation Movement took up gender violence as one of their key themes, especially rape and domestic violence. Our fourth generation campaigners have taken that discussion to the next level, bringing an international dimension to the debate.

Hibo Wardere

Hibo Wardere, FGM campaigner[137]

No longer silenced by shame, a number of women activists are opening up about the violence they've experienced, using their anger to propel their campaigning. This is particularly true with Hibo Wardere, a victim of FGM.

Hibo was born in Somalia into a large and very close family. She was woken in the morning by donkeys and goats and describes it as an idyllic life. But at the age of six her world changed. Like 95% of young girls in the country, she was *"cut"*. She wouldn't speak of the abuse for nearly 40 years.

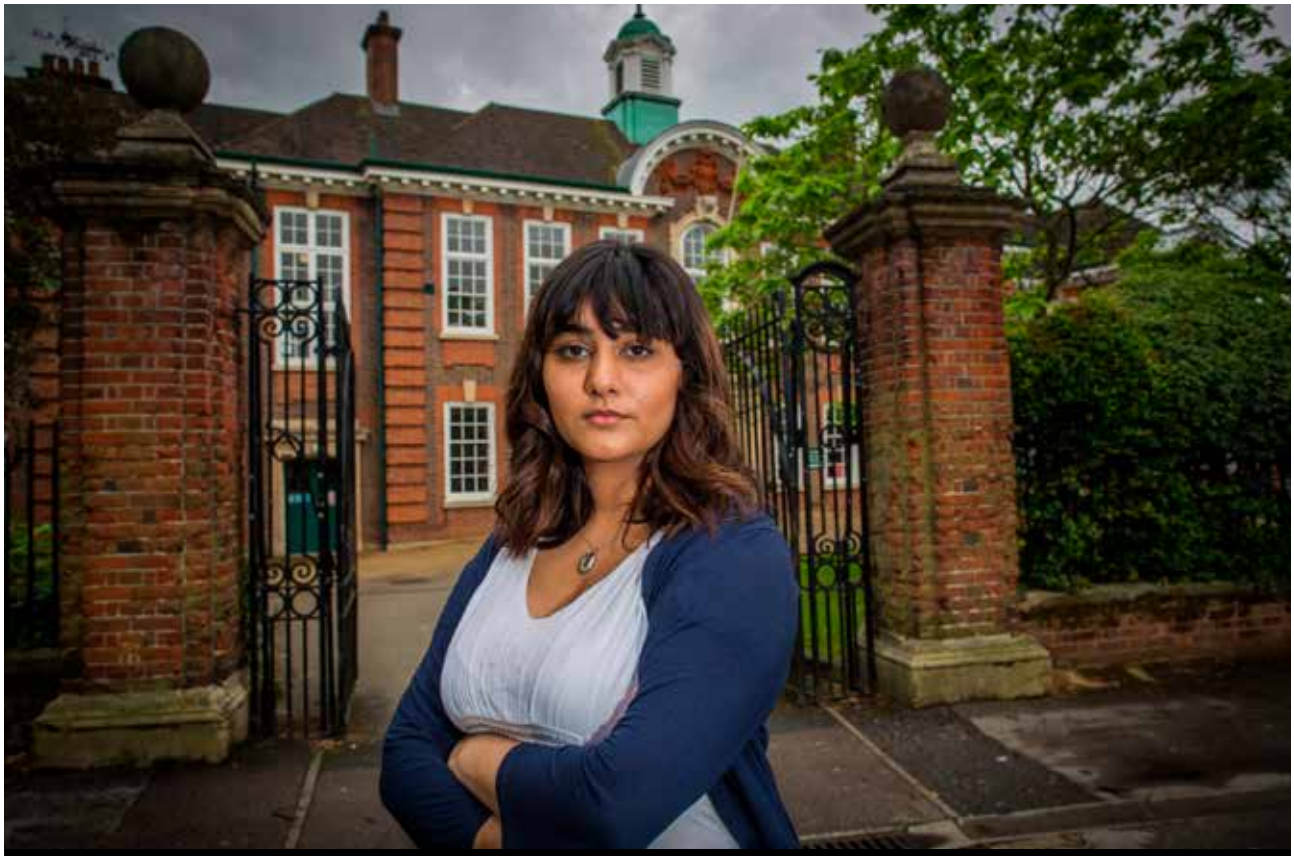
The war in Somali intensified, and Hibo's family decided to leave. They were planning to go to Canada, but Hibo wanted to come to England. When a family friend said she was going to London, Hibo persuaded her mother to let her go with her. Although only 16 and separated from her family, when she arrived at Heathrow she was overjoyed, breaking down in tears. She knew that if she had daughters they would not be cut. She recalled: *"I saw stars in my head; I saw freedom."*

Hibo married, had seven children and began training as a teaching assistant in a school in Walthamstow. As part of her training she had to write an essay about child protection. Her husband suggested she write about her own experiences. Although reluctant at first, once she started she couldn't stop. She worked through the night, breaking down many times. The next morning she took her essay to the headteacher and told him she wouldn't go until he'd read it.

The headteacher immediately asked her to talk to the other staff. Since then she hasn't stopped, going from school to school talking to teachers, and now students, about FGM.

One of her most memorable moments was when a child stayed behind to tell Hibo she'd been cut, and was worried the same thing would happen to her sisters. For Hibo, saving just one child makes it worth it.

137 Ibid



Arifa Nasim

Arifa Nasim, honour abuse and FGM campaigner

Arifa's grandfather was Iranian and the main inspiration for her activism. He became a councillor, and was eventually mayor of Waltham Forest. Arifa's grandfather took her to council meetings and she sat at the back, with a colouring book, absorbing what was going on. He taught by example, coming home late because he was helping local families.

When Arifa was 14 she read Daughters of Shame about honour abuse and killings. The stories in the book haunted her: *"They made my heart hurt so much I couldn't sleep."* Inspired by her grandfather she decided to do something about it.

Arifa's mother is from Pakistan so she saw herself as a survivor by default. She survived because her mother didn't subscribe to that tradition. But the book made her realise it was happening all around her.

Arifa decided she wanted to run a fundraising event at her school for Karma Nirvana, a charity that supports victims of honour abuse and killings. It took her a long time to convince the staff as they were worried about how it would impact on her exams. She replied: *"Nobody is more worried about my exams than me. To you it is just a statistic, but to me it's my life. And I think I can do it."* In the end the event raised £5,000. And she aced her exams too.

Following the fundraising event, she teamed up with other gender violence campaigners. They realised the key to eradicating these issues was education. So she formed Educate to Eradicate and she is training teachers and running school workshops on the issue. Her initial goal was to get into every secondary school in the borough, but now she wants to go into primary schools too. She also wants to go into other London boroughs, and eventually the rest of the country, or even the world.

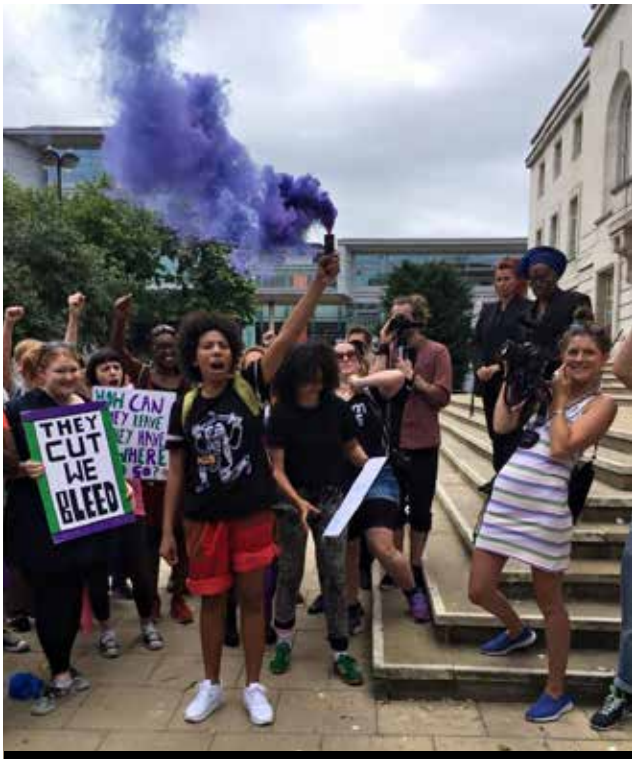
Although still young she has made great strides. By the age of 18 she had already been to New York and spoken to the UN, including to four world leaders. But being young has its disadvantages, as people don't always want to hear what she has to say.

Sisters Uncut

On 7th October 2015, at the premier of the new Suffragette movie, a group of women broke through the barriers and staged a *"die-in"* on the red carpet. As they were dragged away by security guards, they chanted *"dead women can't vote."*

The women were from Sisters Uncut, a feminist direct action group protesting cuts to domestic violence support services. The heritage of women-led activism is key to the way they define themselves. Sisters Uncut activist Emma Smith said:

> *"The suffragettes took direct action because they couldn't wait any longer for the right to vote. We are taking direct action because we can't wait any longer for women's safety: our sisters are dying."*

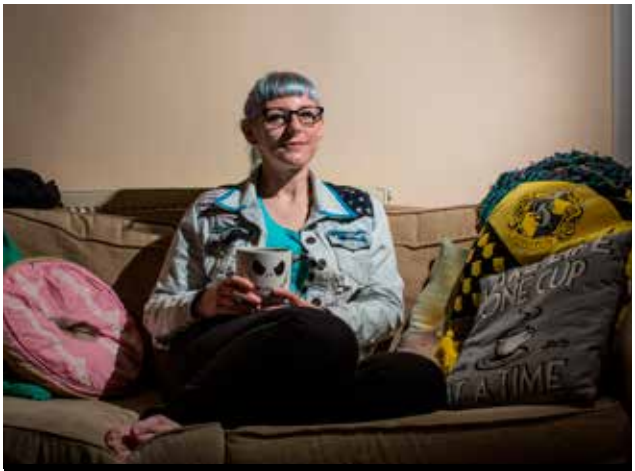


Sisters Uncut Hackney Town Hall (Credit: Sisters Uncut)

Like the East London Federation of Suffragettes, Sisters Uncut recognise how inequality cuts through all aspects of women's lives. In July 2016, the East London collective of Sisters Uncut staged a march from Hackney town hall to Link Road, where they occupied an empty council flat in protest at the cuts in social housing. A Freedom of Information request revealed there were 1047 empty council properties in the borough, yet domestic violence victims were being sent to hostels or as far away as Essex to be housed. Like the Sumner House protestors before them, they gave a voice to the *"faceless homeless"*, asking: how can she leave if she has nowhere to go?

Emmeline May, street harassment campaigner[138]

Raised by a single mother, who herself was raised by a single mother, Emmeline was surrounded by strong and resourceful women. She was brought up to believe that if you have something to say, then say it. So after experiencing sexual harassment a number of times, she blogged about it. She got a huge response online from others who'd been through similar experiences.


Emmeline May

When a local woman asked if anyone wanted to work with her to start a campaign to end street harassment, she immediately said yes. Along with another friend they co-founded Walthamstow Women: Taking Back the Streets. They started a Facebook group, which immediately attracted hundreds of members. It's been a key tool in sharing experiences, information and mobilising other women in the community.

They've also been working with the police to ensure all street harassment is logged, whether legally defined as harassment or not. They're also campaigning to get more women reporting it, but this will take a big cultural shift because it's often trivialised.

This is not the first time Emmeline's used social media to great impact. Emmeline's also blogged about sexual consent, developing the cup of tea analogy: sometimes you want a cup of tea, and sometimes you don't; you never force someone to have a cup of tea if they don't want one. It went viral. It's since been used by the Crown Prosecution Services and Thames Valley police as their official campaign. It's also been taken up internationally, translated for different cultures and languages.

138 Ibid

Welfare

Lutfun Hussain, Concrete to Coriander

Lutfun moved to East London in 1969. Separated from the culture of growing vegetables in Bangladesh, she volunteered at Spitalfields City Farm. Here she applied the knowledge she'd accumulated in the garden of her London home.

In 2000, Lutfun founded the Coriander Club, a gardening and cookery club for Bengali women. It provides regular opportunities to socialise with others, learn how to grow vegetables, as well as cook them. Some of the women are first generation migrants, and only speak Bengali. Many did not have opportunities to leave the house, or were scared to do so. Lutfun's initiative effectively battles homesickness and engages a group potentially at risk of social exclusion.

The initiative has made a positive difference by supporting women's sense of ownership, accomplishment and community. Lutfun's commitment to promoting ethnic diversity, cultural exchange, inclusion, organic horticulture, and healthy living, led to her being chosen as a London Leader by the Sustainable Development Commission.

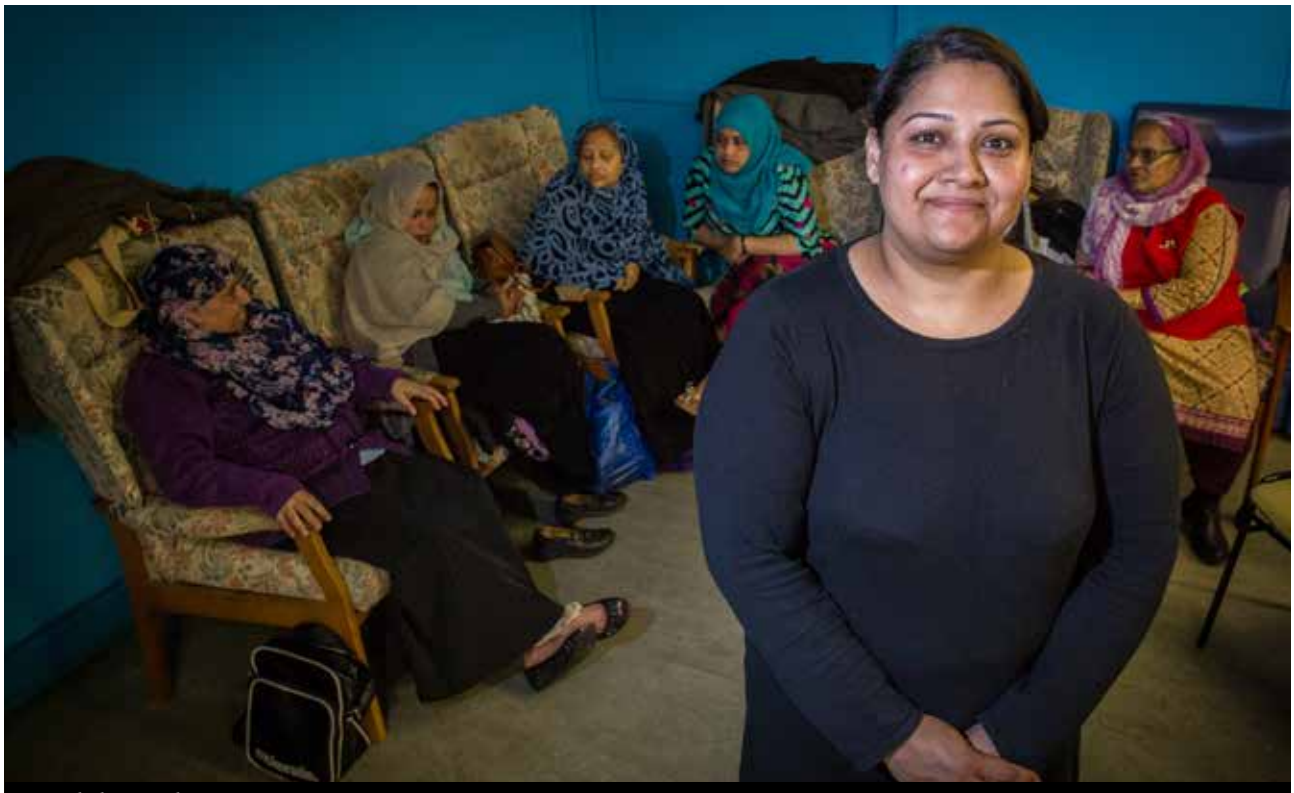
Sabeha Miah, Boundary Women's group[139]

Sabeha moved to the Boundary Estate in Tower Hamlets with her young son. Suffering from post-natal depression and without friends, she knew she had to get out and do something.

She got involved in the Boundary Women's Group, who were trying to create safe places for young people. The estate was run down and crime-ridden so they did up a playground, encouraging more children to come out and play.

Sabeha got more and more involved, and when a vacancy came up to run the group, she was hired. Her work now focuses on breaking isolation and building confidence in other Bengali women. She networks with schools, local NHS services and goes out on the estate.

Like Lutfun, Sabeha's work epitomises the type of *"gentle activism"* women excel at. It creates tidal waves of change. But like many other women interviewed for this project, Sabeha had never considered herself an activist.



Sabeha Miah

139 Ibid

Racism

Julie Begum, anti-racism campaigner

Julie Begum's memories of growing up in the east end in the 70s are not good. Bengali families knew they were not wanted or accepted. Most people tried to keep a low profile, and just wanted to get on without being attacked. There were a lot of no-go areas in the East End, including Brick Lane, despite the presence of so many Bengalis.

In 1978 the murder of Altab Ali sparked a change in the community. There had been murders before, but this one sparked thousands of Bengalis and non Bengalis into action. They led a procession to Downing Street with Ali's coffin. Young men in particular were angry and started organising.

The fight felt very personal to Julie, and she wanted to do something. However, she was often frustrated that it was always the same men at the anti-racism meetings, making the same statements. Many women felt excluded. So she got together with other women and organised Women Unite Against Racism. They avoided the cult of leadership, there was childcare provision, and they made sure women not normally involved in activism had their voices heard. They came together in each others' houses and made banners and posters, discussing how they were going to do protests. They wanted to make sure the women were visible, but still safe, as the protests could get violent.

Julie Begum, Whitechapel in the 1990s

At one protest in Whitechapel, the police arrived in their riot gear and on horses. They wanted to set the dogs on young men. Julie knew that as a woman, if she stood in between the police and the young men, it would defuse the situation. It was an automatic reaction that grew out of her experiences of protecting her younger brothers from racist attacks as a child. Despite the risks, she couldn't stand by and do nothing.

In the 1990s the BNP put forward a candidate in the Tower Hamlets elections and won by half a dozen votes. The reason this happened was because many Bengalis were too scared to go out and vote. When the next election came round, Julie and the others were determined this wouldn't happen again. They went door-to-door and made sure people were registered. They targeted areas with high levels of violence, and escorted women to the polling stations. When the election came, the BNP were defeated – it was a huge victory.

Sonali Bhattacharyya, anti-facist and anti-imperialist campaigner [140]

Sonali Bhattacharyya (photo courtesy of Helen Murray)

In 1966 Sonali's father arrived in England from Calcutta, and her mother came over soon after. They settled in Leicester which, although multi-cultural, didn't have many Bengalis, so this created a sense of isolation from the rest of the community. Her parents also experienced racist abuse. It was worse for her mother, however, because she was alone a lot of the time and couldn't speak English.

In Bengali culture there is a strong strand of socialism and being out spoken. Sonali feels both of those qualities were passed on to her. Her older sister had a big influence. With her, she was involved in campaigning against deaths in custody and miscarriages of justice in 1990s. A lot of the work happened around Asian Dub Foundation gigs, which challenged the idea of activism being austere and heavy.

Sonali moved to London after graduating and got involved in the Stop the War Coalition, as the world was in the midst of the Iraq War. She was also involved in Palestine Solidarity, which overlapped with Stop the War work.

Palestine has not been an easy issue to campaign around. Most other campaigners were socialist Jews, and as the *"one brown face"* she was often a target for abuse. She was once accused of being *"an agent for Iran"*. On one occasion, a man came over and started shouting and threw the stall over, accusing them of persecuting Israelis. Christian zionists also got very angry and said she was interfering with God's work. It could be very scary.

During this time Sonali was quite suspicious of party politics. The first election she was eligible to vote in was 1997, when Labour won. Her family have always voted Labour but her mum used to say it was a *"last resort"* because of Labour's past history of imperialism. This became even more obvious with the invasions under Blair – she saw Labour as the *"war party"*. However, Sonali joined the party in 2015 after Milliband lost the election. She says she did it out of despair. She thought *"people like me should join"*. When Jeremy Corbyn got on the leadership ballot she was excited because she knew him through his work with Stop the War. She never dreamed he would get elected, and it felt unbelievable when he was.

Sonali is very involved in her local Labour Party branch in Walthamstow, where she now lives. She was elected BAME officer to increase diversity and participation in the party. She has tried to open up discussions about racist policies in her branch, including around the hostile environment. She wants to educate people about what is happening and where issues likes Windrush have come from, but also to move internal policies to the left.

140 Ibid

Jennifer Whilby, black Labour activist[141]

Jennifer's parents came to Waltham Forest from Jamaica in the early 1960s. As a child, Jennifer remembers things were tight. They lived in a one-roomed apartment and her mum had to go back to work six weeks after giving birth.

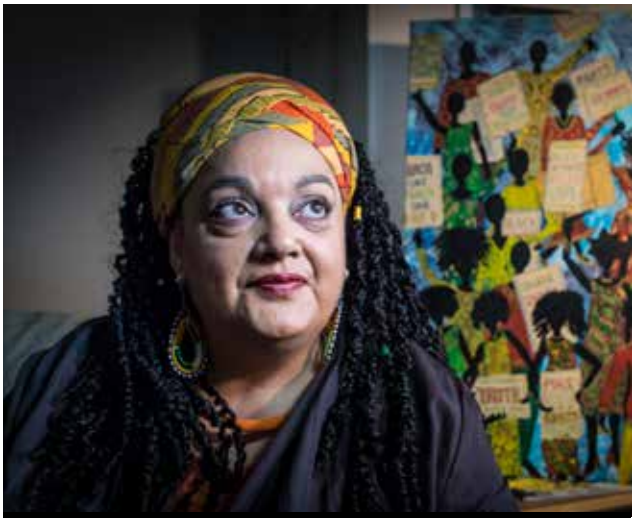
School was hard for Jennifer. There weren't many black children, and people made her feel different. They would asked questions that weren't malicious but made her feel *"other"*. Secondary school was hardest as that was when the National Front was taking hold in politics. Jennifer would see posters up in people's houses saying they supported the National Front. That was a big trigger for her involvement in politics.

Jennifer was never involved in party politics beyond voting, however, that all changed when Jeremy Corbyn became leader in 2015. His politics matched hers. So she joined the party and went along to her constituency AGM to see what it was all about. She ended up becoming a branch delegate at that meeting, even though she didn't really understand what it meant. Soon after she became the constituency BAME officer. She organised a BAME forum, which Diane Abbott spoke at. About 90 people turned up.

Jennifer is a member of Momentum. She is also involved in Black Caucus, a black interest group affiliated to Momentum. One thing they are trying to do is get more black representation in parliament.

Jennifer works with groups in South London on Windrush and knife crime. Although there are larger black communities there, the problems are happening in East London too. Often it's just less visible because the community is more disparate. Windrush in particularly has many hidden victims, because the government doesn't know how many people they've deported. Many in the Afro-Carribean community are very scared about the future.

Zita Holbourne, trade unionist and human rights campaigner[142]



Zita Holbourne

Zita's mother is from the Caribbean, and she was raised with a strong sense of racial and social justice. Her mother taught her how to stand up to racism in her own life, but also stand in solidarity with others around the world.

Her mother taught her about the South African anti-apartheid movement, and from as young as five she knew she should not buy South African goods. Zita continued her involvement in the boycott campaign as she grew older, eventually branching out into other areas of social justice, including the campaign against student tuition fees under Thatcher. She was part of a large student demonstration on London's South Bank, where she witnessed police brutality and feared for her own safety many times. Zita would find herself back at the forefront of that fight many years later when her son was going to university.

In 2010 Zita founded Black Activists Rising Against Cuts (BARAC) with Lee Jasper. They knew the coalition government was going to introduce huge cuts, which was going to disproportionately impact the black community. They held round table events, film screenings and conference fringe events, and had a parliamentary and legal arm. They also contributed to the wider anti-austerity movement as those groups often overlooked the black experience.

Deepening racism, injustice and attacks on migrant communities goes hand-in-hand with austerity, so they founded the Movement Against Xenophobia with other migrant organisations. BARAC ran a poster campaign on public transport to promote the positive aspects of migration and fought against the Immigration Bill, a racist and divisive piece of legislation. Unfortunately, the bill passed into law as at that time all major parties were pandering to the right wing. They warned that one outcome of this legislation was a threat to long-term British residents from the Caribbean. This concern became reality as the Windrush scandal broke. Zita helped set up BME Lawyers for Justice, which supported individual families facing deportation.

141 Ibid
142 Ibid

Zita has been stalked on line and in real life by fascists, who issued death threats. She had trouble getting the police to take it seriously, so she instructed lawyers. Eventually the police took action, and her lawyers got Google to co-operate to track the stalker down. He was taken to court and found guilty. She has had other abuse and threats from Liverpool fans, who targeted her on Twitter after she spoke out against racism in the club. Lots of women get targeted online, but if you are black women it is even more vitriolic.

In 2012 a lot of Newham communities were negatively affected by the Olympics. There was the threat of demolition to local estates, local traders being moved on, and missiles installed by the Ministry of Defence on the roofs of people's homes. Zita organised public meetings and raised awareness of these issues through the media. She forced the British Olympic Association (BOA) to u-turn after The Voice, Britain's leading black newspaper, was refused a media pass. The committee that allocated media passes were nearly all men and all white. Zita launched an online petition, got local politicians involved and generated international media attention. Within 48 hours the BOA agreed to issue the pass.

Through her trade union work, Zita has also represented hundreds of people who have faced discrimination, harassment and bullying at work and won; she has negotiated with employers and brought about positive changes to policies and practices; and she has helped organise a collective voice of members on an everyday basis.

Zita uses art in her politics as she believes it enables you to reach audiences you wouldn't be able to reach otherwise. She organised an exhibition for young black artists in recognition of the institutional racism in the art sector and the disproportionate impact of austerity on the black community. The exhibition was such a success and is now in its 7th year.

Inbar Tamari, Palestine Solidarity activist [143]

Inbar was born in Jerusalem in 1964. Her family moved around Israel until they settled in a suburban town that was a diverse mix of both Jews and Palestinians. Both communities attended her school, but despite the integration there was still anti-Palestinian taunting in the playground. Her father was highly critical of this. His best friend at university was Palestinian. He was also on the left, while her grandfather was on the right. They were about as politically diverse as you could be and it caused a lot of tension in the family.

Inbar went back to Jerusalem for university. While there she volunteered on a helpline for families who had been separated from their children. The vast majority were Palestinian. They helped connect parents to lawyers and other support services, or they just listened. She was also involved in protests following the arrest of a journalist who exposed the Israeli government's nuclear capabilities.

She met her husband Roland while in Jerusalem, and the two of them moved to East London after Inbar graduated. They were heavily involved in the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, as well as anti-poll tax demonstrations and protesting the first Iraq war.

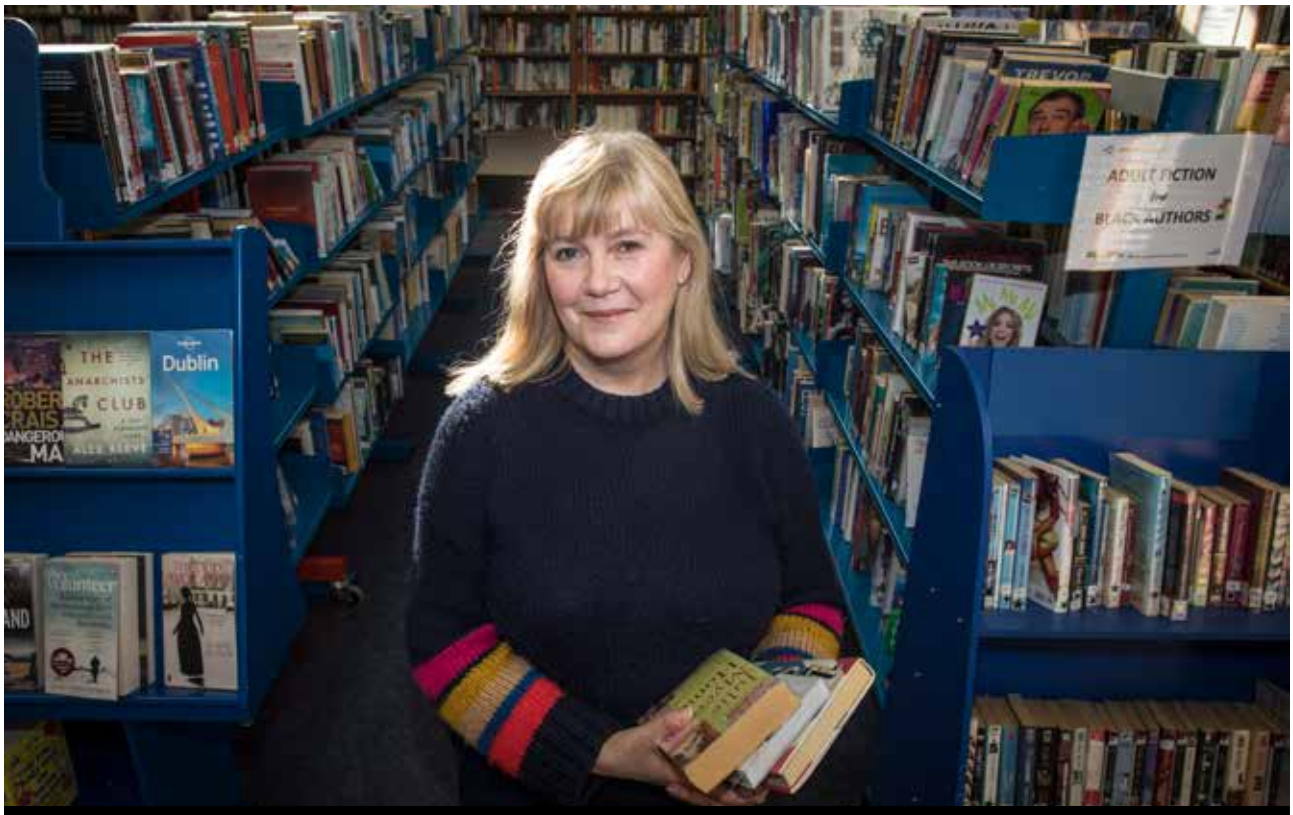
In the mid 1990s Inbar joined the Labour Party. She went out canvassing a lot and became the local membership officer, encouraging members to become more active locally. During the Blair years she became disenchanted with the party and left. During these years she also was busy raising a small child with additional needs, so she had less time for campaigning.

It's within the last ten years that Inbar has become more politically active again. She rejoined the Labour Party after Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader. She is also involved in Jewish Voice for Labour, which represents a different Jewish voice in the Labour Party. She was part of Jews for Jeremy, a Jewish support group for the former leader.

Inbar is very interested in arts in politics. Across the many campaigns she has worked on, she has produced banners, using screen printing and appliqué techniques. Her most recent banner was for the climate strike in September 2019.

143 Ibid

Education



Susan Wills at Higham Hill Library

Susan Wills, library campaigner

The first public libraries were established in the late 1880s and proved hugely popular. For those from working class backgrounds, who had missed out on school, they were an essential source of self education. And self education was an integral part of radical political culture.

Even today they are an important part of community education. They provide a quiet study space for young people living in noisy, crowded accommodation; access to a wide range of literature for those who may not be able to afford to buy their own; and a meeting place for everyone from new parents to refugees learning English.

As a committed socialist and educator, Susan knew the value of libraries. She said:

> *"[libraries] are a brilliant socialist concept, and although less books are borrowed nowadays, their function is far more than that. They offer something that is really unique to communities."*

She also understood the threat libraries were constantly under since the coalition government began its programme of austerity in 2010. *"I knew at some point they would come for my library, and I was determined to be there to stop them."*

In 2016 her fears were realised when Waltham Forest Council announced plans to close three local libraries, one of which was Susan's local in the Higham Hill ward of Walthamstow. So she pulled together some people she knew who could help and they organised a public meeting. Hardly anyone came to that first meeting but they pushed on. More meetings were organised, and slowly people started getting involved. Then some local councillors opposed to the plans came along. That's when it really took off.

There were many strands to the campaign – they had people mounting a legal challenge, issuing Freedom of Information requests and they also had a creative strand, including art exhibitions, and children sending cards to councillors. They joined up with other library campaigns around the country and got local support from Momentum and the Socialist Party.

There was such huge public outcry that within a year of the campaign being launch the council backed down and Higham Hill library was saved. Susan knew it would take little to bring the threat back so she set up a *"friends"* group to ensure the library stayed a vibrant and valued part of the community.

Disability

Disability activism is the late bloomer of the equality movement, coming of age in the 1990s. The peak wouldn't last that long either, dying out following the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act.

Austerity sparked a revival of this movement, with 80,000 spectators booing Chancellor George Osborne at the 2012 Paralympics. This brought the campaign against Atos, main sponsor of the paralympics and architects of the *"fit to work"* programme, to an international audience. Paralympic gold medal winner Tara Flood said: *"It is a shocking irony that Atos is a main sponsor of London 2012 whilst destroying disabled people's lives on behalf of the government."*[144]

Rachel Salmon, disability campaigner [145]

Rachel and her sister were some of the first visually impaired children to go to mainstream schools in Wales. They were taught in a special unit for visually impaired children. They were trailblazers but it could also be quite challenging as some teachers didn't want to teach them.

These experiences informed Rachel's political views and during the 1980s and 1990s she was involved in various campaigns, including against the Youth Training Scheme and poll tax. Then she went to a conference where there was a fringe meeting about disability. They were encouraging disabled people to take action. It was a very difficult time for disabled people as it was perfectly legal to refuse someone a job because they were disabled. There was no legal protection.

Rachel Salmon

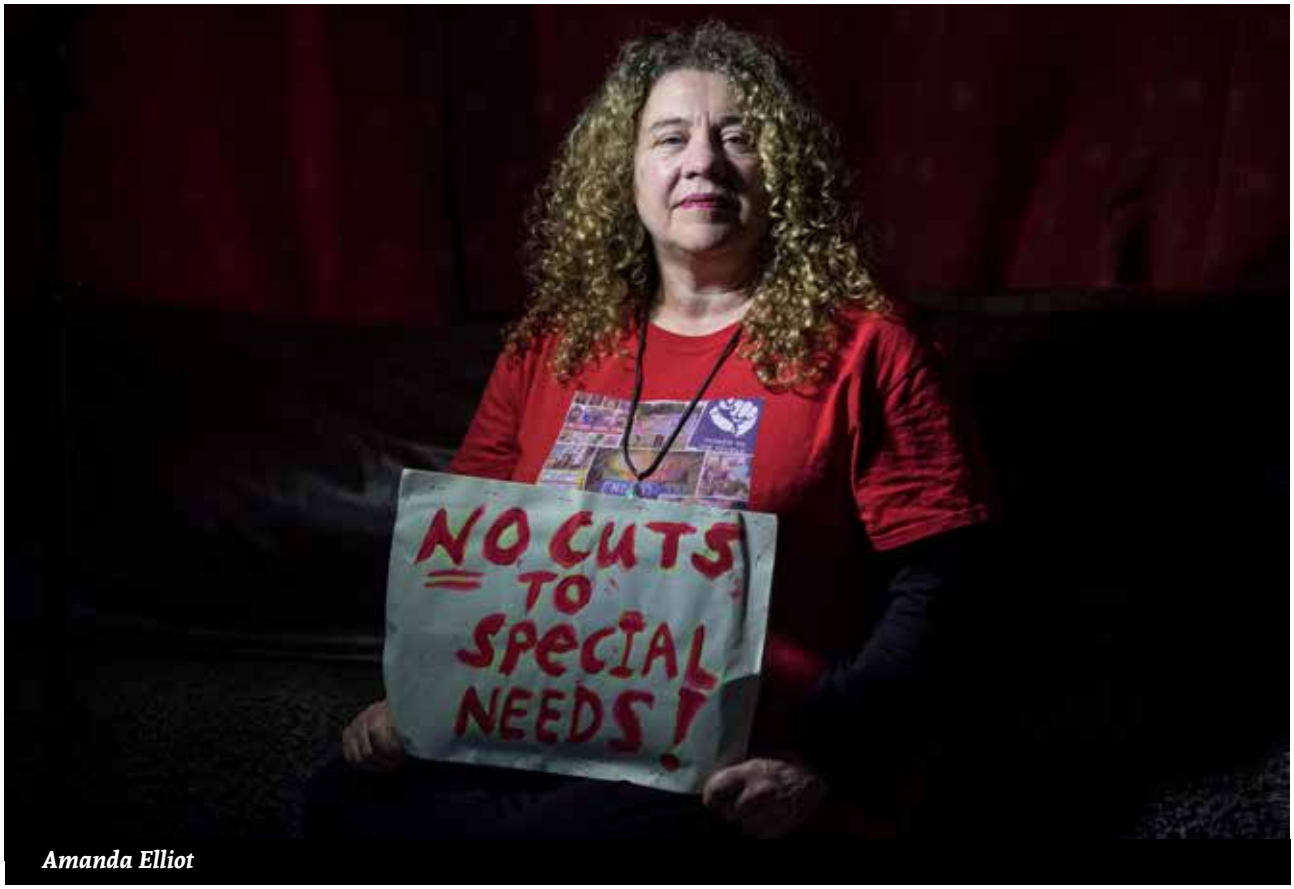
Rachel moved to Manchester and joined the Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People and Disabled People's Direct Action Network. She was involved in many direct actions during the 1990s, such as stopping traffic by chaining herself to buses in Whitehall. There were lots of arrests, including Rachel, and police brutality, including a famous incident where police tipped someone out of their wheelchair, a photo of which made the front page of the Independent on Sunday. It got a lot of media coverage and helped to raise awareness of disability issues. The public were sympathetic and eventually the Tories were forced to pass the Disability Discrimination Act.

This whole period was an important part of Rachel's coming of age; understanding and being proud of who she was. It was also an important part of her education and incredibly empowering.

Rachel currently works at Hackney council and is shop steward for her union. She has done a lot of work around diversity and inclusivity at work, including race, sexual identity, gender and disability.

Rachel was also disability officer for Walthamstow Labour Party, where she encouraged the executive committee to ensure Labour Party events were accessible for disabled people, as well as others who find being involved in political activity difficult more generally. She is involved in Disability Labour, which is focused on more national issues, such as making sure disabled people can access things like public office. They also challenge issues when they come up, for example some disabled people have been told they can't be councillors because they can't go canvassing. They are pushing for reasonable adjustments to be found for disabled people, such as phone banking.

144 https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2012/aug/28/atos-paraylmpic-involvement-brings-protests accessed 15th November 2019
145 Oral history interview as part of the Women Activists of East London project, archived at the Bishopsgate Institute



Amanda Elliot

Amanda Elliot, special educational needs and disabilities campaigner [146]

In the late 1990s Amanda's son Calum was born, which turned out to be the event that has most shaped her activism. When Calum was a toddler it was clear he was not like other children. When he was five he was diagnosed with autism.

In 2008 she helped set up the Hackney parent-carer forum, which enabled parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) to "ask difficult questions of the local authority about provision", and reached out to isolated families. They ran events on benefits and where to get help, advice and legal support.

While working with the forum Amanda found the council was increasingly calling parents in for *"co-production meetings"*, basically asking them how they could reduce services. In 2017, faced with another big round of cuts, Amanda and other parents decided to mobilise against the local authority. They generated hundreds of responses to the consultation and organised a demonstration outside the town hall, with some children leading a delegation. The council were taken aback by the scale of the protest. Previously the issue was not on their radar and now it was right in their face.

The parents forced the council to u-turn on some of the cuts but it forged ahead with others. Despite this big impact the cuts continued, so they decided to crowdfund to mount a legal case against Hackney council. Around this time it became clear this was not just a local issue. Parents in Bristol and Surrey were also mounting legal cases against their local authorities. Bristol won and cuts were reversed, but Hackney and Surrey lost[147].

It was a setback, but Amanda had not given up. Joining with parents of disabled children around the country, the newly formed parent-led SEND Action network launched a legal case against the government for failure to provide adequate funding. Within three days they'd generated £14,000 for legal fees through crowdfunding. Although that case was lost the government later announced £700m worth of SEND funding, an increase on the £350m previously offered. Although still unlikely to be enough to plug the huge deficit, the campaign is clearly having an impact. SEND issues are on the political agenda at last.

146 Ibid
147 At time of writing appeal in both Surrey and Hackney are pending

LGBTQ+

Janine Booth, LGBTQ+ and disability campaigner

Janine grew up feeling at odds with the world, thinking things were unjust and unfair. Then she heard Going Underground by The Jam and realised other people felt the same. From that point onwards she got more involved in politics, initially through Youth CND, then she joined the Labour Party Young Socialists and threw herself into supporting the miners' strike.

Janine is bi-sexual and was involved in the LGBTQ+ movement during the 1990s. She was very involved in the campaign to Repeal Section 28 when she was at university in Manchester. The city was the centre of resistance and there were several large demos.

It was also around this time that Pride became a much bigger thing, which Janine became a regular at. She also was involved in Body Positive, the HIV charity. Although there are still many issues around LGBTQ+ rights, she feels there has been the big progress in this area.

Janine got involved in disability politics when her right eye got blown out by a firework in London Fields in 2005. It became even more important in 2012 when she found out she was autistic, and then in 2016 she was diagnosed with cancer. She started going to the TUC disabled workers' conference and is now on the TUC disabled workers' committee. Originally the National Executive said there was no demand for the committee. It took the rank and file to rise up and insist there was before it was implemented. She sees disability rights as vitally important in the workplace as it can lead to you losing your job if appropriate adjustments are not made.

Janine feels being autistic has helped with her campaigning as she doesn't observe social protocols as much as other people. She also feels it gives you additional insight and the ability to dig in and focus without other social distractions. There is also autistic perfectionism – a drive to do it perfectly.

Janine became aware that as autism diagnosis was increasing, more people were asking for alterations in the workplace. This may be either for themselves or because they had autistic children and needed more flexible working arrangements. She started running training workshops on autism and neurodiversity. Initially she ran them at The National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers, where she is a member. Now she goes around the country doing two-day workshops with a range of trade unions. She has trained hundreds of union reps who go back into the workplace and implement what they have learned. She is also involved in the Neurodivergent Labour group who launched the party's first neurodiversity manifesto.

Sonia Quintero, poet and queer rights activist

Sonia is from Bogotá in Colombia where new legislation has provided greater rights for the LGBTQ+ community, for example same sex couples can now get married, but society can still be unaccepting. It's not unusual to experience workplace bullying, or harassment in the street when holding hands with a same sex partner.

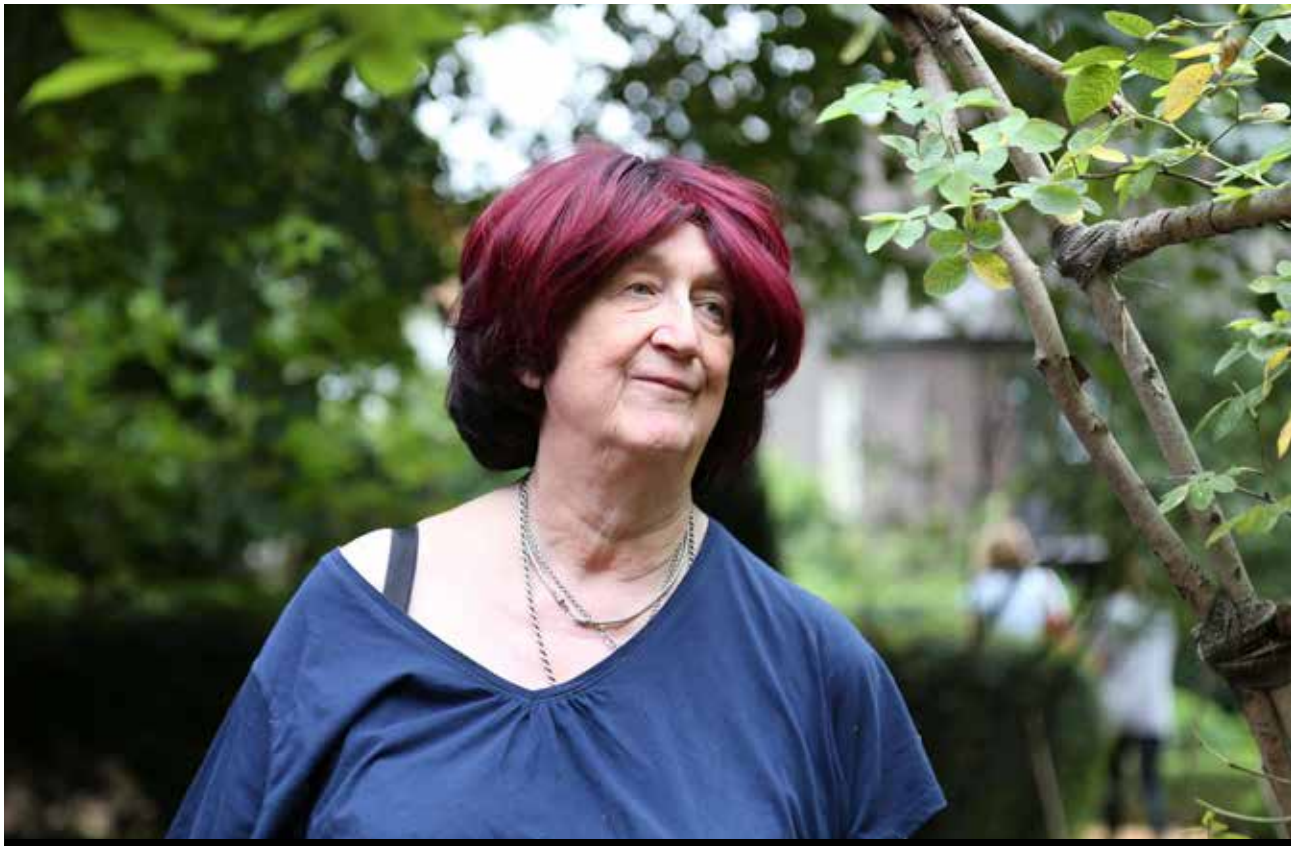
Sonia and her partner didn't feel welcome in Colombia and decided to leave. When she arrived in London she got support from an LGBTQ+ charity who help immigrants. As her English improved she was able to make friends and meet a wider range of people. She started to engage with different groups, including on human rights and LGBTQ+ issues. Her mind was expanded.

Today Sonia is very interested in LGBTQ+ education. She co-founded Queer Newham with some friends and they worked with the council on a project to educate people about LGBTQ+ issues. They created an exhibition with a workshop, showing people from different sections of the queer community, including politicians, activists, and writers. The exhibition went to eight libraries around Newham, and also to youth centres.

Queer Newham also runs Queer Cinema. They show films with queer representation and by queer filmmakers as she feels this is lacking in mainstream cinema. The screenings are often followed by a discussion afterwards.

Poetry is Sonia's big passion. She set up a poetry club at her local library, which grew so big they had to split into two different groups. The group have published two books and are planning a third. Sonia has recently set up her own poetry cafe.

Sonia believes everyone has a creative spirit in them somewhere and her job is to help bring that out. She has done work with everyone from first time writers to homeless people. She feels poetry can connect people socially and empower them to change their own and other people's lives. While Sonia is not going on marches or storming parliament, she sees herself as an activist as she is positively impacting other people's lives.



Roz Kaveney

Roz Kaveney, transgender activist

The transgender community has frequently found themselves marginalised from the rest of the queer community. From the 1990s onwards, however, their own movement began to grow following increasing acceptance of gender fluidity.

Roz Kaveney is a writer, poet and trans activist from Hackney. She said: *"I was reared Catholic but got over it, was born male but got over it, stopped sleeping with boys about the time I stopped being one and am much happier than I was when I was younger."*[148]

Roz was part of the policy forum during the creation of the Gender Recognition Act 2004, which allows trans people to get their identity recognised on their birth certificate. She said of the process: *"It was important we took something, but it was unsatisfactory."*[149]

She is a founding member of Feminists Against Censorship and a former deputy chair of Liberty. She is deputy editor of the transgender-related magazine META.[150]

Online platforms have enabled a deluge of hate to be directed at transwomen in particular, with Roz being especially singled out for attack.[151] As in the 1980s with the Women's Liberation Movement and lesbians, there continues to be huge animosity towards transwomen from some feminist groups and individuals.

148 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roz_Kaveney accessed 15th November 2019
149 Making Her March exhibition, Hackney Museum, 2018
150 http://lgbthistoryuk.org/wiki/Roz_Kaveney
151 https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/online-platforms-enable-deluge-hatred-against-trans-women-uk/ accessed 2019

Concluding remarks

The stories in this report highlight the constant and powerful force of women in East London. For over 150 years they have been fighting and winning, changing the social and political landscape. In doing so, they have innovated, overcome obstacles, showed tremendous bravery and used their femaleness to further their cause.

From the beginning, the match women defined the tone for women-led activism, engaging in what would become a landmark strike in the history of the trade union movement. They pioneered the use of community engagement to further a cause, a technique copied since by countless other campaigning groups, women and men alike. Yet despite their innovation, they rarely get the recognition they deserve.

Women have also shown immense bravery. In 1921 the Poplar Rebel Women faced prison for their beliefs, and in the case of Minnie Lansbury, sacrificed her life. Meanwhile, in 1936 many women faced violent, male-dominated crowds at the Battle of Cable Street, while those at the Langdale and Brady Street Mansions endured police brutality. Others like Murial Lester and Ellen Jones, withstood social stigma; vilified for supporting unpopular causes.

Obstacles to women's participation in activism are numerous. Early women trade unionists faced hostility from male counterparts; while in the 1970s Bengali women were often not allowed to participate in activities outside the home. Despite this, they achieved numerous victories, turning these challenges to their advantage. Collectively, east end women paved the way for the Equal Pay Act, and Bengali women used their position in the home to lead housing protests.

Women have also made the personal political. The horrors of working in the sweatshops were key to Milly Witkop's political engagement, while Jewish women like Beattie Orwell describe the Battle of Cable Street as a deeply personal one. Generations later Julie Begum would describe her early experiences of racism as a driving force in her campaign against the BNP. It would lead her to face off against the police and their dogs at an anti-racist demonstration. More recently, the childhood abuse suffered by Hibo Wardere drove her mission to end FGM. And it was not until the embracing of the personal as political in psychiatry that disability activism could really take root, and Women's Liberation activists began campaigning around body image, rape and domestic abuse.

One of the key findings of this research is what we've defined as *"gentle activism"*. Compassion and gentleness are traits often ascribed to women, and not always in complimentary terms. Indeed, some schools of feminist thought suggest women should take a more aggressive approach, for example, the *"lean in"* philosophy of Sheryl Sandberg. Yet we have seen gentleness in activism deliver incredible results. Lutfun Hussain's Concrete to Coriander, and the Boundary Women's Group, illustrate this gentle and creative approach to social change. It is striking too in the early days of state education that it was the women who concentrated on health and welfare issues in the classroom, rather than legislation around education provision. This may be because women still had limited parliamentary power at this point, or they had the vision to understand that schooling was more than academia.

Yet women like Lutfun and Sabeha rarely describe themselves as activists. The term is often attributed to an approach, rather than the change it creates. And this approach is defined by stereotypical masculine qualities, such as aggression and violence. Even when women stand alongside their male counterparts, like they did at the Battle of Cable Street, their participation is often overlooked or sidelined.

This masculinist approach to activism dominates the history books, sidelining women's participation in social change. Retelling events from the past from a female perspective disrupts the idea of women as passive. They are active, but often in their own ways. They organise from the home and with objects from the home.

It is important to remember too that some women have found themselves excluded by both men and women. Lesbians felt over-shadowed by the men in the GLF, and told their experiences had no place in the Women's Liberation Movement. More recently it is clear that transwomen are being outcast in similar ways, despite being on the end of unprecedented hostility and hate crimes.

There is no question that women have left an immense legacy in East London. Much of the cultural memory of resistance in this part of the capital is down to the work of women. Those women have come from many different backgrounds, ethnicities, abilities, and sexualities. Their impact will be felt for many generations to come.

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