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**Monica Patricia Shaw**

**Women in Protest and Beyond : Greenham Common and Mining Support  
Groups**

The main purpose of the thesis is to locate the study of women's protest within broader feminist debates. A critical analysis of feminist theory, methodology and practice uncovers complex problems entailed in taking account of commonality and difference in women's experience. On the basis of the study, I argue for a politically engaged feminism which includes diversity of women's interests and is committed to examining the tensions between commonality and difference. The data strongly support structural analysis underpinning experience rather than disembodied post-modernist constructions of women's fragmented identities.

Principles of grounded theory and feminist methods are employed to explore women's experiences of the Greenham protest and the 1984-5 miners' strike. The data is synthesised through themes of class and gender which emerge from it and which inform our understanding of the processes of engagement and disengagement with protest. The separate contexts of women's struggles and the links which they endeavoured to make across protest are explored through the voices of women activists.

The solidaristic ideals of the miners' strike are found to be tempered by the extent of women's support and by the contradictions which emerged for women confronted by the patriarchal power of the NUM. Orientations to Greenham suggest a fragile unity around ideals of a common womanhood which would overcome all other differences between women.

Links across protest are shown to be affected by class difference, which if not an insuperable barrier to collective action, indicate significant problems in achieving a common voice for women. The study suggests that romantic ideals of sisterhood and a common womanhood, far from supporting the struggle of affiliation and co-operation between women, obscure the power differences between them. Recognition of these differences and others which potentially divide women is seen to be essential to the development of an effective feminist theory and practice.

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**WOMEN IN PROTEST AND BEYOND:  
GREENHAM COMMON AND MINING SUPPORT  
GROUPS**

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Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Ph.D.

University of Durham  
Department of Sociology and Social Policy

**1993**



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## **GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THIS THESIS**

<b>CAB</b>	Citizen's Advice Bureau
<b>CND</b>	Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament
<b>ILP</b>	Independent Labour Party
<b>LP</b>	Labour Party
<b>MSG</b>	Mining Support Group
<b>NACODS</b>	National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfirers
<b>NATO</b>	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
<b>NUM</b>	National Union of Mineworkers
<b>NVDA</b>	Non-Violent Direct Action
<b>UDM</b>	Union of Democratic Mineworkers
<b>UPG</b>	Umbrella Peace Group (Fictitious name for group in study)
<b>WAPC</b>	Women Against Pit Closures

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## INTRODUCTION

### WOMEN IN PROTEST AND BEYOND : GREENHAM COMMON AND MINING SUPPORT GROUPS

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This thesis is based in the experiences of women who were involved in the Greenham protest and women who were active in the miners' strike of 1984-5. As such it will contribute to a growing literature which argues that traditional analyses of women and politics have ignored or underplayed the contribution of women at the informal level, particularly in terms of community based action and various forms of protest. However it is intended as something more than an attempt to write women into the history and politics of the peace movement and that of working class struggle, worthwhile though those objectives might be. My main purpose is to locate the analysis of women's experiences of protest and beyond, within broader debates about the nature of feminist theory and political practice. I see this as a very practical purpose, for without an appreciation of the diversity of women's defiance rooted in their differing needs and experiences, feminism runs the risk of falling prey to stereotypes of partiality and exclusivity or indeed of promoting such stereotypes itself (Bryson 1992).

Neither Greenham nor Mining Support Groups began as protests against unequal power relations between men and women. Yet these were protests in which women asserted their right to a political voice, all the more interesting since they burst into life when women's rights (amongst others) were under concerted attack from a right-wing Tory Government. Just when socialist feminist writers were entering a phase of self-critical review and bemoaning lost ground in permeating the left with feminist ideas, and when feminism, if not in retreat in every respect, was thought by some to be in crisis (Phillips 1987, Segal 1987, Lovenduski 1988), women were on the move again. The question which arose in feminist literature was whether challenges to the power of the state made by women, many of whom were assumed to have no direct relationship to the women's movement, were in some sense resonant of feminism. What feminism might learn from these examples of women's protest is a question which has been more rarely addressed and is one which the thesis seeks to explore.



Analysis of the activities of Greenham women and Mining Support Groups has not abounded in feminist literature and there is little by way of detailed research. Of the two areas of women's action Greenham has attracted more critical concern, its status as a feminist protest more often called into question. The activities of mining support groups have been widely documented often by the groups themselves, but feminist research and critical appraisal of the women's action has been limited, often to cautious adulation. This is based on the view that working class women found a voice which they had not done thus far through the women's movement(s), an issue of wide concern to those who criticise the middle class bias of the women's movement(s) and to many who see themselves as within it. The reaction of feminists to Greenham and to women in the miners' strike is considered in the thesis in relation to the meanings attributed to their actions by women who were involved.

In Chapter I, I look at the main features of the Greenham protest and the women's action in the 1984-5 miners' strike. The discussion is intended to set the scene for the complex and variable meanings which those who supported these protests revealed in the study.

In Chapter II, I describe the scope of the study and the methodology which informed it. Drawing on grounded theory and feminist methodology, I argue for an approach which recognises the active participation of women in the research process but also acknowledges the responsibility of the researcher in creating a synthesis from the data.

In Chapter III, I examine feminist theory and political practice and suggest that it has not attended sufficiently to the diversity of women's experience for a variety of reasons. The problem of conceptualising gender and class relations is explored in the context of liberal, radical and socialist thought.

Chapter IV explores the meanings which women attributed to their participation in the 1984-5 miners' strike in the context of class and gender relations in traditional mining communities. As is shown within a common perception of the strike as a class war in which they were united with their men, women were also critical of traditional gender relations which the strike only partially disrupted.

Chapter V discusses the polyvalence of the Greenham protest and uncovers three distinct orientations of women supporters - women as peace activists, women as

feminist peace activists and socialist feminists. Assumptions that Greenham created the conditions for women's relationships to overcome difference are examined from the perspective of supporters.

Chapter VI explores the problems which women experienced in making links across the protests both during the miners' strike and in the period beyond. The realities and perceptions of class difference are identified as significant, if not insurmountable barriers to achieving unity amongst women.

Chapter VII examines the process of a declining solidarity in mining support groups after the strike had ended. It focuses particularly on the women's struggles to define their agenda and the reasons why in the end they failed to do so.

Chapter VIII explores the loss of idealism of Greenham feminism amongst supporters. It focuses particularly on one Greenham group and follows this process through their experiences.

Chapter IX relates the study to debates in contemporary feminism. In particular, it discusses the complex problems entailed in analysing commonality and difference of women's experience.

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## CHAPTER I

### THE GREENHAM PROTEST AND WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE 1984-5 MINERS' STRIKE

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#### Introduction

With some notable exceptions, such as research on 'the women's movement', the 'history of women and social protest has been largely ignored, misrepresented, or repressed' (*West & Blumberg 1990*). Women's invisibility can be largely attributed to androcentric definitions of political behaviour which either exclude women or regard them as less than full political human beings (*Randall 1982; Siltanen & Stansworth eds 1984*). But it is also the result of some contemporary feminist definitions of what counts as authentic political practice. Here a complicating factor has been the tendency to take 'the women's movement' as synonymous with feminism, thus feeding a somewhat limited, middle class view of women's political action (*Delmar 1986*).

There are some excellent examples of studies which brings to light working class women's history (*Rowbotham 1972; Liddington & Norris 1978; Taylor 1983*). But the difficulty remains in feminism of categorising or defining women's political action 'which does not start from women's search for autonomy, but from relations to others: class, race, community, and family' (*Rowbotham 1992, p294*). Perhaps this explains why women's participation in the 1926 miners' strike remains largely buried and the history of women's peace movements is a relatively new area of study (*Wiltsher 1985; Liddington 1989*). It may also throw some light on the surprise which feminists, amongst others, expressed when women mobilised to support Greenham and the 1984-5 miners' strike, as if they had done nothing like this before.

In this chapter, a brief introduction to each protest is intended to set the scene for what follows. It does not pretend to be a full account or a detailed analysis. This would be inappropriate to the main purpose of a study which explores the meanings of protest and its aftermath through the voices of women activists.

## **Greenham: Establishing the Women's Peace Camp**

Greenham Common might have remained an insignificant point on the map of Berkshire, had it not been for the women's peace camp which sprang up there in 1981. By this time, the airbase located on the Common (given over to the Royal Airforce during the second world war and remaining a disused airfield until 1968, when it was leased by the United States Airforce) was selected as a site for the deployment of American cruise missiles. This decision had been signalled by NATO in 1979, the missiles finally arriving at Greenham in 1983. Before their arrival, a remarkable protest had gathered momentum, the women's peace camp at its centre.

The immediate origin of the camp lay in a march organised from Cardiff to Greenham under the banner of Women for Life on Earth.<sup>1</sup> It left Cardiff on the 27th August 1981 and arrived at Greenham on the 5th September, its purpose to protest at the impending arrival of American cruise missiles. The original marchers, thirty six women, four men and three children, had little idea what their initiative was to lead to - 'a historic moment hardly looked at' (*Liddington 1989, p228*). As the marchers neared their destination they were concerned to counter the disinterest of the national media. After lengthy discussion, it was decided that four women should chain themselves to the perimeter fence and the press should be notified. This accomplished, the women presented a letter of protest to the base Commander. No doubt, he later regretted his dismissive response - 'As far as I'm concerned, you can stay here for as long as you like!' (*Harford & Hopkins eds 1984, p17*). By the end of a week, during which women took part in the chaining action on a rota basis, a peace camp came into being, inspired as much by the practical encouragement of supporters as by a growing media interest. By November it was firmly established, and, by March 1982, it had become a women-only peace protest.

The above account of the origins of the peace camp at Greenham is mainly culled from the much fuller one provided by Harford and Hopkins (1984), which draws heavily on the memories of those involved. Statements from those on the initial march indicate that they were only dimly inspired by feminist principles or goals. Their protest letter, emphasised women's role as mothers and protectors of human life. Men were not excluded from a support role in the march or for the first 6 months of the peace camp. However, the organisation of the march, early actions at the base and the establishment of the camp were women led. Moreover, although embryonic, the first days of the

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<sup>1</sup> *Liddington's study traces the stirrings of women's peace initiatives in Britain, America and Northern Europe which presaged Greenham. (Liddington 1989)*

peace camp saw a developing sense of women's collective power, experienced by some as 'an intuitive feeling of an indefinable energy stirring among women' (*Leland 1984, p113*)

'I remember the women at that final rally ... They each clambered on to the trailer without notes or practice, to speak to the crowds. They reached out to us with their hearts surprising themselves and celebrating with us their new-found strength. We began to understand that the message of Greenham was, 'no one can do it for, you have to do it for yourself.' ' (*Wendy Franklin, quoted in Harford & Hopkins eds 1984, p17*)

A significant event in the development of the peace camp, which altered its meaning as a peace protest, was the controversial decision, in February 1982, to define it as women-only. Amongst the reasons offered for this decision was the desire on the part of some women to develop new non-masculine ways of working, which included 'shared decision making, non-hierarchical leaderless groups, co-operation and non-violence ... caring, compassion and trust' (*Jones 1987*) These aspirations were at the heart of the Greenham camp from that point on, and, it became known over time, as much for its feminist, as for its anti-nuclear objectives.

As will be elaborated in Chapter V, the Greenham protest held different meanings for its supporters, but it is indisputable that the permanent presence of women 'dug in' outside the perimeter fence provided a powerful focus for a burgeoning women's peace movement (and for the wider peace movement) in the period 1982 to 1984. Beyond that time support waned, but women's resistance at Greenham continued to survive. Twelve years after the first pioneers arrived, a small settlement of women could still be found at Greenham. Cruise missiles were dismantled in 1987 (under the terms of the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Agreement between America and Russia) but Greenham continued to be 'a powerful symbol' and 'inspiration for those speaking out for peace' until the end of the decade (*Liddington 1989, p285*).

### **Greenham Women Everywhere**

The women who participated in the study were not permanent dwellers of the Greenham camp. Like many other supporters, they visited the camp for shorter or longer periods, often, but not only, for specific actions orchestrated by women living in

the camp. It is impossible to be precise about the numbers of women who became engaged, in one way or another, with Greenham, but there is evidence that in the early years of the protest women turned out in their thousands to participate in actions at the base. For example, it was estimated that 30,000 women linked hands to encircle the base in December 1982 (*Harford & Hopkins 1984*). Many women became members of Greenham Support Groups which were mainly loose structures with a shifting and overlapping membership which either operated for the sole purpose of visits to Greenham or combined Greenham sorties with local peace actions. Some developed into longer term feminist groups. Greenham networks spread out across the country and drew in new supporters. The camp also attracted women from other countries and inspired the development of further women's peace camps, 'at least thirty on three continents by 1983' (*Participants of the Puget Sound Women's Peace Camp 1985, p21*).

If the slogan 'Greenham Women Everywhere' encapsulated a widening web of support for the protest, it also signified an appeal which some thought crossed class, race and age boundaries. Some accounts of early actions at Greenham suggest a very broad constituency of women (*Yorkshire Women Go to Greenham 1983; Harford & Hopkins 1984*). But, eye witness accounts vary. For example, one black woman saw only three others amongst the thousands who encircled the base in December 1992 (*Kris 1983*). I found little evidence of a wide constituency of support in the North East of England, where all trails led to white middle-class women. The membership of the Greenham Group to which I belonged and the networks with which it was connected were similarly constructed. But not all such women were attracted to or remained involved in Greenham for the same reasons. Neither did they come from uniform peace/political backgrounds. In that sense the study supports those who argue that a broad spectrum of women became supporters of the protest.

### **Greenham Women in Action**

Support for the protest grew during the bitter winter months which followed its establishment, so that by the end of 1981, up to a hundred women were visiting at weekends (*Liddington 1989*). It gathered momentum and additional support during 1982 as a result of Newbury Council's determined strategy to evict women from the Common and a series of actions by Greenham women which eventually led to arrests, court cases and prison sentences for some. These actions included the first blockade of the base by 250 women in March, a symbolic die-in at the London stock exchange

in June, the occupation of the main sentry box inside the base in August and the encirclement of the base (otherwise known as 'Embrace the Base'), followed by a blockade by 2000 women in December (*Harford & Hopkins eds 1984*).

Many of the characteristic features of the campaign were taking shape during 1982. Women were learning techniques of passive resistance and how to plan and execute large actions within principles of non-hierarchical organisation. They were challenging the legal framework and court procedures in ways reminiscent of the Suffragettes. What many newspapers described as antics, such as keening or singing during court cases, the women defined as 'a continuation of the action' which might 'jolt the court's deaf complacency much more effectively than ritualised advocacy' (*Johnson 1986 p177*). The camp was becoming 'increasingly mystical and spiritual' with 'talk of witches, goddesses and being nice to trees' (*Liddington 1989, p236*), and women were infusing their actions and the life of the camp with symbols of women's resistance with images such as serpents, dragons and spider's webs (*Jones 1987*). A women's culture was coming into being, but not without some ambiguity. By the closing action of the year, images of motherhood and nurturance (which the press tended to present approvingly and radical feminists contested) were jostling alongside those of strong, defiant women - producing a 'powerful', 'many sided' and 'shifting'... 'iconography' (*Liddington 1989, p246-7*).

Media coverage of the protest increased over the next two years as the action escalated and as more people were won over to the anti-nuclear cause. The images projected of the protestors and their encampments became much more virulent. Amongst other things, Greenham women were portrayed as 'sluts', 'harridans', 'sex-starved lesbians', 'witches' and 'in the pay of the Soviet Union' (*Blackwood 1984; Jones 1987; Young 1990*). Such may be taken as evidence of the dangerous, subversive influence which the protest was now seen to wield by those who had earlier failed to grasp its significance. 1983, the year in which preparations were going ahead to prepare for the arrival of Cruise, saw a concerted effort by Greenham women and their growing supporters to focus public attention on the interior of the base. It opened with a daring action in which 44 women climbed ladders to scale the perimeter fence to dance and sing on the silos in the dawn hours of New Years day, before being arrested.

'The next few months were an intense succession of events, actions, confusion. So much happened. Hundreds of women visiting for a day, staying a while or coming to live at the camp. Always new faces,

strange faces. We had become the 'front line' focus of a burgeoning political movement that was growing by the day.' (*Harford & Hopkins 1984*)

Throughout 1983, Greenham women continued to devise ever more inventive ways of drawing attention to their cause, including pressing the case of the illegality of nuclear weapons through the American Courts and seeking an injunction against their deployment (*Hickman 1986*). It was a year in which there were many more arrests and prison sentences as police action was stepped up. The struggle was many sided, with arguments and counter arguments about gender and pacifism coming to the fore in CND, debates about the significance of Greenham as a feminist protest generating controversy in the women's movement, and concerted efforts by the Tory Government to undermine the anti-nuclear lobby in the run up to an election which they won hands down. Meanwhile, the protest grew in strength, non-violent direct actions taking place regularly at the base and across the country. The fence, which had earlier been 'embraced' was redefined as a barrier to be penetrated or cut down (in October, 2000 women cut down miles of the perimeter fence) in an effort to demonstrate the poor security and defences it offered for weapons of mass destruction (*Jones 1987*).

The immediate effect of the arrival of the first cruise missiles in November 1983 was intensified opposition. A December action at the base attracted 50,000 women (*Harford & Hopkins 1984*). By this time, an elaborate network of support had been established regionally and locally with a London Greenham Office providing a crucial information channel. This network continued to be active throughout 1984. However, with the weapons now in place there was greater emphasis on spontaneous 'guerrilla warfare' at the base, a strategy of 'constant attrition' somewhat replacing the emphasis on large organised actions (*Jones 1987, p203*). The local countryside became an equally important focus as strenuous efforts went into tracking the movements of convoys taking the missiles out on manoeuvres. Greenham women were also making new links, including leaving the camp to support women activists in the miners' strike - to be discussed further in Chapter VI (*Stead 1987; Liddington 1989; Rowbotham 1989*). Life at Greenham, which had always been hard, was growing tougher with constant harassment and more brutal eviction attempts. In spite of this the encampments survived and continued to attract visitors, although smaller in numbers.



By early 1985, much of the supportive network had crumbled. The period which followed is not well documented. Media silence fell, as if by ignoring women protestors 'they do not exist' (*Jones 1987*). Liddington's brief account draws our attention to a 'chronicle of arrests and imprisonments' for acts of civil disobedience by Greenham women which continued into the later years of the decade - evidence of a protest which refused to die (*Liddington 1989, p280*). Chapter VIII examines the period beyond the height of the protest and focuses upon the crumbling support network as experienced by women who had been active in its development.

### **The 1984-5 Miners' Strike**

The issue which precipitated the strike in March 1984 was the announcement by the NCB that it intended to scrap twenty pits and 20,000 jobs in the forthcoming year. Notice of closure had already been given to Polmaise in Scotland and Cortonwood in Yorkshire. All of this against a backcloth of extensive job losses and pit closures, between 1981-4, in which the NUM had been consulted through the machinery of the Colliery Review Procedure, but which was now flouted by the NCB (*Green 1990*).

The strike was launched against protagonists who were better prepared and ultimately more powerful. In the years preceding the strike, coal had been stockpiled at power stations; diversification into nuclear power by the Central Electricity Board had been encouraged; production targets for coal were revised downwards; and Ian McGregor, with a formidable record of slimming down British Steel and of taking on USA miners, was appointed as Chair of the NCB in September 1983. Legislation was in place which banned secondary picketing and severely reduced welfare benefits to striker's families. Policing policy had ensured trained, mobile squads to deal with civil disobedience and 'unlawful' picketing. These steps were consistent with the 'Ridley Report' (1978) proposing contingency planning in anticipation of resistance from nationalised industries to a future Tory Government's plan to reshape them in accordance with market principles (*Callinicos & Simons 1985; Goodman 1985; Green 1990*). That this amounted to conspiracy has been contested as have other myths of the offensive posture of the NUM under its 'zealot' leader, Arthur Scargill (*Samuel 1986; McIntyre 1992*).

There are many interpretations of the roots of the conflict and the issues at stake as it was played out. Whether viewed as an heroic class battle (*Reed & Adamson 1985*) or

as a defence of pits, jobs and a way of life (*Beynon 1985*), or in some sense a mixture of both, depends upon how the evidence is read and whose testimony is considered. It has been convincingly argued that the development of the strike 'was more like a suspense story than an epic', including 'the euphoria of newly-discovered unity' in the first three months; a potential negotiated settlement of the strike in July; the cliffhanging possibility of supportive action from NACODS in September; and, what eventually became a 'receding hope' that stockpiles of coal would run down in the winter months (*Samuel 1986, p7*). But it was also a story in which the miners and their families came to view themselves as under siege from the forces arraigned against them, and in particular the controversial policing methods of the strike (*Coulter et al 1984; Jackson & Wardle 1986; Green 1990*). Their own unpreparedness for the strike, the decision not to hold a ballot, the failure to bring in Nottinghamshire miners, and the lacklustre support of the trade union and the labour movements have all been cited as reasons why in the end the miners failed. Amongst the many versions of the strike are those offered by women activists who occupy an important space in the history of the strike.

### **The Development of Women's Support for the Strike**

If the Greenham women's protest appeared to spring up suddenly and unexpectedly, so also did the network of support groups (mainly but not solely composed of women) which fuelled resistance in the miners' strike. Among the reasons offered for women's active entry into the struggle were their concern to defend jobs, their traditional loyalty to their men and the sheer necessity of feeding families under the draconian strike benefits rules (*Stead 1987; Seddon et al 1986; Ali 1986*). All of these were present in this study as was women's growing conviction that they were involved 'side by side' the miners in a class war. Throughout the strike and after, questions were raised by women activists and others about their relationship to the NUM, feminism and women's movements (*Stead 1987; Seddon ed 1986; McCrindle 1986*). These will be addressed more fully in later chapters.

The development of support groups was sporadic rather than an overnight happening, reflecting the regional organisation of the strike and the local response to it (*Samuel 1986*). The precise origins of groups varied as did the compositions of their memberships. A carefully documented study of support groups in County Durham came to the conclusion that they were not 'homogeneous' and 'most groups were not initiated by political novices but were the result of initiatives by political or trade union

activists' (McIntyre 1992, p44). Some groups were composed entirely of women, others included men and it was not unusual for there to be members of both sexes who were not directly connected to the dispute. As conveyed by the many pamphlets produced by support groups during and after the strike, each group had its own history but was also part of the broader collective effort.

An important milestone for the emerging women's support network was the Barnsley Rally in May 1984, described as a 'truly exhilarating and electric experience' (Mackey 1986, p55). Organised by Barnsley Women Against Pit Closure, the rally brought together 10,000 women and from it many links were established between groups across the country and internationally (Stead 1987). It inspired the creation of a national organisation. Although WAPC was not formally established until November, it was foreshadowed by a central committee with a delegate structure created to organise a large London rally in August. Events like this which indicated mass support from women for the strike have been viewed in retrospect as over-stating the extent of active involvement of women - something confirmed by women in this study (Winterton & Winterton 1989; Waddington et al 1991; McIntyre 1992).

Women who were active meshed together through a variety of networks, some local and some national. In County Durham and Northumberland (the areas from which women were drawn for this study) local groups came together for monthly area meetings to share information and problems. Nationally they worked under the auspices of WAPC, connected to the national organisation by delegates drawn from area forums. Individual groups paired up with other mining support groups in different parts of the country and developed their own international links. Once the strike was over, this complex and creative web of support gradually collapsed, both locally and nationally - this little researched aspect of the aftermath of the strike is explored in Chapter VII.

### **Women in Action in the Miners' Strike**

It may be too much to claim that 'what began as organisations to feed the families and the young, single miners who received no social security money, ended as a new women's movement' (Stead 1987, p31). But women's involvement in the strike was intensive and wide ranging. The organisational skills required to provide food parcels and to prepare hundreds of meals on a daily basis should not be underestimated. The testimony of support groups indicate the rapidity with which these skills were acquired

and the huge effort which went into providing food, clothing and welfare advice (*Taylor 1986*). Initially it was like feeding the thousands with 'loaves and fishes' (*Sheffield Women Against Pit Closure 1987, p21*). Funds supplied by the union were totally inadequate and therefore women were quickly drawn into fund raising and public speaking, many of them travelling both in this country and abroad. As their writings suggest, these experiences were the source of new found confidence in themselves and in their political role in the strike (see for example, *Here We Go 1986*). Contacts with other political groups followed, including with Greenham women, leading some groups to visit the peace camp.

As the strike wore on more women became involved in picketing, often in opposition to miners who either regarded this as 'men's work' or were concerned for the women's safety. This movement onto the 'front line' of the struggle appeared first in Nottinghamshire, where only a minority of miners had joined the stoppage and where women as well as men were aware of its strategic importance to the Government in breaking the strike. Women, crossing the boundary from neighbouring Derbyshire, met heavy police roadblocks, but often managed to get through where miners failed (*Here We Go 1986; Iris Preston 1986*). What was discovered on picket lines in Nottinghamshire and all over the country was that the police made no concessions to women (*Witham 1986; Stead 1987*). The contentious area of violence on picket lines is further discussed in Chapter VI.

The cold winter months of the strike created even greater challenges for support groups. By now many families were suffering ill health and could not pay heating bills. For months they had existed on a poor and inadequate diet. Under such circumstances and with some men drifting back to work, Christmas assumed a special significance. Support groups all over the country threw themselves into appeals for money, food and toys, the distribution of which proved to be a logistical nightmare. In spite of this and stress levels which were now running high in support groups, many looked back on this as the best Christmas they had ever known (*Here We Go 1986*). But in some ways it also marked 'the beginning of the end' of the strike (*Stead 1987, p150*). Against a backcloth of a steady return to work in the New year (10,000 men in January) and a series of failed negotiations throughout February which added to the general 'weariness' now 'settling over the coalfields' (*Goodman 1985, p171*), there was little that women activists could do to prevent the eventual collapse of the strike. Women's last political act of the strike was to march with the miners back to the pits in March 1985, the dispute unresolved but effectively over.

## **Conclusion**

The above brief accounts of the participation of women in Greenham and in the miners' strike introduce some of the main features of both protests, some of which are developed in this thesis. Appendices 3 and 4 provide further detail on the key events of each protest. In each case there are aspects of women's action deserving of separate and detailed enquiry. The approach taken and the lines followed in this study are discussed in the next chapter.

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## CHAPTER II

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### *DEFINING THE STUDY: GROUNDED THEORY AND FEMINIST ENQUIRY*

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#### **Introduction: Early Beginnings**

The fieldwork for this thesis did not formally begin until 1986. However my interest in the area of study began earlier. During the period 1982-4 I was caught up in the Greenham protest in my local area and I belonged for a short time to a women's group which developed as a result. It was with members of this group that I participated in making a video of women's support groups during the 1984-5 miners' dispute.

Our purpose in making the video was two-fold. We felt it important to record women's actions both as a testament for themselves and for a wider audience, and it was designed, as far as possible, as a joint project with some of the women who were filmed. But we also regarded the act of making the video as a political expression of our support, as Greenham women, for women in mining communities - an active expression of 'making the links'. So, for example, we did not just film women on picket lines but we also picketed with them. We joined their rallies and offered our support with fund raising, collecting clothes and food. We entered, invited, into their world in various ways, in their homes, soup kitchens and meeting halls. Yet, of course, we remained in important respects outside of their experience. We were welcomed by the women and given credit at the launch of the video (after the strike had ended) by one of key organisers of the women's support groups for 'increasing the women's morale at a very bad time'. But whilst making the video we were conscious of the stark contrast between the hardships and poverty suffered by women in mining communities during the strike compared with our own lives. We were also aware that they were living their protest on a daily basis whereas Greenham activities, however compelling, were for us a matter of choice.

It was the experience of making this video which helped formulate the ground for this thesis, mainly because it suggested to me that there were similarities and differences between women's involvement in Greenham and in the miners' strike which could sharpen an understanding of both. At that stage I was struck by the sense of purpose and determination which women expressed in both protests and by their sense of unity and strength with other women. In both cases it appeared to me that women were

challenging traditional concepts of women's roles by their actions, even though in neither case were these protests begun (or even in a simplistic sense continued) as an expression of women's dissatisfaction with their oppressed status in society as commonly depicted in feminist theories.

There seemed to be similarities in the way that women were organising through autonomous networks of groups through which they experienced their power as women to make a difference to the outcomes of the protests. Women in the video spoke of how support in such groups had increased their confidence and determination. We shared similar feelings of excitement about the ingenuity, daring and creativity unleashed by being women protestors, and by confronting in our different ways the power of the state. That we could share such experiences suggested some common ground. Thus although the objectives of the protests were different and they arose in different circumstances, it seemed that involvement in protest could be the basis of shared experience amongst women.

Of some interest to all women, those who participated in the video, those who made it and those who saw it, was the question of whether prolonged and intensive political action by women would lead to further changes in women's lives. Those who were active were convinced that the energy unleashed by women in support of protest would carry forward in some way. This reinforced my growing enthusiasm for attempting a study of women protestors who could both reflect upon their recent participation in political action and its meaning for their lives subsequently. The study was also partly conceived by my growing interest in the relationship of women's protest to feminist theory and practice. I wanted to concentrate on 'ordinary' women supporters and not 'leaders' or 'stars' although during the research I was to meet some of them. I also decided to limit my research to one area of the country - the North East in which I live and work.

### **Early Fieldwork: Searching for an Approach to the Study**

Armed with only the broadest of research questions - namely what had happened to women following the height of their involvement in protest - I began the fieldwork for this study during 1986. The initial stage consisted of re-establishing contacts and exploratory discussions with women who had been active in both protests about the levels of remaining support and what forms it was taking. It soon became apparent that few mining support groups had survived and that there was only one remaining

Greenham support group in the area. However, networks of women were still alive and some women were still active. Even those who were not, were interested in the research and were keen to be involved. I received a good deal of encouragement for the study and within a short space of time had been promised information and help in making further contacts. I was also welcomed into and became a member of a mining support group, in which I remained until its demise in 1991.

My approach to the fieldwork which forms the basis of this thesis was influenced by both theoretical and practical concerns. On the basis of initial enquiry I decided that a qualitative approach was likely to yield a better understanding of women's experience of protest and its aftermath. Traditional sampling methods were clearly inappropriate and it was unlikely that I could ensure 'tidy' samples of any kind. I wanted to develop the study through an interactive process which would include interviews with individuals and where possible with groups. The loose networks of women which still existed offered a promising opportunity for defining and refining the research questions and for gathering and interpreting data in a manner consistent with the principles of grounded theory.

Grounded theory advocates amongst other things a focus upon action and process, a concern with change and a flexible and open approach to developing research - all of which emerged as persuasive guiding principles during the early part of the fieldwork. It also allows for research questions to grow out of the researcher's personal experience, so long as this does not act as a template through which findings are interpreted. I had already begun to suspect that my assumptions concerning women's common experience, born in the heady days of political action during the miners' strike and associated with Greenham, needed considerable refinement. Aware of my closeness to the field it seemed essential that I should work hard to overcome initial pre-conceptions of what it might yield. As such, an approach through which the concepts, explanations and interpretations of those participating in the study would become the data for analysis (*Glaser & Strauss 1968*) seemed most fitting to my purpose. At the same time it was my intention to carry out a study in the spirit of feminist enquiry - the purpose to uncover the experiences of women in protest and beyond with a view to informing feminist theory and practice.



## Problems of Feminist Enquiry

'To suggest that there are simple questions, simple answers and simple definitions of what constitutes 'feminist research' is misleading.'  
(Stanley & Wise 1983, p26)

Both a reading of feminist debates on methods and methodology and the research process itself revealed the complexity of carrying out 'a feminist enquiry'. My study was to focus on women's experience; men were not to be included. Was this then to be a further example of 'adding women in' in order to fill out a picture of the social world in which women are too often absent? If so, the study might have some merit as had earlier empirical work which had attempted to address the invisibility of women, but it would fall short of the development of more radical approaches to feminist enquiry. The distinction to be made is between 'feminist empiricists' who argue that patriarchal social science can be remedied by more thorough research which includes women ('adding women in') and 'feminist standpoint epistemologists' who reject the very foundations of patriarchal science (Harding 1986).

'If we substitute *male* research objects with *female* research objects we have changed the 'object' of the research, but not necessarily the philosophy of the researcher who might still believe in her position as the distant 'expert' who investigates a certain trait/disposition/ variable out of 'objective' interest.' (Klein 1983, p91, *emphasis in the original*)

Fundamentally 'feminist standpoint' epistemologies are based in a critique of the positivist conception of science and social science from which they build upon and extend earlier critiques. They advocate the development of feminist knowledge through a politically engaged process by which women's awareness of their oppressed position is made more likely and social change made more probable. Rather than doing research 'on' women, they argue for research 'for' women' (Westkott 1983, Klein 1983).

'The most central and common belief shared by all feminists whatever our 'type', is the presupposition that women are oppressed. It is from this common acceptance that there is indeed a problem, that there is something amiss in the treatment of women in society that feminism

arises. This statement is a factual one for feminists and is not open to debate.' (Stanley & Wise 1983, p51, *emphasis in the original*)

Conceptions of scientific neutrality and value freedom have long been under scrutiny in the social sciences. There is little new in arguing that knowledge is a social construction which is shaped by ideological and political interests. Consistent with this line of reasoning, feminists have coalesced around an exposure of the androcentric bias of scientific epistemology as the unreflective and disguised expression of men's interests. This lies not merely in a conflation of gendered man with generic man as the subject of enquiry so that women are rendered invisible (Smith 1974; Elshtain 1981), but also in the masculine values underpinning the controlling, unemotional and detached principles of positivism (Westkott 1979; Bleier 1984; Harding 1986). Building upon the Marxist and interpretive traditions in social science, feminist standpoint theorists have argued that traditional social science has generated its problematics from the vantage of those who manage and control society (Smith 1987; Rose 1986; Harding 1986, 1987). Typically this excludes women (and other disadvantaged groups) and leaves unquestioned their experience of oppression, which most 'feminist standpoint' theorists agree should be a defining feature of feminist enquiry.

'One distinctive feature of feminist research is that it generates its problematics from the perspective of women's experiences.' (Harding 1987, p7)

Upon closer examination, this relatively simple proposition leaves unresolved a number of important issues concerning the construction of a feminist epistemology. For the researcher intending to take a feminist stance, the way is not clear because there is little agreement on what constitutes a feminist methodology (Ramazanoglu 1987). Although there is widespread interest in exploring women's experiences there are disagreements about what this means in practice (Stanley & Wise 1990).

### **Women's Experience(s): Methodological Questions**

A central question arising from 'feminist standpoint' perspectives is whether we can assume that women have a set of shared experiences which are distinct from men's. Halberg is sceptical of the project of grounding feminism in a notion of the uniqueness of women's knowledge and experience.

'I reject experience as a grounding for feminist epistemologies, and I oppose the proposals that men and women do have different ways to know.' (Halberg 1989, p6)

The suggestion that they do is implied in the tendency to biological reductionism in some brands of feminist thought, but has also been understood as an outcome of social constructions which, though shifting, are reflections of the unequal gender/power structure in society. Thus it has been argued that women, excluded from certain areas of social life, are likely to construct the world differently to men or at least to have separate concerns (Rose 1986). This fundamental epistemological problem has been overshadowed by related debates concerning the meaning of the category 'woman' and whether it is valid to assume that women share a set of common experiences. As has been argued, 'to say that women share 'experiences of oppression' is not to say that we share the *same* experiences' (Stanley & Wise 1990, pp 21-22, *emphasis in the original*). Once we have accepted that women's experiences of oppression may differ, it is at least possible that in certain contexts they may overlap (even if they are not identical) with those of men. As will be discussed in Chapter III, black feminists have argued that they have more in common with black men than with white middle class women (hooks 1984; Spelman 1990). Similarly in this study, women in mining communities were aware of shared class oppression with their men as well as of the disadvantage of being women in a traditional working class culture.

Debate about the construction of a feminist epistemology focuses upon the importance of experience and subjectivity as the means to developing an understanding of the complexities of women's oppression. However there are disagreements about what such a project should entail. Some argue that feminist researchers take on the mantle of the male oppressor if they attempt to overlay women's experiences with theory, particularly theory with a 'capital T' (Stanley & Wise 1983). A potential danger here is that feminist theoreticians who elaborate relationships between analytic categories such as 'women', 'patriarchy', 'capitalism', 'race' and 'class', run the risk of distortion and of positioning themselves 'as experts on and over other women's experiences' (Stanley & Wise 1990, p 24). But the process of articulating women's experiences inevitably requires interpretation, abstraction and synthesis in which the researcher cannot avoid being in some sense 'over' the experiences of the women they study. As such it has been argued that feminist theory is advantageous in providing a conception of the social world through which a more valid account of women's experiences can be

produced (*Ramazanoglu 1987*). For those who adhere to this position, the disadvantage of the Stanley & Wise perspective is that it can run the danger of leaving the fruits of enquiry in mid-air, producing a relativism which negates the stated political purposes of feminist enquiry.

'A sociology for women is inevitably and fundamentally an empirical sociology. However, it is not a sociology which eschews abstraction and theory. Abstraction and theory are essential if 'new meanings' are to be welded between the personal and political domains. It is, however, a sociology which places emphasis on experience and subjectivity as the route to theory.' (*Graham 1984, p122-3*)

The decision for feminist researchers (and all researchers in effect) is not whether to engage with theory but how and at what level. The development of grounded theory, as in this study, demands that the researcher works through the data towards theory. But even slavish adherence to this inductive method (which I do not claim in this study) would not get the researcher 'off the hook' of deductive reasoning. The value of grounded theory for feminist research is that it encourages an interactive approach to theory and data. Thus the explanatory power of feminist theories is not taken for granted, but neither is it necessary to exclude analytical categories or concepts (as Stanley & Wise suggest we do) in the analysis and integration of data, provided that the data supports them. Grounded theory offers a means to revealing the structures which constrain action through the experiences of participants in the research, whilst at the same time enabling new understandings of such structures. This process of analysis, like all others, carries a danger of imposing meaning on the experiences of those in the study but without it the aims of research would remain limited indeed. For those engaged in feminist enquiry the problem of staying close to the data (women's experiences) whilst making sense of it, is a particularly sensitive one, since it focuses upon the potential exploitation of the research relationship, an ethical problem (inherent in all social science research) writ large when women are researching women.

'...research that aims to be liberating should not in the process become only another mode of oppression. But, this aim poses an on-going contradiction; ultimately the researcher must objectify the experience of the researched, must translate that experience into more abstract and general terms if an analysis that links the individual to processes outside

her immediate social world is to be achieved.' (*Acker, Barry & Esseveld 1983, p425*)

The tension arising from the researcher as the mouth piece for the women who are researched is at the heart of many of the debates concerning feminist enquiry. Grounded theory gives primacy to voices of the researched but also defines the researcher as someone with a different and specialist role in the research process. Hopefully, analysis based on engaging and re-engaging with the data keeps the researcher close to the subjective worlds of those in the study, but in the end the activities of participating in research and being a researcher are recognised as qualitatively different. The question raised by feminist researchers is whether the research relationship can be defined and developed in such a way as to overcome the difference. This question is not different in kind from those which have been raised about feminist theory and political practice, which will be further explored in Chapter III.

### **The Research Relationship**

The feminist literature on research promotes ideals of research practice which give expression to the wider emancipatory goals of the women's movement(s). However, prescriptions that feminist scholars should be change agents (*Westkott 1983*) or should research 'in the same ways as we try to 'be feminists' (*Stanley & Wise 1983, p195*), are not unproblematically translated into ways of conducting an enquiry, just as they are not easily achieved in everyday life. There is broad consensus in the literature that the feminist researcher should move away from a construction of knowledge based on a vision of herself as an impersonal, objective, knower (*Smith 1979*), but many writers are cautious about providing recipes for carrying out research. However, it is widely agreed that the manner in which the research relationship is defined and developed is crucial. The dichotomy between the researcher as 'subject' and the researched as 'object', upheld in positivistic traditions, is rejected as the basis of feminist enquiry, and is therefore the central problem which feminist researchers must strive to overcome.

'... feminists must attempt to reject the scientist/person dichotomy and, in doing so, must endeavour to dismantle the power which exists between researchers and researched.' (*Stanley & Wise 1983, pp194-195*)

'The vertical relationship between researcher and 'research objects', the *view from above*, must be replaced by the *view from below*.' (Mies 1983, p123, *emphasis in the original*)

How feminist researchers are to redefine the research relationship in ways which ensure greater equality is still being discussed. Earlier concentration on finding the 'correct' feminist techniques of enquiry has given way to broader epistemological concerns. It is widely argued that once the epistemological ground has been cleared, the dichotomies of the 'traditional' research relationship fall away and knowledge can be produced in forms consistent with feminist practice; it is not the methods per se which are the key, but rather the orientation and behaviour of the researcher and by extension of the 'research objects' (Harding 1987; Stanley & Wise 1983). The research relationship is reconceptualised as one in which the inter-subjectivity of researcher and researched is the focus of enquiry and where the researcher takes a self-reflexive role in the research. In practice this means that 'the researcher herself must be placed within the frame of the picture she attempts to paint' (Harding 1987, p9). Thus the assumptions, beliefs and feelings of the researcher should 'be located in research behaviour' including 'an analytical concern with 'intellectual autobiography' (Stanley & Wise 1990, p23). In short the researcher is advocated to become a subject of her own research.

Such principles of self-interrogation and exposure are useful anti-dotes to the role of the researcher as 'distant expert' (providing they do not lead to paralysis or self-obsession!), but they do not guarantee a research relationship which is equal or where the researcher and the researched have common interests in the outcomes. The researcher's role is likely to be more extensive and comprehensive than the researched. The questions asked of the data by the researcher may or may not be shared by the researched. But, it is important to see oneself as part of the field and to be aware of differences which, as it were, set preconditions for establishing relationships and communication through the research process. For example, in this study, I was initially concerned that as a middle class woman with no personal experience of life in mining communities, I might be greeted with suspicion and perceived as an intruder. Worse still, I could be regarded as an inappropriate 'mouthpiece' for working class women's views. In fact, differences in our personal lives did not affect the warmth, support and open engagement of these women with the research. It is impossible to judge whether one has struggled hard enough to get inside the experience of others, other than by checking interpretations with them which I endeavoured to build in to the research

process. Whether closer to the experiences of research subjects, as I expected to be with some Greenham women, or starting from an acknowledgement of difference, the research relationship is best conceptualised as a negotiated reality. As such, assumptions in the feminist literature which rest in notions of the researched as powerless 'victims', have to be treated with caution.

In this research the confidence which women had gained from their involvement in political action spilled over into their participation in the research. For the most part they were neither surprised nor reticent about the fact that they had an important story to tell. Both they and others had established that before I came along. Involvement in protest had brought women into contact with many others from different backgrounds. Indeed the mining support group of which I became a member was only partially made up of 'miners' wives' and it was open to receiving people who were judged to be sympathetic and supportive to their cause. These women and others in the study told me that their willingness to help in the research and their trust in me as a researcher sprang largely from my known involvement in the same political actions. I did not then start from a position of being seen as an 'outsider' or 'distant expert', with one exception in relation to a Greenham group, which I discuss below. But where reciprocity in the research relationship is approximated, it might be argued that the danger of exploiting women is just as problematic as in traditional models of research.

'The researcher's role is always to gather information; thus the danger always exists of manipulating friendships to that end. Given that the power differences between researcher and researched cannot be completely eliminated, attempting to create a more equal relationship can paradoxically become exploitation and use.' (*Acker, Barry & Esseveld 1983, p428*)

Although the question of how one approaches the research relationship is primarily a methodological one which cannot be reduced to techniques of enquiry per se, the strategies used in research to build in checks and balances against exploitation are important. In this study many of the interviews were conducted with women with whom I had a prior friendship or with whom I developed a close relationship as a result of the research, for example those in the mining support group of which I became a member. Although this had the effect of blurring the research relationship, both for the women and for me, I would argue that it gave me a valuable opportunity to become immersed in a field which was controlled and defined by the women

themselves. In order to manage the possible tensions which I felt could arise from the 'insider' status accorded to me, it was important to re-establish from time to time that I was (also) a researcher carrying out interviews, taking part in certain discussions or meetings and documenting certain events with the research in mind. The women themselves were active in this process by referring me to information and to other women who could be helpful in the research.

Reminders that I was for certain purposes 'outside' as well as 'inside' the field were important in defining and re-defining my role as researcher and of being overtly honest about it. It was also important for me to draw a line between confidences which were given to me as a friend and those which women intended to be included as data in the research. This was established through the use of taped interviews in which I checked on what women were happy for me to quote (always anonymously). Thus the interviews with individuals or groups were clearly marked as research events, punctuating the flow of more inclusive relationships, but drawing on understandings which developed from them. Within a mutual understanding that the material from interviews would become research data, the data was generated in a style consistent with those feminist researchers who have argued for the researcher to be a participant in a dialogue rather than a detached questioner (*eg Oakley 1981a; Acker, Barry & Esseveld 1983*).

Arguably the very characteristics of so-called poor interviewing in traditional research methods textbooks - interviewer involvement, subjectivity, concern with the individual case rather than with statistical comparability - produce better conditions for finding out about people (*Oakley 1981a*). If this is the case, and I would support it based on this study, the researcher has a special responsibility to avoid substituting the 'expert' role for a more subtle 'manipulative' one. Although I was still in a position of power in defining areas for discussion, I endeavoured to keep the interviews as loosely structured, as open and reciprocal as possible in the manner suggested by Strauss and Corbin. They advocate a list of questions as a 'beginning focus' which must not 'foreclose on data possibilities, limit the amount and type of data collected or prevent the achievement of density and variation of concepts' (*Strauss and Corbin 1990, p180*). I would describe the process as an interactional one in which the women helped to map out the areas of the enquiry but where I had a special responsibility for charting the lines which were ultimately followed.



Others have demanded more from feminist researchers. For example it has been argued that research for women should involve them in defining the project, carrying it out and writing it up. In this respect collective action research has been upheld as an ideal where the research relationship is construed in such a way that all participants are both researchers and researched (*Mies 1983*). As a means to overcoming exploitation and power relations in research it has much to commend it, where it is practical and possible to achieve. As many feminist community projects have found, it is difficult to achieve non-hierarchical ways of working and to avoid specialisation of tasks even with those declared objectives at the heart of the organisation (*Brown 1992*). Research models based on such principles are likely to encounter similar problems, as I found in relation to one group involved in this study.

The case concerns a Greenham Group (the last active group in the area), some members of which were initially uncertain whether to take part in the research. At the first meeting with the group, different women interrogated the worth of the research, the purpose of doing it and the methods I had employed thus far which did not sound to be sufficiently feminist to some members of the group. In particular there was disagreement about whether women in the group should agree to individual interviews (as I had also requested) without the group's permission. Individual interviews were viewed suspiciously as a method which confirmed the controlling power of the researcher. It is fair to say that the group was split over these issues just as it was over whether I should join an impending group visit to Greenham. Some women felt that this would be too intrusive; others that it would be beneficial to the research.

From these unpromising beginnings, in which some members of the group and I, as we subsequently learnt, had felt threatened by one another, we decided on a study of the group which would be based on a participative method through which there would be joint control over the process and joint ownership and interpretation of the data. In reflecting on how successful this was in practice, there was general agreement that we had only partially redefined the research relationship. For example, the transcripts which I toiled to provide before each subsequent discussion were rarely read and commented upon by group members. The constituency of the group altered over the four research meetings which we held, indicating varying levels of commitment or at least the difficulty of fitting such a commitment into otherwise busy lives. The responsibility for synthesising and interpreting the data fell to me, although the script was open for discussion and approval in a final meeting. My role in the discussions was different and best described as a facilitator rather than a full participant. This was

inevitable since I was not part of the group's history. The group had taken an active part in defining the areas covered in the discussions and I was drawn into the group for purposes of the research but I also occupied a separate space. This was apparent at the post-mortem meeting which marked the end of the study and co-incidentally the finale of the group.

As the group reflected upon their initial reaction to the research and what it had meant for them as it had unfolded, it became apparent that the research had been a vehicle for bringing to the surface tensions in the group and uncertainties about its future. As several women made clear, being involved in research at this time in the life of the group was experienced both as a threat and an opportunity.

**'I think a safe explanation in terms of the group, ... is that there were actually women in this group who were politicised about research ... but I think there are other explanations to do with the group and what has been going on in the group and you got caught up in them. There were quite a lot of debates that were going on in the group which were not explicit and you became a catalyst for some of that.'**

**'I know from my experience of youth work that kids will be close for a few years in adolescence and then they'll grow out of it and they'll go their different ways and they won't need that group any more. Its not because the group was of no value but it's served its purpose and maybe that goes back to what you stirred up when you volunteered to research it. Maybe there was a panic that there was going to be nothing to research, that the cracks were beginning to show.'**

**'But maybe some people hoped to get out of the research the intimacy or whatever it was they felt they were lacking before, or there was just the possibility of making things explicit that had been bugging them for a long time, so the research held some kind of hope but also threat. Maybe the research was positively dealing with unfinished business.'**

The practical achievement of the research for the group was that it facilitated discussions, which though not foreseen by anyone involved, brought about an open and constructive decision to end the group. The research was in effect its swan song. From my perspective, the group members' willingness to include me in their reflections of the group's experience was a valuable opportunity to explore in greater depth a number of themes which had been signalled by women I had interviewed previously. Thus although the interests of the researched and the researcher coincided in this case, they were not identical. The group defined this as a study in its own right (which it was for them) but I was concerned to locate it within a project which had been more broadly conceived. This produced some tensions in the writing up of the thesis largely because the group wanted the write-up to stand as whole piece - a reference to the potential power of the researcher in altering the meaning of experiences shared and validated by the researched. The in-depth analysis of the group undoubtedly provides rich documentary evidence of the life of a Greenham support group (presented in chapter VIII) and would have been best complemented by a similar study of a mining support group. However I did not find it possible to replicate the same method of enquiry elsewhere in the study.

My attempt to introduce it into a mining support group with whom I was taping discussions during the same period as I was researching with the Greenham group, was not successful. The attitude of the mining support group was that they were happy to be involved, and they welcomed me into the group, but they did not feel comfortable with a model of research which demanded the same kind of involvement as that which suited the Greenham group. I did not feel it appropriate to persist in negotiating such a model with women who were already giving generously of time taken out of regular weekly meetings. This serves to show that feminist ideals of participative research have to be tempered by what is practical and acceptable to research subjects. As others have pointed out, expecting the same level of participation by women in a study is not always realistic, 'because the pre-conditions of such participation, some similarity of interest, ideology, and language between researcher and researched is sometimes absent' (*Acker, Barry & Essveld 1983, p425*).

If feminist enquiry is narrowly conceptualised as that which is modelled on action research for the purpose of consciousness raising (the participative process and the equalisation of relationships as it were, the main goals of the research), it would be incumbent on the researcher to work with women to develop such pre-conditions, whatever the difficulties. A more permissive view of feminist enquiry and one that

accords well with a grounded theory approach such as I adopted in this research, is to treat 'subjects' as active agents in the development of the research and to aim for reciprocity in the research relationship, whilst acknowledging the somewhat distinctive role of the researcher. To return to earlier themes explored above, my intention was to develop a study 'for women' rather than merely 'adding them in', but within the obvious limitations of my interest to weave the experiences of the women into a larger thematic whole. It is difficult to see how any attempt to document women's experiences, even if produced under prime conditions for equality in the research relationship, could be otherwise.

'While feminists have argued against the need to objectify the subjects of research, it does not seem impossible to escape objectification entirely ... The research may be justified on the grounds that it will be socially useful when applied or it will provide the weak with knowledge, and thus the means to struggle. The objects of research can be treated with honesty and the engagement of research made plain, but it does not seem possible to avoid some objectification and control of the knowledge produced.' (*Ramazanoglu 1987, p10*)

### **The Research Process and the Women in the Study**

As suggested above, grounded theory does not require traditional sampling techniques for its development. It advocates the development and testing of research questions as an iterative process, the subjects of the study actively engaged in that process, the data an on-going source of directions which are taken in the research. The women in this study were drawn into it, using my own and other women's networks, this mutual selection becoming more directed as certain questions arose in the enquiry. No one who was approached refused to be involved. All the women who participated are included since it would not be appropriate to distinguish a pilot from the main study as is the case with more traditional methodologies. In individual and group interviews a range of areas for exploration were established early on (Appendix 8), but the flexible and exploratory nature of the study meant that standardisation would have been restrictive. The value of the method must be judged by the quality of the data as it supports the conceptual development of the study rather than by traditional statistical tests.

A systematic account of a long period of intensive fieldwork is always hard to produce. Inevitably it is selective and presents an orderly picture which does not fully capture the complex and at times 'messy' processes involved. At the risk of over simplification the following account explains how the research questions arose and were pursued in relationship to the constituency of women who participated in the study. This was a process in which my own rather naive assumptions about women protestors in both the miners' strike and at Greenham were considerably overhauled. It was also one which promoted a clearer understanding of some of the problems of feminist theory and political practice.

At the start of the study I drew on my own experience of involvement during the heady days of big actions at Greenham and in the period of the miners' strike up to Christmas of 1984, when although the struggle was getting very tough, women still had some hopes of winning.<sup>1</sup> Thus, although aware of some of the obvious differences between the two protests, I approached it with memories of a climate in which solidaristic ideals had for a time prevailed. My initial perspective did not rest in a belief in women's common oppression, but more in an optimism, drawn from the evidence of these two struggles, about women's strength and determination which seemed to be a binding force in their respective protests and a means of building bridges between them. As the study developed, important differences began to emerge in the way that women defined and contextualised their experience of protest, both in the height of engagement and beyond. The research questions which arose were all in some sense related to this overarching theme.

### **Women from Mining Support Groups in the Study**

In all, 32 women who had been active in the miners' strike participated in the study in either group or individual interviews (sometimes both).<sup>2</sup> Women were, in the main, members of 4 mining support groups which were still active (although not necessarily of the groups to which they had belonged in the strike). They were drawn from Northumberland and County Durham, but with a much greater weighting towards the

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<sup>1</sup> *The birth of my son early in 1985 meant that I did not directly experience changes at Greenham and I witnessed the end of the miners' strike very much from the sidelines.*

<sup>2</sup> *Biographical details of 20 individual women are provided in Appendix 1.*

latter because the women's networks in Northumberland had almost totally faded by the time of the study, and also because the research was more 'bedded down' in County Durham. Women are located in the text by fictitious names and as members of groups to which they belonged at the time of the study (also with fictional names). A description of the whole 'sample', within the framework of support groups, usefully precedes the explanation of directions taken in the research.

### **Groups in the Study:**

***Highhill Support Group*** (County Durham): Meeting weekly, the group had maintained a regular membership of 9 women. During the strike there had been 40, and 43 families to feed. Located in an isolated hill top village, the group felt that they were a 'little community within a community'. All were from mining families in the village, although it was no longer a pit village and their husbands were travelling miners.

*Participation in the study: Two 'research' discussions with the group, one a taped discussion with 9 women; individual interviews with 7 women; attendance by me at 5 meetings.*

***Castlehill Support Group*** (County Durham): Meeting fortnightly, the group had a regular membership of 12 women and 2 men. The membership was drawn from several villages and towns, the group having emerged from a much larger parent group for local support groups during the strike. Just before the study started, the group had diminished in size because of a split which occurred. It was an open group which included 3 regulars who were not members of mining families, one of them myself.

*Participation in the study: Long-term involvement over the whole period of the research, the group providing information, insights and contacts. My own involvement in this group was much more than that of a researcher. Because of this, the women preferred to meet me for purposes of taped interviews mostly in two's or three's. In this manner, 11 women participated.*

***Valley View Support Group*** (County Durham): Meeting fortnightly, the group had a regular membership of 7 women. During the strike there had been 30. Located in a mining village, close to a pit, there had been 300 families to feed

during the strike. The group was closely related to the Castlehill group from which it broke away, after a period of amalgamation following the strike. Membership was closed to 'non-miners' wives'.

*Participation in the Study: One taped discussion with 5 women.*

**Seascape Support Group** (Northumberland): Meeting occasionally with only 3 regular members left. During the strike there had been 45. Located in a town, near two coastal pits, there had been 1700 miners to support during the strike. The group had been women-only during the strike and its members were all from mining families in the broad vicinity of the town.

*Participation in the Study: one taped discussion with the three remaining members and one individual interview with the Chair of the group during the strike.*

In addition to these group members, three national officials of Women Against Pit Closure, one based in Northumberland and two in Sheffield gave taped interviews. There were other women who were helpful in informal discussion and in providing background information in the early stages of the research, but the 'formal' inclusion of the women above was integral to the developing directions of the research.

### **Conceptual Directions and Lines of Enquiry**

It became clear at the exploratory stage that it would be essential to include women's reflections of their action in the strike in order to understand what had happened to them in the period beyond. Informal discussion with women suggested that there was widespread agreement that women were united with the men in a class war, but that women's autonomy from men had varied. The first two groups to be included in the study in a formal sense were Highhill and Seascape, the latter describing much tenser relationships with the union both during the strike and after. However, both groups described their experiences in the strike as an assertion of women's political voices in the context of traditional patriarchal gender relations in mining communities. At this early stage the data suggested a 'partial unity' in the strike which required further checking, as did women's understandings of class and gender relations. Here I was concerned with the way in which women contextualised their experiences of the strike as a means to understanding the constraints faced by women in keeping their action

going (discussed in Chapter IV). In particular I wanted to explore how far those problems were the result of women's class experience or opposition from men, or, as was more likely, a complex interaction of the two. The inclusion of women in the Castlehill and Valley View Support Groups, ensured a reasonable spread of women's experiences from which to make interpretations and to develop a synthesis.

Within a study which focused relatively quickly on the conceptual directions discussed above, two areas emerged as important lines of enquiry. The first concerned the split which had occurred between the Castlehill and Valley View groups, which enabled some amplification of the process of fragmentation which beset the women's efforts to remain active after the strike (discussed in Chapter V11). Although a matter of some sensitivity to the Castlehill women, they agreed in the end that I should 'get the story' from Valley View as well.

A second line of enquiry concerned relationships between women in mining communities and Greenham women. Initial data from interviews with women in mining communities was not strong enough by itself to draw conclusions about the connections which women made across the protests. However, there were hints that Greenham women were thought to be different, although their action was mainly approved of. The opportunity to investigate this further arose as the result of an initiative to bring the women together for a conference to plan a day of action (under the auspices of LINKS, described in chapter V1). Interviews with women from the Castlehill group and some Greenham supporters after the conference allowed more detailed exploration of the question of class as it affects relationships between women.

### **Greenham Supporters in the Study**

In all 33 women who had actively supported the Greenham protest participated in the study, of which 22 gave separate interviews.<sup>3</sup> Because of the widespread demise of Greenham support groups by the time of this study, only one group is included. Participants (whether individual or group) were drawn from the cities of Newcastle Upon Tyne and Durham, and surrounding areas. Women in the text are located by fictitious names as are any references to groups to which they refer. The exception is the Greenham Group, who requested total anonymity.

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<sup>3</sup> *Biographical details of these 22 women are provided in Appendix 2.*



## **Individual Women in the Study**

My first contacts were with seven women I had known through our mutual membership in a group which had ceased to exist early in 1985, referred to in the text as 'the Greenham Purples'. Through their networks, I established contact with six other women, who between them had belonged to four other very active groups which had all died at about the same time. Of these, two women were recent visitors to Greenham and they suggested further contacts with women who were still (as far as they knew) active supporters and still visiting Greenham (either as individuals or by accompanying the surviving Greenham Group). Thus one direction which 'the sample' was taking through mutual negotiation was towards some balance of women who had ceased to be active Greenham supporters (13) and those who were still (or had been more recently) active (9: and in addition the Greenham Group). However, there were other, overlapping, reasons for following up particular leads to women, related to emerging conceptual questions and lines of enquiry, which are discussed below.

## **The Greenham Group**

At the time of the study, the group had been in existence for almost two years, its membership still including a core of women who had been there at its inception in September 1986. The history and life of the group is developed in some detail in Chapter V111.

*Participation in the study: I was involved in six meetings with the group, two negotiation meetings and four taped discussions. In all 13 women participated, although not consistently. 11 women participated in the first taped discussion; 7 at the second; 8 at the third; and 7 at the fourth. 5 women were present throughout. In addition 2 of these women and 4 others who had had some association with this group participated in individual interviews (these are included in the total of 22 individual interviews).*

## **Conceptual Directions and Lines of Enquiry**

The conceptual development of the study, if at times descending into buzzing confusion when I moved between women of both protests, began early on to move

along parallel lines. Thus early interviews with Greenham supporters suggested the importance of exploring women's reflections of involvement in Greenham in order to understand the pathways they had chosen (feminist or otherwise) in the period beyond. It was late in the study before repeated analysis of the data confirmed three distinct orientations to Greenham (discussed in Chapter V). The inclusion of women in the study whose experiences of Greenham varied in this way arose from the pursuit of certain lines of enquiry relating to gender unity and class difference in women's relationships, cutting across both protests but also throwing up specific questions in each case.

A central line of enquiry which emerged was the extent to which Greenham feminism was attractive to supporters and whether this had affected the development of support groups. It was apparent early on that Greenham had been experienced in different ways and that the study should seek to involve women from different peace/political backgrounds in order to uncover some of this complexity. As the study progressed, questions about the relationship of women to Greenham feminism focused more closely on the idealisation of women's relationships which the protest was seen to promulgate. One suggestive finding was that groups which endeavoured to combine peace action with consciousness raising had run into difficulties, partly, at least, because of fragile assumptions about gender unity. The data was much strengthened in this respect by the participative study of the Greenham Group, through which members sought to examine such assumptions in relation to difficulties and frustrations they had experienced over time as a feminist group. A process of fading idealism concerning gender unity is uncovered, which builds upon similar experiences of women in other feminist Greenham groups (discussed in Chapter V111).

As the study moved into the complex terrain lying underneath the apparent unifying forces at work at the height of the Greenham protest, a further line of enquiry (as explained above) concerned the effect of class difference on relationships between Greenham supporters and mining support groups. The study was strengthened in this respect by the inclusion of Greenham supporters whose close proximity to one of the heartlands of strike activity, had brought them up against some of the problems of supporting the strike and of relating to women in mining communities.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *I am grateful to my supervisor, Professor Richard Brown, for suggesting useful leads in this respect.*

## **Conclusion**

No claim is made that the study effectively closes off all possible interpretations of women's role in the 1984-5 miners' strike and in the Greenham protest. It is not intended to be a definitive work of that kind. Rather it attempts to weave together the experiences of women, as exemplifications of a process in which the themes of gender and class arise from the data and inform it. Although impossible to avoid some objectification of women's experiences, the thesis relies heavily on the voices of women in the study and their words are substantially represented in the text of chapters IV-VIII. The following chapter examines the weaknesses of feminist theory in advancing our understanding of differences in women's experiences and interests as a precursor to the exposition of such differences in relation to women protestors in Greenham and in the miners' strike.

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## CHAPTER III

### FEMINIST THEORY AND POLITICAL PRACTICE

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#### Introduction

The main purpose of this chapter is to consider the difficult and complex relationship between feminist theory and political practice, a complexity which is compounded by a number of competing feminist theories which seek to identify causes of women's oppression in society and to define ways in which women should combat their oppression. There is no easy relationship between the prescriptions of such theories and the political struggles which women take up. Is this because such theories are too abstract and in their disembodied form bears no resemblance to the experiences of women in their everyday life? Or is it because they are too narrow and partisan, reflecting only the white middle class interests of the women who tend to produce them? Has the tendency to conflate feminism with 'the women's movement' blinded our vision of what feminism is or could be?

These questions and other related questions concerning the development of feminist knowledge, now prominent in the feminist literature, have been prompted in part by the claims of black writers and activists that feminist knowledge and contemporary women's movements have been dominated by the interests of middle class women. It has been convincingly argued that feminist theory (if defined by the writings of the feminist academic establishment) has been limited by a refusal to engage with different forms of oppression experienced by women whose material circumstances and histories differ, particularly black women and working class women - real differences which when denied constitute a form of racism and elitism. Correspondingly it has been argued that the women's movement has benefited only those women who are already privileged in society and has failed to make any substantial difference to the vast majority of women.

Not all feminists have relinquished the idea that there is a common womanhood, a concept which had particular resonance in the development of the women's movement in the 1960s and 70s and which influenced the development of radical and socialist theories of women's oppression. Indeed in the early 1980s the view that women are essentially different and superior to men was argued with considerable force in the pro-

women writings of cultural/ecological feminists and it has a certain currency in some understandings of the Greenham protest. However there has also been a shift away from that concept towards an understanding of the different ways in which women experience oppression. The political implication of this shift for feminism is significant, but need not be daunting. As Elizabeth Spelman points out:

'...it is only if we pay attention to how we differ that we come to an understanding of what we have in common.' (*Spelman 1988, p112*)

As this study developed, differences in the way that women defined and contextualised their experiences came to the fore, both in relation to the Greenham protest and between Greenham women and women in mining communities. The thesis seeks to chart those differences and to explore their significance for feminism. One of the precepts of grounded theory is that engagement with the literature should be guided by the research question as it becomes more focused through the data. In this sense existing theory becomes another sort of data from which it is reasonable to ask questions and to check understandings so long as this process does not blinker or impede understanding of the primary data (*Strauss & Corbin, 1990*).

Guided by the data, I went back to feminist theories (liberal, radical and socialist) to examine their assumptions about women's experience and their prescriptions for women's political organisation. This taxonomy of feminist theories might be viewed as dated, and some would argue that it has always been an over-simplification of wide ranging and over-lapping feminist positions (*Oakley 1981*). However, it was one pointed to by the data, as a means of understanding women's varying orientations to political action and some of the difficulties which were experienced in trying to make links across protest (further discussed in Chapter VI).

The interplay between primary data and literature will be pursued throughout the thesis, particularly in terms of understandings offered by feminist writers of aspects of the two protests. This chapter will argue the more general case, that feminist theories, for different reasons, have not attended sufficiently to diversity in women's experiences of oppression and have therefore offered limited, and at times unrealistic, prescriptions for political action. At the same time I share the position taken by Phillips (amongst others) that concern with diversity should not obliterate 'an aspiration or impulse towards universality ... a politics of greater generality and alliance' (*Phillips 1992, p27*).

## **Liberal Feminism**

### **A. Introduction**

Liberal feminism is arguably the least radical perspective on women's position in society, although it has been suggested that it has radical potential (*Eisenstein 1981*). It is in some ways the most optimistic since it is based on the belief that women's rights can be achieved without major structural changes in society. The problem is variously expressed as one of enabling women like men to express their humanity or personhood. What this might mean is open to interpretation, although, initially the notion of humanity or personhood was founded on a belief in rationality and the liberal ideals of human dignity, autonomy, equality and individual self fulfilment (*Jagger 1983*). Jagger argues that feminism owes a great deal to liberalism via such ideals and that whatever the imperfections of liberal feminism, liberal ideals are worth retaining for feminism. This view is interesting since it reflects a wide consensus amongst many middle class feminists, whatever their persuasion.

'..the dominant traditions of feminism are couched in terms of morality, justice, or equal rights, relying on a notion of the self-evident fairness of distributing rights and opportunities equally among humans.' (*Barrett 1983, p202*)

The problem is that these principles cannot work for women as a whole unless they start out from the same position in society. Under present conditions, one women's self fulfilment might well be at the expense of another's. Neither are all men in a position to take advantage of ideals of fairness in a society in which access to power and opportunity is unequally distributed. The question is how could equal rights be secured without major structural changes?

An important effect of the failure to provide a structural analysis of inequality is that liberal feminism ignores differences in women's material circumstances and speaks of women as if such differences did not matter. This is inevitable in a body of thought which argues for the primacy of the individual.

'Liberal individualism is both ontological and ethical. It involves seeing the individual as primary, as more 'real' or fundamental than human society and its institutions and structures. It also involves attaching a

higher moral value to the individual than to society or any collective group. In this way of thinking the individual comes *before* society in every sense.' (*Arblaster 1984, p15*)

Liberal feminism sets out to assert women's right to a place in that vision. For some critics this means that the liberal feminist ideal is one of a sex-blind androgynous society, which may seem attractive to some, but is unattainable (*Jagger 1983*). Such an ideal is cynically read by feminists of other persuasions to mean 'why can't a women be more like a man?' (*Elshtain 1981, p228*). The argument is that since rationality was construed as a masculine characteristic which women lacked, largely through lack of educational opportunities, then liberal feminism exhorts women to become more like men in order to improve their status (*McNeil 1987*). But whilst liberal feminism has argued for legal and educational changes which would make possible equality of opportunity (between women and men), it has never totally succumbed to the notion of 'masculinised woman'.

## **B. Woman: Sexual Weakling or Rational Being?**

Wollstonecraft, seen by many as writing the manifesto for liberal feminism, though not necessarily for all forms of feminism, argued for women to be allowed to express their humanity through the development of reason, in which respect, she argued, they were not naturally different to men. In making this argument she applied the broader political ideology of liberalism the main ingredients of which were a belief in the free market as the best economic model, individualism, self-interest, and environmentalism. All of these were linked to a belief in the inherent rationality of the individual which though it could be corrupted by social injustice, as for example in the ignorance induced by lack of education, could emerge under conditions of equality. These ideas, which had their roots in the 18th century philosophical revolution of the Enlightenment, have been persuasive and influential in Western political thought and therefore not surprisingly in the development of feminism.

Wollstonecraft developed her thesis on women's claim to be equal in respect of the principles of liberalism partly by examining some of the prejudices of its earlier proponents, and in particular Rousseau, who found it difficult to overcome traditionally conservative views of women in his otherwise egalitarian views of society. Wollstonecraft took him to task for his conception of women as sexual beings whose education should confirm the virtues appropriate to that state, such as chastity,

gentleness and obedience. Rousseau's analysis in 'Emile', which formed the basis of Wollstonecraft's complaint, advocated an education for men which increased their rationality, an achievement of culture over nature. Wollstonecraft questioned the premise that women should be offered a restricted and different education which on her analysis ensured their continuing role as sexual weaklings rather than as full human beings. In order to overcome women's existing weakness, dependence and emotionality she advocated equality of civil rights and equality of education so that women as well as men could enter their chosen profession. However one strong theme in her argument was that reforms which enabled women to express their rationality would make them better mothers, since this would still be their most likely career.

'As the rearing of children, that is, the laying of a foundation of sound health both of body and mind in the rising generation, has justly been insisted on as the peculiar destination of women, the ignorance that incapacitates them must be contrary to the order of things. And I contend that their minds can take in much more, and ought to so, or they never will become sensible mothers.' (*Wollstonecraft 1975 edition, p313*)

Charvet defends Wollstonecraft on the grounds that she was clearly not reaffirming the dependent relationship of women in marriage and the family but was rather envisaging how such relationships would change under conditions of equality. He summarises her vision in the following way:

'Women's primary 'task' is that of a human being to realize her potential for rational and virtuous conduct. However, her destiny as a human being can be fulfilled, although it need not be fulfilled, in her function as a wife and mother.' (*Charvet 1982, p21*)

Even so, Wollstonecraft and other liberal thinkers who followed (e.g. J Stuart Mill and H Taylor) qualified the general principle that women should have a right to education and economic independence with an acceptance of the natural division of labour through which women would take on a caring, domestic role. That women should do this as rational beings rather than as sexual weaklings was seen to benefit society as a whole. In one sense the message of early liberal feminist thinkers was clear. Women were not to be seen as naturally different to men because both have the capacity to



develop reason. On the other hand, Mill and Taylor exemplify a tendency which has continued to the present day of defining rationality as a masculine accomplishment (culture over nature) which women must strive for in order to be truly human (*Gatens 1991*).

When liberal feminism flowered into a women's movement it carried forward the message that the locus of women's struggle should be the public realm as the arena in which women could lay claim to their capacity to 'be more like a man.' Some of the central battles of the 19th century middle class women's movements were centred on women's access to forms of education and the professions, such as medicine, from which they were excluded, and such battles continued into the 20th century. However, there is much evidence to suggest that as the 19th century developed, middle class women and working class women were in different ways constrained by, and active agents in proclaiming, a definition of womanhood which contrasted their 'softer' and morally superior virtues with those of men (*e.g. Banks 1981; Taylor 1983*).

Liberal feminism, both in its early forms and in the development of women's movements which endeavoured to enact its principles was contradictory on the question of whether women would achieve their humanity through competing with men or through greater fulfilment in the domestic realm. This contradiction can be seen in the writings of Betty Friedan, generally regarded as the most important contemporary exponent of liberal feminism.

### **C. The Personhood of Women**

'The personhood of women, that's what it's really all about... and real equality for women and men. Twenty years ago, breaking through the feminist mystique, it seemed as if the personhood of women meant only what a woman does and is, herself, not as a husband's wife, children's mother, housewife, server of her family. So, some of my feminist sisters react with a disconcerted sense of betrayal when I say we will come to a dead end if we keep on talking in terms of women alone.'  
(*Friedan 1983, p86*)

Friedan, is seen by her critics to have done a U-Turn in 'The Second Stage'. Her first book, 'The Feminine Mystique', published twenty years earlier and widely read, had

argued that women should escape the trap of the powerful and mystifying image of femininity and domestic isolation by entering the public world of men. Only then could they hope to achieve fulfilment on an equal footing with men. As founder of the largest arm of the modern women's movement in America (The National Organisation for Women, founded in 1966) she advocated that women should campaign for equal rights, lobby politicians and put forward their own political candidates. This had a wide appeal to professional women and middle class women who joined NOW and other similar equal rights organisations in their thousands.

In the 'Second Stage' Friedan worries that the 'feminist mystique' has overtaken the 'feminine mystique' and is just as confusing and damaging to women, because in her view, it presents a damning image of motherhood and family life. She argues that real equality will exist when women feel they have the right to have as well as the right to not have children. Friedan is basically optimistic about the achievements of the women's movement for women to compete on equal terms with men. For her the battles outlined in 'The Feminine Mystique' have been all but won. But she claims this should not be at the expense of family life and the more caring values normally associated with women. Again in optimistic vein she sees these female values increasingly being adopted by men both in the home and in organisations. She outlines the political programme for the 'second stage' in the following question:

'How do we transcend the polarisation between women and women and between women and men, to achieve the new human wholeness that is the promise of feminism, and get on with solving the concrete, practical, everyday problems of living, working and loving as equal persons? This is the personal and political business of the second stage.' (*Friedan 1983, p 41*)

For her critics, this view of the personal and political business of the second stage, represented a retreat from the radical impact of modern feminism and from her own earlier insights into the oppressive nature of the ideology of motherhood and family life. They question whether so much has really changed for most women in modern America that the 'feminine mystique' is now a part of history. It has been convincingly argued that 'The Second Stage' :

'...represents a liberal's response to the failure of liberalism and a feminist's response to the setbacks of feminism.' (*Stacey 1986, p224*)

The elusive quest for women to capture their personhood, as exemplified in the work of Betty Friedan, reflects the basic problem of liberal feminist thought, that women's role/nature as carers in society must not be lost as they cross over into the public world of men. Consistent with liberal values of individual freedom and liberty, what matters is that a woman has the choice to enter the public realm, and not that women as a whole will rock society by taking it!

Friedan argues that the achievement of women's rights in the public sphere has painfully brought to the fore the need for women and men to re-engage to overcome 'sex-role polarisation'. As such, it fed into the backlash of the New Right which asserts that feminism has been a destructive force in society and has misled women about the true pathway to self-fulfilment. Susan Faludi analyses the 'backlash decade' in America as a series of conscious and successful strategies to splinter earlier collective campaigning efforts of women.

'While the 1980s was an era that trumpeted the 'one person can make a difference credo', this strategy proved a blind alley on the road to equal rights. To remove the backlash wall rather than to thrash continually against it, women needed to be armed with more than their privately held grievances and goals. Indeed to instruct each woman to struggle alone was to set each woman up, yet again, for defeat' (*Faludi 1992, p429*).

But the individualism at the heart of liberal feminist thought leaves it open to the 'one person can make a difference credo'. What perhaps was lost during the 1980s was the potential contradiction between individualism and collective action, which Eisenstein considered to be a radicalising force in liberal feminism (*Eisenstein 1981*).

#### **D. Personhood and Difference**

'Personhood', however it is to be achieved, expresses the concept of the abstract individual. It encapsulates the liberal values of autonomy, individual self expression and self fulfilment which have a wide currency in societies built upon the liberal ideal,

although in practice they remain ideals to all but a privileged few. The problem is that liberal feminism upholds the principles of formal equality and freedom which in the end place responsibility for change upon individuals without recognising the inequalities which divide them. Widening social opportunities and thus individual choice may seem reasonable enough if no thought is given to competing interests and the differential distribution of power in society.

The political problem for feminists who have been attracted by liberal feminist ideals is that they may conflate their own interests as women with women as a whole, without becoming conscious of their own advantage. To take one example, we can refer to the work of Anne Oakley, who argues that 'feminism is about putting women first' (*Oakley 1981, p335*), but whose semi-autobiography contains a passage which illustrates the divisions which can underlie such a position.

'My Ph.D., which took four and a half years from start to finish, was accomplished largely in the evenings and at weekends during the six (later nine) hours a week when we hired a series of decrepit ladies to watch Adam and Emily downstairs while I ruminated upstairs. One of them, a Mrs Stewart, lied about her age and at four thirty when I came downstairs to take over, was already fixing her hat in front of the mirror. The next, a Mary Hill, was lacking most of her internal organs, and was consequently always catching the children's ailments. She gave up on medical advice, but at least she did take the children to the park a few times first.' (*Oakley 1984, p125*)

The passage will no doubt be read uncomfortably by many middle-class feminists who, like myself, will find it resonant of the gap between theory and practice in our own lives. We are reminded by Oakley that when we speak of women's interests, it may be women like ourselves that we have most in mind. Oakley's myopia in this respect can be contrasted with the self-conscious discomfort of Virginia Woolf in her reflections on attending a conference of the Women's Co-operative Guild in June 1913.

'All of these questions - perhaps this was at the bottom of it - which matter so intensely to the people here, questions of sanitation and education and wages, this demand for an extra shilling, for another year at school, for eight hours instead of nine behind a counter or in a mill, leave me, in my own blood and bones, untouched. If every reform was

granted at this very instant it would not touch one hair of my comfortable capitalistic head ... (she supposes she might identify with their interests through imagination) ... But after all the imagination is largely the child of flesh. One could not be Mrs Giles of Durham because one's body had never stood at the washing tub; one's hands had never wrung and scrubbed and chopped up whatever meat may be that makes a miner's supper.' (*Woolf, introductory letter in Davies 1977, [first published 1915], pxx-xiii*)

Liberal feminists, more than any other group of feminists, have been castigated for avoiding the discomfort illustrated by Woolf's experience and for promoting principles which serve the interests of white middle class women. This may be an overstatement of the case, since some of the political strategies endorsed by liberal feminists, such as broadly based organising and mounting militant campaigns for equal rights, have brought them into collective action with many different groups of women.

However, as historical examples show, collective action in pursuit of reform can best be understood as fragile strategic coalition rather than as unity of interest (*Cott 1986*). Angela Davis' analysis of the way in which the women's suffrage organisations in America reneged on their earlier alliance with black abolitionists when black men were later struggling to retain their right to the vote, and turned instead to racist arguments to support the white women's case for the vote, provides one such telling example (*Davis 1982*). Another concerns the class differences which were a source of conflict in the suffrage movement in Britain, a movement which we now know was as much inspired by working class women as by those middle class women who gained fame in the height of the campaign (*Liddington & Norris 1978*). The re-telling of women's history indicates that liberal feminists have been drawn into tactical alliance with other groups of women, but that their belief in individualism has not been severely shaken by the experience.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>To elaborate the point, Mrs Pankhurst and Christabel Pankhurst, at one time spearheading the daring exploits of the WSPU and inciting other women to militancy, became firm supporters of conservatism and allies of the Government in the first world war. Although an early member of the ILP, Mrs Pankhurst had taken the view that votes for women meant on the same terms as men, namely on the basis of property. She eventually broke with her other daughter, Sylvia who tried to develop a link between the women's cause and socialism. Mrs Pankhurst eventually joined the Conservative party. The Pankhurst family provides an example in minuscule of the tensions which existed in the suffrage movement, when we bear in mind the deep divisions between those who saw it as a struggle which could advance women's

For many critics of liberal feminism such a belief is a convenient one for middle class women because it coincides with their interest (*Elshtain 1981*). It might be argued that reforms achieved by middle class feminists (though not by them alone), such as those in the area of education, family law and women's health have been advantageous to all women, even if reforms alone cannot overcome the deeper structural inequalities of gender, class and race. But the specific problems of black women and working class women are barely recognised and cannot be analytically tackled through a body of thought which rests upon concepts of formal equality and individualism. The limitations of such a position are clearly stated by Allison Jagger:

'When it was first formulated, this conception of equality was extremely progressive, and indeed it is progressive in many contexts today. It also has serious drawbacks. The most obvious is that real human beings are not abstract individuals but people of determinate race, sex, age, who have lived different histories, who participate in different systems of social relations, and who have different capacities and different needs. But the liberal insistence on 'formal' equality, which comes from viewing people as abstract individuals, makes it easy not only to ignore these varying needs but even to claim that satisfying the needs of a certain group would amount to 'reverse discrimination' or giving special privileges to certain groups of women.' (*Jagger 1983, p47*)<sup>2</sup>

## **E. Conclusion**

Liberal feminist analysis is not primarily concerned with women as a category or with the differences which might exist between women. The concept of formal equality is far removed from the lives of many women and obscures the real differences of opportunity which women experience as they attempt to make changes in their lives.

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*interests by achieving the vote for some women, and those who felt that it should be a fight to achieve the vote for all women and all men.*

<sup>2</sup> Such a limitation is apparent from equal opportunities policies which have been adopted in the public and private sectors during the 1980s in Britain. Whatever the weaknesses of such policies, and they are legion, they are intended only to set the conditions in which individuals can compete on merit for employment. As such they are unlikely to do more than to create a climate of justice and fairness which will benefit very few members of disadvantaged groups.

Thus, whilst it has been a force for change in the status of women, it offers few insights on structural inequality or remedies with which black women and working class women can easily identify, even if some of the causes which women pursue collectively over-ride such differences from time to time.

But the ideals of liberal feminism live on and this study suggests they were most potent for those middle class Greenham supporters who were searching for a feminism which combined freedom of choice and autonomy with aspirations for a 'women's space' (the latter resonant of radical feminist ideals). By contrast women activists in the miners' strike were concerned with the lack of opportunity for themselves and their families in working class communities under threat. Liberal feminist principles of equality were far removed from their descriptions of the constraints on working class women's lives in mining communities and of the possibilities of breaking free of those constraints. Radical feminism, for different reasons, overlooks the differences in women's lives and assumes a common womanhood.

## **Radical Feminism**

### **A. Introduction**

Radical feminism, as a distinctive brand of feminism, emerged partly as a reaction to the frustration experienced by women activists on the left of American politics in the 1960s, their demands on behalf of women being refused or trivialised by male left wing groups. Other women who were unconvinced by the reformist politics of liberal organisations such as NOW also joined the break away groups through which women from the New Left began to organise around a new politics for women (*Nicholson 1986*). Developing out of the work of some early writers (*e.g. Firestone 1974; Millett 1971*), radical feminists in the 70's argued that women had been oppressed throughout history and through every conceivable social and political order. From this perspective, patriarchy and not capitalism was defined as the root cause of women's oppression.

'Radical feminism (from the United States: British radical-feminist history surfaced later in the decade), offered a breath-takingly audacious understanding of relations between the sexes in history. Sexual divisions prefigure those of class was the message that Shulamith Firestone and Kate Millet flung at a male-dominated

intellectual world; patriarchy the concept which they restored to the centre of debates around social formations and social relations between the sexes.' (*Alexander 1987, p164*)

Having defined men as the problem, radical feminists argued for a feminist politics which went far beyond the surface analysis of the equal rights tradition to all areas of life in which men controlled women. In particular they redefined the political terrain to include areas of life which had been regarded as non-political and private, such as motherhood, romantic love and sexual relationships. Their use of the slogan 'the personal is political' was intended to put personal relations between men and women at the forefront of the political agenda and also to signify the importance of a political theory and practice for women which grew out of their feelings and personal experiences. What women were expected to uncover through consciousness raising groups was that 'the problem which had no name' (Friedan's evocative phrase of the 1960s) was in fact the deep penetration of men's controlling power into every aspect of our lives. Although widely regarded as an important corrective to the liberal feminist acceptance of the public/private divide, radical feminist thought has been criticised for being reductionist and ahistorical.

'If the strengths of radical feminism lay in its theory of the interconnection of sexuality and gender and of their importance in affecting social life, its weakness results from its tendency to collapse gender into sexuality and to see all societies as fundamentally similar.'  
(*Nicholson 1986, p35*)

An important theme of early radical feminism was that women constituted a sex-class or sex caste, bound together through their common oppression by men. This fed the ideal of a common womanhood which has remained a defining feature of all radical feminist writings. Initially the concept of women as a sex-class was intended to force an understanding of men's power over women which ensured their continuing domination and which nothing short of a revolutionary power struggle would overthrow. As radical feminist theory developed, the search for the origins of men's power over women (typically located in biological differences between the sexes), gave way to attempts to discover and reclaim women's special nature. As Ramazanoglu has commented:



'Both the negative and positive approaches assume that women share an innate, essential, female nature that distinguishes them from men, and gives them interests in common with each other (even though such apparent barriers as racial and class differences may obscure their view of their common interests).' (*Ramazanoglu 1989, p30*)

The belief that there was more to unite women than to divide them was influential in both the American and British Women's Liberation Movements of the 60s and 70s. Although not sufficient to withstand the increasing fragmentation of the movements from the late 70s onwards, it can be argued that the assumption of unity and the pro-women stance initially gave these movements considerable political force (*Coote & Campbell 1987*). Others have argued, black feminists in particular, that the notion of a common oppression was a false platform on which to build a women's movement (*hooks 1984*).

#### **B. A Common Womanhood: Nature's Decree**

Radical feminism is widely regarded as having offered a new and distinctive perspective on women's oppression which echoed earlier concerns of women, particularly in relation to sexual autonomy, but drew together such concerns into an analysis of sexual politics. This analysis focuses upon the control which men exercise over women's bodies and their exploitation of women's sexuality to their own ends in such areas as restricted abortion, pornography, woman battering, rape and sexual harassment. Even though other feminists disagree that patriarchal theory alone can explain male violence against women, they agree that radical feminists have been most responsible for bringing it to the public gaze (*Tong 1990*).

Before the birth of radical feminism in the 1960's, issues such as birth control, abortion and divorce were predominantly couched in terms of family welfare and the health of women as mothers, and they remain matters of civic rights for liberal feminists. (*Banks 1981*). Of course it can be argued that earlier feminist campaigns to increase women's rights in these areas were put forward in reformist terms which were most likely to bring success, what radical feminists would describe as 'playing the game by men's rules'. Sarah offers such an analysis of why earlier insights into male control over women became submerged by the demand for equal rights, leading to the failure of what she defines as the first Women's Liberation Movement.

'Today's radical feminists do not believe that it is possible for women to participate in a male-controlled society on equal terms with men - both because it is not desirable (rejection of male values), and because we know that men will not voluntarily relinquish their power.' (*Sarah 1982, p150*)

For radical feminists, the liberal and socialist feminist traditions are suspect, because they fall into the trap of wishing to share men's power and/or are premised on an unfounded optimism that relationships between the sexes can be transformed. In contrast radical feminists argue that men are by nature aggressive, competitive and driven by a lust for power which renders them impervious to change.

'The radical feminist portrait of man represents, in some ways, an inversion of misogynist views of women. Even as woman has been portrayed historically as an evil temptress or a fount of idealised goodness rather than as a complex flesh-and-blood creature who is both noble and ignoble, radical feminists, sketch a vision of the male that is unrelenting and unforgiving in its harshness.' (*Elshtain 1981, p205*)

Radical feminist writings are strong on descriptions of male cruelty and tyranny, as for example in Mary Daly's account of cross-cultural sadistic and mutilating practices against women and in Andrea Dworkin's analysis of pornography (*Daly 1979; Dworkin 1981*). Explanations in radical feminist theories for pervasive male dominance are weaker, tending towards biological determinism. Thus, for example, Brownmiller argues that whether men rape women or not, the biological fact that they can, enables them to hold all women in fear (*Brownmiller 1977*). Firestone's analysis of women's oppression is more complex. She inverts the Marxist analysis of historical materialism to give priority to reproduction rather than production and views changes in relations of reproduction to be the outcome of struggle between men and women. But in the end the 'dialectic of sex' is reduced to a biological tyranny which renders women the weaker sex because they bear and nurse children, the only solution a 'technological fix' which would free women from these biological functions (*Firestone 1974*).

Early assertions of male power over women, whatever its source, projected images of women as victims and were somewhat ambivalent about the female body and 'feminine'

qualities. Later the development of cultural feminism promotes a positive revaluation and celebration of womanhood. This version of radical feminist thought moves uneasily between viewing biological facts as socially constructed (by men) and yet locating women's more nurturant and caring values in their reproductive role. A central theme in cultural feminist writings is that it is given to women to be closer to nature, and thus, to be more in touch with the mystical, creative, life-giving energies of the universe. It is men, conversely, whose greed and aggression, threaten its survival. Susan Griffin, for example, writes poetically:

'As I go into her, she pierces my heart. As I penetrate further, she unveils me. When I have reached her centre, I am weeping openly ... The earth is my sister; I love her daily grace, her silent daring, and how loved I am *how we admire this strength in each other, all that we have lost, all that we have suffered, all that we know.*' (Griffin, *emphasis in the original* 1984, p219)

This personal revelation of her closeness to nature echoes the work of other writers such as Mary Daly who offers a journey to the cosmic essence of womanhood through a creative non-phallocentric language, which is both a description of the separate world of female 'Be-ing', and the means to reaching it (Daly 1979). Within the appeal to women's greater harmony with nature there is also a depiction of the female body and instincts as a source of knowledge which puts us in touch with our 'true' nature and with other women (Rich 1977). The images which spring from the pages of these writings are of strong, sensuous, creative and nurturant women who move beyond the reach of the male oppressor into a women's space. There are many references to women as protectors of the planet in whose hands the threat of nuclear holocaust would not arise. Patriarchy is held to be responsible for that threat as for all ravages of the natural world, for it is seen to arise from the predatory and evil nature of the male sex.

Apart from dubious assumptions entailed in 'the return to nature thesis', the danger of grounding patriarchy in biological sex differences, is that it can be used to justify the differential power positions of men and women, which radical feminism seeks to subvert. Although not intended, but because it is ahistorical and essentialist, radical feminist theory comes perilously close to depicting the sexual divide in terms which are not dissimilar to conservative, anti-feminist views of men and women (Segal 1987). A related problem is that it is difficult to see how women can break free from the

patriarchal forces which entrap them, particularly if, as some radical feminists assume, men police and control women's minds as well as their bodies. How are 'ordinary' women, apart from the theorists who have somehow stepped outside the timeless prison of patriarchy, supposed to transform their lives?

### **C. A Common Womanhood: Separatist Strategies**

'A limited separatism is healthy and necessary. But a politics of total separatism is necessarily classist and racist, no matter how far classism and racism are eradicated inside the womanculture. In part it is classist and racist because access to the womenculture is more difficult for poor women and women of colour, just as it is more difficult for such women to be exclusively lesbian. On the most fundamental level, it denies the importance of class and racial divisions. It assumes these can be overcome without the full participation of the groups who suffer from them.' (*Jagger 1983, p296*)

Radical feminist answers to ending women's oppression have centred on separatist revolutionary strategies, whether in direct struggle with the oppressors or by celebrating women's nurturant and creative nature. Drawing upon the theory and practice of the New Left, which many early radical feminists brought to the women's movement, they argued that women would be empowered through consciousness raising to recognise the political nature of their private troubles and to change their lives.<sup>3</sup> The problem was that for many women the reality of their lives did not sit easily with an analysis and a political practice which put them in direct confrontation with men. Bell hooks, for example, argues that women-bonding around a common oppression was an aspiration of white bourgeois women.

'Anti-male sentiments alienated many poor and working class women, particularly non-white women, from the feminist movement. Their life experiences had shown them that they have more in common with men of their race and/or class group than bourgeois women. They know the sufferings and hardships women face in their communities; they also

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<sup>3</sup> *The emphasis on feminist life-style changes was carried into the British Women's Liberation Movement, even though here it was more strongly associated with socialist feminism.*

know the hardships and sufferings men face and they have compassion for them. They have had experience of struggling with them for a better life. This has been especially true for black women.' (*hooks* 1984, pp 68-9)

In practice the degree and type of separatism envisaged by radical feminists has varied. It has always promoted women-only meetings, conferences and campaigns and advocated that women's relationships are special and different. It has inspired a range of women's institutions which provide support and enable practice of pro-women ideals, such as women's collectives and businesses, women's centres, rape crisis centres and women's educational projects. However the logic of their analysis of sexual politics has lead some radical feminists to argue that the only 'true' feminists are those who withdraw from sexual relationships with men. For example:

'(Can you imagine a Frenchman serving in the French army from 9 to 5, then trotting 'home' to Germany for supper and overnight? That's called game-playing, or collaboration, not political commitment.) It is this commitment, by choice, full-time of one woman to others of her class that is called lesbianism. It is this full commitment, against any and all personal considerations if necessary, that constitutes the political significance of lesbianism.' (*Ti-Grace Atkinson quoted in Jagger* 1983, p272)

There has been considerable debate about the definition of lesbianism from within radical feminism, ranging from a narrow focus on sexuality to the broader definitions, such as a 'lesbian continuum' advocated by Adrienne Rich (1980). Nevertheless the message which many women have received is that feminism and heterosexual relationships are incompatible and this became a major source of conflict within the British Women's Movement in the late 70s (*Coote & Campbell* 1987). For many women, political lesbianism remains an unrealistic and/or unattractive ideal. In that sense, although it is a potential source of unity amongst women, it is also a source of division (*Ramazanoglu* 1989). Further, for many women engaged in class and race struggles, political lesbianism would not be the priority above all others.

'Although we are feminists and lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand. Our situation as Black

people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race ... We struggle with black men against racism, while we also struggle with black men about sexism.' (*Combahee River Collective 1979, pp365-366*)

The problem for radical/cultural feminism is that such voices have not informed their theory even though there are examples of change in practice (*Nicholson 1986*). Wilmette Brown in her piece on 'Black Women and the Peace Movement', which is highly critical of white middle class feminism, also gives examples of black and white women organising around the issues of rape and prostitution which, she argues, was possible because separatist arguments did not come into the frame (*Brown 1984*). Radical feminists have not been uniformly insensitive to criticism and in practice have endeavoured to work with women whose material circumstances differ in a variety of community based projects. However their analysis consistently argues for the priority of a common oppression which is then seen to be overlaid by other oppressions such as race and class. This fails to understand how such oppressions interact and to produce different understandings of what it means to be a woman in different contexts.

'... simplistic assertions as to the universality of women's experience must be rejected: these deny the very real differences that exist amongst women and, by invoking a spurious sisterhood that takes white middle-class women as the norm, can constitute a form of racism and elitism ... feminism must develop an analysis that recognises the interaction of different forms of oppression and does not treat women as a unitary group that can be abstracted from all other social relationships.' (*Bryson 1992, p266*)

#### **D. Conclusion**

Whilst the essentialism of radical thought has been subject to much criticism, it has also been acknowledged that its pro-woman stance is attractive and has been influential. So, for example it has been argued that the radical feminist idealisation of women and women-bonding offered an optimistic view of what women could achieve in a women's culture, which explained the attraction of Greenham to many of its followers (*Segal 1987*). However as the study shows, the idealism of Greenham feminism was contested in various ways from amongst its own supporters, and it was a source of

tension in trying to establish links with women in mining communities. Women-bonding of the kind envisaged by radical feminists proved difficult to sustain, given the different social realities, understandings and experiences of oppression of women activists.

The radical feminist assumption of a common womanhood has been considered to be particularly inappropriate in a society in which social divisions have widened and the poverty gap increased (*Wilson & Weir 1986; Segal 1987*). Socialist feminists have generally been more exercised by these problems. However, they too were caught up in the early ideal of sisterhood which characterised the development of 'second wave' feminism. As the following discussion suggests, this had the effect of directing their gaze away from the diversity of women's experience until relatively recently.

## **Socialist Feminism**

### **A. Introduction**

Contemporary marxist and socialist feminist perspectives are many and varied, but they have in common a belief that women's oppression arises from complex socio-economic conditions which must be transformed if women are to be liberated. Thus socialist feminists are critical of the a-structural analysis offered by liberal feminists and of the a-historical perspective of radical feminist thought. Both are judged to provide simplistic understandings of gender relations, the one advocating reformist political practice to combat powerful and resilient structures of inequality; the other separatist and retreatist strategies to overcome the tenacity of patriarchy. Yet, the development of radical feminist thought has had a significant impact upon socialist feminist thought and practice.

'The central project of socialist feminism is the development of a political theory and practice which will synthesise the best insights of radical feminism and of the Marxist tradition and that simultaneously will escape the problems associated with each.' (*Jagger 1983, p123*)

Early in the development of the contemporary women(s) movements, writers such as Juliet Mitchell and Sheila Rowbotham signalled such a project as a corrective to the



marginalisation of the 'woman question' in socialist thought and political practice (Mitchell 1971; Rowbotham 1972) .

'As radical feminists demand we must dedicate ourselves to a theory of the oppression of all women and yet, at the same time, not lose sight of the historical specificity in the general statement. We should ask the feminist questions, but try to come up with some Marxist answers.'  
(Mitchell 1971, p99)

Ensuing dialogue between radical feminists and socialist feminists has not always been fruitful, either in the production of theory or in devising common strategy, and to a large extent they remain as distinctive strands in a women's movement which has become more and not less divided (Wilson & Weir 1986). Where they appeared to overlap initially was in assumptions threading through both about the common oppression of women, though with different theoretical underpinnings. However for a time, socialist feminists were caught up in the idealism implicit in notions of women's common experience and their special relationship. But, they were also committed to bridging the gap between marxism and feminism. Efforts to combine patriarchal and capitalist explanations of women's oppression, portrayed as 'the unhappy marriage of Marxism and Feminism' (Sargent ed 1981), posed difficulties both at the level of theory and of practice.

'Marxist feminists are ... in the contradictory situation of having a commitment to struggle for the interests of women as women, regardless of our class, power or economic interests, while at the same time having a commitment to struggle for the interests of the exploited working class, which entails struggling with some men against some women.' (Ramazanoglu 1989, p14)

As Rowbotham and others have stressed this does not produce a coherent line or easy rhetoric around which women can organise collectively (Wilson & Weir 1986; Segal 1987; Rowbotham 1989.) Moreover, it sets up a tension between the idealism, inherent in assuming that women have common interests, and the analysis which is required to understand divisions between them. This tension has been at the heart of much socialist feminist theory and practice. Whether women should work with men as well as separately, and whether they should work through formal labour organisations as well as informally, became the subject of much conflictual debate within an



increasingly fragmented women's movement. These issues have been compounded by the lack of success of socialist politics, posing the problem for women of where should be the most appropriate locus of struggle, either on the libertarian left or through Trade Unions, Labour Party Sections, and Local Government (*Rowbotham et al 1979; Philips 1987*). In practice they have done both and have found it difficult to insert a women's agenda into socialism. However, as Segal argues this does not mean that they should capitulate to the 'passionate rhetoric' of radical and cultural feminism.

'... it seems crucial to insist, against so many varieties of idealism which are now prevalent in feminism (*from Mary Daly to Dale Spender and beyond*) that all social relations and social practices are connected with the specific and material world in which they occur, and are affected by changes in that world ... in analysing the relations of exploitation or oppression, socialist feminists should, I think, begin by asserting the very different problems of diverse groups of women and stress the contradictory changes which have taken place in women's lives.' (*Segal 1986, p 67*)

Concern for diversity, which emerged belatedly in socialist feminist writing from the mid 1980s onwards, arose from self-critical review of failures to recognise the limitations of the middle class constituency and orientation of the women's movement, and as response to black women and working class women who argued that their interests had been excluded. It also represented a move away from lengthy and, some would say, sterile debates on the primacy of class or gender as the root cause of women's oppression and various formulations which sought to bring the two concepts together in a general theory of women's oppression.

It is widely agreed that the search for a general, all encompassing theory of women's oppression had the effect of obscuring differences of interest between women. There were important spin-offs, with much interesting work emerging on reproduction, sexual relationships, and women's relationship to the labour market. However the tendency to treat women as an unproblematic category was also evident. This, I think, reflected the influence of radical feminist views on women's common identity, and the strength which socialist feminists sought to find through a united sisterhood - a not unreasonable aspiration in view of the secondary place traditionally accorded to women by socialism.

## **B. Sisterhood and Personalising the Political**

The flowering of the women's movement in Britain with a utopian call to sisterhood is now regarded as having obscured the diversity of women's oppression, its appeal reaching mainly white middle class women. Latterly, the emergence of identity politics has called into question whether solidarity across oppressions can realistically replace sisterhood (*Adams 1989*).

'In the early years of women's liberation ... disagreements about the nature and causes of women's subordination had not hardened into antagonistic currents ... There was a belief that 'sisterhood' - an experience of oppression common to all women, black or white, working class or middle class - would unite all women and transcend our differences. These differences were recognised, but the recognition paled by comparison with an optimistic, and what may now appear a naive faith in women's common interest and experience.' (*Wilson & Weir 1986, p 99*)

Sisterhood also expressed the wish of women to be fully part of fraternal socialist visions, which so often had failed to include women or had left them on the margins. Thus, socialist feminists were committed to political solutions which included men, albeit men who would change. In this, they recaptured former socialist aspirations, most notably the early 19th century 'utopian socialists'. The Owenites, for example, sought to pursue the equal rights legacy of bourgeois feminism within a radically changed social order in which private property would be abolished and the traditional division of labour between men and women overturned. They attacked marriage as an institution and held up a vision of communal living in which sexual relationships would be transformed and domestic duties collectivised.

Owenism inspired a popular movement which appealed to working class women and provided opportunities for women to speak on political platforms to give voice to socialist feminist ideas. But experiments in communal living were no match against wider religious, social and political forces, which (without providing a detailed analysis) asserted the doctrine of separate spheres so that women were widely believed to more naturally suited to domesticity, 'an ideology actively adopted by many working class women as the best in a very narrow range of unhappy options' (*Taylor, 1983, p112*). However, the subsequent equivocal and secondary place of women in marxist

and socialist thought, and in socialist movements did not entirely obliterate a vision of transformed gender relations.

Contemporary socialist feminists held on to that vision, even as radical feminists, particularly in America, were rejecting it. In Britain, socialist feminists picked up on part of this separatist spirit in terms of an advocacy of working through the personal towards the political. So, for example, they embraced the idea of women working together in consciousness raising groups as a means of clarifying women's objectives and campaigns, but with the ultimate goal of transforming relationships between the sexes. For these purposes women needed to come together without men, but their political analysis would not necessarily exclude men, and nor would their personal relationships. Writing in 1969, when she suggests that there was no Women's Liberation Movement in Britain, but only a small number of women's groups, Sheila Rowbotham addressed the fears and anxieties of men as women were beginning to make demands.

'Any breakthrough must occur dialectically. As women's situation becomes more defined, the conditions will be created in which men can clarify more exactly the nature of these fears. At the moment of clarification such anxieties begin to dissolve, and a new process of release will begin for both men and women.' (*in Rowbotham 1983, p15*)

That sisterhood should be the new basis for revolutionary change, challenging men's power over women without subscribing to a view that 'masculine' and 'feminine' identities were immutable, was a central tenet of the developing socialist feminist strand of the women's movement. As Segal recounts, 'Feminism, it was hoped would give birth to new women, and to new men' (*Segal 1987, p13*). The means for achieving such a transformation included consciousness raising groups and experiments in communal living. Many articles appeared in the early 1970s which combined a critique of the family with utopian ideals of alternative ways of living as essential to abolishing gender inequality in society. But, with hindsight, socialist feminists have criticised the conceptual and political weaknesses of such a strategy.

'... the complexity of psychic life, the resistance of men and the hazards of collective living were underestimated ... ultimately the emphasis on personal change created limits to the political effectivity of the critiques. As prescriptions, they were pertinent to (some) women in the

movement. To the vast majority of women outside, they remained largely irrelevant.' (*Nava 1983, p78*)

Moreover, an emphasis on the personal and the interpersonal as the basis of politicisation created problems for concerted action. Although it had the important effect of asserting the place of feelings and emotion in women's politics and provided a source of strength, it may have been largely responsible for fuelling the development of identity politics, oppression coming to be seen as 'a dynamic between individuals rather than as a structural system' (*Harris 1989, p36*). Prophetically, Rowbotham writing in 1972, worried about the strengths and weakness of the loosely connected autonomous groups through which women shared their experiences of oppression, but which did not of themselves provide the means to alter their own or other women's lives.

'The small group is the living cellular organism which gives us a kind of gentle toughness to survive and grow, amoeba-like. But it means, again amoeba-like, that we find it hard to steer any concerted course and can drift into the line of least resistance ... our self consciousness can turn inwards and disintegrate, borne down by its own intensity; we can be so preoccupied with maintaining ourselves that we neglect the ways in which we can be effective. Our emphasis on the personal and individual change can harden into an impossible stereotype, an 'ought' which women feel compelled to live up to.' (*in Rowbotham 1989, p59*)

In retrospect, it has been argued that the slogan 'the personal is political' was flawed, because it had the effect of detracting attention away from 'the concrete material reality that lays the groundwork for that personal experience' (*hooks 1989, p108*). For those of us involved in consciousness raising groups, it was seductive because it implied that our shared experience and sisterhood were synonymous. Even if that could be partially captured in group meetings, it was difficult to extend into personal and political life beyond. How were discoveries about the self to be integrated into life outside such groups? (*Zimmerman 1984*). As well, there was a growing awareness that sisterhood was a fragile concept. During the 1970s, both within the women's movement and in some of the campaigns which it spawned, such as the National Women's Aid Federation (established in 1975), conflicts developed around the question of men, political lesbianism and separatist strategy.

'The wrangling was bitter and it demoralised many of the stalwarts of the movement, who began voting with their feet. For the argument about men seemed to have become an argument about categories of women.' (*Coote & Campbell 1987, p26*)

The argument about 'categories of women' gathered momentum as black women developed their critique of what they judged to be the imperialist and racist values of white middle class feminism. Socialist feminists, stung by charges of class and race myopia, entered the emerging debates in the 1980s on diversity and specific forms of oppression, with various degrees of openness and defensiveness. Whatever the fault lines, it is now clear that the splintering of sisterhood (always a possibility in a movement built upon principles of consciousness, identity and autonomy) is one which gives rise to wide concern. From a socialist feminist perspective it generates anxiety about the role of theory and analysis in political practice, the emphasis on specific experiences of oppression promising to obscure our understanding of the interconnectedness of structures of power which bring them about. Much of the debate on identity politics and the tyranny of 'political correctness' has been conducted with this concern in mind (*Adams 1989, Phillips 1987*).

But it might be argued that without attention to diversity of experience, a constructive dialogue on common elements of women's oppression cannot take place. Without recognition of the ways in which white middle class women are implicated in the structures of power which benefit them alongside men, there are unlikely to be great advances in the theory and practice of feminism. Some have defended the explanatory value of marxist theory for this purpose (*Mies 1986; Ramazanoglu 1989*). Within the confines of this study which employed a grounded theory approach to women's experience of protest, it became clear that the concept of class was significant both subjectively (the way in which women contextualised their experiences) and objectively (a synthesising concept with explanatory value in making sense of their different experiences). But a return to the socialist feminist literature on class and gender relations only served as a reminder of the dangers of assuming simplistic understandings of women's class 'position'.

### C. The Marginalisation of the Woman Question

Even though influenced by the radical feminist focus on women's common interest and experience, class 'shifted from the centre stage' (Phillips 1987, p5), it has never been entirely absent from the socialist feminist agenda. In recognising that the 'sisterhood' should include working class women, and in lamenting the fact later that it had not, socialist feminists have reminded us that the question of class interest as it affects relationships between women is a salient one (Coote & Campbell 1987; Phillips 1987). But confronting this issue has proved difficult, not simply because of a prevailing idealism about women's relationships, but also because of the legacy of socialist ideas about women. A central feature of much contemporary theorising has been a ground clearing exercise on the ambivalence with which the woman question was treated earlier.

For many feminist critics of the socialist record on women, the failure lies in the influential texts of Bebel (*Women Under Socialism*, 1879) and Engels (*The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* 1884). In both cases it can be argued that, although the authors were profoundly concerned with the relationship between sex and class oppression, they promulgated a view that the women question should be subsumed under class analysis. This led Bebel and his followers to question the value of a separate women's movement (even though he believed it necessary to treat the women question separately), and to suggest instead that women's interests could best be served through their involvement in class revolution, although what this involvement might consist of was unclear. His analysis reflected the reformist tendencies of the time, moving away from a marxist analysis of class exploitation towards more liberal notions of personal independence and fulfilment (Vogel 1983). A central problem was that he and Zetkin were unable to move beyond an analysis of women's oppression which challenged women's place as being in the home.

'Bebel did not conceive of a change in the sexual division of labour nor a sharing of household tasks by men. He saw women mainly as a mother, and did not envisage a change in her role in the future. This is also the view held by Clara Zetkin. In spite of her struggles against 'proletarian anti-feminism', she saw the proletarian women as a wife and mother rather than as a worker.' (Mies 1986, p108)

Socialist feminist writers are more inclined to turn to Engels' text in order to evaluate the promise of a marxist analysis of women's oppression, from which might be developed a more compelling theory. The flaws in his work have been well documented and there have been numerous attempts to refine his approach (*e.g. Sayers, Evans & Redclift 1987*). One of the central areas of debate concerns the place he accords to human reproduction in his thesis, the most common criticism being that although he argued that both production and reproduction were determining factors in the material base of society, in the end reproduction became subservient to production.

'Engels views activities concerned with reproduction as analytically equivalent to those concerned with production in the understanding of society. On the other hand, the execution of the analysis is less than perfect. In particular there is slippage between the status of human reproduction in Engels' exposition of his approach and its role in the actual analysis.' (*Humphries 1987, p11*)

Humphries echoes many similar criticisms by feminist writers who feel that Engels' account of the origin of women's oppression simply relegates it to an economic effect, with the obvious conclusion that it will disappear with the overthrow of capitalism. Another somewhat related criticism is that Engels fails to relate patriarchal to class domination as forces which produce specific forms of oppression amongst women. His analysis of the origins and continuing oppression of women is then viewed as mechanical and as lacking the faithful application of a marxist method (*Vogel 1983*).

Engels sees women's oppression as the outcome of the rise of private property and the emergence of patriarchal power, both as it were, appearing together. Monogamy and the family ensure women's continuing subservience. Engels assumed that once private property no longer existed, the economic foundations of monogamy would be shattered and the relationships between the sexes transformed; the single family would cease to be the basic economic unit of society; the public-private divide, which Engels showed as having particular significance for the loss of women's status, would disappear. In his view it was only amongst the proletariat that the conditions existed for this transformation since lack of private property and large scale employment of women outside the home undermined patriarchal power. For Engels a pre-condition of women's emancipation was their full-scale entry into production, partly as a means of gaining economic independence and partly as a means of speeding up a socialist revolution. The difficulties for women of working in production and still retaining

responsibility for the household would be solved by the socialisation of domestic work and childcare.

In all of this he may be said to have underestimated the developing emotional hold of the family under capitalism, the growing ideology of separate spheres, and also the contribution of women's reproductive labour. His work contained over-romanticised assumptions about relationships between proletarian men and women, ignoring domestic violence and the power of men over women in the family (*Bryson 1992*). He expected that working class women could, with relative ease, enter paid work on the same terms as men, ignoring the male bias and exclusionary practices of the developing trade union movement. The pattern of paid employment for women throughout the 19th and 20th century has shown increasing occupational segregation, a process through which working class women have continued to be marginalised in the labour market.

Socialist feminists conclude that the many flaws in Engels' work arise from the stress he laid on class relations which obscure the problems of gender relations, a legacy which produced a continuing marginalisation of women in socialist politics. Hunt, for example, documents the perception of women which dominated the Social Democratic Federation, Britain's first Marxist party, covering the period from 1884 through and into World War 1, a perception which she feels followed directly from the failure of socialist theory to integrate sex analysis with class analysis. She argues that the SDF's open policy on women's issues created a political vacuum so that certain stereotypes of women as politically conservative and as frivolous predominated. The view that women required to be educated in order to be politicised served to confirm the view that women were the problem and not socialism itself (*Hunt 1986*). Working class women were not easily put down by such views. They were active in such organisations as the Women's Co-operative Guild, in the suffrage campaign, in trade unions and in separate sections of the Labour Party. However, it has been argued that their struggles were rarely integrated into male dominated socialist agendas, the prevailing assumption being that the woman question was intimately bound up with, but subservient to, class analysis and class revolution.

The problem with which contemporary socialist feminists have wrestled is how to overcome the gender blindness of marxist theories of class, such that socialist strategies for change incorporate women rather than leaving them on the side-lines. This has lead to much discussion on the vexed question of the value of class analysis to



the situation of women. To some this quest is fruitless - the concept of class (however defined) is judged to be andro-centric, and therefore to irrelevant in understanding women's oppression or the means for opposing it (*e.g. Eichler 1980*). A crucial problem of some complexity, even for those wishing to extend marxist analysis to women, has been how women 'fit' into a definition of class based on the relations of production.

#### **D. Women, Social Class and Difference**

The domestic labour debate, spanning the decade 1970-80, represented one attempt to fill out the reproduction side of Engels' production - reproduction formula, by searching for the material base of women's oppression in their work performed in the home. A key assumption underpinning the work which followed was that the family was the main site of women's oppression resting on either direct or indirect economic exploitation. The debate turned upon how women's unpaid labour in the home was to be understood in terms of Marx's labour theory of value, a central issue being whether domestic labour is productive or unproductive.

'The relevance to the development of feminist theory was seen to lie in its contribution first to the definition of the class position of women and consequently of appropriate political action and second to groups of activists who were developing a strategy of 'wages for housework'.

(*Burton, 1985, p61*)

Opinions are divided as to how useful the domestic labour debate turned out to be in either advancing the theory of women's oppression or in developing a politics to combat it. One criticism is that it lost sight of the women question in the enthusiasm of most of its authors to demonstrate the usefulness of marxist categories (*Mies 1986*). The result, as even some of the original contributors agree, was to reduce women's oppression to economism much as Engels had originally done (*Fox 1986*). Thus, the dynamics of the relationship between class and gender really didn't come through in spite of the avowed attempt to improve on Engels.

The demand for 'wages for housework' advanced by some of its proponents, was criticised for being impractical and for reinforcing the view that housework is women's work. The concentration on housework in the wider debate implied that 'a women's

identity is primarily based on her role as housewife rather than paid worker' (Bryson 1992, p239). However, on the credit side it has been argued that the domestic labour debate made public the importance of women's unpaid household work and its interconnections with the world of paid employment.

'...we went some way to comprehending the special character of housework as a labour process, the reasons for its obscurity under capitalism, its indirect effects on patterns of capital accumulation (via its role in the daily and generational reproduction of labour power) and, most important, the forces shifting the proportions of paid and unpaid labour which household members, as a group, perform in making ends meet.' (Secombe 1986, p207)

But a notable failure of the debate was that it left open whether domestic labour, by virtue of a separate though different relation to the market place, puts all women into a separate class. Arguments of this kind appeared early on (e.g. in Dalla Costa 1973), and then disappeared even in the work of those who argued that all women were united by their common position as housewives (Vogel 1983). Since most of the work concentrated on working class women and households, the alternative possibility of class differences between women was not a strong feature of the debate. It therefore failed to address the way in which domestic work is itself a terrain of division amongst women, both in terms of its centrality in their lives and whether they can afford to pay others to do it (Ramazanoglu 1989). The domestic labour debate, then, did little to clarify the class position of women or to expand our understanding of class difference amongst women. However, it has been suggested that it was important for demonstrating the limitations of class analysis when applied to women, and that it helped pave the way for attempts to combine class and gender analysis (Fox 1986).

These attempts concentrate on 'marrying' aspects of marxist theory with insights from radical feminism, the purpose to analyse the interaction between capitalism and patriarchy to uncover the complexities of women's oppression. Initially it was hoped that such a synthesis would avoid the economic reductionism of classical marxism and the sexual determination of radical feminism. In practice there was a tendency for emergent theories to slip in either direction. So, for example, Heidi Hartman (1979) argued for a dual systems approach to capitalism and patriarchy (either working together or at times conflicting) and endeavoured to establish the material base of

both. For her, patriarchy is a hierarchy of power relations amongst men, who have in common their control over women's labour power.

'Men exercise their control in receiving personal service work from women, in not having to do housework or rear children, in having access to women's bodies for sex, and in feeling powerful and being powerful'. (*Hartman 1981, p18*)

Hartman did not argue this as a universal form of gender relations, but her analysis descends into the familiar subjectivism of radical feminist texts, that women's oppression is a 'product of a conspiracy among men' (*Burris 1982, p57*). In practice most attempts to forge the link between capitalism and patriarchy found it difficult to give equal weighting to either. Theorists tended to prefer formulations in which patriarchy (a historical constant) takes different forms (*e.g. Eisenstein 1979*) or to revert to the argument that it is only under capitalism that sex and other forms of oppression emerge (*e.g. Vogel 1983*).

The result was a body of abstract debate in which the proposed synthesis failed to emerge, because of 'the depth of the antagonism or the separate integrity of each theory' (*MacKinnon 1983, p227-228*). The political choices open to women in opposing their oppression remained the same as they had been - namely to throw in their lot with class struggle, to develop an autonomous platform or to do both simultaneously. Throughout there was a tendency to treat women as an unproblematic category and thus it had little to say about divisions between women.

During the 1980s, socialist feminists, impatient with searches for the root cause of women's oppression, re-oriented the debate towards an understanding of the diversity of women's experience as it is contextualised within changing relations of class and gender.

'Rather than posing an original 'source' of women's oppression ... we must analyse the ways in which these specific forms of oppression are articulated within the present structure of social relations ... Hence the analysis of sexual differences must avoid ascribing an *a priori* unity to the category 'women' or to the forms of women's oppression, and direct itself to understanding the specific ways in which these differences are

constituted for particular categories of women in particular social contexts. (*Burris 1982 emphasis in original, p67*)

Such a level of analysis is advocated as a means to understanding the importance of class, not as a static concept, but as one which resonates through women's changing experience and which has posed and continues to pose dilemmas for women's political practice (*Phillips 1987*). The proposition is that both historical and contemporary research should examine gender relations in class specific contexts, but also consider the ways in which gender affects experiences of class. For some, the issue is still bound up with the resilient claims of radical feminists, that class and other differences are secondary to women's common experience of oppression. By contrast, it is not uncommon to find in the literature a reassertion of the importance of class in defining women's experiences in opposition to assertions about their common gender identity (*e.g. Burton 1985, Segal 1987, Ramazanoglu 1989*).

'... relations between the sexes in different parts of the class structure are not the same. The constructs 'femininity' and 'masculinity', need, at least to be examined in class specific contexts, rather than in relation to capitalism as a totality. The difference between women of different classes, and within different parts of the working class are more significant than their common gender identity.' (*Burton 1985, pxiii*)

## **E. Women and Class Experience**

To reassert the importance of class in understanding divisions between women, does not solve the problem of what we mean by a woman's class position or how it may be said to define her interests. Whatever definition of class is used, whether it be marxist, or those which treat it as a structural variable measurable by occupational categories, the problem of gender blindness remains. The tangential relationship of women to occupational stratification models has been justified in a number of ways. For example, it has been argued that the logic of classifying occupations hierarchically is to define the status of the occupation, and not the sex of the person who happens to fill it (*Lockwood 1986*). However, this entirely begs the question of whether the structure of occupations is itself gendered.

'Gender affects not only what kinds of jobs people do, but also the kinds of rewards accruing to the occupation in question ... the status of

the *occupation* will often have been decisively influenced by gender.'  
(Crompton 1989, p572 *emphasis in the original*)

Gender, we might also add, influences access to paid employment and whether the work which women do (paid or unpaid) is categorised at all. Taken to its extreme, this line of criticism of traditional sociological theories of occupational class systems, implies that women do indeed fall outside them, leaving the way open for others to argue that a woman's class identity is best construed as deriving from that of her husband or male head of household (*e.g. Goldthorpe 1983*). However, women have different opportunities vis a vis one another in gaining access to occupational hierarchies, and their relationship to the labour market varies. Should this be the defining feature of class difference amongst women? Phillips warns against the economic reductionism implied in the question.

'The political and social categories through which we live our lives rarely coincide with the economic categories of capital and labour ... For women in particular, class can refer to a whole complex of work and family and cultural norms.' (Phillips 1987, p25)

The implication of this view is that attempts to refine the measurement of class by extending occupational classifications to women will be inadequate. The structural dimensions of class, always a central problem of sociological analysis, are even more elusive when applied to women. Yet, we seem unable to do without the concept of class, for whether at some common-sense level or whether elaborated in ways suggested by Phillips, it has currency in our understanding of difference.

'Social class creates divisions between women in the course of our daily lives and also divisions between feminists in their interpretations of where women's political interests lie.' (Ramazanoglu 1989, p96)

If we move away from seeking equivalence of treatment for women in traditional approaches to class, and choose instead a level of analysis which focuses on women's experiences, it may be possible to clarify what are the significant practical and political divisions between women. In this study of the experiences of women protestors, it was not surprising to find the issue of class constantly being asserted in the context of the miners' strike, contrasting with a resurgence of idealism about women's

relationships emanating from Greenham. It is important to stress that this was not conceived as a study through which definitional problems of women's class position would be resolved. However, a brief analysis of the ways in which women in the study used the concept in making sense of their lives and of their political action is a necessary precursor to discussions which follow in the thesis. Although not producing a schematic account of class definitions the study suggests that it has variable meanings for women. A common ingredient, though, was the weight given by all to access to qualifications and paid work.

Women activists in the miners' strike defined their class in terms which echoed traditional class consciousness (i.e. they had been engaged in a class war), but also in terms of the constraints they experienced as women in mining communities. Such constraints were understood to arise from the structure of gender relations surrounding the mining industry and from a lack of opportunity to gain qualifications and to secure well paid employment (partly resulting from gender relations and partly from the high unemployment areas in which most lived). Details of women's occupational experience are provided in Appendix 1. But also integral to their identity was the value and importance they placed on their role as mothers, something which they felt contrasted with a different model of womanhood emerging at Greenham. So, for women in mining communities, their situation as working class women was defined very largely in terms of their intricate relationship to mining via the male members of their households, but though closely associated, it was never seen to be identical to the class experience of men. But did it encompass a sense of division from middle class women?

This question has been fleetingly discussed in the literature, usually in a context where the links made by groups in the strike, such as Greenham women, are approvingly invoked to indicate what is possible under the banner of class solidarity.

'Women in the mining communities are not complaining of the privileges of middle-class women: if privilege is invoked it is that of an entire class.' (*Phillips 1987, p146*)

The study suggests that the reality was more complex than this. Women activists in the miners' strike certainly felt gratitude for those people from outside their communities who had supported them in their struggle. However, they were not

convinced of the Greenham strategy of separatist action or of the understanding afforded to them and their interests by middle class women. The study examines some instances in which difference along class lines emerged for women both during and after the strike in Chapter VI.

Greenham supporters, somewhat surprisingly, made many references to class as a feature of their lives and the political choices they had made. Even though I did not ask the question directly, all described themselves as middle class, by achievement, if not by origin. The common ingredients of such descriptions were their educational qualifications, their access to paid employment (and the opportunities which followed) and values which they had learned in middle-class families or which they had later acquired. Thereafter it was apparent that class meant different things to these women and led to different political strategies. Being a middle class woman did not lead to a unified view of where women should engage in struggle. Rather, I would argue, it provided the means for women to make choices with less constraint than those experienced by women in mining communities.

For some Greenham supporters, being middle class was a mark of privilege which set them apart from working class men and women, creating problems in crossing a cultural divide. Others, but by no means all, saw gender relations rather than class as the important defining feature of their and other women's lives, reflecting radical feminist ideals inherent in Greenham feminism. A related perspective was that feminism provided a welcome retreat from class as a divisive issue. But there were women in the study who chose the alternative path of working for and with working class women, invoking marxist notions of class and class conflict as the basis of their political practice. These alternative views of class and gender were embedded in three different orientations to the Greenham protest, discussed in Chapter V.

Although not framed initially as a study of women and class, the study provides some support for those who argue that the most practical way to proceed is not to search for refined tools of measurement, but rather to concentrate on what class means for women. As suggested in Chapter II, a grounded theory approach allows for such meanings to arise from the data as they inform action and process. It does not deny the structured differences in the material circumstances of women's lives, but encourages an understanding of these, as they arise from women's experience and inform their political philosophies and political strategies.

## Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter a number of questions were raised about the relationship between feminist theory and political practice. Taking a somewhat traditional divide of liberal, radical and socialist feminist thought, the critical examination of each reveals a variety of weaknesses in understanding the complexity of women's experiences of oppression and therefore of offering realistic prescriptions for political action. It is undeniable that until recently the women's movement(s) was predominantly white middle class and that the interests of other women were assumed rather than recognised. Feminism has entered a self critical review, out of which its boundaries may become less narrowly drawn. Attention to diversity of women's experience of oppression (now more current in the literature) can lead to concern that theoretical and political underpinnings will dissolve into a post modernist fragmented nightmare, the political consequences of which would be that women would never pool their strengths. But I would argue that out of an understanding of difference might flow the means to forming meaningful alliances.

'Above all, modern feminist theory must understand that the problems of gender inequality have no simple explanation or easy solution ... This means that there must be flexibility and a plurality of forms of feminist political activity, which should be seen as complementary rather than rival strategies. It does not however, absolve feminists from the need to assess priorities and possibilities or imply that all actions are equally valid; here good feminist theory must enable us to make effective political choices, and it will not allow pluralism to disintegrate into total relativism.' (Bryson 1992, p267)

The inclusion within one study of Greenham supporters and women activists in the miners' strike, provided a unique opportunity to open up the challenges put by Bryson, not least because these women were involved in protests whose relationship to mainstream feminism (or the women's movement) was ambiguous. Their concerted actions, their experiences of endeavouring to build bridges and the gradual fragmentation of their networks of supporters are instructive to those who wish to see the revitalisation of feminist politics. The following chapters, written from the perspective of the women in the study, uncover some of the problems they encountered in keeping their respective actions going and in coming together to pool their strengths. Arising from their discussion of these problems we gain further



insights into the complexities of class and gender relations for women engaged in political action.

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## CHAPTER IV

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### WOMEN IN THE 1984-5 MINERS' STRIKE: CLASS AND GENDER RELATIONS

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**'This fight does not just belong to the men, it belongs to us all ... In this country we aren't just separated as a class. We are separated as men and women. We, as women, have not often been encouraged to be involved actively in trade unions and organising. Organisation has always been seen as an area belonging to men. We are seen to be the domesticated element of the family. This for too many years has been the role expected of us. I have seen a change coming for years and the last few weeks has seen it at its best. If this Government thinks its fight is only with miners they are sadly mistaken. They are now fighting men, women and families.'** (*Lorraine Bowler in Barnsley Women Against Pit Closures 1984, p23*)

This rallying call to women at the Barnsley rally in 1984, set an agenda for women's involvement in the strike in the context of class and gender relations in traditional mining communities. It challenged the exclusionary male practices of the trade unions at the same time as asserting the importance of uniting, as women with men, in a strike which was widely understood to be a class struggle. The view that women could be a strong force for socialism in opposing the threat to communities and jobs gained momentum as the strike developed. The women asserted their right to a central place in the history of what turned out to be a bitter and prolonged struggle. But the question was whether their participation in the strike opened up a space in which the traditional sexual divide in mining communities could be transformed in any way. Such debate as there has been in the feminist literature concerning the role of women in the strike has turned upon this question.

Notable by its absence in this literature is any sort of critique from radical feminists. The concerns they expressed about Greenham, to be discussed in the next chapter, were not focused on women in mining communities. They might have asked, for example, whether women activists in the miners' strike were merely affirming the self-sacrificial and nurturing role of women for which Greenham women could be castigated. They might also have asked whether, in supporting the strike, women were

diverting their energy to preserve communities which were dominated by masculine culture. Such a radical feminist critique did not emerge. This may signify a reluctance to question the actions of working class women at a time when demands for the recognition of class and race difference in feminist analysis and action were becoming difficult to ignore. It is more likely that the mobilisation of women within a class struggle was viewed as irrelevant to the radical feminist cause. As Rowbotham has observed, such protests by women in support of their communities, 'do not fit neatly into the concept 'feminist'' (Rowbotham 1989, p285) .

### **Socialist Feminist Perspectives**

Socialist feminists, as might be expected, were more excited, if at times puzzled, by the emergence of a working class women's movement against a backcloth of increasing fragmentation of 'the women's movement' and a corresponding crisis of feminism (Segal 1987; Phillips 1987). As such, the women's action in the miners' strike was greeted as a welcome affirmation of some closely held principles of socialist feminism, although often within a rather thin analysis.<sup>1</sup>

'... the most recent and extraordinary evidence of the effect of women's collective struggle on women's consciousness and sense of power comes from the women in pit villages organising together during the miners' strike ... the women aren't doormats any more because personality is not a static entity.' (Segal 1986, p232)

From a socialist point of view the main significance of women's actions in the strike was that they appeared to have crossed the political divide, moving from the private domestic world into the public domain normally dominated by men. In so doing they demonstrated that they were not the conservative force which some had supposed and they undoubtedly helped to prolong the resistance of the men in the struggle.

'The strike offered women the chance to take part in a collective political struggle, and they grasped with both hands ... women's consciousness of themselves, of their capabilities and strength, and of

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<sup>1</sup> Most socialist feminist texts offer only a cursory examination of the women's action in the miners' strike, perhaps denoting some ambivalence about its status within mainstream feminism.

their role in political activity has changed. They no longer identify themselves as 'just' housewives and mothers, but as political beings.'  
(Coulter et al 1984, p204)

Coulter et al suggest that in crossing the political divide, women had challenged male dominance in working class culture and had fought for a voice for all women. So from their point of view it seemed that by joining the struggle with men, women had advanced their own interests. Of course this leaves to one side whether the male culture of mining communities was so easily contested either during or after the strike and it calls into question what 'women's consciousness of themselves' might mean in the context of those communities.

### **Feminism or Just Plain Socialism?**

There is wide agreement that the women in mining communities did not enter the struggle out of feminist ideals, by which we might mean they did not start from an analysis of women's oppression in society or their own oppression within mining communities and seize the chance to advance their own interests as women.

'Rather than deriving from feminist issues, the women's support groups arose spontaneously in response to the needs of the community for food, an issue coming as a direct extension of their domestic concerns. Contrary to what some middle-class feminists wish to believe, women's participation in the strike was not part of some wider feminist struggle. Furthermore, the working class women involved in the strike had more in common with their working-class 'oppressors' than with their middle-class 'sisters'.' (Ali 1986, p102)

'It would be quite wrong to say that the movement of women in the miners' strike was a feminist one. Why ever would it have been? Pit villages embrace a tightly knit community in which the focus on men and masculinity is more pronounced than most ... The actions of the women in the dispute were motivated by very direct and immediate needs; overwhelmingly the need to defend their livelihoods and their communities.' (Loach 1985, p169)

The study supports these views of why women got involved but also shows that the process of organising as women gave women a strong sense of their strength as women to make a difference to the outcome of the strike. However it holds as a generalisation that the women's actions were not 'feminist' inspired. Some have argued that the women's movements of the 70's and the Greenham protest were important influences (*e.g. Campbell 1986; Stead 1987*), but this was rarely acknowledged by those participating. Jean McCrindle, for example, reports that she was chastised by miners' wives for suggesting such an influence.

'They like to think that what has been created by the miners' wives is a working class feminism which owes very little to the women's liberation movement.' (*McCrindle 1986, p117*)

Most studies confirmed that the women did not think of themselves as feminists (*Gibbon and Steyne 1986; Loach 1985; Bloomfield 1987*), the word conjuring in their minds images of another kind of women altogether - a women whose values and life style would threaten family life and relationships with men.

'We don't class ourselves as feminists. We've met a lot of feminists and we've been insulted by a lot of feminists! Not that they mean to insult us, but we still want to be married women. We still want to love our husbands. Love our kids. But at the same time we know we've got to go further afield now. But we want to keep what we've always had.'  
(*Here We Go 1986, p78*)

A study of the Maerdy Women's Support Group in Wales also documents the women as refusing the label feminist. It quotes one woman who felt that the men were worried about the women getting too involved in the strike and reaching more people with their public speaking. The men were apparently reassured when they realised that the women were not going to run off and split the families and demand rights for women (*Bloomfield 1985*).

The women in this study, with the exception of a few, were equally unwilling to see their actions as having anything to do with a feminism which threatened family life, although they did see links between women's struggles and most felt that their awareness of these struggles had developed through the strike. That they gained an awareness of their power as women to make a difference to the struggle and a sense

that they were stronger than the men (widely shared experiences by women in this study) without necessarily seeing themselves as having separate interests to the men, is illustrated by the following passage from an interview with a woman in the HighHill Group.

***Dot - Chair, Highhill Support Group:***

**'I don't think Women Against Pit Closure is feminist. I think it's dawned on women the power that they hold when they really get together. We went all over the country during the strike but we didn't chase the men away. They were quite willing to come with us and to back us all the way. No, I don't think it's feminist ... If women really got together it would frighten the pants off a hell of a lot in the Houses of Parliament because women have got an awful lot of strength once they realise it and they really stick together, unity. When a women gets the bit between her teeth she's not going to let go. She's going to fight to the bitter end and that's what kept the strike going. It was the women who kept the strike going. It wasn't the men. It was the loyalty of the women behind the men.'**

A rich source of documentary evidence of women's growing sense of their power and unity lies in the many pamphlets which support groups produced both during and after the strike. Although not all support groups were women-only, as most writers imply, it is clear that during the strike women carved out an area of influence for themselves and were often working more closely with women. They celebrated their work together and documented how they as individuals had changed. Some felt that they had developed a working class women's movement, with a separate identity to middle class feminist groups, preserving an affinity with the men of their communities. As this study confirms, the wish to use their power as women as an expression of working class solidarity was central to their involvement in the strike. Whether this denotes a feminist consciousness has been contested, but of course a lot depends on what is meant by feminism.

In this case what might have been expected was that women activists in the strike in developing solidarity amongst women, would come up against concrete instances where their right to act as women would be challenged by men. They might have experienced limitations of their role as women in relation to the power of the NUM,

and in this way become more aware of specific instances of men's control and privilege. At the very least they would be faced with contradictions about the unity between men and women involved in the struggle.

'If the argument against feminism is that class oppression is paramount what better challenge could there be but from working class women who not only identified with the need and requirements of their class and community, but who through personal struggle had glimpsed some of the oppression they feel in relation to men.' (*Loach 1985, p170*)

There is evidence in the study that women had learnt some of this through their experience of the strike and its aftermath. But it did not necessarily lead to a movement towards the sort of feminism which they associated with a threat to their way of life, even though it seemed essential to some feminist observers that it should.

'For sure, the women have organised as women, they now have a sense of their own strength and without a doubt they have created the infrastructure of a working class women's movement within the coal communities. But its very existence is contingent on it being a movement in support of men, and it has the support of men because it is for them. But the future of this women's movement lies in its commitment to women and changing the relationship between women and men. (*Campbell 1984a, p10*)

Clearly, what was being recommended here was a dramatic change in emphasis for most of the women activists in the miners' strike which might hi-jack the meaning of their actions. The suggestion was that, to their undoubted socialism, the women should then add feminism, the sort of feminism which many of the participants might find unattractive or impossible. Such prescriptions were seen by Ali to be based on a misunderstanding of the solidarity of women with men in mining communities.

'The view that sees the mining culture as oppressive to women comes from outsiders, especially middle class feminists. Women within these communities do not perceive themselves as oppressed. They take comfort in the closeness of the community, for they know such unity derives from coal-mining life.' (*Ali 1986, p97*)

Such debate as there has been in the literature about the significance of women's action in the miners' strike turns then upon whether women found a voice within socialism, a strong enough voice to develop a working class feminism, or whether they were engaged in a socialist battle in which women's oppression was irrelevant. With a few exceptions, the debates have been conducted on behalf of women without detailed study of their views. This chapter allows women protestors to speak for themselves, focusing upon the way women who had been active in the strike viewed their participation as women and what effect it had had on traditional roles.<sup>2</sup> It explores their understanding of class and gender relations in mining communities and their views of any changes which had been brought about by the strike. Such reflection on what the strike had meant for them sets the scene for later discussion of what happened to them after the strike had ended.

### **Women's strength and determination**

#### **'Everybody has always glamorised it'**

Two years after the strike had ended, participants in the study recalled the part they had played with pride but they were concerned to put the record straight on some of the images promulgated about women in the strike. When discussing the study with one of the national organisers of WAPC, she expressed concern that it should not repeat 'over-romanticised ideas' about mining support groups and the extent of women's participation in the protest. Her knowledge of the national picture and her personal experience of women's action in the Sheffield area had led her to different conclusions.

#### ***Kate:***

**'Everybody has always glamorised it, it was such a wonderful thing that there were millions of women active. There never were bloody**

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<sup>2</sup> *I discovered early on in the field work that it was not always appropriate to discuss feminism directly with women in mining communities for the term 'feminism' was either unattractive to women or open to misunderstanding. For example, when I did use the term directly in one group discussion it was taken to mean femininity.*



millions in the first place! If there had of been, we'd have won the strike. They just weren't there. We had a silent army, like we have now, that we can fall back on, and like the London rally there were thousands of women there but those thousands of women weren't all active.'

Most women expressed similar strong views about simplistic images of women's unity and working class solidarity during the strike.

*Dot - Highhill Support Group:*

'There were various incidents in the strike which sharpened me up on what was going on. Not all miners' wives were involved. Some of them didn't want to dirty their hands. Loads of miners didn't picket, most of them didn't picket.'

*Veronica - Seascope Support Group:*

'Women's role in the strike? Its a myth really, I mean in one way I was very saddened because I had this beautiful idea of the working class, of working class solidarity, that everyone would work together for a cause and not for themselves, which was totally idealistic. I felt personally very hurt on many occasions when people were selfish and dishonest.'

*Shirley - Castlehill Support Group (Formerly a member of South Durham Support Group):*

'There was a lot of miners' wives who wouldn't get involved. There was a lot of union men's wives wouldn't get involved, their husbands didn't want them to be involved in it. Mine didn't want me to, but I did.'

*Catherine - Castlehill Support Group (Formerly a member of North Durham Support Group):*

'I mean a lot of people get on about women during the strike. There's lots of women during the strike didn't care, didn't want to be involved, but they would take everything they could, but they didn't want to help.'

It is not surprising that two years after the strike had ended in defeat for the miners, women would feel that if only all women had 'stuck together' they might have won. Such a view provides an important clue to the importance they attributed to the strength and determination of those women who **had** been active during the strike. This is a study of such women who felt that they had been on the 'front line' of a struggle which drew varying support from women and men in mining communities and which became more divisive as the strike progressed. Within the limitations of a study which concentrates on the experiences of women activists, a complex picture unfolds of what can best be described as a partial unity during the strike.

### **'It Was the Women Who Kept the Strike Going'**

As women reflected on how they got involved in the strike they stressed that they acted at first out of sheer necessity. The main reason they gave for themselves and other women joining support groups was to provide relief to families and to 'single lads', particularly when it became clear that the dispute was going to be a long one and when the Government insisted that the non-existent strike pay was to be taken into account in assessing benefit. Eventually most women were to see the strike as a class war in which they had played a significant role.

The precise history of groups varied, the groups emerging at different times in the early months of the strike and developing into elaborate networks of support for striking miners and their families. As one of the key women organisers in the North East commented, '**the groups evolved to meet a need**'. However there were those who wanted to give their time because they defined it from the beginning as a political struggle. These women were already active members of the Labour Party, or if not held strong political views, and they played a central role in the development of their support groups. Others have confirmed this tendency for already political women to spearhead support activities in their communities (*Gibbon & Steyne 1986; McIntyre 1992*).

*Veronica - Chair of Seascope Support Group; ex- member of the Communist Party:*

**'I realise, perhaps I was at fault, most people didn't like my politics. They were in it, a lot of women that were in the organisation, were in it out of desperation, were in it out of**

wanting some kind of support, and I make no excuse I was in it for the politics.'

*Jill - Co-ordinator of a Constituency Support Group; active member of the ILP:*

'What happened, as I say I had always been politically active in anti-apartheid, the peace movement, whatever. You name it - I've been in it, IWC, the lot! We had a meeting at the ILP a few weeks into the strike and discussed what we were going to do about it. We decided that we would have to involve as many people as possible in the support group because it was obvious it was going to go on for a long time. First of all we took a resolution along to the Constituency to set up a Miners' Support Group by the Constituency ... eventually we had this grouping of various people including a couple of miners. We decided that the help should be solidarity and not charity.'

*Dot - Chair of Highhill Support group; Chair of Local LP:*

'I think this is the first ever group of women that's been political in the village ... the strike was political, and that's why we were formed, we were formed to survive really you know, but it was definitely political.'

Such women felt they were in the minority. For them the main work of support groups was to provide relief and support, but it was also clearly directed towards the political goals of fighting for jobs and communities and of engaging in a class war. But others who did not have these perceptions at the beginning of the strike were to share them later. This perception was closely linked to the view that without the active involvement of women in the strike the men would not have been able to stay out for as long as they did. Thus, in retrospect, women were to see their role in the strike as a significantly political one in which their strength and determination had kept the fight going.

*Barbara - Seascope Support Group:*

'I've got to be honest, when the strike started I didn't agree with it, I didn't. The majority if they tell the truth were like me, but when we sat and thought about it and what it entailed, it took about a

month before I sort of like agreed. The group really helped and it was the women who really kept the strike going.'

*Sandra - Highhill Support Group:*

'If it hadn't been for the group nobody would have survived, they'd have all been forced back to work, if it hadn't been for the women, the men wouldn't have got through it. The women were stronger than the men, the women like egged the men on and we'd do it again if we had to.'

*Ann - Highhill Support Group:*

'Folk should learn a lesson, nobody won in that strike. I mean we were forced back, because believe me, if it was up to the women, in this group anyway, the men would never have gone back, because we were standing firm with them.'

*Jessie - Chair, Valley View Support Group:*

'It was a traumatic experience. The women didn't want to be shut out from it, they wanted to have a say in it. Initially it was a question of survival but it went deeper than that, and the determination of the women in this Mining Support Group, well they were stronger than the men.'

From these and other similar comments both in this study and the writings of women active in the strike it is clear that the activities of support groups kindled a collective spirit amongst women. This spirit was sometimes severely tried when internal conflicts blew up in the groups or between groups. Relations with local NUM officials were at times strained. However despite these difficulties and the ever present problems of trying to feed their families, women looked back at what they achieved in the strike as showing what women could do together against all the odds. The rallying song, written for the women by Mal Finch, reflected a spirit which, if in some respects romantic, expressed what women at the centre of the action felt:

**'We are women, we are strong, we are fighting for our lives,  
Side by side by our men who work the nations' mines  
United by the Struggle, united by the past**

**And it's here we go, here we go,  
For the women of the working class.'**<sup>3</sup>

However, it is important to distinguish between the broad consensus which women in the study expressed about solidarity with their men in opposition to the Government, described by one woman as a 'glimpse of socialism', and their awareness of the differential power relations of men and women in mining communities. No doubt active involvement in the strike brought such gender issues to the surface in important respects such as when the union flexed its muscles and tried to control the women's activities, examples of which will be discussed later. It is probable that the process of organising as women during the strike heightened women's awareness of the traditional sexual divide in mining communities and restrictions in women's lives. Certainly the study illustrates some tensions between women's strong sense of class identity and their wish to achieve some measure of freedom from men's power and control, tensions which have a longer history.

'The loyalty of the women of the mining communities to their menfolk is, of course, legend. It is invoked as an instance of those communities' internal solidarity. But that loyalty was mediated by a common critique of their own, shared in kitchens and over doorsteps, of the authoritarianism endured by the women.' (*Campbell, 1984b, p106*)

Lorraine Bowler's speech at the Barnsley rally, with which this chapter began, made that critique public within her overall appeal to class loyalty. Like her, the women in this study were critical of the traditional power of men over women in mining communities but also felt that some changes had occurred, albeit in a context where women would have to continually assert their rights.

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<sup>3</sup> *Mal Finch explained to me that she had first composed quite a different song which stressed the separate identity of the women in the strike, but eventually, based on meetings and discussion with women in support groups, she changed the lyrics*

## **Changes in Traditional Gender Relations**

**'The women used to be there just to have kids and to do the baking.'**

Much was said about the possibilities which the strike threw up for eroding traditional household roles. If women were so busy organising food parcels, soup kitchens, fundraising, public speaking, and picketing, surely men must have taken over some household duties (*Stead 1987*). There was some expectation that such changes alongside recognition from the men for the women's part in the strike would have a lasting and beneficial impact on the traditional sexual divide in mining communities, - a divide so graphically portrayed in Dennis's classic study (*Dennis et al 1956*). As already noted, assumptions that women would experience gender oppression in mining communities were criticised for misunderstanding the class unity of men and women. Before examining the impact of the strike on traditional roles it is therefore worth looking at the way that women in mining communities regard their relationships with men. From what I learnt in this study, women in mining communities felt that there had been a gradual generational change away from the dominant husband/father in mining families, a change of which they approved and which they saw as benefiting the younger generation most.

***Phyllis - Chair, Meadow Vale Support Group:***

**'I think there is a slow change, there is a kind of evolution if you like, there's no doubt about it. You see, the young couples and their husbands are different. Their men are different to what my father was and even to what my husband was.'**

This view of gradual change was echoed in other interviews and group discussions and was seen to reflect wider social change and strategies developed by women to counter male authority in the home.

***Members of the Castlehill Support Group :***

***Mary :***

**'I know my Grandmother had sixteen kids but she still had to have his meal ready on the table for him coming in. The father was the master. My Grandfather was a contractor in the pit and when he had paid out the men, if he had no money left, he still expected to be fed. He was cured when my Grandmother put an empty plate**

in front of him and said 'that was the same as the kids and me had to eat'. After that he always made sure he brought some money home. Now that wouldn't happen in our house.'

*Susan ( Mary's daughter ):*

'I don't think I could accept that.'

*Jenny:*

'But when you look back on it, you were brought up to be that way. It's society that's changing and we're changing with it.'

*Mary:*

'Even our generation has changed that. The younger generation is even stronger than we are. The women used to be there just to have kids and to do the baking.'

The view that women had gained some freedom over the years was shared by other women I talked to, the comparison often made with tyrannical men in their own households in the past. Not all women remembered fathers or even grandfathers in this way. Some men were remembered as more helpful in the home than others. But there was a shared feeling that the old traditions which gave men absolute power in the family were no longer so much in evidence.

*Members of the Highhill Support Group:*

*Ann:*

'Well you see when we were at home there was that many of us to look after him (her father) wasn't there?'

*Dot ( Ann's sister ):*

'Well there were seven of us, but I don't know how you felt Ann, but I felt, looking back now, I felt the menfolk (Ann - 'Got away with it!'), they were the important ones in our the household. The girls had to wait on them, you had to clean their boots and you had to iron their shirts for them to go out before you could decide whether you could get out or not, you know.'

*Joan:*

'I had four brothers and they didn't know what it was to pick up a spoon mind.'

*Ann:*

'I mean that was the same with them because their pit clothes was done for them, their meals was put on the table and everything, their pit clothes was put out for them on a morning.'

*Dot:*

'But they always sat down to a meal first and we had to wait until they were finished.'

*Monica:*

'So there's been some changes there has there?'

*Joan:*

'Oh definitely!'

*Dot:*

'Oh a hell of a lot because in my household democracy rules. If there's a decision the whole family vote on it ... mind I've got a son that pushes his luck and tries to get you to do things for him eh ...'  
(laughter)

*Betty:*

'I've got one like that! He tries to get me to do his washing for him. I won't, but he tries everyday!'

*Ann:*

'Well and then we've made them more independent to look after themselves. If you're going out anywhere they can cook a pan of chips or you leave them something behind and they can help themselves, but when we were at home you couldn't do that. I think women are going forward, they're not going back, definitely



not ... they want to be recognised now which is to me, women are equal with a man. You know, what a man can do a women can do, whereas before you just used to sit back. You used to be the women at home, the house was yours, there were no outings or owt like that. You had the meals ready on the table and you brought the children up. I don't think for one minute that I would have liked to live through them times that a women was a women and her place was in the home. I think women can get more help to get out of marriage now. We sort of took after our mothers but not now ... if anything happens now there's battered wives homes and all sorts whereas before there was nothing. You couldn't go nowhere with four or five bairns. They go their own way now and I think that's a good thing. As I said to my daughter (who is divorced and now lives with another man) you only live once, live it the way you want to live it, not the way a man wants you to live it. You've got opinions as much as him.'

Ann's determination to support her daughter's escape from marriage to a violent husband who drank away all his own and her daughter's earnings was counter-posed with Ann's own experience of being restricted by her husband's long-term illness which left her with 'the responsibility of bringing up five children and making all the decisions'. Although she would not have parted with her children, she confessed 'I was tied down, and I'm just as tied down now as when they were little.' Other women spoke of husbands (theirs or other women's) who were 'old fashioned', who thought that 'a woman's place was in the home' and who 'were cut in the old mould' and of patterns of lives in mining communities where women were still mainly confined to the domestic sphere.

*Veronica:*

'The over-riding view of women in this area is that women have to conform to the ideal role of women, which is wife, mother and housewife. Her main concern is paying the bills and doing the shopping on a Friday. She might take a part-time job but that's just to keep the house going. She's expected, if she's taken out, to look glamorous, and most of the women in this area do make an attempt ... on a weekend they try to look glamorous and an appendage of the men and that's the accepted view. The strike was exceptional, but even then at social gatherings, men and

**women reverted to traditions. The pressures come from men, but mind they come from other women too.'**

Veronica argued that even if some women, like herself were making changes in their lives and in bringing their children up differently, this was a hard won fight against the traditional sex-role divide in mining communities.

### **A Continuing Sex-Role Divide**

**'A man can just put his coat on if he feels like it'**

Whether or not they detected much change from a past in which 'men were the masters', all women in the study agreed that the controlling power of men over women in the home could still prevail, even though it was no longer acceptable to them. The feeling that marriage and family responsibilities constrained them whilst men were free from such constraints was a common view.

#### ***Members of the Castlehill Support Group:***

***Susan :***

**'I don't want to get married yet. When I'm thirty five I might give it a try ... I want to enjoy my freedom. I don't want to be tied down. I want to get out and do what I want to do. A lot of my friends are married. Now and again you feel left on the shelf, and I seem to be the only one in the village that isn't. But when you think about it again, well.'**

***Mary:***

**'I think if everybody told the truth there's very, very few happy being married because you feel so tied down.'**

***Jenny:***

**'A man can just put his coat on if he feels like it.'**

***Mary:***

**'I've always said that a man's hours are nine to five, something like that, and then he's finished, whereas the women go on and on.'**

***Jenny:***

**'My husband didn't like to work so that had a lot to do with the breakup of my marriage. I went back to work when Michael was six months old because there was no money coming in and I got fed up with it in the end.'**

***Mary:***

**'My husband just wasn't interested in family life so we never should have got married in the first place. I mean he wanted to get married but he just didn't want the responsibilities. All he wanted to do was to go down the club and things like that. He wanted the kids but after they were born that was my job, my responsibility ... I had to go where he wanted to go and sit with his friends. If you talked to anyone else, 'what are you talking to them for', if you laugh, 'what are you laughing at now.' In the end I just gave up. But once the children are up, I shall go out and he won't know where I'm going because I never knew where he was going!'**

The above discussion illustrates women's experiences of a traditional gender divide within mining communities which though showing signs of erosion, still imposed restrictions on women who were now demanding greater freedoms than had been common in previous generations. As active agents in this process of change, women felt it to important to make a stand within the home, to train their children differently, and to counter resistance from men cut in the old mould in whatever way possible - either by divorce or by seeking independence in other ways. Dot argued that if housewives were given a wage this would transform their power and status.

***Dot:***

**' ... because for me power is money. Men control women by money. They hold the purse strings. They're the wage earners and they make you feel inferior, but if a women had a wage of their**

**own, they've got their independence and 'bugger you mate', I'm going to show you exactly what we can do.'**

Most did not advance such a radical solution, but they did approve changes which had given women greater freedoms, including the possibility of paid work, if only part-time. However, their experience of trying to find paid work in areas of high unemployment meant that financial independence was an unrealistic option for most. As has been found in other areas of the country, the economic position of women in mining communities has steadily worsened as pit closures have resulted in lost job opportunities in pit canteens and in the local infra-structure. (Allen 1989; Waddington et al 1991) At the time of the study only a minority of women had paid jobs of any kind. Most had been employed prior to the birth of their first child, typically in low-paid jobs in shops, factories and domestic work. As many women commented, even these limited opportunities had dried up for themselves and for their children in areas with well above the national average unemployment rates.

Yet it would be wrong to conclude that approval of greater freedom from men's controlling power in the home, however achieved, meant that women did not value their central role in the home and, in particular, in bringing up children. A clue to their values in this respect arose from their attitude towards Greenham women. Although they admired Greenham women, they were concerned that the Greenham protest demanded that women leave children and families behind, something which they could not contemplate.

### **'I would rather be at home with my kids'**

Greenham supporters in the study who were mothers felt able to make visits to the camp because of supportive husbands or partners and, for some, such visits were valued precisely because the Greenham culture enabled them to shed their mothering role, however briefly. For women in mining communities the priority given to children 'until they are up' and their family responsibilities were central to their lives. The Greenham protest was seen to conflict with such priorities in contrast to the strike where women took children with them, except on picket lines. Drawing on a common stereotype of Greenham women as women who had 'left home', they were impressed by political convictions which could inspire women to do so, whilst feeling unable themselves to be so committed.

*Janet :*

'I just thought if they want to do it let them get at it. I would go if a trip was organised but I can't see myself feeling so strongly about anything that I would leave my family to go and fight for it.'

*Judy:*

I do agree with what they are doing but I'd never be a Greenham women as such. I would rather be at home with my kids. If there was one at the bottom of my street I'd be there.'

*May:*

'Well I don't agree with nuclear weapons but I don't agree with Greenham because it's women-only. They're not at home if they're doing that all the time. I mean picketing, you're out two and three hours we'll say, and then that's it, you see. I think it should fit in with your family.'

*Dot:*

'These Greenham women they have my highest esteem. I think they're fantastic. I sometimes wish I had the courage to go down there and live with them. I don't think it's lack of courage, you know, my husband is bloody helpless. He is, he's bloody helpless, I don't suppose he would survive if I wasn't there. He can make a cup of tea and fry an egg and that's his limit. (Monica - Do you feel that pull to put him first in a way?) Yes, I mean God forbid if something happened. Supposing we divorced or something I would be the first woman down at Greenham. I would love to go and be among them. I think the spirit must be fantastic. They're really dedicated.'

*Barbara:*

'Well before the strike I never used to give them much thought but from the strike I think, eh how can they give up their homes? They're doing something they really believe in, really dedicated people.'

These views about women at Greenham indicated the extent to which women in mining communities felt bound by family commitments. So much so that Greenham women who are seen to have left their homes were viewed as '**really dedicated**'. Questions about how far the strike altered men's and women's roles in family life must then be seen in a context where women valued their central domestic role, even when they were critical of certain aspects of it. The generational change of which they approved was one which gave some women more freedom within a sexual divide which was still a strong feature of relationships in mining communities when the strike was called and which was reflected in separate though intersecting spheres of influence during the strike.

### **The Gender Divide During the Strike**

#### **'Men do men's things and women do women's things'**

Did men get involved in the home as a consequence of the women's participation in support group activities in the strike? From this study it would seem that the natural supposition that they did had to be qualified by an understanding of the broader patterns of strike activity as well as specific variations in individual households. From the accounts of women in this study it seems that men were more likely to participate in household tasks when they were not doing daily duty on the picket line or attending meetings or where women took on part-time work to try to make ends meet. Women for their part managed households and were responsible for children as well as being active in support groups.

#### ***Phyliss - Chair of the Meadow Vale Support Group:***

**'During the strike, it was like going to work for the men. They went on their picket duty. They were at the club every day, they weren't drinking but they were with their mates. They would do their picket duty, they would come in and have a hot drink and a pasty and maybe a game of dominoes, but they had a social meeting place. The wife was up there doing the parcels, maybe street collecting. She had to pick the kids up from whoever was looking after them. She had to produce a meal but not just for that day. She had to figure out what had she got from SS, she got her little food parcel, she had to figure out how to feed everybody. O.K. the men's responsibility was to get a fire on which they did,**

no questions asked about where they got the fuel from! Not only that, but it was a full year, you couldn't afford things like polish, you couldn't afford paint. My house needed emulsioneing and it got dirty. The men used to come in with muddy boots ... The women were the strongest. They had the bigger burden to bear. I mean the men went as I say on the picket line. It was like just going to do their day's work. They were with their mates and when they came back home the wife was there, O.K. she might not have been, but they fitted your time in, they knew when the wife was going to be there.'

*Judy:*

'Well you were pulled up by your roots ... we were picked up and thrown into all this turmoil that didn't just affect you or your street. It was on the news, it was in the papers, and you were in that, it was all about you, and you were thrown into all this utter bloody chaos. It was bound to change us more than the men. And the men always had their mates whether they were going picketing or going to work ... We were dropped with people we'd never seen before in our lives, going places we'd never been before in our lives.'

*Catherine:*

'I know the men went on picket lines but for the women it was different because the hardship was there for them every day, all day, from when you got up in the morning till you went to bed. If you had no money what were you going to do for the rest of the week, what were you going to eat?'

Women explained that when they had to, men in the families had catered for themselves during the strike because they 'backed the women' and a few said that their men did get more involved in cooking and cleaning. However women described their own pattern of life as one in which they had the responsibility for budgeting, running the home and making arrangements for childcare. Often children were taken along, especially to soup kitchens, where impromptu creches developed, and on rallies and demonstrations. Indeed the women expressed some astonishment when I asked who had looked after the children when they were involved in support group activities. It

drew such responses as 'whey we took them along', 'ours came with us', 'the children were there with us, it was just natural.' When women went on picket lines various solutions were found, including support from other women in their families or taking turns to stay off the picket line to 'mind the bairns'. The frenetic activity of juggling political activity and domestic duties was described as very stressful by all the women, their greatest anxiety the mounting bills and lack of food. One very active member of her group described how her resolve weakened six months into the strike.

**'The half of me that wanted him to go back was because of the bairns. (aged nine, eleven and fourteen) They were all good eaters, well you felt awful when you had to say 'you can't have any more of that', it used to choke me. I had two dogs which had to be fed and they had to be cut down. I've seen me go two or three days, I used to have a cup of tea and if there was nobody around I'd have a slice of toast and then I'd say to Pete 'I've had mine'. He knew I hadn't mind, but you see you tried to do that so that the bairns came first ... I had a lot of problems with the electric but then I got a meter and only put the cooker on once a day. I used to put the kettle on the fire. The parcels were good.'**

All of the 'miners' wives' I interviewed had experienced severe hardship and felt that if it were not for the groups through which they had received practical advice and help, they would not have been able to manage. This important aspect of support groups underlines the central responsibility women had for domestic activity. Normally this was a privatised activity. But the strike brought about, in some groups at least, a sharing of private troubles.

***Members of the Highhill Support group:***

***Ann:***

**'I've had a hard time Monica, because my husband has been on the sick for a long time ... I make all the decisions and its been hard for me because you've got nobody to turn to and you just sort of bottle everything up and that's why when you joined this group, you just sort of let go and enjoyed it whereas before I didn't have that.'**



*Janet:*

'It was a lovely atmosphere in the group, everyone helped one another ... Dot used to get everyone to pour out your problems, and those that had the guts to say 'I'm going to get my electric cut off', others heard them and thought 'well if she's saying it, I'll say it', and we helped one another that way ... even the stuck-up people, those who keep themselves to themselves, came down to earth.'

*Sandra:*

'There was times I was really desperate, I used to be really depressed, but my husband was really good with us. But I'll tell you something now, if it wasn't for Dot and the group, my marriage would have broke up during the strike. Being the only one with a baby I got tret a bit special like.'

*Joan:*

'It got you involved with the girls, I mean you knew them and you used to speak to them outside but you became so very close when that strike came on because you knew everybody was in the same position as what you were. You could share your troubles, it was nice to know that you had somebody in your own position and you could talk about your troubles, whereas other times you wouldn't dream of talking about them and sort of keep them locked inside.'

Other women in the study described the feelings of 'togetherness' and 'sharing' of problems in their support groups. They also recollected times of great stress in groups when women grew tired and could see no end in sight. It was not unusual for disagreements and conflicts to break out, particularly as the strike wore on. The 'togetherness' of the women was severely tested by men returning to work and 'scab's wives' leaving groups, the disruption in women's relationships reflecting the erosion of unity amongst the men. Women also spoke of the in-fighting and personalised quarrels which could occur in groups when it seemed that some were getting more privileged treatment than others. Mostly they put this down to tiredness, fear and personal hardship which could be divisive as well as unifying experiences in groups.

*Phyliss:*

'... the everyday work of collecting, sorting out food, making up parcels, and people increasing week by week, it was a headache - all those names and addresses. Then there was the problem of trying to make it go round by appealing to those who needed it less and the buck stops here you see. It's not always nice being in the Chair, you had to explain, say 'now you know that you really aren't in desperate need'. See, you had to get it to the ones who were desperate without upsetting the others to the point where they would go back to bloody work, so you had to decide which is the lesser of two evils here.'

As women related their experiences of support groups they revealed the extent to which they felt responsible for coping with the effects of increasing poverty on their families. From that perspective the concessions won in terms of men helping with household chores were relatively insignificant compared to women's overall management of the home and family which echoed their usual role. In taking this on as their collective responsibility the women were breaking new ground and creating new possibilities for themselves without making excessive demands on the men. Similarly, Waddington et al found in their study, that 'if men did offer contributions, this supplemented rather than substituted for women's work' (*Waddington et al 1991, p82*). In cases where men were asked to enter the new world which women were creating, for example in helping with soup kitchens, this was still seen to be the prime responsibility of the women. Men, it seems, helped when required, some giving a good deal of support and others only grudgingly, most men and women probably seeing it as exceptional activity for the duration of the strike.

*Catherine:*

'We had a soup kitchen in the chapel and had the worry of running it. I remember I went to a meeting to put it to the men that we needed their help. They said 'noted'. I says, 'just hang on a moment', I says 'noted'!, I says 'before I go out of this room tonight I want a list of names' ... Some of the men were saying 'bloody women, let them in and see what happens', but I didn't see why it should be women's burden. I worried myself sick, but I mean for the men it didn't have anything to do with them. Their day was worked out for them ... The men for most part were very good, but it was like everything else. Men do men's things and

**women do women's things, I mean some of the men washed dishes but they didn't like it. You had to make up a rota and they would stick to it, but for some of them 'if you went on a picket line you shouldn't have to work in a kitchen'. Some of them it didn't bother them.'**

Although women felt that life was more demanding and tougher for them in the strike, and some were critical of men's reluctance to help out in women's activities, most valued a separation of spheres of responsibility which allowed women to show what they could do without interference from men. The Highhill group, for example explained that the men who came to their meetings had **'backed them'** and had **'not interfered'**. They laughingly described how men had been willing to take a 'back seat' because **'Dot was a strong spokeswomen'** and because **'the men had learnt that it was a good thing for us to get on with it because they got fed!'** However a number of women reflected back to incidents which illustrated the difficulties they had in carving out their area of influence within the controlling power of local trade union officials both during and after the strike, echoing the words of one of the women interviewed by Jean Stead, that the NUM 'are the bastion of male chauvinism' (*Stead 1987, p119*).

### **Exclusionary Male Practices**

**'It was a culture shock for a lot of them to have women involved.'**

Although women constantly reflected on the strike as a time when they stood side by side their men, this solidaristic theme was broken at times with guarded references to the union's lack of support or interference. In a number of cases I was asked to turn the tape recorder off because women didn't want to be quoted saying things against the union. One such case concerned an angry tussle with the local Lodge about the contents and distribution of food parcels, the men thinking they knew better than the women what families needed. When families complained about the contents, the women told the union men 'where to get off'. The women were angry about this episode and made veiled references to others in which they had to fight off interference from men who tried to organise them. Similarly one of the National organisers of WAPC reflected on her experience in the Yorkshire area.

**Jen:**

**'I can remember the early days of the strike, Union would have loved to have controlled our action group, and I told them to get lost, I said 'no we're doing it ourselves' and we fought for that in a small way but fought for us own autonomy and us own way of doing things.'**

That similar fights for women's autonomy might go on beyond the strike was illustrated by one group's conflict with local union officials who demanded that the support group's remaining funds be handed over to the local lodge at the end of the strike. The women chose instead to put their money into the national fund for sacked miners. This conflict was experienced as demoralising and disruptive and was seen as a major factor preventing the group from staying together after the strike. The group were unwilling to hand over their funds and their books because they felt that the local union officials had not wanted them to form a women's group in the first place and had not been fully supportive of their work during the strike. That this had been a vivid and damaging experience for the group was underlined in a comment made later about men in Labour Party meetings:

**'Oh they try to dominate meetings ... it's the same feeling as when the strike finished and the men sort of pounced on us. In fact it got where Ian McGregor and Maggie Thatcher was the enemy during the strike and when the strike was over, it got to be where the union was the enemy. We had to think hey! We were thinking of ways we could get even with them and that's when it had to stop, we were supposed to be together.'**

How widespread were such experiences is impossible to judge, but they have been documented elsewhere (*Loach 1985; Miller 1986; Gibbon & Steyne 1986*). They were also graphically illustrated by one group in this study who were not at all reticent about discussing the patriarchal attitudes of the union to the support group during and after the strike.



*Valley View Support Group:*

*Jessie - Chair:*

'We invited the NUM and the Mechanics to attend our meetings. Of course that wasn't reciprocated, I mean we were never allowed to attend theirs. I mean we were told at one of our meetings, 'you talk a lot of rubbish' and I said 'well we canna get into your meetings to hear your bloody rubbish!', we had to sit on the stairs until we were admitted into the inner sanctum. But we said 'you are quite welcome to come to ours' to try and establish some liaison with them and they did from time to time.'

*Liz:*

'Having said that you can't throw fifty years of tradition out the window in one fell swoop because it was a culture shock for a lot of them to have women involved, it was a shock.'

*Josie:*

'And to have women who knew what they were talking about.'

*Jessie:*

'Oh they didn't like that at all, I mean they work amongst men and they play hard, but women had never played their part as equals in their organisation and they came round eventually, but they still thought we were one step behind like. A little funny story, we had an NUM and Mechanics service in our village just after the strike and the Mechanics, they've got an area banner and well we've got our own banner. Well at the end of the strike we were all good friends and I thought we had established mutual respect and everything, so I went up to a Lodge secretary and I said 'where have we got to go?', I said. 'can we go in front of your banner?'. He says 'what!, what!, you can't go in front of the Lodge banner', so I says 'well where do we go?', he says 'behind the Mechanics', but I says 'but the Mechanics are at the back'. He says, 'well you go behind the Mechanics.' And that's it in a nutshell, and that was straight after the strike. We thought at least we would be on a par with them and as for associate membership, well, oh dear!'

*Monica:*

'What did you think about that?'

*General Chorus:*

'We didn't want it!'

*Jessie:*

'We never wanted their associate membership because it was nothing to us, it didn't mean anything. I mean if they'd come along and asked us and said 'well we want you to have it', well we'd have thought 'fair enough.'

*Michelle:*

'But it became a campaigning issue, utter rubbish! Never mind the men were worried.'

*Liz:*

'I always thought we were being patronised by them as well.'

*Jessie:*

'Arthur Scargill, a fortnight after the strike ended at a day school, he went to pains to reassure the men present that this associate membership was nowt, you know, there was nothing there, he went to pains to point it out to them.'

*Monica:*

'What were the men worried about?'

*Jessie:*

'They were worried about us getting into their union meetings because there was one, an official, he sat here at a party we had after the strike ... he turned viciously against me, he said 'as for you, I've never liked you, I've worked with you for a year and I've never liked you and your nose is getting bigger by every second.'

**You'll never dominate us, you'll never dominate us'. (much laughter in the group)**

***Liz:***

**'They were terrified of us. They were frightened. They just did not want us inside that door as well. They tolerated us.'**

This group revealed a keen sense of their own struggle to secure a sphere of influence and recognition against the exclusionary male values of the union. As they recollected various incidents during the strike in which the union had endeavoured to show them who was 'boss', for example through union control of funds for food parcels and other aspects of the women's welfare work, they also uncovered their increasing sense of unity as a women's group.

The group developed its own series of running jokes about certain officious union characters and shared a wealth of stories about their use of humour to put such men down and these were an important part of their memories of the strike. For example, one member of the group described how she had approached a particularly 'tightfisted' union man who responded to every request for funds with the phrase 'Whey, whey. I'll have to think', and said she was wondering, if when she went to court following her arrest on a picket line, he would lay on a band and a banner to march her in. He failed to get the joke! On another occasion a woman had burnt a hole in her skirt and the group with one voice had said, 'you'll have to apply to X for compensation!' The group had primarily adopted strategies of negotiation and humour to deal with the problem of difficult men and felt that they had made some progress.

Establishing a working relationship with the union was experienced as difficult but not impossible; indeed it was a necessary aspect of securing the victory which women wanted 'side by side with their men.' Achieving a long lasting recognition for the major role the women played in the strike was a different matter. As one woman put it, 'it makes you feel used.' The strike put the Valley View Group and others wise to the patriarchal relations enshrined within the NUM which women's political role in the strike had challenged. Nevertheless the assertion of the women's voice against the power of the union was not the prime objective of women's support groups. It emerged as a result of the determination of women to fight for jobs and communities with men who both needed women's support in the strike but also feared it. As this

study and others have shown, women were aware that the question on men's lips was not just whether women would get ideas above their station in relation to the male province of the Union, but whether they would return to normal life once the strike was over.

Whether women would remain a political force in mining communities after the strike and what that might mean will be discussed later. However it is important to stress here that even when women came up against the traditional gender divide in various ways during the strike, they saw their situation, that of women in mining communities, as inextricably bound up with their class. To put this simply whilst aware of the greater restrictions in their lives as compared with men in mining communities, they tended to see class rather than men as the main enemy.

*Jessie:*

**'I never expected it to go on as a mass movement after the strike because I know the difficulties of working class women. I know my own difficulties that I've had over the years. I mean my kiddie's up now but when she was small, my husband was working on night shift, or tug loading as we say here, and I was trying to educate myself, trying to do an A/L in Economics and I couldn't get to classes because I had nobody to look after the bairn ... I used to feel aggrieved but I thought it's not my husband's fault that he's got to go to the pit to keep us alive is it. You can't blame men for that situation can you? I think it's something that should be picked up by the community as a community, like what we had during the strike. We didn't have any special facilities for the children, they were just there, it was natural, just took them along.'**

From Jessie's point of view the restrictions of women's lives flows from the structure of pit work within a working class community; men are not to be blamed for a pattern of work which constrains women's freedom. Like most women interviewed in this study she articulated an understanding expressed in Rowbotham's work.

**'The experiences of being working class and being women are intertwined; they cannot be separated.'** (*Rowbotham 1989, p286*)



## Conclusion

Many active women expressed the feeling that they would never be the same again after their involvement in the strike, a common theme of their writings during and immediately after the strike. However their participation in the strike was not inspired by an upsurge of women's consciousness of their oppressed status as women, even if Lydia Bowler was right to detect a 'change coming' in women's acceptance of being seen 'as the domesticated element'. Rather women were fighting to preserve their communities and jobs in mining. Few women in this study anticipated major changes in their lives as a result of their action in the strike. But their action in the strike had certainly made them more aware of their collective power as women and of their individual talents and capacities. The strike had also heightened the awareness of some of the sexual divide in mining communities. For a minority at least this led to changes in their personal lives even if it did not inspire a working class women's movement as some hoped it might.

The data in this study suggests that it would be simplistic to accept the view of Ali (1986) that the question of women's awareness of male oppression is irrelevant within the unity of mining community life. This appears to be an equally romantic view to those which viewed women's action in the strike as resonant of feminism, a perspective which Ali wished to dispel. By listening to the women's own voices, we discover their awareness of a more complex pattern of experience in which aspects of masculine dominance are interwoven with class oppression. From the women's accounts it can reasonably be argued that as well as the strike providing 'a glimpse of socialism', it also provided further glimpses of men as an obstacle to women's equal participation in that vision. But for all this, women protestors interpreted their action as primarily focused on a cause which united them with their men. The focus might have blurred from time to time as they struggled to deal with difficult men or, indeed, fractious quarrels between themselves, but the clear objective was to win what they increasingly understood as a class war.

In the chapter which follows, the Greenham protest is examined from the perspective of supporters whose perceptions of it reveal less of a united objective, even though they have been portrayed as women bound together by a common gender analysis in the cause of peace, in which their separation and autonomy from men were crucial factors. Again we shall find that a more complex picture emerges when women speak for themselves.

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## CHAPTER V

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### THE GREENHAM PROTEST : PEACE AND GENDER RELATIONS

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**'The women who set up the peace camp have made personal sacrifices because they feel so strongly about this issue. They have left their families and given up jobs ... The women who have left their families feel that they are taking the greatest responsibility in caring for their children by stopping Cruise missiles coming to this country. We are all individuals with a responsibility to sustain and nurture life - something we can do together, with mutual support.**

**The peace camp has been a women's initiative. Reversing traditional roles, women have been leaving home for peace, rather than men leaving home for war. The camp involves women of different ages and backgrounds. Some have never taken part in any political action before; others have been members of the Labour Party or women's groups, but all feel the urgency of the nuclear threat and are determined not to remain silent. As women we have been encouraged to stay at home and look up to men as our protectors. But we reject this role.'** *(Extract from the Chain Letter sent out from Greenham Common, 14th October 1982, quoted in Yorkshire Women Go to Greenham, 1983, p5)*

This early appeal to women to come to Greenham emphasised women's special place in pursuing the cause of peace by extending their mothering and nurturing roles even if paradoxically they must leave home (their traditional locus) in order to do so. It also suggested that differences between women were inconsequential since they were bound together by the common cause of fighting the nuclear threat, something which distinguished them from men who were no longer to be trusted as protectors. These themes, of women's special role in pursuit of peace and of 'women bonding', reverberate through debates about Greenham and, in particular, about its contribution to the development of feminism.

## **Greenham: Anti-nuclear Protest and Women's Space**

The Greenham protest started out with a fairly precise objective; to oppose NATO'S decision to site cruise missiles at Greenham Common. From the accounts of the original marchers, it would seem that their actions were humanist rather than feminist inspired, although from the earliest days the potential publicity and impact of a women-only protest was recognised. This humanism was tinged with feelings which some feminist observers regarded as detrimental to the cause of feminism - namely traditional feminine concern of mothers about the future of their children and, in that nurturing role, concern about the future of the planet. Yet the accounts of those women who were involved in the early days of the protest also emphasised the sense of power and confidence which they gained in the meetings held at the base to decide upon further action, described as a new experience for themselves as women. Thus although Greenham did not begin as a feminist protest, many would argue that it provided a place for feminism to flourish precisely because it empowered women, particularly six months into the campaign when it became a women-only protest. The dramatic effect of making Greenham women-only was not simply in terms of initial media coverage (which owed much to the contradictory images of 'women-as-mothers' and 'women-as-subversives') but also because of its mounting attraction as a women's space.

'As well as being a round the clock protest against Cruise missiles, it is also a resource - a women's space in which to try to live our ideals of feminism and non-violence, a focus for information and ideas, a meeting place, and a vital place for women to express their beliefs and feelings.'

*(Cook and Kirk 1983, p5)*

## **Radical Feminist Perspectives on Greenham**

The claim that Greenham had become an important site of feminism in action was one which drew criticism from a number of feminist quarters. The early and most vociferous denunciations of Greenham came from radical feminists who saw the protest as a diversion from the immediate and pervasive forms of male violence to be countered in all aspects of women's lives (*Breaching the Peace* 1983). From this radical vantage, Greenham women (and peace women in general) lacked an incisive feminist politics and were in danger of reinforcing traditional stereotypes.

Not all radical feminists were so clear in their condemnation. Ruth Wallsgrove, who attended the one day conference from which sprang the Breaching the Peace papers, described her feelings as ambivalent. She noted the serious grounds on which Greenham had been criticised,

'....for taking the energy away from the Women's Liberation Movement, for using feminism for liberal ends, and for relying on the 'feminine' stereotypes - particularly of the 'natural mother' who cares for everything and is emotional rather than political - which feminists have struggled against.' (*Wallsgrove 1983, p4*)

Yet she felt that feminists could not fail to be impressed by the attraction which Greenham held for women. For her it was at least pro-women, but the politics were still suspect.

'...the camp hovers uneasily between its old 'ordinary mum' and its new 'superwimmin' images, and it doesn't add up to feminism.' (*Wallsgrove 1983, p6*)

So radical feminists may have been attracted to some aspects of Greenham but in the final analysis many held to the view that it was based on a 'soft centred' women's politics - one in which the anti-nuclear protest for the common good obscured an analysis of women's oppression. The counter argument was that involvement in a women-only protest could raise awareness of the issues so central to the radical feminist project, even if in the end not all women embraced it. This point of view was expressed in a pamphlet by Jean Freer. As a radical feminist living at Greenham she took issue with the hard line expressed in 'Breaching the Peace'. For her, Greenham was a place where lesbian consciousness could flourish, where women's ways of thinking and communicating could develop and where a women's culture could be established. She also argued that women of different persuasions could be politicised by taking part in direct actions in spite of weaknesses in theoretical analysis.

'...analysis at Greenham is still weak - a consequence of so many women being at Greenham as their first ever political action, with the population of camp changing all the time, and the movement being so broad based. But the Peace Camp is reaching many women, and after

the initial outreach (a constant concern of WLM) comes the understanding of theory.' (*Freer 1984, p17*)

For Freer then, Greenham provided an opportunity for the active participation of women in a women-only culture, the peace protest being the means to developing a radical feminist consciousness which went beyond it. The basis for politicisation in these terms would be, not just the pro-women culture of the camp, but its antithesis exemplified by the male weapons of control within the perimeter fence.

'Its unique dynamic was a demand for disarmament yoked to an analysis of patriarchy. Men were seen to be representatives of the nuclear madness which supported the potential for global destruction while women were thought to be able to eradicate nuclear weapons through protest and struggle.' (*Young, 1990, p1*)

### **Socialist Feminist Perspectives on Greenham**

As far as socialist feminists were concerned the dangerous underside of Greenham was that it contributed to the worst elements of radical/cultural feminism. Segal, for example, found much to admire in the Greenham protest, particularly 'the sense of purpose and confidence Greenham has given to so many women' (*Segal 1986, p166*). However she was concerned about the essentialist view of womanhood and the individualism inherent in the Greenham protest and evident in Greenham writings.

'It is not their women-centred tactics nor their focus and their goal. I am troubled by their belief in some intrinsic or inevitably greater pacifism amongst women than men, and how this fits our preconceptions as well as media attitudes which sensationalise and simplify the issues. And, related to this, I am troubled by a rejection of what I see as any adequate analysis of modern militarism and the arms race for one which reduces it to an issue of individual psychology and immediate interpersonal relations.' (*Segal 1986, p165*).

It is doubtful that Greenham offered up so coherent a theory of feminism as Segal supposed, although for some women the peace camp undoubtedly provided a women's space in which relationships between women could flourish, but it was also home to a

very broad spectrum of feminist philosophies. Of course it could be argued that the very protest itself provided a powerful and misleading metaphor of the sexual divide, with men guarding weapons of destruction on the inside of the fence and women peace protestors outside. The actions carried out by women at Greenham also exploited that metaphor further when they were infused with ideas about a culture of womanhood.

The judgement that Greenham promoted simplistic theories of gender difference and of the causes of militarism was based on the assumption that the Greenham camp was a radical/cultural feminist stronghold. If at times Greenham came near to this stereotype, it is not at all clear what influence it had on its many supporters who were themselves active in generating the complex and shifting meanings of the Greenham protest. Segal, like other writers, tended to draw the feminist meaning of Greenham from within the confines of the peace camp and as such was anxious about the potential influence of its retreatist feminist message.

For this reason, socialist feminists were as concerned as were those radical feminists who argued that Greenham diverted women away from the real locus of action in the fight against women's oppression. For socialist feminists this meant hard struggle through Trade Unions, Local Government, the Labour Party and left wing and community based groups in order to achieve change for women and society as a whole - a difficult arena in the 1980s as Thatcherite policies made inroads into earlier small gains. On the other hand because of the contrast it offered in the ideals of non-hierarchical methods of working in an all-women setting, Greenham was viewed positively by some socialist feminists.

'Often trade unionism and life in local councils and political parties drains us of energy. Involvement with the women's peace movement energises us because of the explosion of women's imagination there, uncramped by men, expressed in a sense of fun and bold, breathtaking actions. Meetings at the camp have led to a widening network of campaigns. During the miners' strike, Greenham women throughout the country spoke at rallies, picketed, raised money for Women Against Pit Closures, and generally supported women in the mining communities in finding their own ways to fight the government and defend the strike. It was women who stressed the connection between the run-down of the coal industry and massive spending on nuclear power.' (*Finch et al 1986, p96*)

Support of Greenham women for the women in mining communities and other campaigns was seen as a promising departure from what socialist feminists feared to be the isolationist feminism of the camp - a moving outward from the myopic focus on women's culture towards a socialist feminist agenda (*Segal 1986; Rowbotham 1989; Coote & Campbell 1987*).

'The sort of feminism that saw the nuclear arms race as a direct expression of patriarchy has tended to give way to a more diverse brand of socialist feminism which has enabled 'Greenham' to make the links.'  
(*Norden 1985, p8*)

Whether the support from Greenham women for the strike denoted a dramatic change of feminist politics at Greenham is open to interpretation, just as is the assumption that there had never been links with other women's struggles before. The camp was visited by women from within this country and other countries from the early days. It is perhaps the case that the isolationist image of Greenham was always something of a myth. This study suggests, contrary to the views of socialist feminist writers, that the retreat came somewhat later, in the period 1986 and beyond. One woman (**Jennifer**) in this study, who spent the winter of 1982 at the Greenham camp, reflected on her early experience of Greenham as '**the greatest place of learning**'.

'I suppose I just developed personally and lots of things came together, I learnt a lot more about what was going on in the world, I met women from all over the world who were concerned about the same issues ... At Christmas we got loads of support from all over the country, masses of support and lots of money ... we decided to give ninety percent of the money to support other issues which we were involved in like black women's struggles and refugees ... The whole awareness of what's happening in the Pacific has come from Greenham, and it's still happening even though on the face of it, many women may seem to be tied up with women's relationships, that's not the true picture, that's not the entire picture at all. It's just part of working it out within the maelstrom of other issues that are around. For me it's still a place to go to get in touch with all these other issues.'

## **The Polyvalence of Greenham**

The Greenham protest attracted more critical appraisal from feminist writers than did women's participation in the miners' strike, mainly because it appeared to some at least, to have seized the feminist highground with possible detrimental effects. For radical feminists, Greenham lacked a coherent feminist philosophy because the analysis of women's oppression was confused with the peace issue and reproduced a stereotype of women as natural carers. However, some saw promise in the developing women's culture associated with the camp. For socialist feminists, Greenham, at least in the early years, lacked an adequate political philosophy because it dwelt too much on gender and provided a dangerous home for a retreatist cult of womanhood. Yet as we have seen, both radical and socialist feminists also viewed Greenham as enabling the development of their own particular and different prescriptions for political action. Both were impressed by the feminist potential of Greenham to re-energise women's sense of autonomy and freedom through participation in women-only action, yet remained ambivalent about the significance of Greenham for feminism and its further development.

Much of what has been written about Greenham, apart from writings emanating from the camp, has been based on assumptions about the meanings it held for women who actively supported it. This chapter will explore the Greenham experience through the voices of such women. Though small in number compared with the many who participated in the protest, these voices add further complexity to our understanding of the Greenham protest. They suggest that Greenham attracted women for different reasons and affected them in varying ways and that their experiences of the protest were influenced by what they brought to it as well as what it offered, filling out a picture alluded to by Delmar.

'Support for Greenham does not rely in the main on feminist groups (although it does rely on women). Greenham actions have been polyvalent, capable of attracting multiple meanings and mobilizing various ideological stances in their support: this is part of its strength. Without a women's movement a peace camp would probably not have so much resonance; this is part of the success of the women's movement, but does not make Greenham necessarily feminist.' (*Delmar 1986, p12*)



As was shown in the previous chapter, women in mining communities organised around the goal of fighting for communities and jobs alongside their men. Their sense of power as women was inspired by their common understanding of the part they were playing in class struggle even if at times they had to fight for the right to play such a part within the masculine traditions of mining union politics. Thus the focus of their action was relatively unambiguous. The data on Greenham activists in this study suggests that involvement in Greenham was less clearly focused, supporting Delmar's view of the Greenham protest as 'polyvalent' and 'not necessarily feminist.'

The ways in which women defined their relationship to Greenham fell into three broad patterns: those which gave priority to it as an anti-nuclear protest; those which gave priority to it as a feminist action; and those which gave priority to Greenham's links with other struggles. These indicate a range of preferences about the real or potential meaning of Greenham to women who participated. However all were committed peace activists and most saw Greenham as related in some way to a 'feminism' with which they could choose to engage or not. Thus the meanings were multi-layered and complex. The early stated assumption from the camp with which this chapter began, that Greenham women, whatever their different backgrounds, were united in a common womanhood for peace, appears on closer examination to have been salient for only some Greenham supporters.

### **Greenham: A Woman's Peace Protest**

#### **'Greenham is not a women's temple.'**

Women who were primarily involved in Greenham activities in order to extend their peace work (six in this study) valued Greenham for breathing new life into the peace movement and new hope in ridding the world of nuclear weapons. To the extent that it was seen as promoting feminism over and beyond being a women-only action, it was viewed with some ambivalence. Such women regarded peace as a 'people issue' and whilst they positively supported the contribution of women-only action inspired by Greenham and valued working in women-only groups, they regarded the 'women-side' of Greenham as secondary to its peace message.

Their preference for defining Greenham as a peace protest can be illustrated by the importance they attributed to its power to influence people's attitudes and to inspire

further resistance to nuclear weapons. So the Greenham camp was described variously as 'a focus for peace action'; 'like a beacon or a light'; 'a symbol'; a rallying point'; 'a message that's all over the world', such definitions always in the context of anti-nuclear rather than feminist concerns. In several cases this view of Greenham as a catalyst for peace action was given extra emphasis by reference to the feminist attraction which they perceived it held for others.

*Sally - Active Campaigner in Anti-nuclear Power Campaign over a Ten Year Period:*

'Well I first went when we went down for the fence cutting weekend ... in fact going down to Greenham was my first experience of women-only action and I found it quite gratifying in lots of ways, but for me the women's part of Greenham has been a pleasant, not exactly side show, but for some people the re-invigoration of, if you like, their feminist ideas and their woman's side is the most important thing. For me it was not exactly secondary because the two things are so closely entwined but first and foremost Greenham is an American airbase. To me Greenham is not a women's temple, it's more a monument to the human spirit in both its best and its worst aspect.'

*Penny - Local Press Officer for CND, Founder of a Greenham Support Group:*

'Different Greenham experiences have had a different effects on me. That first time on December 12th in '82, embrace the base', that was a wonderful feeling that 'well the tide had turned', you know, that 'this surge of conviction is going to change public opinion', and it was wonderful to see so many different sorts of women from different walks of life, all joining together - but to me it was because they were people ... it wasn't because it was a feminist action but because it was a mass meeting. I find mass meetings unreasonably thrilling because they fill me with hope.'

Further visits to Greenham lead Penny to the following conclusions:

**'It just wasn't my scene. A lot of things that Greenham women do are an expression of their hope and their optimism and are very imaginative, and I know that they are misrepresented and I can see that they are valuable in their own way especially in terms of reinforcing the convictions and resolve of the women who go, but I felt I couldn't contribute to these things ... I could see other ways of being effective up here, I thought 'I can operate better by being local', so that's what I did ... I think there has been a general change in people's attitudes towards nuclear weapons because Greenham acted as a very important focus of attention and because it was a women's action it created sparks and attracted attention from all sorts of people who wouldn't have taken any notice ... I think it's a pity if the feminist side of Greenham side-tracks the main focus of attention which is getting rid of nuclear weapons.'**

The above passage illustrates an ambivalence expressed by all 'peace women' towards feminist aspects of Greenham, including feelings of personal alienation from what they perceived to be the more strident of Greenham women. This was encapsulated for one woman (*Sue*) in the treatment of Ann Pettit, an early founder of the camp, **'by some of the feminists who took over as the camp mutated'**. She described herself as identifying with the **'feminine rather than feminist ideals'** of Woman for Life on Earth, the group through which Ann Pettit continued to organise peace initiatives. Another woman (*Clair*) described her feelings of being an **'outsider'** when she spent a whole weekend at Greenham with a **'very lesbian-oriented group'**, and referred to the women at the camp as **'a right lot, or they can be!'** The main concern of all 'peace women' in this study was that Greenham feminism should not detract from its focus as an anti-nuclear protest.

Penny's decision not to go back to Greenham was not typical, but 'peace women' generally gave a higher priority to local actions or, as in two cases, to their experience of international peace missions than to immersion in Greenham itself. The 'carry Greenham home' philosophy of the protest was interpreted by these women to mean that they could be active supporters without being drawn into the feminist culture of the camp, their main focus of attention on peace work at home and visits to the camp providing 'an adrenaline kick' for that purpose. Because the Greenham camp depended upon a wide web of support, it was possible for women to participate without feeling

compelled to take part in actions on the 'front-line' and to choose to work for Greenham in other ways than by being there.

*Sue - Active Secretary of Local CND group; Quaker:*

'My experience of going to Greenham is to get on the bus, do the demo and come back again ... I could do more but I believe that it's important to 'carry Greenham home' so I go down there for a quick buzz and I come back here and plug away in the old home town, and I mean that approach is validated by the Greenham gurus.'

*Jane - Veteran Peace Campaigner, Signatory to the Peace Pledge Union, Quaker, Member of CND, Member of an Umbrella Greenham Support Group:*

'By the time Greenham got going I had just about had enough of travelling (she had recently been on a CND rally in London and had been twice to Faslane) and so I got involved in a lot of small local activities for Greenham ... I found that people were going and being arrested so I thought 'they're going and doing something and they're having to pay for it and this is not fair, I think we should have a special fund', so I wrote to all my friends and asked them and the response was tremendous. That was a useful thing to do.'

'Peace women' regarded the Greenham camp as an important site of peace action which they could support at a distance. The only 'peace woman' who made regular and prolonged visits to the camp exemplified a long tradition of quaker pacifism passed on to her by an elderly aunt who took her to international peace meetings when she was a child. She preserved a sense of personal distance from Greenham feminism on site by 'being low key' and 'not getting too involved' and her involvement in direct action at the base was modelled on pacifist rather than feminist ideals.

*Clair - Active Member of Local Umbrella Peace Group, Quaker, a Life Long Pacifist:*

'I can remember just standing and looking into someone's eyes for half an hour ... most things I decide then, I never do anything on

**the spur of the moment. I think I always know what I'm doing. I'm fairly sure and concentrated on it and I would disappear or just not be there if I didn't feel in control. I always take control of these situations in a passive way, I think you can. It's arms that's my big thing. I think like movements in India you can be passive resistant.'**

Not all 'peace women' could draw upon a life-time's commitment to pacifism and Quaker principles. Pam and Penny, for example, had been recent converts to the peace movement. What all these women had in common was their conviction that Greenham made a valuable contribution as a women-only protest to a wider campaign in which peace was understood to be a 'people's issue.'

***Pam - Member of a Neighbourhood Greenham Support Group:***

**'They say that Greenham's just about women, but they must have the support of the men to go. My husband supported me and if he could have gone without encroaching on the women he would have gone, so, if you think of him multiplied by however many hundreds of thousands of people, Greenham has really focused things for them.'**

**Peace Action and the Question of Men**

**'I don't see it as a male versus female issue'**

As was shown earlier in this chapter, a number of feminist critiques of Greenham embody concern that it promulgates a simplistic view of sex difference as the explanation for women's protest against male weapons of destruction. If such was a strong message from the Greenham camp, I found it rarely reproduced in a simplistic way by any of the women in this study. Most women felt that gender differences in values and behaviour were to be understood in terms of social, economic and political factors, although some thought biology might play a part. Women's thoughts about gender differences really turned on whether they were optimistic about men wanting to change either what had been given by nature or what had been acquired. 'Peace women' were relatively optimistic about some men wanting to change and, like some

women, to want to work for a more peaceful world. For them the peace issue could not be simply reduced to a gender-related issue.

***Penny:***

**'I do appreciate that militarism and the pursuit of power are very much a man's way of thinking and it's male values behind that fence, but I don't think it's entirely female values which are outside the fence. Come to think of it I think there's a great deal of female support inside the fence as well. I don't see it as a man versus woman issue because I don't think you can generalise about the sexes ... I think we both have male and female attributes and I think it's more economic and social pressures which determine the role we have in the world and it's our personal awareness, not out sex, which determines the way we think about nuclear weapons and a great many other things.'**

Penny's assertion that 'there is a great deal of female support inside the fence as well' is an interesting corrective to the metaphor of sex dissymmetry (and some would say the dominant philosophy) of the Greenham camp (*Young 1990*). The view that nuclear weapons and opposition to them could not be neatly divided into male and female worlds was one which 'peace women' shared. Pam, for example, did not equate the young male soldiers on the base with sole responsibility for the weapons they were guarding.

***Pam:***

**'The first time I went it was horrible, it was like a concentration camp, it really made me feel ill. As I saw the children as I call them, behind the fence, they were only 17 or 18, they didn't look any older - they were only little boys, it was a terrible thing for us to be doing, having those boys standing out there in all weathers just to protect this so called weapon.'**

As a result of involvement with Greenham, Pam revised long-held suspicions that women were 'manipulators' and found that a lot of women 'were carers and selfless' and 'incredibly supportive', and in this were 'somewhat different to men.' Although this reflected some of the early essentialist messages of Greenham (women as natural

carers), Pam also made it clear that she **'would not want to denigrate men'** and that she still thought a **'lot of women are very powerful and dominant.'** This view reflected the views of 'peace women' generally, that women could not be thought of as a single category, although women working for peace were viewed as sharing certain values which set them apart from women who pursued power through formal structures in society.

*Clair:*

**'I think with Greenham, it's partly that you're a woman but it's also something to do with, a bit like the miners' wives got together because they had to and made something of that time ... women like Margaret Thatcher and the women that make it aren't that kind of woman, they never are. I don't think it's a matter of biology and that's why I wouldn't have chosen to work just for women in the first place.'**

Only one 'peace woman' (*Sue*) was tempted to the view that girls and boys **'come out different'**, a view for which she felt she might be **'castigated in some feminist circles'**. She considered that society encouraged men to give expression to their **'hunter, killer instinct'**, but that some men showed by their work in the peace movement that aggression was not an inevitable outcome.

*Sue:*

**'I'm sure that there are those men whose creativity and emotional strengths feed their contribution to the peace movement, and I think there are women who are in it for hard, political motives ... for building socialism.'**

Sue's perspective is one which argues for instincts which can be overcome and this provides her with a sense of optimism about some men, including her husband whom she described as a **'more natural peace-maker from the point of view of personality'** than herself. All 'peace women' drew on their experience of supportive husbands, male friends and men in the peace movement to illustrate their conviction that women did not have a monopoly of the peace issue.

*Jane*, for example, described her own long-term commitment to peace in the context of partnership with her husband. Together they had signed the Peace Pledge Union in the

late 1930s and had then suffered hostility and hardship during the war in which he had been a conscientious objector. Together they had found **'companionship and consolation with like-minded folk in the Quakers'** and had continued throughout their married life to campaign for peace. *Jane's* story was exceptional in this study because she represented an older generation of peace campaigners whose anti-war convictions and deeply held Christian beliefs had inspired a committed way of life in which she felt women and men were 'in it together'. Younger 'peace women' in this study chose to support Greenham in tandem with mixed-sex peace activities and all held to the view that men, like women, varied. *Sally*, for example, described her work over ten years in the anti-nuclear power campaign as a means to **'supporting others and helping men who I saw as good.'**

*Sally:*

**'I felt that what I was trying to do in the anti-nuclear power campaign it wasn't appropriate that it should be a single sex group ... Of course men vary. You couldn't find a more different set of men than live here (referring to her communal household) and the men on the stock exchange floor, they inhabit different planets ... and not because the men here try all the time, they may have had to at some time in their lives, but for some of them now to be thoughtful and gentle is just what they are.'**

Speaking from her experience of men in personal relationships as well as those with whom she shared a house, *Jane* argued that **'in some areas you can feel close to a woman and, some, with someone who happens to be a man, depending on interests, the gender thing is really irrelevant there.'** Her conscious decision to work with men over a long period in the anti-nuclear power campaign and her **'intellectual decision'** to set up a mixed household were explained by her **'idealistic faith'** in the ability of women and men to **'understand one another.'**

The above views illustrate that women who supported women-only actions as part of the Greenham protest could do so without seeing peace as 'a man versus woman issue'. Greenham was an important part, but not the only focus, of their peace work. Yet they also valued Greenham-related experiences for putting them in touch with what they perceived to be productive and creative ways of working in women-only groups.



## **Women-only Support Groups : Effective in Working for Peace**

**'the women together had the strength which a mixed group wouldn't have had.'**

From the earliest days women involved with Greenham described the sense of freedom, power, fun and creativity which they experienced in women-only actions and in women-only support groups. The women in this study echo such feelings so long as their groups and activities remained clearly focused on the peace issue. Greenham groups which mutated into consciousness raising groups were experienced as more difficult, something which will be explored in more detail later in the thesis. 'Peace women' were not drawn into 'feminist' groups of that kind and none had been involved in women-only groups before Greenham.

However it might be argued that by their method of working in non-hierarchical and co-operative ways, all women, whatever their differences were yet taking part in what Campbell described as 'one of the most successful of feminist actions', modelling itself on an important tenet of the women's movement - that the method of organising is itself a political act (*Campbell 1986, p16*). Certainly the women's descriptions of their experiences indicate a sense of discovery and surprise that women working together could be stronger and more effective than mixed groups and they describe a personal change of consciousness about women's strength and skills.

*Jane:*

**'At first I thought how extraordinary it was that Greenham was women-only and that it shouldn't be, that men should be there as well. But I felt later that there was tremendous strength amongst women, a great deal more determination to get things done. Somehow the women together had the strength which a mixed group wouldn't have.'**

*Sue:*

**'I found it a completely different experience working with women and feeling women's strengths with each other and for the first time I enjoyed the extraordinary feeling of trust and absolute support that no matter what, you weren't on your own ... I find the feminist litany of oppression inexplicable and rather tedious**

because it wasn't my experience, so I wasn't a pushover for this enormous buzz which women get from working with other women and I wasn't a normal candidate for that kind of blinding light.'

*Clair:*

'I'd avoided women-only things before, so I felt odd going down to Greenham, not because I thought it was a bad idea. I just hadn't thought it was particularly me and I had thought, in a way I still do think that it's not a good idea not to all work together. It's just that having experienced it with women on their own and finding it better with women on their own you might as well. (So by going to Greenham you got involved in women-only activities?) Yes and there I would be strongly in favour of women-only activities. Yes, I would stick my neck out and stand on a women's line, whatever, so when I went on a peace march in Central America, I was one of the women on the peace march, I wasn't one of the peace marchers.'

All 'peace women' moved from an initial personal ambivalence about Greenham being a women-only protest to the view that women-only peace activities were more supportive and productive than were mixed ones. They experienced women-only support groups as an enlightening process in which their own potential and that of other women was released by a different method of working. Sue's realisation of the contribution of the 'women's movement' to the peace movement, for example, turned in large part upon her discovery that women worked in less structured ways and yet achieved more. Other 'peace women' reflected upon similar experiences.

*Pam:*

'I thought the meetings were great because I'd been in committees and things like that at work and I'd done all sorts of things and I find that women tend to ignore the rules and just get on and get the work done whereas when you've got men in meetings they dither on and it gets annoying, (referring to work based meetings) a lot of it was the men wanting to have their names in the minutes and they'd talk a lot of drivel, but the Greenham Support Group meetings were very business like, they decided what they wanted to say and they didn't mess about at all. It was very good.'

*Penny:*

**'It was absolutely wonderful working in the Greenham Support Group. It was quite astonishing how much we got done in a short space of time and we had a method which I've never used before ... we would create an agenda when we first met and it would be done quickly, and we would take turns to chair and in a cooperative and non-competitive way we would discuss different points of view and come to an agreement about what had to be done ... people were so committed and keen to see results from the meetings that people just got things done, ten times faster than CND where we tended to have very long, boring meetings!'**

These views illustrate the generally positive feelings which 'peace women' had about working together in non-hierarchical and co-operative ways. But they valued such methods largely as a means to getting the job done rather than for developing feminist practice. *Penny*, for example, recounted how in her group there were originally two 'self-effacing' men who were eventually told by a small group of young women that they should not be there. From her point of view this 'was pushing the feminist line' which she 'thought was a bit of a diversion.' She felt that the group worked well as a women-only group because the women were 'like-minded' and had a 'common objective.' A somewhat similar perspective on involvement in a Greenham action came from *Sally* who was 'gratified to find that the theory and practice of a women's group gelled at Greenham.'

*Sally:*

**'I think it worked because the women involved were, if you like, a bit like me, not very young, sort of thirtyish, so experiences of the women's movement were probably similar to mine and it wasn't part of my growing up. I think that was important so that perhaps the expectations that you would be ideologically OK all along the line didn't exist. What women expected you to be was a good companion and a strong fence puller-down and an encouraging friend, all of which people were basically.'**

*Sally's* experience of the women-only group which came together for the fence-cutting protest at Greenham was that it was 'supportive' and 'did not pressurise women to

**conform'**, especially in the sense of feminist identity politics and most importantly it had a clear and common objective.

Initially, the study suggested that however varied were women's involvements in Greenham, there was a common feminist thread woven through their experiences of women-only action. If the peace movement and the women's movement had intersected, I thought it most evident in the common experience of empowerment which women discovered in working together. However, detailed analysis of the data suggested subtle differences in the meaning of 'women-only' for Greenham supporters. For 'peace women', experiences of women-only groups and actions were mainly valued as a means to achieving an end although the discovery of their own and other women's strengths in non-hierarchical and autonomous groups was clearly an illuminating experience which added verve to their peace work. The Greenham experience had made them more open to working with women but, as they stressed at various points in their interviews, it did not alter their view that the importance of Greenham was its pivotal role as an anti-nuclear protest. For other women in the study, the women-only context of the Greenham protest became a more deeply feminist experience.

### **Greenham : A Women's Enclave**

#### **'It's a woman's space'**

All women in this study went to Greenham as a result of their interest in peace work, but some (8 in this study) became pre-dominantly attracted to Greenham as a site of feminist action. Such women described their involvement with Greenham as a process of engagement with new ways of working and relating to women. For them it provided a pathway to self-discovery, an outlet for emotional expression and a developing consciousness of feminism. Running through the interviews with these women were definitions of Greenham as '**a women's space**' or '**a spiritual home**' in which women could safely express their '**power and anger**'; their '**emotions**' and '**feelings**'; '**look at things newly, using women's things to do it**' and '**relate differently together.**'

In comparison with those women who valued Greenham primarily for its real and symbolic power as an anti-nuclear protest, 'feminist peace activists' became much more immersed in the camp, were more constant visitors and were more likely to either

spend prolonged periods staying there or to wish to do so. Their experiences of Greenham were framed in terms of changes in their own lives and invariably Greenham was valued for meeting personal needs as well as for its role in women's consciousness raising. All were at a point in their lives when their commitment to the peace movement coincided with a search for new ways of relating to others in working for peace and in their lives more broadly.

Initially most 'feminist peace activists' were drawn to Greenham as a peace protest and then became attracted to what they experienced as a feminist culture which offered new ways of thinking about themselves as women and new ways of relating to other women. So for them the peace issue became less of a 'people' and more of a women's issue. This was commonly described as a 'conversion' or a change of consciousness as the following quotations illustrate.

*Joss - Founder of the 'Greenham Purples' a Support Group on North Tyneside, active member of CND:*

**'I went the first time to the blockade and somewhere in those five days I got converted. I changed from a very male viewpoint, it was partly because I talked with a lot of women and partly because women's actions have a kind of gentleness about them when all women get together ... It kind of hotted up each day ... Each time women got braver and braver rather than more and more cowardly, I think that was part of the conversion too.'**

*Linda - Member of CND, Member of a South Tyneside Greenham Support Group:*

**'It was Easter 1983 and it was the blockade ... It was something I hadn't really thought about - all women things. After I had been down and I thought about it I could see that that was the thing to do at the time. But I think it was all a bit of a shock really because I've never experienced anything like that before and I hadn't really thought about it. But when I saw how well it worked I was converted really ... the Greenham thing left me very pro-women really.'**

*Eileen - Member of the Greenham Support Group:*

**'Greenham is like a second chance for some women, but for me it has been a first chance in terms of feminism ... Initially when I went down it was to do with protesting about the nuclear issue and to be honest I wasn't really aware of what that meant. For me it became a consciousness raising thing both in the area of nuclear weapons and women's issues and I think Greenham has changed in that way too. For me Greenham has become much more about feminism.'**

All 'feminist peace activists' thought of their relationship to Greenham as a personally changing and liberating process and as such, the women-only context of the Greenham camp took on a special significance over and beyond its perceived effectiveness as a peace protest. It came to be viewed as a living example of what was possible in women's relationships with one another in a women-centred culture. For 'feminist peace activists' it became a 'home' of feminist ideals and an expression of varying degrees of separation from the constraints of hetero-sexism.

*Pat - Very active member of local CND group, member of 'Greenham Purples':*

**'Greenham directed me more towards all women activities than I had been previously. I found that I enjoyed the company of women - it released me to enjoy the company of women. I think the quality of the way women relate to one another changed very suddenly at the time that Greenham existed. Part of the reason why Greenham existed was because of the way women related to one another so it was like 'something in the water - something in the air' when Greenham was going on.'**

*Jennifer - Member of North Tyneside Greenham Group:*

**'The camp is one of the most strong and threatening symbols of male violence and it's the greatest place of learning I've ever come across in terms of making connections with all these issues on women and race, patronisation, male violence and the whole conditioning of women ... one of the main effects has been consciousness raising viewed in relation to the world and everything that's going on there, even the relationship with the**

earth and plants and animals is sort of lived out there ... Greenham will always be some sort of spiritual home for me.'

*Vicky - Regular visitor to Greenham, Member of a Broad Umbrella Peace Group:*

'Greenham is marvellous, it's the only place on earth where you can just be you. You're not a wife, you're not a mother, you're not anything, except you, it's a women's space that's the difference ... I come back feeling whey hey this is me, I come back beaming from Greenham. (Is this because it gets you away from everyday constraints?) Yes and the heterosexual relationships that you don't really want. The woman-only aspect is really important to me. If Greenham became mixed I don't know what I would do, I would really hate it. That's one of the things I like about Greenham, not having to see men there. I wouldn't want to share a camp fire with a man ... and all this stuff about the Molesworth rapes, convinces me that men are just not to be trusted. I don't trust them at all.'

The emphasis on Greenham as a 'women's space' was typically combined with pessimistic views of men as dominant, unwilling to give up power and in various ways alien and outside of the relationship between the personal and the political which Greenham was seen to exemplify.

### **Feminist Practice and the Question of Men**

**'I don't think men want to change.'**

Compared to 'peace women', those who were attracted to the feminist culture of Greenham were less optimistic about men. Although most cited exceptions to the rule (male partners or friends), they also drew on experiences of relationships with men which confirmed their view of men as controlling and as unwilling to relinquish their power.

*Vicky:*

**'I just thought it was a very good thing that it was a women-only protest ... I've always lived in a male dominated family and I find it hard to take male dominated things what so ever. I've met three or four nice men but on the whole I think they're shits. They've got life sewn up to absolutely suit themselves.'**

*Charlotte - Member of CND, member of 'Greenham Purples':*

**'I do have a feeling that women are, on the whole more peaceful than men but I think that is due to conditioning ... I don't think that leads to optimism. I don't think men want to change. I think that men are often unwilling to relinquish the power they have. And I also think it's hard after twenty or thirty-five years or whatever to recognise feelings in yourself and express them.'**

*Lindsey - Member of the Greenham Group:*

**'In my life I've been trying to come to terms with experiences I had as a child and it was a particular trip to Greenham that brought it all up ... there was a Greenham journal and there was in it a piece of writing which absolutely made me weep and it was a story about someone who had been raped and had come to Greenham and I suppose the two things came together for me (peace and feminism), but it was a safe place because it is women-only and there were men in my life that I trusted and valued but I came up against my fears about men.'**

The sense that Greenham had focused their analysis of peace as a gender issue was a strong feature of all interviews with 'feminist peace activists', just as was their feeling that Greenham provided a safe space away from male structures of power. Thus 'women-power' was seen not simply as an effective and different challenge to the nuclear threat but also to male domination writ large. The Greenham experience was described as both pro-women and in varying degrees, anti-men, although not always with lasting effects.



*Joss:*

**'At the time of going to Greenham and certainly after that time I did think women and men were biologically different. I haven't thought about it for a while and now it seems almost irrelevant.'**

*Linda:*

**'The Greenham thing left me very pro-women. I went through a very lesbian phase, and I couldn't envisage myself having a relationship with a man. That's changed now ... a couple of years ago I wouldn't have even entertained the idea that men had any place in what I was doing or in the world even ... my relationships with men are getting more comfortable than they used to be.'**

These views of Greenham are close to those which some radical feminists saw as the strength of Greenham and socialist feminists saw as a danger. They reflect the considerable attraction which Greenham came to hold for some of its supporters as a centre of feminist action in which the anti-nuclear protest was subsumed within a separatist political practice, reminiscent of the earlier radical feminist ideals of women-bonding of the late 60s and early 70s. All those I have typed 'feminist peace activists' in this study regarded Greenham as having opened a door to pro-women ideals and were at least for a time caught up with them. For these women a central and most important feature of the Greenham protest was that it embodied a form of political expression based in feelings and personal experience, something seen to be denied in a male dominated world.

*Joss:*

**'Since the advent of feminism women gradually began to realise that there was an aspect of themselves, that is their emotions and their intuition which had been decried or denied ... and Greenham brought it all together for me because it also was very much guided by women's feelings about things, so you didn't have to indulge in the argument about why you thought cruise missiles were there. It was just as important to feel strongly that you didn't want them there, you couldn't explain, and that your voice rose three octaves when you spoke about it but that was alright. For me it was about accepting emotions emotionally rather than intellectually ... I see**

**Greenham as a really powerful, powerful thing in giving validity to me personally as well as to women generally to their own emotions and to have strong feelings about women and to a certain extent to accept female sexuality.'**

The importance of Greenham in unleashing and validating women's emotions was stressed in various ways by women who became attracted to its feminist messages. From their perspective Greenham not only promoted supportive relationships amongst women but also put them in touch with their emotions, not just their fears about nuclear weapons but also their feelings about themselves and other women. Most importantly for them emotionality and individual expression were seen to be at the heart of the Greenham experience. As such it was seen as a safe space in which women individually could explore their feelings in the context of collective women's peace protest.

### **Greenham: A Means to Self-discovery**

#### **'Greenham was an emotional outlet'**

All 'feminist peace activists' described Greenham as coming into their lives when they were trying to break free from certain constraining or unfulfilling aspects of their lifestyles. Seeing themselves at a transitional phase of their lives, Greenham was deemed to have been an important stepping stone on a pathway which they had actively chosen or were looking for. As one woman expressed it, **'Greenham for me, I was ready for it, it was part of the changes but it wasn't the first thing.'** Whether in search of new relationships, alternatives to existing careers or some freedom from the constraints of the family, there was a common theme that Greenham had been very important to their personal as well as their political development. For some the personal and the political were closely meshed but for others this was less the case. The following examples are illustrative of the way in which women's needs to make a change in their lives found expression in the Greenham protest:

#### ***Jennifer:***

**'I was involved in what I describe as political activities in my work anyway. I worked with a very radical unit in a fairly radical social work agency and we were involved in consciousness raising groups with women ... I went to Greenham the first time for Re-embrace**

the Base ... I was thinking of doing something that I probably wouldn't be paid for and I went to a workshop on despair and empowerment ... I was invited to train to do these workshops and I knew that that was what I wanted to do. The day I came back I handed in my notice. Within a few days I was invited to go to Russia with a group of women but it was postponed because of the Korean plane being shot down, so I went to spend the winter at Greenham, and I suppose I just developed a lot personally and lots of things came together ... I met women from all over the world who were concerned about the same issues.'

*Lindsey:*

'I had been spending a lot of time in the family, except I was also in a women's group and both of them meant a lot to me and were also fairly frightening ... Now I have a much clearer idea of what that was all about. I think it was about having been a full-time mother for six or seven years and finding these women very supportive when I needed support and yet not feeling that it was OK to have it, just feeling very emotional I suppose. And Greenham was an emotional outlet and also about a lot of anger ... A mixture of anger and feeling powerful with women. I think going to Greenham was a real outlet for those emotions which you couldn't have at home and it was a weekend away. Also Greenham had an extra dimension for me because I was in a lesbian relationship with a member of the group, which for me was guilt ridden and traumatic'.

*Charlotte Member of CND, member of 'Greenham Purples':*

'The night I left my husband I had just come in from a Women's Self Defence session. It had energised me to do something about the rather miserable situation I was in ... After I left him, I went to London as a Youth Worker on a girl's project and that's when I got into the nitty gritty of joining groups and doing things ... I went to Greenham with a group of women from CND, which I must say I joined for mainly social reasons. It wasn't an altruistic political act. It somehow makes me feel as if it's not quite authentic to me.'

*Linda:*

'I think it gave me something to put my emotional energies into ... I came back from down South after doing a very demanding job with refugees who were quite traumatised and I had worked with them for two years ... when I came back I was very burned out and I was on the dole and didn't really know what I was doing or what I wanted to do next. Greenham came along and gave me something to put those feelings into. I've heard a lot of women say that it politicised them, that it started them off on other things. I think it helped me emotionally so that I could move on into other things eventually. It gave us room for expressions that I had not personally had. I used to feel guilty about this, this great cause about disarmament and 'we must get rid of nuclear weapons' and I'm floating around thinking personally what a wonderful thing it was for me. That was the overriding thing. If most women were honest they would feel the same way.'

'Feminist peace activists' were much more likely than other women who participated in the study to describe their relationship to Greenham in terms of its personal significance than its collective power as a peace protest. Thus, for them the attraction of Greenham became its supportive context for individual expression and emotion, even if at times individual women felt uncomfortable with their less than altruistic political motives for involvement.

That Greenham opened up a space in which women could find an outlet for their emotions fitted with their views of a 'feminism' which allowed women options, enabling women to follow their own pathway and to define appropriate changes in their own lives. Thus Greenham was seen to promote feminist consciousness without being prescriptive. How women extended it into their lives was seen to be a matter of personal responsibility and choice.

*Vicky:*

'Feminism is important because it's about choice, it's about allowing women to have choices, it doesn't matter what choices they make so long as they are allowed to make them, aware of the alternatives.'

*Pat:*

'I feel that my direction has changed, from being outward going and doing to being inward going and doing ... I'm active in a different way. It's about a period of domesticity but also choosing a new lifestyle because that in its way is a kind of activity against the status quo.'

*Joss:*

'Every person has their own journey to make and they're all very, very different ones and just to allow people to make their journey rather than to intervene and to say 'hey, you should be doing this' ... (was Greenham relevant to your journey?) Yes, it was fundamental to it.'

*Lindsey:*

'Feminism isn't something you can tag on, it has to be integrated so that it becomes a challenge to everything and it's how you work that out ... Some women use the Greenham experience to affirm their feminism and have moved on to separate paths, (referring to women who have opted to move out of heterosexual relationships into lesbian ones) they have sufficient strength to do that and I realise that I haven't done that.'

*Eileen:*

'I suppose I'm really struggling to find out where I might be, I find it difficult to think through theories and put them into practice ... what I'm wanting to do I suppose is to find some sort of approach which will be acceptable for me to use and I also recognise that it will always be with me and changing.'

From these reflections on feminism it would seem that for some supporters, Greenham was experienced as an important stepping stone in what they regarded as personal 'journeys', 'pathways' or 'struggles' to feminist practice. The camp was valued as an energising centre for women to 'find themselves' through collective action with other women, but the feminist quest was described as a lone one. This no doubt reflects the transitional journeys of the 'feminist peace activists' in this study. It may also exemplify

the problems of a feminism whose energy emanated from the centre of a women's culture within the separatist confines of the Greenham camp. As will be discussed later in the thesis, these women found it difficult to replicate the collective women's spirit of Greenham elsewhere, even when they became involved in local feminist groups as an attempt to extend Greenham beyond the perimeter fence.

The question of whether Greenham was or should have been a central locus of feminist action was one raised by all women in the study. 'Peace women' remained ambivalent on this question, yet found it possible to 'carry Greenham home' by extending the anti-nuclear message. 'Feminist peace activists' conversely found it 'difficult to bring Greenham alive' beyond the confines of the camp because this meant for them extending both feminist and peace action. Other women in the study whom I describe as 'socialist feminists' were concerned that Greenham should not assume a position of pre-eminence as a site of struggle for peace or feminism.

### **Greenham: Part of a Wider Struggle**

**'For that fence to go down, you have to get all the other fences down first.'**

Women who engaged with Greenham from a variety of socialist backgrounds (8 in this study), somewhat like 'feminist peace activists', saw Greenham as giving expression to **'women's power and strength'**, and providing **'a focus for the women's movement'**. Whilst not disapproving of feminist ideals which they perceived to emanate from the protest, they stressed that Greenham should not be thought of as only one site of feminist action, thus echoing the views of socialist feminist writers summarised earlier in this chapter. Some expressed doubts as to whether Greenham had lived up to its early promise of promoting unity amongst women. Like the 'peace women' in this study, they felt that Greenham had been an important catalyst for peace action but argued that a broader struggle rooted in community based action and in the everyday lives of women were central to achieving a more peaceful and less oppressive society.

That Greenham might be mistakenly seen as the only site of feminist action and peace action and as the most important focus for women's political struggles was a picture that all 'socialist feminists' wanted to correct. They felt that however important was

the Greenham protest, there were other ways of working for change which had equal if not greater priority.

***Carol - Very Active Member of the Labour Party, CND and an Anti-Nuclear Power Group:***

**'It's not exactly everyone's cup of tea. I don't find it very satisfying, I mean I know it's important to do, but to me there are other things equally important to do ... Greenham is a women's community, a place where women can go. It's a focus for the women's movement, a very strong and powerful focus. For people who keep going it's not an inherently peace thing, it's a feminist thing. It's a women's community which is why a lot of lesbians go and why shouldn't they? It started in the peace movement and the peace movement supports it, but it's the women's movement which sustains it, My first commitment is to the peace movement, my second to the Labour Party and my third is to the women's movement.'**

This passage provides a clear example of how women's perceptions of feminism at Greenham and their personal relationship to the protest could be filtered by strongly held political views - in Carol's case stated with stunning clarity. Given a political perspective which rested in a broader analysis of inequality in society, 'socialist feminist' supporters were concerned that Greenham women should not assume hero status and that the everyday struggles of women in working class communities should not be forgotten. Like Carol they expressed their own preference for working through locally based organisations to achieve change.

***Fiona:***

**'I'm not absolutely sure that I believe in it politically. I believe in local organisation ... Going to Greenham again is not very high priority for me ... It's a path that some people choose but it isn't any better or worse than any other path that might be chosen, and I don't think there should be 'I've been to Greenham for six months', like some sort of badge of honour, because women round here look after their families and have to make ends meet out of a low budget every day. That is as heroic as camping out at Greenham.'**

***Daniel:***

**'I think you sometimes meet people that spend a lot of time at Greenham, and I think it's true to say that they forget that the rest of the world exists ... It's a very direct and singular thing that you're doing at Greenham, and although that one single thing involves a great deal of hardship, a great deal of courage, and a great deal of work with other people, it nevertheless in many ways is easier to do than to carry on at home with your kids ... You are simply trying to cut different fences over a whole range of issues, issues of class, issues of all sorts of differences. I think in some ways these fences are more important than the ones at Greenham, because to make Greenham disappear, it will take much more than the women down there, heroic as they are, are able to do. For that fence to go down, you have to get all the other fences down first ... It is in a way much easier to lie down and stop a cruise missile or a lorry than to mount a defence against attacks on communities and jobs.'**

Actively engaged in local political and community groups, most 'socialist feminists' in this study expressed some personal distancing from Greenham (either the camp or their involvement in Greenham groups) in terms of their own priorities and experiences. Mainly it was viewed as providing a somewhat narrow perspective on women and peace action which, though it had its place, was not the central locus of action as far as these women were concerned. One exception was *Gwen*, who valued the Greenham experience precisely because 'it had put her in touch' with the links between women's struggles in the workplace, on picket lines, in the Labour Party, and in their everyday lives.

***Gwen- Active Member of the Labour Party; Long standing Member of a Community Based Women's Group; Regular Visitor to Greenham:***

**'What I get from Greenham is that feeling of being absolutely at one with women everywhere. The journey down and the journey back and the lives we live outside of Greenham are divided in many ways, but when I'm at the fence it just isn't on the agenda ... It's not that I didn't know about the strength of women. I've got five sisters and trillions of aunties, so I knew about the strength of women and about their oppression in the family first and in other**



**ways. But Greenham has allowed me to reclaim women's strength, I see that strength now in their daily lives, fighting little battles and giving each other support ... working class women were always papering for each other and doing things like that because the men were naff useless. Greenham made me think of that again and appreciate it.'**

*Gwen's* response to Greenham indicates that some 'socialist feminists' could find in the Greenham experience a confirmation of women's strength in fighting battles on many fronts, the unity at the fence reaffirming a knowledge learnt in other places. Others judged the Greenham camp in much the same terms, but found it wanting. They were not persuaded that it could be other than a rather separate and enclosed women's community, described by one woman (*Maureen*) as comparable to a 'nunnery'.

***Maureen:***

**'I saw it a bit like a religious order, having a closed system at the centre, like the people in priories and nunneries, who carry it out to its logical extension and then all the lay people half believe it ... I see it very much in that religious way, the core group who have to go and be it and live it, and it's a calling ... but I haven't had it. My calling is to work for an ecological, socialist, feminist economy, it's what's missing, it's why nobody can progress, because we haven't got a vision of how we're going to organise and how we're going to make this work in a large sense. There are lots of individuals doing lots of individual things, but they have no structure to it which can contemplate being against the power structures we've got.'**

This view of Greenham encapsulates the feelings of most 'socialist feminists' that a predominant feature of the Greenham camp was its attraction as an enclosed community for some women, women other than themselves. Their personal distancing from Greenham in these terms was explained largely by political priorities but also by personal experiences of the protest which confirmed their doubts about a struggle based rather narrowly in a 'closed order'.

## **Greenham: Problems of Exclusion**

**'I've found Greenham very cliquey since I first went down'**

All 'socialist feminists' in the study spoke positively of their first impressions of Greenham for reviving feelings of unity and strength amongst women and for offering a vision of an alternative, non-hierarchical way of organising, but some described experiences through which they had come to revise their early optimism about these pro-women aspects of Greenham. The following three examples illustrate changing perceptions of the unity of Greenham women, grounded in somewhat differing expectations and experiences.

***June - Reluctant member of CND, very active member of NVDA, anarchist:***

**'Initially I think I saw it mainly as a protest but it was also a different way of protesting, it was a lot of different things, it was something positive as well, it was getting more strength for women, it was building a new way of working, being co-operative and not competitive ... I don't go any more, Greenham was too far away and I was doubtful about the direction Greenham was taking. The last time I went, I went for three weekends and some of the attitudes I came across from women there, I thought 'no way!'. The women who lived there didn't want to speak to any who'd just come for the action which is understandable really ... but some of the things I heard when I was walking round the fence, the taunts to soldiers which were based on class, things like 'you must have gone to a secondary modern school', and there was this group of women camped next to where I was who didn't want to share their fire, they didn't offer us a cup of tea when we were cold and wet ... I wouldn't base my whole opinion of Greenham on that but my perception changed, especially compared to Faslane which is totally different, I mean they're so welcoming there.'**

***Maureen:***

**'To me Greenham is the women's movement ... I get less happy about Greenham when I think of it as being, turning into a women's thing, you know, where it's all sort of relationships and jealousies. I think that the women's movement should offer a web of friendship and when it becomes exclusive by sexuality it really worries me, but what I first picked up from Greenham was this**

open friendship ... at first it was very good and I thought 'yes there's a whole world out there that could also be supportive and I could be supportive to it' ... I am less certain of that now, I've found Greenham very cliquey since I first went down, I haven't found it so welcoming, the women I meet don't seem so open.'

*Dianne - Ex-member of the Greenham Group:*

'At one time Greenham did seem to be the crystallisation of what feminism was about, about a type of action that both on an individual level and a collective level could be called up whenever it was needed with the minimum of organisation and the maximum of support as well ... The group I went with changed and became more interested in deeper political and ideological issues around feminism ... these were women meeting as women, supposedly supportive of each other, but in some cases unable to understand the situation women were in, and here I am being subjective really. I was just recently separated with severe financial problems and a daughter who was just beginning a long illness and other quite difficult practical problems, which I felt that although people registered they were not actually noticing, and that struck me as quite ironic, and I began to feel there were divisions between us, that no matter how concerted we might be against certain things in the world, when it came down to the basic things, that division operated.'

Running through the above passages is a sense of being let down by experiences of involvement in a protest which seemed at first to tap and to confirm the ability of women to work together but which in varying ways was seen to become less supportive and more closed. Worries about the exclusive image or reality of Greenham were expressed by all 'socialist feminists' with the exception of Gwen. But even she recalled one approach from a Greenham Group inviting her to go on a trip to the camp, 'this woman said to me come with us because you're a student and being working class it might be difficult for you'. This did little to daunt her generally positive experiences of unity and strength amongst women 'at the fence'. But for others, feelings of exclusion were bound up with strong feelings that Greenham women should not replicate practices which left other women 'out in the cold' and paid no heed to differences between them.

***Julia - Brief association with the Greenham Group:***

**'When I first went to Greenham, I was really impressed by all the different kinds of women who were there, that struck me quite forcibly, different ages, and there were black women, and women there with different motivations, Christian women, political women and all that, and yet I feel that it was more middle class, maybe because the group I joined was middle class ... I never felt part of it, I always felt excluded, I suppose I expected more because it was a feminist group and I expected them to be better at admitting new members ... we mustn't make the mistake of saying if we want to attract women into structures we have to run things informally and that goes right back to our laid back Greenham group, 'we all love one another, we'll organise informally'. If you try to get working class women into that kind of organisation they'll scratch their heads ... then they'll make tracks.'**

Personal disappointments with feminist groups which sprang up around Greenham will be analysed more fully later in the thesis. What we see here is that 'socialist feminists' gave qualified approval to what they saw as the feminist ideals of Greenham because they felt that in becoming more exclusive it also became more detached from their own and other women's lives, particularly working class women's lives. This did not arise from criticism of Greenham as a women-only action for they believed that separate organisation was justified in order to make women stronger and more confident in joint action with men. But neither did they see peace as an exclusively feminist issue or one which should be pursued entirely through separatist action.

***Maureen:***

**'I think women and men should work together. I see it as the same as the black consciousness movement. If you have black groups or women's groups, then you draw strength from that to have joint groups. I don't condemn separatists, but I would be happy if they don't condemn women who organise heterosexually.'**

## **Political Practice and the Question of Men**

### **'I believe in the long term aim of using mixed groups'**

Like other women in the study, 'socialist feminists' valued working in women-only groups and found them different to mixed groups, but they held to the political objective of working in both. Most felt that men wanted or needed more structure in groups allied with a wish to dominate and that women were more used to working informally with looser structures. Because of their perspective of tackling inequality on many fronts, these women believed it important to assert their political views in groups 'both inside and outside of the system' and to work with men even if they were found to be difficult.

#### ***Gwen:***

**'I go to Labour Party meetings and I sit with two councillors who I think were given their names to give me something else to laugh at because they're called Balls and Snowballs and they're appalling! There's only four at the meeting and they say 'a bit order, a bit hush, now the lass wants to speak' and I have done everything, even like 'a bit order, a bit hush, now give the man his turn', doing the same thing back, but it doesn't make any difference! I go to make them accountable on issues like asbestos dumping in the playing fields and I go out of stubbornness ... It's different working with women, I know there are differences and difficulties but I never seem to get to that barrier or impasse, there always seems to be a way forward, perhaps not today, but you can get there. I don't have that certainty working in mixed groups.'**

#### ***Fiona:***

**'I like to do both, because I believe in the long term aim of using mixed groups, but I think in a way I gained confidence working in women-only groups. But I don't know, it never ceases to amaze me the tricks that men get up to ... a couple of weeks ago I was at a mixed sex meeting, and there were two men and six women and I didn't actually time it, but the men talked most of the time!'**

*Dianne:*

'I think that women's groups work differently to mixed groups and that the reason why is because men are all busy trying to protect themselves or competing with each other. I do think women have a better idea, I was going to say naturally, about collectivity and support than men do, I don't know if that's to do with psychology. I do sometimes feel that the qualities in ourselves which we value, like caring, supporting, are qualities that capitalism have fostered within us and then exploits, but I don't think the answer to that is to deny those qualities ... I will not work with mixed groups on sexism, I just won't subject myself to that. I'm quite happy to work with mixed groups on issues like poverty and the local economy and so on.'

Some women stressed that mixed groups could work, depending on the political objectives and the people in them. To this extent whilst they valued women-only groups, they did not necessarily prefer them.

*Daniel:*

'I was a member of the Labour Party many years before the peace movement started around here so I had a very hard training, but I have also belonged to other mixed groups. I was then and am still a member of the ILP offshoot of the labour Party and I have always found it easy to be a member of that particular group because of the people in it, it has always been a very good mixed group and so I can't say I prefer women's groups.'

*June:*

'I have found a tendency in mixed groups for hierarchy to emerge, and that women including me can get involved in that, but the Greenham support group felt foreign to me, it just didn't feel right. The NVDA group was a mixed group and it was a good group, a good strong group with an awful lot of energy.'

Whether or not they had experienced mixed groups which had reinforced their belief that women and men could work together, all 'socialist feminists' held to the view that separatist action should be a phase in a longer political agenda which demanded joint

action with men. This view rested in their conviction that men were not inherently different to women and that the question of gender difference in behaviour was a social one.

*Carol:*

'Probably why I am a peace person rather than a peace woman is because while I agree that men have made a mess, I actually think women would make a mess of it too, when it comes to organising society I'm not sure that we would do any better. ... I found when I taught in school, that fifteen year old girls were as much a pain as the boys, although in a completely different way, vicious and vindictive. There were some lads that were far more peaceful. I think that's due to socialisation.'

*Dianne:*

'I think there are differences but they're not innate. I think its too easy to run away with the idea that all women by virtue of their sex have innate qualities of co-operation or whatever. I think you can get situations where women will exhibit masculine traits in terms of leadership and aggression, partly because they have to, to get on.'

*Maureen:*

'Differences between men and women? I see it as a social thing, that for whatever reason women got socially into one set of roles and men got into another. What we've got to do is to break down roles, it doesn't lie in your genes or in your biological make-up, I just don't accept that at all ... what we've got to do is to clear time for the quality of relationships, the reproductive and social parts of life, the caring side, and to minimise the productive time on the other side.'

The above views of gender difference were similar to those expressed by 'peace women' in the study. However for 'socialist feminists' the issue was integral to a set of political priorities which demanded that they confront men's controlling power as part of their political practice. Thus women-only practice, including Greenham, was

conditionally approved for enabling women to develop the confidence to work for change with men, but not as an end in itself.

## **Conclusion**

The preceding examination of three orientations to the Greenham protest illustrate that it was indeed capable of attracting women who defined their relationship to it in different ways, confirming Delmar's view of it as 'polyvalent'. Although not captured in this study, there were undoubtedly women who drew other meanings from the protest consistent with their political beliefs and religious convictions. Part of the success of Greenham was the support it drew from women who became involved for different reasons. Such differences could be subsumed under the general banner of a peace protest, but at heart they denoted a fragile unity in respect of developing feminist theory and practice.

At one level, the wide network of support, on which the camp relied, was open to all women, with or without feminist credentials or aspirations. At another level it was well understood by all women in this study that an important aspect of Greenham was its significance as a focus for feminist practice, even if not all found this attractive. The aspect of Greenham which some women found most appealing - namely that it provided a 'women's space'- others recognised but chose not to engage with. More than that, 'peace women' and 'socialist feminists' were ambivalent about a feminism which they considered to be alien in certain respects from their experience. They described themselves as being on the margins of what they perceived in various ways to be an exclusively defined feminist theory and practice at Greenham, with which they could not fully identify.

Such responses to Greenham feminism echoed in certain respects the feelings of women in mining communities that feminism (understood to be a separatist movement) did not accord well with their experience or interests. This theme will be pursued in the next chapter in relation to the links which many assumed to have been forged between Greenham women and women active in the miners' strike. It will also be unravelled in subsequent chapters which explore some of the difficulties which women experienced in both protests in keeping the action going, both in groups and personally.



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## CHAPTER VI

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### MAKING THE LINKS: CLASS AND GENDER RELATIONS

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#### Introduction

The story as it has unfolded so far has been presented as two separate narratives from women involved in protests which had different themes and objectives. They are of course stories in their own right, but connections were made, not just by outsiders but by women activists themselves. At one level connections were made about the issues involved in the two protests, the threat of pit closures closely intertwined with dependence on nuclear energy. At another level links seemed possible to women who were now asserting their political voice and discovering their strength in both struggles. In this it might be supposed, and clearly was by some women protestors, that they had a common interest, particularly at the height of the miners' strike. If women were showing their power separately, why not together?

Concerted action by women in support of Greenham and in the miners' strike revived some of the idealism which initially energised the contemporary women's movement. Socialist feminists (in spite of misgivings about Greenham) regarded both struggles as timely reminders of what could be achieved by women through autonomous organisation. More importantly they were impressed by the catalyst created by class struggle in the miners' strike, for unity across difference.

'Unity and the understanding of difference, is created in the context of struggle. There can be no better example of this than the miners' strike. The mobilisation of women from the mining community has made women more visible in political action than they have been for many years ... The accounts of their experiences show very clearly and movingly this unity in action ... Similarly the specific support amongst the black and the lesbian gay community for the miners has created links and understanding that seemed impossible before the strike began. (Wilson & Weir 1986, pp130-31)

Similarly links made between Greenham women and mining support groups during the strike and beyond were viewed as refreshing evidence of new understandings of struggles which could bind rather than separate women (Rowbotham 1989). This

chapter does not seek to undermine those very real efforts and achievements. However, on the basis of the data in this research, it opens up some of the difficulties which women experienced in forging bonds both during and after the strike and suggests that some observers of women's unity across the protests overstated the case.

One line of enquiry which developed as the study progressed was whether the distinctive forms of action in the protests - non-violent peace action at Greenham and violence on some picket lines - had been a barrier to 'making the links'. As shown by an example of a local peace group operating deep in a strike centre in the North East, differences of views on picket line violence intertwined with perceptions of class difference could be divisive. Further evidence in this study of women's difficulties in overcoming philosophies of protest grounded in their different perceptions of class and gender relations arose from their attempt to plan together a day of anti-nuclear action two years after the strike had ended. The data suggest that aspirations to achieve gender unity are tempered by class difference.

### **Women's Protest and the Question of Violence**

One of the key ideals of Greenham was that protesting for peace and feminist practice should be lived through non-violent action. It has been suggested elsewhere that the Greenham women bonded effectively with women in mining communities during the strike but that they and the miners did not really understand one another and disagreed fundamentally about the use of violence to meet violence from the police (*Stead 1987*).

'The miners had most of what Greenham considered to be the usual male faults - miners were inclined to be violent and they wanted women kept in their place.' (*Stead 1987, p54*)

But women in mining communities also got caught up in the battlefields of the picket line, sometimes in opposition to men who wanted to keep women in their place. The Valley View Group, for example, recalled an incident in which three of them were arrested:

*Jessie:*

'... then one of the lads came up and said 'let them gan', that's all he said 'let them gan' and they grabbed him by the throat and threw him into the van as well.'

*Liz:*

'And it's awful when you hear of Jo getting arrested like that because a lot of the men used to say 'you're not coming picketing with us, there's nowt for you there, we dinna want you', but Jo never actually said that. I imagine he would have been more concerned about the safety side of it, not that he didn't appreciate the support, where they like never acknowledged the support. They were just saying 'there's nowt for you there, wives doesn't want to be on picket lines.'

*Jessie:*

'He's got his old fashioned protective ideas because if I remember correctly what he said made me smirk. He said 'they're only women.'

Women from a number of groups referred to resistance from some men on the grounds of their concern about women's safety on picket lines but few were deterred by this. However men were also reported as appreciating the support and solidarity of women and even the Valley View Group had been cheered on by the men on occasion. There were also stories of the men standing back sometimes to let women talk to scabs because they felt that women would be more successful. The writings of support groups from across the country suggest that men's preference to keep the picket line a male preserve was gradually broken down by some women's determination to participate and by the realisation that women's support was needed. For many women activists this was the most significant indication that men's attitudes had changed as the following quotation from a Sheffield pamphlet shows.

'Talking about sexism, I rang my son and said 'Can I come picketing with you', 'No', he says, 'Women don't come on the picket line'. The first time I knew my son's attitudes were changing was when he said that he would collect me to go on the picket line.' (*quoted in Sheffield Women Against Pit Closure 1987, p49*)

The violence of picketing may have been viewed as a male versus female issue by some Greenham women but there was little evidence in this study that this was a view shared by women in mining communities. For them, it was inextricably bound up with the class-based nature of their struggle. The majority of women in this study had been on picket lines and most had been involved in violent tussles with the police. Some of these were women-only, organised by the NUM either to act as a decoy for a men's action elsewhere or where a women's picket was seen to be the appropriate protest against women workers who were returning to work. In other cases women joined men to show their solidarity. The Highhill Support Group, for example, explained their decision to join picket lines in the following way:

*Dot:*

**'We were for this strike as well and when we were just sitting at home and well dads were out on the picket line and husbands were out, well you just felt as if you weren't doing enough. Well that's what I thought and I just wanted to be out on the picket line as well.'**

*Janet:*

**'And it showed that we were solid.'**

*Joan:*

**'It showed that we were supporting the men.'**

With very few exceptions all of the women in this study who had been involved in the strike felt that men or women met violence with violence on picket lines because it was provoked by police brutality. They saw the police as the front-line battalions in a war which was waged against them by the Tory Government. As large numbers of police were brought in to protect those going back to work, feelings of betrayal merged with fierce hostility towards the protectors of 'scabs'. Those who had been on picket lines argued that even on women-only picket lines, the police treatment was needlessly rough and meted out to humiliate and degrade them.

*Jessie:*

**'Somebody had eggs and three eggs hit a scab van. Well there was this Inspector and he knew me and he just pointed like that to the**

Sergeant and he came up and got me and twisted my arm up my back... we got punched into the van and punched out the other end ... I swear that those who got hold of us were not policemen. I would not believe that they were trained policemen, I mean you're under their control when you're in the van, to be sitting taunted like that, I mean one of them accused me of leaning on him and we were squashed in the van and he says 'stop leaning on me', and I said 'I'm particular who I lean on hinny' and he said 'shut that woman up' ... and I said 'how dare you treat me like this!' and he says 'you are a prisoner' and eh I thought 'you silly bugger!' and I said 'I have never witnessed such violence in all my life' and I haven't mind, and he says 'and you married to a miner.' That really annoyed me and I said 'the miners stand head and shoulders above you sonny'. They were horrible, they punched me out of the van and there was no need for that, that's what shocked me as well, the hatred.'

As well as direct injuries sustained, women spoke of taunts such as the police waving five pound notes at them as Christmas approached and of verbal abuse and sexual innuendoes which they heard regularly from police on picket lines or when collecting. One woman from the Highhill Group recalled how appalled her group had been on a women-only picket line when a policeman shouted 'you fuckers want to get back in your black holes where you've come from.' Many were shocked by what they had seen and experienced and told me 'you had to be there to see it.' Their bitterness against the police was matched by their sense of injustice about media distortion, not just about the miners' case but the biased way in which violence on picket lines was portrayed to the public.

For women in mining communities the Greenham view on non-violence was simply not relevant to their case or was based in middle class idealism and privilege. It was seen to miss the point of a struggle which had immediate, devastating consequences for people's livelihoods. This view was expressed very forcibly by one women who had been to Greenham and who made the contrast on the basis of her personal experience.

***Doreen:***

**'The policing through the miners' strike, I think is a class thing. The police just seemed to be able to treat the miners any way**

because they didn't seem to realise that the miners knew their rights, whereas at Greenham you're dealing with middle class women in a middle class situation, if you like, and the policing is completely different, because the women know their rights, the police know that the women know their rights, so the police have to treat them with care because they know they can take it further. The women here we just couldn't afford to do all the things that women at Greenham could. I'm not saying they've all got money, but a lot of the women who go down there have got middle class backgrounds and they're fighting a middle class fight. Here we were fighting a working class fight.'

*Monica:*

'Do you think the police treated you worse?'

*Doreen:*

'A lot worse, they treated us like animals, I think they were more violent to women because they didn't like to see women on picket lines ... I found I reacted differently at Greenham and on picket lines, I mean this was our community, our pit, this was our village we were fighting for, all of a sudden it became so real. At Greenham you're fighting for an idea, against nuclear weapons but it's only when it hits you personally that you know the full extent of your feelings. I mean a cruise missile hadn't landed here, but someone had gone into work, your reactions were totally different. You see at Greenham you stand outside of the perimeter fence and you look at the silos and it's still abstract you know. Here it was real, the fight was real, whereas there it was abstract. It was easier to react peacefully at Greenham because of the abstraction, if that's the right word.'

Others found that even at Greenham their feelings about police treatment in the strike spilled over into their reactions to the non-violence demanded of them. This became an issue for the Castlehill group with whom I went to Greenham in 1987, from where we moved on to join a women's camp at Aldermaston which had become another focus for the Greenham protest. When a plan to blockade a contractor's gate was put into action, the women from the Castlehill group were reluctant to take part either because

they couldn't afford to be arrested and maybe lose their jobs or because of fear of conflicting with the police. When a threatening police presence arrived, one woman found herself, physically shaking, with a rock in her hand shouting, 'I can't stand the bastards. Leave them alone you bastards, there's pregnant women in there.' Another member of the group tried to calm her down by saying, 'Shirley don't get yourself into bother, they're not worth it. Put them stones down, I think the women want it to be a peaceful picket.' Shirley's response was, 'are them pigs peaceful!'

This episode was later incorporated into a piece of theatre which the group wrote and performed and was presented as a simple statement of difference of approach to the problem of police attack. In the debate surrounding the episode, the general consensus was that whilst it was possible to respect 'the Greenham way', it had been extremely difficult for women to adopt who had been on the receiving end of police brutality in the strike and where family members were victimised by the police in the years following the strike. Most women offered examples of police intimidation which either members of their families or their communities had suffered after the strike had ended. The feeling of personal threat, which many spoke of as a key to their willingness to 'take arms' with their men, was highlighted in a discussion I had with two of the national organisers of WAPC who had debated the issue at some length with close Greenham friends.

*Kate:*

'I went to Greenham once and I wouldn't go again ... I found it very, very difficult to stand there with some bloody big policewoman with her elbows in my back telling me that I'm a fucking miner's wife gone there to make trouble. I mean all I wanted to do was punch her straight in the mouth and because of the laws of Greenham being non-violent you don't do that, but I don't honestly see how they can live down there and build up this repertoire that they have got with the police and all the rest of it, I mean it really sickens me off, and those women know what happened through the miners' strike with policing and they know what's happened to ethnic minority groups in London and elsewhere, they know what's happened at Wapping ... I mean I'm not violent, but on that particular day I just felt so bad about it and I've talked it through with two close Greenham friends and I do understand what it's all about but I can't go down there and feel like the way they feel about it.'

*Jen:*

'I think before the strike I could have gone to Greenham and had this non-violent thing, but during the strike my violence level increased. I used to go on raids, I used to say 'we'll get some M16s, we've got contacts, we'll sit on pit top and shoot at scabs'.

*Kate:*

'I just felt so frustrated by it all, everybody was doing these little things that weren't achieving anything ... if there'd just been somebody with a little bit of organisation, the women would have actually got over the fence, at the same time the fence would have come down, I mean there were enough women, that would have been more worthwhile and it would certainly have given them the publicity that they don't get any more.'

*Jen:*

'I don't think you change people unless it's something that affects them, something that touches them, do you know what I mean, politicians try to thrust their party lines at people ... like NIREX, now this nuclear dumping, nuclear waste, you take Lincolnshire and all that, they thought Greenham were right weirdos about two years ago and then as soon as they're threatened themselves, then they're all up in arms. Miners were the same until they were personally threatened.'

I rarely found women in mining communities questioning the effectiveness of 'Greenham non-violence' at Greenham. On the whole they admired the Greenham women but saw them as different. The view was repeated often in interviews and discussions, that in the miners' strike it was not possible to adopt a passive posture to the offensive launched by the Government against communities, families and jobs. Although women did not approve of examples of unprovoked violence on the part of miners, they felt the 'police would have just walked all over us anyway so why not fight back'. Most women felt no compunction in taking the police on when incidents blew up. As one woman said when I asked her what she had done when a policeman had kicked her, 'well I had these size ten boots on, so I kicked him back!'



As they reflected on the place of violence in the miners' strike they articulated more or less directly that it had to be understood as a regrettable but necessary dimension of a class war waged against them and not by them. As such the gender issues (women going on picket lines in spite of men; women engaged in physical combat with the police; women experiencing increasing levels of violence) were submerged in class interest. The point is made by taking the somewhat untypical example of a 'miner's wife' who defined herself as a feminist and a pacifist. She felt that she had learnt two lessons on the picket line, one concerning solidarity even with sexist men, and the other, her own violent reaction to the violence of the police.

*Veronica:*

**'I disliked this union man on sight ... I thought he was thick, sexist and horrible, but on the picket line in August, I was being held roughly by three policemen and he flung them off ... later I thanked him and he said 'you watch my back hinny and I'll watch yours', nothing about, 'oh I've got to protect the little woman.' We didn't like each other, but the point I took when he said 'you watch my back and I'll watch yours' was solidarity and I'll never forget that.'**

*Monica:*

**'You were saying you thought you were a pacifist.'**

*Veronica:*

**'I thought, because I'd never been confronted with it, I thought I was pacifist, I did all my life, until I was thirty eight, and my eldest son has suffered for it because from being very young I said, 'don't fight back, it's a weakness to fight back, it's the bravest man who walks away', and consequently he has had quite a few hidings and has walked away, so has the youngest son. But I discovered the violence inside me that day. There were only four women and even the men said that if there had been forty four women the scabs wouldn't have got in. We laid in the road, like the Greenham women do, in front of a bus and we were dragged off and then we went back and then fighting started and a group of lads were running and we ran with them and then the violence**

settled ... I saw that the police had blocked another group of men off whilst beating the men in my group and I dived forward, and it was embarrassing, they said 'did you give this lass red meat or what?', because I just stood in the middle of the road and screamed 'the miners united will never be defeated' at the top of my voice. The men did break through and something happened and I wished I'd got something in my hand and I didn't wish I had a stick in my hand, I wished I had something that would cause instant obliteration to this blueness, I wanted it out the way.'

Some Greenham supporters in this study, including myself, found pacifist ideals equally hard to follow at Greenham in the face of macho police tactics. I recall at the 'fence cutting' action at Greenham, when the police charged the fence from the inside like a line of enraged bulls and knocked a woman flying off my shoulders, that it was fear, rather than pacifist ideals, which made me stand frozen to the spot! As a Greenham group we had many confused discussions then and subsequently about what it meant to be pacifist, clear enough if resisting being moved on a blockade or arrest for which we had trained, but less clear when engaged in direct action such as fence cutting.

Not all Greenham supporters were committed pacifists although all were aware of the feminist non-violent ideals of Greenham. For those committed to socialism, the violence of the miners' strike was seen to be unjustly reported and therefore blame difficult to apportion. Others felt that the miners lost ground because of their response to police tactics. The case is illustrated by one woman who was planning to go and work in Nicaragua in which case she felt 'passive resistance against the Contras would be no good'. However she argued that the miners would have been more effective if they had adopted Greenham methods against the police:

*Jennifer:*

'I think it's absolutely essential to recognise the potential for violence in yourself and once you've done that you've got a better chance of behaving non-violently ... and there is the whole difficult thing about to what extent non-violence is a privilege that we have in this country for as long as we've got it and I honestly think that if the miners had had massive workshops on non-violence they might have won. They wouldn't have lost support. If they had been non-violent then the riot gear, as it is at Greenham, is a laugh

and one of the most powerful experiences I had at Greenham, one of the many, was one day when the paras were deliberately marched out in front of us to line up almost one to one, to line up in their ferocious gear, guns in hand and just stand staring at us, the most powerful thing to do was that we all burst out into giggles, and hundreds of women were falling about laughing at these men and within minutes they were marched off again ... at the beginning of the miners' strike I joined the march through the city, before I went to Russia, and I remember being conscious of the different feel of that march from the feel of being on a march with women ... and finding it jarring. I mean I could understand the anti-Maggie and anti Mac songs and the violent feeling, but I was really conscious of how much more powerful it could feel.'

The perspective on violence offered here, and one that a number of Greenham supporters women repeated, is one which argues for the gender ideals of Greenham although it also acknowledges that women as well as men would have to struggle to overcome 'the violence in us all'. From the point of view of women in the miners' strike this was a luxury that they could not afford in the face of what they defined as deliberate and brutal policing used to break the strike. But some would not have chosen the Greenham way because it was not their way. As is shown in the following section the question of different philosophies of violence and non-violence bound up with class difference could be divisive for women.

### **Class and Gender Politics: A Local Peace Group Divided**

The study included some women who belonged to a 'broad umbrella peace group' (UPG), described in this way because it included people with various political persuasions and was affiliated to CND, rather than a CND group as such. The group operated in close proximity to a number of union based and labour supported activities during the strike and some of its members networked across these activities. As such, it was not surprising that the question of whether UPG as a group should support the strike should be hotly debated. A number of women suggested to me that the issue of whether a peace group could declare support for violent miners was a contentious and wounding issue for the group and this was confirmed in interviews with some of the women involved. UPG apparently resolved the issue with an uneasy compromise.

*Vicky:*

'The resolution actually said that UPG didn't support it as a group but supported it as individuals, and for some reason each warring faction got hold of this and twisted it around to suit themselves. The Labour Party lot saying, 'yes you see UPG does support it' and the other lot saying 'you see, UPG doesn't support it', so as a compromise it didn't work.'

*Clair:*

'It was a crisis really at UPG, that we were supporting the miners who were being violent on the picket line. It was absolutely desperate for some people ... (how was it resolved?) Well it wasn't really, there are people in the town, those divisions will never go away now. It was handled very badly, we didn't agree to differ.'

The group would have made an interesting case study in its own right and in which I suspect would have been discovered many political cross currents running through the conflict over whether the miners' strike warranted group support. This view was put to me by a key organiser of mining support groups in the area. Her view, corroborated by women in the group was that the splits were as much about class politics/identities as about violence on picket lines. One MSG woman (*Doreen* above) who had been a member of UPG before the strike had felt unable to argue with professional people in the group when they had failed to grasp what she felt to be the significant class differences between the peace movement and the miners' strike. As an active member of a local MSG, she felt that she had no option but to leave UPG.

*Doreen:*

'It was through UPG that I went to Greenham, I was in UPG for a year or two before the strike and then there was all this conflict about the strike and I left because they couldn't see our (the miners') point of view. I would go back now for certain activities and I could even possibly see their side of it now. I can see what they meant. I was very offended at the time but I would be able to argue now, I would be able to put it into words, it wouldn't be just feelings any more. You see I was just there as a Mum and you know that feeling when you're just a Mum, these people here that

**you're talking to have degrees, or they're teaching or they're a doctor whatever and you're just a Mum.'**

In talking to Greenham members of the group about the conflict in UPG, it was evident that their understanding of it and the strategies they personally adopted to deal with it were also based on class perceptions. For one woman, the issue of non-violence was totally eclipsed by her political analysis of the strike as a class struggle which was close to the views expressed by women in mining communities.

*Astrid:*

**'I was working throughout the strike collecting money and selling some awful rubbish to raise money and making badges and all sorts of other things. And I was all the time hoping that they would make the links that they did after the strike, and I realised that I was getting too impatient, that I think there was so much on their plate just surviving that they couldn't possibly make the link with the peace movement at that moment, although small individual miners' groups did do during the strike.'**

*Monica:*

**'But weren't there some problems about the peace group making links during the strike?'**

*Astrid:*

**'It was a problem for some who felt they could not support the strike because of the violence and some changed later. I felt from the start that it was about political violence and in any case the miners came off worst on picket lines. For me the miners' struggle was a class struggle and they needed our support.'**

Astrid was aware that her public support for the strike had been controversial in UPG, but from her perspective it was not a question of fighting for peace or class but of tackling oppressions on a broad front in the most effective ways possible. As such, the question of supporting the strike was a political one and not one which rested in pacifist philosophy. Others were concerned about the challenge to pacifist ideals which the violence of the strike represented. However, such women found support for

the strike more generally problematic because of their sense of alienation from the culture of working class women in mining communities.

*Vicky:*

'I didn't get involved in any miners' support groups at all , I think mostly, because I think they would turn round and tell me to 'fuck off', you know, 'you middle class bitch' kind of thing because I've had that reaction so often from people or at least I've heard it said ... and mining communities tend to be so closed anyway. My grandfather was a miner and, you know my relations are a bit like that. They don't really want to know us because my father got out and he's seen as a traitor and so 'we're these toffee nosed people and you don't think the same and you don't talk the same' and it's true, so you've got no answer to it and I can't get involved in that. I supported it in some ways, because the children they like sunflower seed bars, and I told them 'that money is going to the support groups while the strike is on', but I never actually rattled a tin.'

*Monica:*

'How did you feel about what happened in UPG?

*Vicky:*

'It was a very divisive issue in UPG and I just wanted to stay out of it. I think it was mainly the people who were in the Labour Party who supported the miners and then there were those who weren't in it and didn't want to get involved, didn't see it as their particular issue and they didn't wholeheartedly support the strike either for various reasons, like the fact that there was no ballot and the thin veil of democracy and also the violence ... we had three miners' wives staying here and it was very useful talking to them because it was like listening to an older society talking, their values were so clear cut. Bell was saying things like 'what's the point of not chucking things at the police because they're going to put the boot in anyway', whereas our approach was 'don't do it because if they put the boot in and you don't, then they're wrong and you're right'. But Bell was saying 'well you get hurt anyway, what's the

odds, you might as well bang his head in first.' So it's a very different approach, a different philosophy, you're starting off from somewhere totally different.'

This sense of separation from women in mining communities grounded in perceptions of class difference was echoed by another Greenham supporter. She recalled having been at Greenham during the miners' strike when a group of miners' wives from Wales were there and were given food by the Greenham women.

*Clair:*

'It meant that Greenham could support them because they always had too much food and the MSG didn't have any so it got to be that they came up with their van and took it away and that seemed to be a positive link, more than we've ever had here ... There's one more thing, well I feel I am very middle class person, I came from a family of conscientious objectors who have been active for years and years ... and that was something about coming to live in the North, seeing men on the dole, you could see that they had no way of achieving anything ... I feel that there are whole lots of people who have no power at all to change anything. I don't think I have particularly but I feel as if I have that power, so coming to live in the North I feel I'm quite a stranger here and to get involved in the miners' strike would have been difficult. I feel I'm very alien from miners' wives for instance, and the mining way of living, I feel very far removed from the miners' wives, I don't have an experience that they have ... and you feel that you are like a sore thumb pointing out something, I mean I have the strength that people are not aware that they have really, that was a privilege that I was born with ... for that reason I felt it very difficult to be involved with the miners' strike, so what I did, because I used to work at home for peace work, so one day I worked very hard and put all the money I earned in tins around town. I used to do it as a very deliberate thing because it was awful watching people collecting and feeling that mostly I would have been one of them.'

*Monica*

'So you wanted to support the strike in some way?'

*Clair:*

'Yes, exactly the same way I would support Nicaragua, I mean I would stick to pacifism above all but there's no way you can criticise people for fighting with guns there, so I would send money even if I knew it was going to buy guns, it's just personal, I couldn't do it myself. ('Could you go on a picket line?') I don't think it's the way of doing things, well yes I could because it was forced on people, it wasn't like you read in the paper that people chose, and besides it's the culture that you are brought up in, it comes back to that again, I mean I've been brought up in a very different way to that. I would have supported the miners whatever they had done I think. If they had taken up guns I'm sure I would have carried on sewing and putting the money in the tin ... so I think it was a lot for people in UPG who said 'no, we can't support them', I think it was a lot to expect of those miners' wives to sit down on picket lines. That's what I would have done easily but then that's what I'm used to doing. I don't think you can expect people who aren't used to it and haven't talked about it for hour after hour, to do it .. I've always had to keep quiet really because I feel I would do things differently and that's awkward really. I don't like talking about class very much but it just seems to be who you are, I'll never not be that person.'

Clearly membership of a peace group which had become divided over the issue of support for the strike had brought some women up against questions of class identity and class allegiance in a way which other Greenham supporters had not necessarily confronted. Illustrative of the 'polyvalence of Greenham', the Greenham response to the strike in UPG was not uniform. As I understood it from discussions and interviews much depended on whether women identified with mining support groups on the basis of class struggle or whether that definition of the strike intensified feelings of class difference. Given a strong sense of class difference combined with pacifist ideals, unconditional and visible support for women in mining support groups was experienced as a problem.

The example of UPG concerned women's recollections of some of the dilemmas which arose for them during the strike. But what about afterwards when the fight against pit closures was continued in different circumstances? Would perceptions of class



difference blur and allow women to come together through their common experience of 'women-strength'? A direct opportunity arose to explore these questions when a conference was called in the North East to bring together Greenham women and women from mining communities. The purpose of the conference was to plan a day of anti-nuclear local actions under the auspices of LINKS.

#### **'LINKS' : Gender and Class Difference**

The purpose of LINKS was defined in a 1986 pamphlet by Anne Suddick who had been a central organiser of the mining support effort in the North East during the strike and was still a key activist in the fight against pit closures. Against the background of increasing closures of coal-fired power stations and pits, and in discussion with other women, including Greenham women, Anne drew out the links between the run-down of the coal industry and nuclear power.

**'I realised in five years' time, if things continued in this direction, there would be no coal mining in the North East; that meant there would be no alternative to the Druridge Bay nuclear power station. We won't be able to say 'No thanks' to nuclear power because there won't be any alternative.**

**By then we had already met up with women from Greenham. We went down there. And talking to people about plutonium and nuclear weapons made me realise why the nuclear programme was so important. It dawned on me we were fighting something bigger than pit closures.'** (*Suddick 1986, p26*)

Anne explained to me that LINKS was not intended to be a bureaucratic organisation but a network of like-minded groups which could be called up when needed, somewhat modelled on the Greenham method of organising. It had been used to some effect to plan and mount demonstrations against the Chernobyl disaster. In 1987 it was proposed as the basis for 'widening the web' to mount an anti-nuclear action to mark the occasion of Women's International Day for Disarmament. The conference was attended by some forty women with a mix of Greenham women and women from

WAPC, though more thinly attended by WAPC.<sup>1</sup> WAPC groups from the North-East, Sheffield and Stoke-on Trent were represented.

The conference opened with an introduction from Anne Suddick and Rebecca Johnson each explaining how their groups had come to make links with other causes and campaigns. Anne speaking first emphasised the new understandings which had been brought about through the strike, especially the connections made between pit closures, nuclear energy and nuclear weapons. She also drew attention to the links which had been made with Greenham, emphasising unity across difference - 'I remember those strange looking women who supported us in the market place during the strike and since then we have made visits to Greenham and we've learnt something about each other'.

Rebecca explained that Greenham women had been making the links for a long time and had come out into the community to support the women in the miners' strike partly as a result of a long process of thinking about how to 'widen the web'. She argued that the earlier focus of action at the base had changed, but that although cruise missiles had been put in, the women were not defeated and were still there because they wanted to be and because 'they were feeling good about women and other issues'. She put to the conference that CND had wanted to drop the campaign against cruise but the women hadn't, so she felt that the action planned at this conference should be 'women-only' and that anyway 'linking is a women's initiative, a women's way of working.' This was a theme which she reiterated throughout the day, arguing that the reason for the day of action lay 'in women reaching out to other women' and that 'it should be about doing it for ourselves and putting women at the centre. We did it at Greenham because we had to do it, the women who went there first did not have the intention of starting a women's movement.'

These opening remarks, in which Anne for WAPC, laid more stress on interconnecting issues and Rebecca for Greenham, on 'women-bonding', were followed by small group discussions to begin the process of planning the forthcoming action. The underlying

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<sup>1</sup> This account of the conference is based upon participant observation and interviews which followed with the Castlehill group. Greenham women from London, Oxford, Manchester, and UPG/North East attended and in addition Rebecca Johnson, a long standing member of the Greenham camp.

themes of class and gender relations pervaded these sessions, and the whole-group discussion which followed, and caused considerable tension. As a participant I felt that the potential links between Greenham women and women from mining communities slipped away during the day, largely because potential differences of experience and understanding were left unstated and unexamined. My field notes recorded my feeling that 'the meeting was heavy with the problems of making the links but that few were really prepared to discuss this; the influence of the Greenham women was strong', something which I learnt later had caused resentment amongst some peace women and women from mining communities.

*Clair:*

**'There was one group that came up from London and I know them from Greenham and they're a strong group and they're effective at Greenham and I thought they were good here but alien, and they would have had to be here for ages to really feel part of anything that was going on here and to understand it at all. I was with them in the morning with the miners' wives.'**

The problem for this conference, as for many such attempts by women to join forces, was to find the means to communicate in ways which drew positive outcomes from women's different experiences. In that respect, we did not really succeed, for the world inhabited by women from mining communities was not given adequate expression or recognition by ardent Greenham women on this day.

### **Excluding Men**

One important source of tension during the conference was the imposition of a pro-women, separatist agenda, which was not explored, but assumed by some women to speak to the experience of all. As became clear subsequently, this stance was alien to women from mining communities and caused some local Greenham supporters to feel uncomfortable and angry on their behalf.

*Clair:*

**'I thought the whole day was uncomfortable, and the other thing was that one woman (referring to a local peace woman), her two sons had been working hard in miners' support things and for it to**

be a women-only, she found it very hard that it was going to be a women-only action.'

*Monica:*

'I certainly felt that that was a problem for the women in the Castlehill group. Perhaps we should have started the day by questioning what we meant by the links.'

*Clair:*

'Yes it would have been better to go back wouldn't it, for a lot of people it would have been, even if you are going over old ground it would have been worth it, it would have been more comfortable in the end. I think there would have been people who would have been far too worried about saying 'I think men should have been here as well as women', but it could have been said perfectly well and gone through and could have been women-only in the end with no bother, but if we'd gone through it, it would have felt altogether different and everybody would have known how it was. There would have been some understanding instead of all those tensions which were obvious really.'

The unquestioning assumption that it would make sense to women in mining communities to be involved in a LINKS organisation which excluded men was confirmed by members of the Castlehill group to have been an alienating message for them.

*Shirley:*

'I came out. It's alright but it's nothing I can really em, well there was nothing brought up about mines or anything like that. I think it was too much about the peace women, we didn't really talk about what the links are supposed to be and I don't agree that men should be left out. Anne is links, she's linked all over.'

*Judy:*

'I can see how it's tied to us, nuclear power and we have coal fired, but that's about the only link I can see, and I'll go out and say

don't build a nuclear one, build a coal fired one, I think that's all I should say. I just think it's gone a bit broad and I don't think it should be women-only. I don't mind hearing what's happened, and as long as it's something to do with us and keeping pits open that's alright ... Anne is links, it's her address and phone number but it didn't come out of our group.'

Such views indicate the failure of the conference to connect with the experience and interests of the Castlehill group and a personal distancing from the idea of LINKS which was seen to be the inspiration of *Anne* alone. A central objection on the part of these women and others in the group was the proposition that LINKS should exclude men. This was seen to challenge the relationship between women and men in mining communities and therefore to put the whole basis of LINKS at risk.

*Catherine:*

'I applaud the Greenham women, I don't know if I could be that committed, but in saying that the miners' strike did involve me personally so therefore I was committed, but when we're on about women I think they deserve a place in society, should be recognised for what they are, but unfortunately to get that you've got to use men, you cannot do it on your own. I mean, they were on about men have got to be excluded, I think they are making a big mistake. As I say somebody has got to stand up for the women to get what they want and their rightful place in society but I don't think you can do it like that, and I was sitting there thinking, I've thought about this an awful lot lately, do they want to be equal or do they want to be superior. I don't want to be superior to anyone, I want to be equal, I want to be able to compete with a man but I don't really want to be better than anyone.'

*Monica:*

'Do you think it might put women off in mining communities as far as LINKS is concerned?

*Catherine:*

'Yes, I think it will ... you see a lot of women that are married, you do things with your husband, you also do things separately on

**your own, but a lot of women in mining would do it with their husbands, a lot might think 'if he's not included I don't want to know'. I don't think it would bother my husband and yet in saying that he said, 'why does the social just have to be women?', and I think it might be guilt to go home to your husband and say 'I want to join this group but you are not included.'**

The women in the Castlehill group could not see the point of excluding men from LINKS and were not happy about the conference being set up in such a way as to keep out the few young local male students who had been so supportive to them in the strike and subsequently. Some also resented the way in which their own ideas for the day of action had been over-ruled by Greenham women.

***Mary:***

**'What got me was that we had a great group and we had some great ideas like carrying plastic bags and saying 'this could be you and your child buried here in a heap.' And this woman said, 'oh we can't do that.'**

***Susan:***

**'And totally destroyed it. It got no further forward in the afternoon did it? In the finish I was so mad I walked out.'**

The women from mining communities made repeated attempts to bring children back onto the agenda, an indication that for them, the celebratory pro-women theme which dominated the conference and which became the focus for the day of action eclipsed their concern for community and family life. Such concern was at the root of their involvement in the miners' strike and was fundamental to their perspective on women's action, something which was barely recognised in the conference discussions.

### **Ignoring Class Difference**

The loss of enthusiastic involvement in LINKS by women from the Castlehill group, was explained by 'socialist feminist' Greenham supporters, to be at heart a failure of Greenham women to respect class difference and to take account of women's struggles other than their own.

*Astrid:*

'I feel that the peace women were much too dominant and much too wishy-washy. What the women in our group wanted to do was fairly early on knocked on the head, but it was never replaced with anything else that really interested them ... I got very angry with Rebecca and I told Anne afterwards. I thought there was very little regard for the women from the mining communities and that in actual fact if you decided to make that particular link, then it must be on the basis that you are interested in making it and that you have some regard for people from different backgrounds to your own. And I think that there is this myth, and that it is a class based one, that the Greenham women or the Greenham support network think they are the only women in history who have been engaged in any kind of struggle. That of course is totally untrue, because the women in mining communities have always been engaged in struggle. I felt their attitude to women in mining communities here was very offensive.'

*Fiona:*

'My most recent contact (with Greenham) was to do with the LINKS campaign and I felt not really that I was supposed to bow down and kiss their feet, but that there was no appreciation of how other people have their lives to run. At Greenham you don't have to get kids from school and feed them, it's a different world ... The thing that disturbed me most was the thing of putting people on a pedestal. It's really easy to do and I'm prone to doing it, if you do it you feel as if you've got certain rights about controlling things because you do so much and you give up so much of your time and you're so committed. You become a first class citizen as opposed to the troops who are around.'

One exchange in the small group of which I was a member, highlighted the considerable tension which surrounded a lack of recognition and understanding of class difference which characterised the whole conference. It arose from a suggestion made by a middle class woman from a London Greenham group, that *Jen*, a WAPC organiser from Sheffield, should put up a celebratory women's banner outside her council flat on the day of action. This drew the wry comment, 'there's enough

**graffiti there already.'** The exchange opened up the chasm of class difference but it remained unbridged, the sensitivities surrounding it too difficult to deal with.

*Vicky:*

**'I mean that woman from Sheffield, saying there was no way she could put a banner up because she'd get stuff thrown through her window and the woman from London quite clearly didn't understand did she? I felt like shaking her and saying 'for God's sake, we don't all live in Camden town', absolutely classic and that's why I don't get involved because I'm sure women like that could easily resent me, because I stink of privilege, so I feel very shy of going to groups like that because they could turn round and say, 'what the fuck do you think you are doing here?' and I say, 'well yes you're right what am I doing here?'.'**

Without some attempt by middle class women to get involved, the LINKS conference itself would not have happened. However, from the point of view of women from mining communities, much depended on the active effort of middle class women to understand the realities of lives less privileged than their own.

*Kate:*

**'The thing at the moment is to get on a social services course, anything that puts you in line for a social worker's job and we've talked to middle class women doing this course and they absolutely slay me. The thought of some of these women coming out at the other end and going and dealing with some poor woman on the twenty fifth floor, a single parent with nowhere for her kids to play and this bloody middle class woman who can't even speak english comes along, it just frightens me to death. I think there's going to be a few more jumping off the top! In the strike we had a couple of sessions with the CAB and we went out and told people how to deal with their debts, you learned like that, You need people who can talk to people on their own level ... I think a lot of middle class women who have worked or who have been involved with the women's movement and have been involved with working class women over a period of time see the problems on both sides, but I mean the LINKS conference was a typical example when that**



woman said to Jen 'decorate your flat', I mean if you could see Jen's maisonette! There's the children at a school down in the valley who have to put up with taunts about their lesbian mother, and everybody thinks we're crazy anyway. It's alright if you live in this tight knit environment of the women's movement.'

*Jen:*

'I've had a poem published in the Notts book, it sums up my feelings about how middle class women treated us and I think there are differences, that came to me because I had it all during the strike, being wheeled out at meetings and women saying 'you must have a meal with us and this is meat', yes we had all that ... and they were amazed that you could write poetry and amazed we women could sing, 'my God you're working class and you can do that!', but the thing that really did me, we went to Here We Go concert in Piccadilly Theatre, and they sat us miners' wives in front rows, and then they wheeled Mal on to sing, and all the middle class and people from London sitting behind us, and we had to stand up and sing and I thought, 'bloody hell, we're performing seals here!'

Both women were impressed with the support given in the miners' strike by many different groups of people, yet they were aware of the lack of understanding shown by some middle class women about the hardship and constraints faced by women in mining communities. The incident at the conference simply reminded them of a class divide which, in their experience, complicated relationships between women but was not insurmountable. They counted amongst their friends some middle class Greenham women with whom it was possible to communicate and who were more sensitive to the realities of working class women's lives.

Given that the Castlehill group also had links with Greenham which stretched back into the strike, it is possible that the tensions which emerged in the LINKS conference around gender and class, were partly due to general feelings of disillusionment and weariness which became apparent through the conference discussion. Women from mining communities pointed out the practical problems for women in their localities in attending meetings, such as family responsibilities and financial constraints, and the demoralising effects of a long campaign which in the end was lost. Greenham women

also described feelings of demoralisation amongst themselves and supporters, suggesting that small campaigns still went on but were isolated, unconnected and lacking in continuity, reflecting a low point in women's political activity at grassroots level. Some felt that women's networks needed reviving with a new focus, but others argued that searching for ever new ways of protesting was draining and that it was more important for women to effect change in their personal lives. Many women seemed caught between the pressure of wanting to motivate others to keep the action going and needing support themselves. LINKS depended upon such women to re-activate networks in their localities but it was evident that they were tired.

The conference finally marshalled some energy around a celebratory theme for the day of action which acknowledged what women had accomplished, whilst recognising that much remained to be achieved. The idea which caught on for the day of action was to combine celebration with protest through locally based action. The Castlehill Group eventually decided upon combining the scattering of seeds upon a burial ground, with a market place gathering to hand out anti-nuclear/WAPC literature and the release of balloons carrying a peace message. The unease which had surrounded the issue of whether men should be involved was partially resolved by an agreement that they could have a support role on the day of action. Yet the abiding impression of those peace women and women from mining communities captured in the study was of a conference which had foundered on a false notion of the links which might be made by women, precisely because it failed to address differences between them.

## **Conclusion**

The data presented in this chapter do not substantiate the general case that women from different class backgrounds cannot find some common ground. Indeed, the examples included suggest that some women activists searched for ways of doing so. But the data points to the weakness of working on assumptions that all women will feel the same by virtue of the fact that they are women. It supports the position of those authors, discussed in chapter III, who indicate that without understanding and respect for the different realities of women's lives, little progress will be made in developing a feminism which embraces those who have been consistently relegated to its margins, and who 'move away' as a result. Thus the theoretical stance that begins with the concept of a common womanhood is unlikely to bring about the unity of women which it expresses and seeks to advance.

The study suggest that the fragile unity which is achieved when protest is at its height comes under considerable strain as the focus of the action wanes and becomes more blurred. The LINKS conference was indicative of this problem when women from both camps described how they were struggling to sustain the active involvement of women who were weary of campaigning (as they were themselves) and who were now not brought together through the large causes which had first mobilised them. The following chapters elaborate this theme, drawing together the support group experiences of women in the period 'beyond protest' (that is after the end of the miners' strike and after the big actions at Greenham).

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## CHAPTER VII

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### MINING SUPPORT GROUPS: A DECLINING SOLIDARITY

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#### Introduction

The last chapter suggested that aspirations for women to join hands through protest, which had found some expression in shared support between Greenham women and women in mining communities during the miners' strike, evaporated in the period beyond. In order to explore this process further it is useful to examine some of the problems which arose for remaining support groups as the numbers of women attempting to extend their respective actions dwindled. Chapter VIII assesses the gradual loss of Greenham idealism as it was experienced by those women in the study who were most committed to Greenham feminism. This chapter focuses on the problems which beset mining support groups, as they struggled to keep going once the focal goal of winning the strike had been lost.

From the perspective of women in mining communities, the issues which might continue to unite them were ones which echoed their class solidarity with men during the strike. This did not exclude the possibility of linking with other women in a variety of struggles, but neither did it signal a commitment to separatist action, something which some Greenham feminists still wanted to advance. But activists in mining communities were aware that they had entered a period where support had fallen away, where clarity of purpose had dissipated, and where the prospects of developing a working class women's movement were fading.

The LINKS initiative resembled the dying embers of political action which had opened up the possibility of forging bridges (though not without problems), but which women in both protests were now too weak to build. The vision of 'women-strength' was fading, and women, by now tired campaigners, were instead voicing a need for support. However, with no organisational base, the loose network of scattered groups which still survived promised little comfort. This was the case for women in their separate struggles, let alone in any new action which might borrow from the strengths of each.

Women activists in the miners' strike regarded this process of fragmentation as almost inevitable, given the realities of working class women's lives in communities which had emerged severely battered by a year-long period of confrontation and hardship. Some support groups were still in existence (four in the study), but they worked separately on different issues. This chapter focuses on their experiences, their isolation from one another and their distant relationship to the national organisation, WAPC. First it explores women's recollections of the period immediately following the men's return to work, and their explanations of why most women ceased to be involved. The themes of class and gender ran through their accounts - their ability to develop into a women's movement constrained by continuing financial problems and a structure of gender relations which had been only partially disturbed during the strike. Under such conditions whatever solidarity had been earlier achieved began to fade.

### **Life After the Strike**

Although women activists in the study remembered the strike as a time of great hardship when family and other relationships could become strained, they also recalled it as an enjoyable and exciting time. They had to fit their activities around the running of the household, but they felt that they had broadened their horizons and gained some freedom from the confines of the home. When they talked about making up the parcels, running soup kitchens, fundraising, public speaking and picketing during the strike it was usually with great excitement. Reflecting the feelings of most women in the study, *Shirley* recalled, **'I was going to bed on a night time, waiting for the next day to come round and see what else was going to happen!'** Most had never done anything like this before and all gained confidence and developed personal skills as a result.

By contrast the period after the strike left a gap in their lives, the frenetic, all involving, activity of the past year now over. Again echoing the feelings of many, *Catherine* remembered the stark change - **'for a year, I always had something to do, somewhere to go, people around us constantly, this was just like central station ... and then it stopped dead and I think for a month I walked round, I was so miserable.'**

Not surprisingly most women activists experienced a difficult period of adjustment after the end of the strike. **'Boredom', 'feeling unsettled' and 'being down in the dumps'** were some of the expressions used. Although all had hoped that their support

groups would survive, they had to come to terms with a fairly rapid 'return to the home' by most women. In the context of declining support only a few groups had managed to remain in existence after the year of the post-strike period - not surprising, given the demoralisation and practical problems which the strike left in its wake.

*Veronica - Seascope Group:*

'... we started talking about when the strike's over, we'll keep the contacts going. it was a bit of euphoria really because most of the women were housewives and they started to get a bit of confidence, and they wanted to be involved in things, and that was the idea that we would become involved in things afterwards, join organisations and keep contacts going, that was the intention. What happened in fact was that some did, very few. Disillusionment set in because we were beaten basically.'

*Catherine - Castlehill Group:*

(referring to her support group during the strike which folded soon after) 'The others are back to the way they were before ... I think a lot of people felt bitter the way the strike ended. I think that a lot of people thought 'a year and all those debts with a lot of hardship, for what?'... A lot of people had debts, probably still have. It was a case of 'well I want to forget', but when you talk about it, it was a year that none of them would have missed ... It was a year of my life I'll not let go. Four or five years ago, I wouldn't have dreamt of going to classes, or going to Sheffield for meetings. I would have thought no, I can't go away for weekends ... Maybe I'm just lucky that she's up. Perhaps it would be different if I had little uns.'

Only a minority of women in the study had children who were 'not up', the membership of surviving support groups made up of women who were predominantly over forty years of age. (Appendix 1). Collective structures created during the strike collapsed, including impromptu childcare and the financial help for women to travel to meetings. Shared problems became once again personal troubles. As was observed in other studies of the immediate post-strike era, physical and mental exhaustion, the mounting pressure to deal with debts and the wish to restore some stability in the home, made

continuing action an unrealistic option for many women (*Witham 1986; Stead 1987; Waddington et al 1991*).

***Barbara: Seascape Group:***

'I think the majority of people is just getting on with their lives ... we used to speak about our problems because we all had one and you go up there (to the support group) and pour your heart out and get advice, but now most women have gone back to what they were. I feel as if I can leave my kids (now teenagers) but I mean those with little uns, getting their kids watched for one night was hard enough for them to come up during the strike.'

***Dot:***

'... they don't realise there are other people still struggling after the strike, they think they're the only ones so they don't come forward and say anything ... they think 'eh, I've never heard of anyone else having problems. It's just me' sort of thing.'

With the men's return to work the collective spotlight was on sacked miners, the problems of those who were saddled with extensive debts returning to the arena of private struggle. In many cases this would be a long drawn out process.

***Jen - National Organiser for WAPC:***

'... it's like my husband, he phoned me the other day and said 'I've worked out that I'm working 3 days for the Building Society, 2 days for the bank and if I get a Saturday or a Sunday, that's mine!' He's like that for two years.'

Continuing financial hardship for many families had a direct effect on women's motivation and ability to remain loyal to their support groups. Raising the money to travel to meetings could still be a problem, two years after the strike had ended.

***Clare - Castlehill Support Group:***

'I went to the group religiously every week, well it's once a fortnight now and I don't go very often, religiously every week, it didn't matter how hard up we were, but as time goes on, being on

**low pay, the more you go on the harder it is each week, every week is worse than the last, and it's not often you have a spare £5 to pop off to Castlehill.'**

If there had been nothing else to undermine the development of a working class women's movement, the financial problems left by the strike would have probably been enough. But there were other pressures on women which sapped their motivation to continue their action.

### **The Reassertion of Traditional Patterns**

*Jessie - Valley View:*

**'You heard all the praise and what was going to happen and I thought 'well I'd like to believe that', but I think once the men get back to work, the difficulties are there'.**

Most women in the study felt that the return to work by the men signalled the expectation that women would return to their traditional domestic role. In their experience such expectations built into the fabric of women's lives and gender relations in mining communities, would be hard for many women to resist, although they might possibly be accommodated. This might be achieved through judicious management.

*Barbara:*

**'I was like the breadwinner during the strike and he did things in the house and he still does. If I work at a weekend in the hospital, when I come home things is done, but when I have my weekend off he just sits in front of the television like that, he doesn't budge, so I'd rather work weekends! I get more money and I get my work done at the same time!'**

Such a strategy to bring about a desired change in traditional roles was somewhat exceptional in the study, most women acknowledging that their support group activities and aspirations to make changes in their lives (where these existed) had to fit with the demands of home. So, for example, variable attendance at support group



meetings and activities was sympathetically viewed as the result of normal constraints caused by husband's shift systems, as illustrated by a discussion in the Highhill Group.

***Highhill Support Group:***

***Betty:***

'I've got to leave the meeting today at three o'clock. Now next week he's going out at four and won't be in 'till ten. I've got all day, but when he's coming in from work, he wants you there, but before (in the strike), he was perfectly happy if there was a meeting.'

***Dot:***

'I think if it was a big day, say a London day, my husband would definitely set himself in from work or he would call in at the canteen and have a meal ... if it's anything to do with the sacked miners or the support group, my husband will see to himself ... well put it this way, he'll have to because I won't be there!'

***Betty:***

'Oh my man's not at the stage now where he can't prepare a meal if he's coming in from work and I'm at the support group, but like when we went on the demo the other night, he was going to work but he wanted me there to prepare his meal before he went out which is understandable.'

***Dot:***

'Yes, but you did do the demonstration you know.'

***Betty:***

'But I did go and see to him, and I don't think he would have appreciated it had he to put up his own bait and his own meal and me not being in when he went to work. As long as I was there before he went, that was it.'

The structure of men's work and traditional role expectations were widely acknowledged as significant factors affecting women's commitment to support groups in the demoralising period of struggling to restore normality after the strike. But, women in every group were suspicious that members had dropped away because of direct pressure from men. Such pressure was experienced by one woman who remained very active in the national WAPC after the strike, who described in some detail the competing pressures on her and her feelings of being torn, in view of her husband's desire 'to get his wife back' after the strike.

*Phyliss - Chair Meadow Vale Support Group: National Official WAPC:*

'Oh yes, I would like to see changes in the old traditions, but I think its fantasy, I really do ... My husband is very much like my father was but I must say that during the strike he wasn't like that, and after he went through a bit of a phase where the other men all had their wives back, if you see what I mean. Life was back to normal but it wasn't in our house. In fact I was staying away from home two or three days a week more than I was during the strike and he said, 'the bloody strike is still on in our house', and of course he wasn't on the picket line. He was coming in and the meal wasn't ready, and then of course I said, 'that's OK love, I'll give it all up if that's the way you feel.' 'Oh no you can't do that, there's no need for that.' And my oldest son is a great ally, 'now Dad you can't have it both ways, what she's doing, it needs to be done and she's getting a lot of satisfaction from it.' I did enjoy doing it and so gradually, he said afterwards, 'I just went through a time where I thought its never going to end, I wanted it to be back the way it was.' Recently I went to the Labour Party conference for the week and I had to phone home every night and you know sometimes it's difficult to find a phone which I explained to him. 'I know but you said you would ring'. I would think to myself, 'I could do without this', but at the same time, I'm not a feminist ... what I do is not more important than my husband and family. They are important. It wasn't easy, I was torn, I was very torn, but having been married for twenty eight years, this is not just some person I'm talking about. This is my partner, this is the other half of me, if you like. I mean women, feminists, purse their lips when I talk like that ... but I wonder how many of our women

**who have stopped coming to meetings, I wonder if that's the reason.'**

It would be difficult to argue that this was a typical experience in that the desire, opportunity and determination to remain so active after the strike clearly varied. Of those women who had experienced conflicts in their marriages as a direct result of the strike (three others in the study), one put this down to '**financial hardship**'; one to a feeling that she and her husband '**were now in different worlds**'; and one to her determination to be '**get a bit of leeway**'. Those who were politically active before the strike (*Dot, Veronica, Jessie, Jill*) were married to men with whom they shared political convictions and experienced few conflicts in their relationships afterwards. Others felt that they could accommodate support group activities with demands at home, and that where necessary, their men would be willing to bend a little. Reflecting on this process of accommodation, *Jen* and *Kate* (WAPC organisers, who had moved out of their traditional marriages), considered it to be typical of remaining activists.

***Kate:***

**'Jen and I know loads of women who are really, really active, out at meetings and fundraising, and they're trying to do it within a marriage and they're trying to stay married to this bloke and bring the kids up, and they want the marriage. I actually think Jen and I took the easy way out to leave it all behind. It was difficult in a lot of ways but it was easy compared to some of those women, it was easy because you get blokes, and we've all met them, who say 'I let my wife to this, I allow her to do this', and he thinks he's this great wonderful white God ... but he isn't saying that she's got to get a baby sitter first, and make sure there's food in the fridge, so there's no harassment to him at all. The clothes are washed and ironed, he doesn't actually have to do anything, but he lets her do this!'**

The extent of marital discord directly resulting from the strike and its aftermath remains unclear (*Waddington et al 1991*). The study indicates that most women remaining active were not experiencing problems in their marriages, probably because they were not challenging the pre-strike pattern of life to any great extent. But, strained marital relationships may have been more common amongst those who had drifted away from support groups. This at any rate was the opinion of those who

remained active. The surviving members of the Seascope Group drew on their experience of younger members whom they felt had been most unsettled by the strike, as an illustration of women giving up collective action to find freedom in other ways. They knew of five cases of such women having extra-marital affairs (out of the original group of forty).

*Veronica:*

**'Sadly the pressures were to return to what we were before, and most of them did, and those that rebelled by having a bit on the side, found their freedom, but their freedom, their energy hasn't been directed in the right way.'**

All women in the study agreed that 'pressures to return to normal' combined with the trail of personal and family problems left by the strike, made it very difficult for most women to remain politically active.

### **Fragmenting Relationships: A Legacy of the Strike**

The stress put on domestic relationships by the strike and its aftermath, should not be underestimated as an obstacle to the survival of support groups. Just as important were experiences of fragmented relationships in extended families and communities, a legacy of the strike which had a continuing effect on any concept of solidarity which might at one time have existed. In the Highhill Group, for example, Ann described the effect of the strike on her family.

*Ann:*

**'I have a brother a policeman, to me I'm the soft one, I still speak to him, but Dot doesn't. I've also got a sister whose man worked (during the strike) and she came to see me recently, here's me sister standing in the yard and she just looked at me and started crying and she says, 'can I come in?' Well I hadn't the heart to turn round and say 'I'm sorry', I just brought her straight in ... Dot feels that she's only one sister left and that's me ... the strike has broken a lot of people up, I've heard there's been a lot of divorces (not in her village) ... to me a scab is one who worked**

**through the strike but not the ones who went back three weeks before the strike ended. I think it's financial worries that drove them back in the finish, and I mean, put it this way, everybody had to go back in the finish, we were so low.'**

Other women in the study were not so forgiving towards scabs, generally regarded as 'outcasts'. The Valley View Group described how it had become 'a very, very bitter issue' for their group as **'women (scab's wives) who had been good workers had to be put out'**, leaving lasting, unhealable rifts, amongst women in the community. The process of regrouping around those who remained loyal, and becoming more separated from those who had not, went on beyond the strike. For example, during the study, the Highhill Group angrily condemned a loyal member of the group for **'fraternising with scabs in the club'** and labelled her as a **'trouble maker'** who should now be treated as an outcast. But it was not just scabs, and people who associated with them, who were hard to forgive. Men (and by association their wives) who took their redundancy after the return to work, were viewed somewhat less harshly as having undermined the continuing struggle against pit closures. That this could contribute to divisive relationships amongst women will be discussed later. The legacy of broken relationships caused by the strike was hardly the seed bed for a resurgence of solidarity, even amongst those who continued to be active.

*Jen:*

**'I mean we can talk about the good side of the strike, I enjoyed loads of it, the majority of it. As a woman it did a lot for me, but as a family and a village it was devastating. There was the aftermath of loosing close friends and family because you will never speak to them again and then there's the bitterness, the hatred and actually realising that you can hate ... It totally destroyed a lot of people and relationships.'**

The fragmentation of relationships amongst women in support groups was also fuelled by tensions arising from relative differences in hardship experienced by members as a result of the strike. In the Castlehill Group, for example, the question of deserving cases was a fairly constant source of disagreement. On one occasion, an appeal made by several members to support a woman (she had just left the meeting and never returned to the group) who was severely depressed - her husband a sacked miner and her child very ill - drew the response from others, **'we've all had it hard'**. This appeal

on behalf of another member, opened up the scars of those in the group who had also suffered depression, financial hardship and a range of problems specific to their own situations. During a subsequent, special meeting, called to share personal problems (reminiscent of support meetings in the strike), agreement on how to treat special cases proved to be impossible, the discussion getting lost in what we might call 'a hierarchy of hardship', which the strike had brought about.

Given the many obstacles in the way of women trying to keep their action going, it would have been miraculous for a working class women's movement to have flowered. Stead, commenting on similar evidence to that summarised above of the reassertion of old patterns of life after the strike, concluded that 'with the 1984-5 coal strike a working class based women's movement has been clearly defined' (*Stead 1987, p168*). Sadly, the data in this study suggest that such clarity of definition eluded women in the period beyond the strike, as they struggled to establish their political goals both in local support groups and nationally through Women Against Pit Closures.

### **WAPC: Establishing the Post-Strike Organisation**

The problem for WAPC in the post-strike era was how to hold together a weakening network of support groups around a coherent goal. The search for a way forward for WAPC began soon after the strike had ended. The first post-strike national conference, described by several eye witnesses in the study as 'a fiasco', signalled some of the problems which were to beset women in defining who the organisation was for and what should be its agenda. I am grateful to Anne Suddick, for the following account of WAPC's efforts to establish itself after the strike.<sup>1</sup>

'It was always envisaged that this would be an opportunity for discussion rather than for decision making. The conference ranged from chaotic to difficult, due in part to inexperienced chairing. Some groups had decided to oppose the open discussion consensus agreed by the national WAPC committee. They wanted to push for the conference to take voting powers and make decisions because they wanted a "showdown" on some issues of principle. Central to the

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<sup>1</sup> *Anne Suddick was a delegate to WAPC for a period of a year, following the end of the strike.*

problems was the issue of ex-officio members, women who are in the organisation because of their position elsewhere rather than because they represented an area, i.e. the wives of the General Secretary and President of the NUM.

An issue of some importance was the constitution of membership of WAPC, the guidelines drawn up prior to the conference had suggested 75% miners wives and 25% non miners wives. The reasons for this were complex, but at least two can be highlighted. Firstly, UDM allegations suggested that WAPC was overrun with subversive politics (loyal to Scargill). Secondly, and more importantly, miners' wives did not want themselves to be open to manipulation by outside bodies. Again, this was not a simple matter because of the feelings of loyalty which many had also felt to those who had helped them during the strike.

The turmoil experienced at this first conference had the effect of alerting women to the wider political issues and from it came the will from all areas to solve the fundamental problems, such that the next conference would be controlled, would be set up in such a way that decisions could be made and would rule out manipulation. The next conference was successful in these terms. The 75% : 25% aim was agreed formally and a constitution for the future set out. Another decision of that conference was the retention of ex-officio members on the National Committee.'

The formal establishment of the national organisation to take the women's action forward was an achievement in itself, but its development was hampered by a number of overlapping problems.

### **WAPC: Obstacles to Development**

With a funding base which depended on donations and subscriptions, the capacity of a skeleton office to keep up regular communication with members and to mount campaigns involving women from across the country was severely limited. This problem was compounded by a delegate structure which, as will be discussed later, left some remaining activists feeling excluded. By the time of the study it was apparent that a declining membership meant that WAPC could not hope to levy the sort of funds

required to spearhead a national women's organisation. A membership fee, which was introduced in 1986, failed to be effective and was later abandoned, the weakening local groups needing to support their own activities. Lack of funds was then symptomatic of a declining membership which in turn made it difficult for WAPC to hold together those who were left. This spiralling effect was also conflated by an agenda (Appendix 6 provides a Statement of WAPC Aims) which, in the view of the national organisers dwelt too heavily on men's issues - an extension of women's loyalty in the strike.

*Jen:*

'After the strike the main issue was supporting sacked men, but while we've been doing that we've forgotten our WAPC ... we've fought for nearly three years for men, looked at the men's issues and forgot entirely about the women's issues ... we did it all during the strike, supported each other and I think there's a lot of things women could fight with loss of services. I was saying to women last night (at a fundraising benefit concert for sacked miners), what about women, what about nurseries, we should be campaigning on that for a change ... I thought it stuck out a mile last night when one women's group gave three and a half thousand pounds and another group gave a thousand pounds ... and I think men have got to start thinking about men a bit more and women have to get to thinking about their own issues a bit more.'

*Kate:*

'The women gave the bulk of the money last night, but WAPC can't have a conference because they haven't got enough money ... It's a real sickener for me, because, alright we've got to support the sacked men and it's kept a lot of groups active being involved in the Justice Campaign, but while they've been doing that, all they've sent to the national organisation (WAPC) is their subs, if they've sent those, and a lot of areas haven't done that, and we're running out of funds ... Women aren't selfish. I think that's the problem.'

This analysis of the 'ills' of WAPC was not widely shared in the study. Indeed most women felt that they, and WAPC, should be doing more to support victimised miners and, as will be discussed later, it was a matter of contention as to whether WAPC had



been diverted by too many other issues. However, in one sense all women in the study did regard men as a problem. In the context of a relentless programme of pit closures (see Appendix 5 - Colliery Closures 1985-87), women activists believed that their own determination to continue the struggle was not matched by that of miners.

*Members of the Castlehill Support Group:*

*Judy:*

'You feel a bit daft being a member of WAPC , and people say 'well you can't do much because they're closing them anyway', but it sticks in your craw that you're willing to go out and fight against pit closures and the men vote for it, that's a kick in the guts that is ... we might be women against pit closures, but there's not a damned thing we can do about it.'

*Shirley:*

'The men's not fighting against it. The women are, but you never see a man and it's their colliery.'

*Judy:*

And we're not in a position union wise to really fight. We can just object against it. They're in a position to fight.'

This sense of lost unity with men, which had been at the heart of women's struggle in the strike, left many women feeling powerless to mount effective political action in defending their communities. The NUM, which had drawn upon their strength during the strike was widely criticised for side-lining local women's groups and WAPC in the post-strike era. From the perspective of the national organisers this was a crucial factor draining women's political determination.

*Kate:*

'As you talk to women, there's been more and more things happened, especially during the last six months rather than after the strike, that have really sickened women off. I mean we all fought for various reasons, some women were fighting for their husband's jobs and felt they were fighting for their communities.

**Other women thought they were fighting for the greatest union in the country. Everybody had a different personal feeling and the women who have stayed active have had their noses rubbed in the dirt on so many occasions that its like standing up and singing the women's song 'side by side with our men', we're not side by side any more. We're back behind them where they wanted us ... the more you look at it, the men have kept the women out in a lot of ways from the organisation.'**

***Jen:***

**'Our union in our area will not allow any publicity about sacked men whatsoever. They won't have it because they say they're doing all sort of things to get the jobs back and that will jeopardise their chances, and it's like we wanted to set up a proper Justice Campaign in North Derbyshire, and the secretary came to our meetings and said, 'you're affiliated , that's all you need to do. I don't want it in this area, and it will only rock the boat' ... I just can't see what they're getting at. The only thing with me is, I thought they were more or less saying, 'women get back, go away, we don't want women involved.'**

Whatever the root causes of women's diminishing commitment to WAPC, it was evident to all concerned, that by 1987 it was in serious decline. Phrases such as 'dying a death', 'fading away' and 'folding up' were widely used by remaining activists to describe their feeling that WAPC would not be able to survive.

***Jill - Delegate: Castlehill Support Group:***

**'I had the impression at the meetings I went to of it gradually fading away, with groups continuing to fold each time ... I think there should be a national structure to keep areas in touch with one another, but what its future will be I don't know, because it has dwindled down so much. It's different in a strike situation where people will do whatever is required of them in order to look after the basics of life and to look after their families.'**

The interactive effect of groups folding and the national body, thus weakened, being unable to hold together remaining activists, was a process of mutual decline. The study suggested that this process had started almost as soon as WAPC had established itself after the strike.

### **WAPC: The View From the Ground**

In one sense all women in the study thought of themselves as 'women against pit closures', but not many felt connected in any meaningful way with the formal organisation. The Highhill Support Group had never become members and saw the national organisation as external to their activities. From the perspective of all groups in the study, WAPC became a remote and somewhat separate organisation which had failed to involve them or to provide an agenda around which concerted action was possible. The Seascope group, for example, discovered that the flagging energy of their members could not be revived by a formal organisation far removed from their base.

#### *Veronica:*

**'The numbers in our group dwindled and dwindled and the view was that there was nothing to be gained from it (the group) and so we tried to gain something politically by joining WAPC, which worked for a while, but it didn't last because of problems of elitism, people not being able to have any power over their own ideas, not being able to express their own ideas, being restricted in being active really. You can only have so many delegates ... we voted a delegate but the women wanted to go themselves, they wanted the atmosphere, the buzz from being involved and they weren't allowed, so one by one they drifted off. And then the communication was bad, you wouldn't get minutes from meetings, you didn't know what was going on ... so we got more and more disillusioned and our group diminished to a hard core of six and the delegate resigned.'**

This perhaps represents a worse case, where a group was looking for some sort of national lead and support for its revival. As Hilda put it, 'we were never told to do anything ... one day we got on the phone to Phyliss (WAPC Official, formerly closely connected with Seascope) and said 'they're going to close Blyth, why are we

women in WAPC doing nothing about this?' A contrasting experience of WAPC, from a committee member's point of view, was provided by *Phylliss*.

*Phylliss - Chair Meadow Vale Support Group; WAPC Official:*

'The main concern is our sacked miners ... also as a women's movement we are strongly in support of the women, ancillary workers in hospitals since privatisation ... links with Greenham women, lots from WAPC have been down there. I think next to sacked miners has been the women in print ... I myself have been to Wapping five times ... Betty and Ann and a couple of other women have just come back from America where they visited the women coal miners ... we also give support to the likes of the silent night women, and we are also taking up the issue, along with the workers at the artificial limb factory. I feel as if it's still going strong, you take this away and there'd be murder!'

This level of involvement was possible for very few, especially with a structure which allowed only one voting delegate from each group. This, combined with spasmodic and poor communication, left most women feeling somewhat excluded from what was happening at the national level. In effect the organisation had very little presence amongst remaining activists in the North East of England. A number of women felt that WAPC was inevitably stronger in Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire because the national office was located in the NUM Headquarters in Sheffield.

*Catherine:*

'... it tends to be more Yorkshire where it is. Betty Heathfield worked tremendously, but it's all centred around where it is. You don't hear anything, unless Jill (the delegate) reported back, but even when she comes back from there, there's nothing like substantial comes out of it. Everybody should get copies of the minutes and reports to see what's gone on.'

Women's feelings of separation and exclusion from the national organisation were also reflected in complaints about perceived elitism in the constitution of WAPC and in the election of delegates who were not miners' wives.

*Members of the Valley View Support Group:*

*Jessie:*

'We don't believe in elitism that women should be put on committees just because of their husband's positions ... I mean I admire Betty Heathfield, I think she's a brilliant woman, but Betty I think should stand on her own merits. Now to say ex-officio for Mrs Heathfield and Mrs Scargill we thought was wrong ... that means by virtue of office, but what office did they hold? It was their husband's office ... you'd had all this projection of miners' wives but I'm afraid miners' wives got pushed into the background.'

*Josie:*

'... and Jill (the delegate from Castlehill and not a miner's wife) says in the end she was the wrong person to go to Chile, because all they wanted to know about was miners' wives and she couldn't tell them. They wanted an ordinary miner's wife to tell them what had gone on and she wasn't in a position to do so.'

*Jessie:*

'It came to my mind, why wasn't a miner's wife chosen to go to Chile? Was it thought that a miner's wife was incapable of reporting on a visit to Chile? I didn't like it because I thought miners' wives should have been to the fore all the time.'

*Liz:*

'I think WAPC are just trying to make a structure of themselves.'

From the point of view the Valley View group, and they were not alone in making such observations, WAPC had extended privilege to a chosen few. This, compounded by lack of information, led most women to feel that the national organisation had failed to provide a coherent framework which brought remaining activists together and gave them a sense of belonging to a larger whole. At the same time they were aware that support groups, the life blood of the organisation, were disappearing.

*Judy:*

**'It was enormous at this conference (the first post-strike conference) we had ... there was such a lot of groups then. Its just reflecting, I think, everybody's groups, groups are just folding up ... I don't know if it will go on, I wouldn't like to say in a year's time that it will still be here.'**

### **WAPC: A New Way Forward?**

One possible solution to the 'ills' of WAPC, debated by a national conference in 1987, was to broaden the base of membership by re-defining the goals of the organisation and adopting a new name (Appendix 7 provides the Conference Agenda).

In the event the name remained unchanged, the majority of members in favour of retaining their roots in mining based issues. A broadening of the membership, though more sympathetically discussed, yielded no clear way forward. There was a strong feeling that women who had once been involved should be encouraged to return, but also a fear of opening the doors too wide lest the organisation lose its roots and be taken over by outsiders. There was general agreement that the delegate structure had not worked and that it should be revised to allow more women to come to meetings. One woman from the North East, described to me subsequently her feelings of being 'heartbroken' because she had not been able to stay on as a delegate once her group of fifteen women had folded, even though she was still 'very, very interested.'<sup>2</sup>

Arguably, the 1987 conference came too late to counter the process of decline which had prompted it. Those at the national level who wanted a change of direction with a much stronger agenda on working class women's issues, were unable to wrest the organisation from its past. Betty Heathfield, for example, championed the concept of a Women's Union to be affiliated to the TUC as a means of giving working class women a political voice and of tackling their isolation in the home, their unemployment and their concentration in part-time, poorly paid work. Although this idea attracted some interest at the conference, most argued that it was not so much the aims of WAPC

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<sup>2</sup> *I accompanied 5 women from the Castlehill Support Group to this conference. There were between 40-50 women in attendance at the conference. The summary of what happened is based on my fieldnotes, checked against other women's interpretations.*

which were at fault, as the structural problems of keeping them alive. What women wanted was to regenerate the informal ways of working which had served them so effectively during the strike, and which the formality of WAPC had never replaced. This aspiration was shared by Kate, who felt that she would be able to organise more effectively at an informal level.

*Kate:*

**'Well I feel at the moment as if WAPC is going and it's actually draining me completely. I haven't got anything else to give ... if we can resolve this thing of me being in the office with the ridiculous title of national organiser, who doesn't actually organise anything, I mean, it's 'she who carries the can' which would be a much better title ... I just feel I can do more at ground level than I ever can here ... if we can resolve this in some way that I can just get out and keep going round the groups and keep in touch with them, then I can give something, but to actually be expected to just be in that office when it's a complete waste of time. There's not enough information coming in, to be put out, anyway.'**

As a member of the Castlehill Support Group until it finally faded out completely in 1991, I observed no tangible changes in the direction of WAPC or in the relationship between the group and the national body.<sup>3</sup> This group, like others in the study (with the exception of Seascope which had virtually folded) continued to work on its own agenda, the sense of belonging to a larger body of women gradually receding into the past. The study indicated that, in any case, local networks had disappeared much earlier and that groups worked largely in isolation from one another. It might be argued that the central organisational problem for WAPC, all the other constraints notwithstanding, was the loss of a web of local and area support networks which had connected women to the national body during the strike.

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<sup>3</sup> *At the time of writing, WAPC still exists and has been active in opposing the pit closure programme announced by Michael Heseltine in 1992. How many of those were women who were involved in the strike is unclear. Jill (former member of Castlehill Group and delegate to WAPC), attended a WAPC meeting in Durham at which she found ten women (mainly from the Labour Party), none of whom were known to her from earlier mining support group activities. She was told that women in local mining communities 'didn't want to know.'*

*Catherine:*

**'It started off beautiful and I think it could have been, it could have been a women's movement, because the women had so many contacts during the strike, so many avenues they could have used ... if women had been involved and they'd kept involved and there had been a motive, something to do, it could have been something good, but not now.'**

Primary networks at grass roots level, underpinning the organisation and mobilisation of women (so effectively demonstrated in this case during the strike), have been identified as key in the development of earlier women's movements (*Aveni 1978; Freeman 1983*). With a crumbling infrastructure at the informal level, it is perhaps not surprising that the formal expression of women's aspirations through WAPC, would have a hollow ring to some of the scattered groups of activists on the ground. The rest of the chapter explores women's experience of a declining solidarity at local level.

### **The Breaking of Local Ties**

By the time of the study, support groups in Northumberland had disappeared, except for the few women in the Seascope group who continued to meet. Without a local network to which they could relate, the remaining women looked back on a process of **'fading unity'**, where their **'meetings became less and less interesting'**, and where there **'wasn't a main issue'** which gave them any sense of purpose. They regarded themselves as **'not active at the moment, but always there if something crops up.'** There was evidence in their area of small groups of women getting together socially, and of links retained with families in other parts of the country. One example was of a sister support group to Seascope, which had long since ceased to meet, but some of whose members preserved their friendship with people from Croydon Labour Party who had supported them during the strike.

*Veronica:*

**'The ties between families still exist. They even had a house swop this summer between themselves and Croydon. There's a big party being organised for the New Year and the people from Croydon will come, the word goes out and the telephone starts ringing. There is a loose network which can be reactivated for**



**social reasons, but for anything else it would take something big like a strike.'**

Such special friendships between individuals and groups in this country and abroad were not uncommon and were a positive, if somewhat hidden, legacy of a strike which had been divisive in so many other ways. However, these were separate ties to those required to preserve solidarity between women's support groups in continuing their action. The experience of three groups, who had earlier been closely connected through Durham Area Support Group meetings and activity during the strike, illustrate the process of declining solidarity at the local level.

### **The Highhill Support Group**

This group, its membership drawn from an isolated hill top village, was unlikely to retain a very strong link with the area group if only because of a ten mile journey to meetings and lack of transport. However there were other reasons why the women chose to operate independently. The physical isolation of the group and, what *Dot* described as their '**segregation from the village community**', served to strengthen their reliance on one another. Once a pit village, mining families were now a minority and had '**kept themselves to themselves**' even before the strike began. Women were not surprised to have received little support during the strike from their village, but it had the effect of drawing them even closer together. All women experienced the group as cohesive and tightly knit, their reasons for continuing to meet a mix of social need, community action and support for the sacked miners.

#### ***Edith:***

**'I look forward to coming on a Monday and we have a bit chat and a bit bingo .. I used to be the type of person that wouldn't mix, so it has brought us out quite a bit coming here ... we haven't got to worry where the next meal is coming from now, so it's more relaxed. I think its more to with social rather than political things.'**

#### ***Mary:***

**'Whew its a day out and I mean you get in with a group of women instead of like sitting indoors. You're out among them.'**

*Alice:*

'I think the group should be involved in other political activities. I think there's a lot on the agenda which we can get involved in and I think that broadens your mind and all, such as the bin issue ... also I feel I can share my problems here about my family and my husband. Here you forget all about it 'till you go back.'<sup>4</sup>

*Evelyn:*

'Well its still for the strike but there isn't as much information as there used to be. It's just keeping in touch with each other ... we did do the wheely bin thing, We had a collection and took all our bins back and the majority of the village did as well. Dot is the main inspiration, she lives and breathes things like this, but you've got to have someone like that.'

*Pauline:*

'Its really for the sake of the sacked miners that we kept going. I don't know if it would fold like if they went back, but I like to think we've got money in the bank. I don't think there'll be a strike in the near future but I don't think its over.'

*Dot:*

'I think the group will survive even if the sacked miners are reinstated, for the simple reason that we're a community within a community now. Its the miners' wives against the rest in the village really.'

The women expressed unswerving loyalty to victimised miners, their weekly bingo and raffle at the meeting providing funds which were shared equally between the sacked miners' fund and their own. But they agreed with *Dot*, that the group did not need the issue of sacked miners in order to survive. On the other hand, the group was not

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<sup>4</sup> The 'bin issue' concerned the imposition on the village of wheeled dustbins. The women opposed these on two counts. First they considered them dangerous for elderly people. Second they were concerned at the loss of council jobs implied by the change.

attracted by the broader agenda emerging in the area group (involvement in anti-apartheid, anti-nuclear campaigns and a variety of links with other women's struggles) which in their view failed to give priority to strike based issues. As will be seen this was an important source of tension in the area group and one contributory factor to the break away of the Valley View group and their supporters. *Dot*, a powerful leader with her women behind her, had ceased to maintain contact with the area group because in her view it had failed to keep miners' wives and mining issues to the fore.

*Dot:*

'The mother group during the strike was a good thing. You could take your problems there and get them sorted out, but even before the strike finished there was an awful lot of unrest because of outside people that were in the area support group. The miners' wives felt as if they were being pushed back and taken over by Labour groups and what have you ... I am disillusioned with one of the area organisers, I feel she used me an awful lot ... If there was a picket she'd contact me, 'get your girls', she knew we were a militant lot up here. My women were on the front line and they took an awful lot of bashing ... where was the Labour girls then? ... now the strike's over, they've took it over completely and lets face it, it was the miners' wives that took the beating, not the Labour groups ... I disagreed with her being elected to WAPC, because she wasn't a miner's wife ... it should be against pit closures and for re-instating sacked miners, that's the priorities as far as I am concerned, I think they're taking too much on board.'

Although the Highhill group had made no dramatic gesture in disconnecting from the area group and did not approve of groups formally breaking away, they operated completely independently of it. The solidarity they felt within the group was sufficient to keep them together and a more collective approach through the area group was no longer attractive. *Dot* suggested that there were other groups who had parted company more or less quietly with the area group because they felt that 'miners' wives were pushed into the background.' One group which did not go quietly was the Valley View Group, its concerns close to those expressed by *Dot* at Highhill. In both cases they mirrored the contentious issues raised at the first national conference of WAPC after the strike.

## **The Valley View Group**

The Valley View women had belonged to a federation of East Durham support groups (Save Easington Area Mines) during the strike, from which network delegates went to the area meetings in Durham. When the strike ended in defeat, the Valley View Group became more involved in area meetings because they saw it as the appropriate collective forum for fighting pit closures and for supporting victimised miners. But they became disillusioned with the way in which the area group worked, as a result of which they mounted a challenge to existing office holders on the committee at the first AGM (a year after the strike had ended). When it came to the vote, the Valley View contenders lost.

*Liz:*

'... all we wanted, we wanted the miners' wives to take over the positions. We felt we could do it. A man was treasurer and he took his redundancy which we didn't think was right. We knew one women who was perfectly capable of taking over that position ... what was put around was that we were trying to get rid of the Chair, but that wasn't it at all. We wanted the position of co-ordinator making for her ... but we felt that it was about time, it was our organisation, that a miner's wife did do the position. And there was that much bitterness and everything, that we all walked out. All the people who walked out were miners' wives ... I was really disappointed because it was going to be this new movement, everyone was going to be equal.'

*Jessie:*

'We got a structure passed at the national conference and that should have been implemented by the areas, and every organisation I've been in, a local constitution cannot contravene the national, but that one did ... the provision made at national was for miners' wives and yet at the area meeting they whipped people in and that was for the particular purpose, to defeat the constitution.'

*Liz:*

**'We decided we would go back and we went to the next meeting and it was worse.'**

*Jessie:*

**'Well I'll tell you what destroyed it Monica - the deceitfulness, the double dealing and the legitimate demands which miners' wives had were brushed aside ... the bitterness set in.'**

The Valley View Group were highly critical of the informality and lack of organisation at the area meetings, which they regarded as masking the power of a few individuals. Women thought that the style of meetings, described as 'a free for all', had been effective when everyone spoke their mind during the strike, but had prevented open and accountable decision making in the period afterwards. Their challenge to the area group was as much about hidden power structures in the area group as it was about empowering miners' wives, though the two were closely related.

*Jessie:*

**'I felt that something was wrong when we went back after the strike. I said to Liz, 'I'm just not happy with the system, it's wrong when a couple of individuals have all the knowledge' ... there were no minutes kept, there was no organisation ... the year of the strike and the year after, there's no record ... in our group, if there was holidays or people going abroad, the names went in the hat. There was no patronage. What I felt at the area group unhappily was that there was patronage ... That's what destroyed it because they think 'we'll be all informal', but you need structure. That was its downfall, I think, looking back.'**

This articulation of the 'tyranny of structurelessness' was much more common amongst Greenham supporters in relation to their experience of feminist support groups, which aspired to work collectively and non-hierarchically (discussed in Chapter VIII). Mining support groups varied in the way they operated, some more structured than others. The area group had debated this very issue during the strike and decided against the creation of a formal committee structure, the majority of the participants arguing against the rigidity and bureaucracy which this might produce. As one woman

put it, 'It won't be the same on a Monday night if we're bogged down in rules and regulations above people's heads.'<sup>5</sup> All women in the study agreed that the area meetings had worked well under strike conditions, because in spite of a tendency towards the chaotic, they were effective in providing ready support and responding rapidly to problems as they arose.

The Valley View Group argued that such a way of working had outlived its usefulness and contrasted unfavourably with their own during the strike which they described as 'a bit traditionalist', borrowing from political party and trade union models. In Jessie's view, this was not only more democratic, but also essential to women's political education and their confidence building.

*Jessie:*

**'I thought 'our women should be able to stand up with any woman from any political party or trade union' ... it wasn't that you wanted to be bureaucratic. It was to the benefit of women, it was just part of the education ... I mean our girls was as good as any, all they wanted was just polishing up, the confidence. It's not that anyone should be put off or intimidated by Standing Orders or Rules or anything, lots go in and change things, but they want the confidence to stand up and say, 'I can speak as good as her and why shouldn't I get up?'**

*Liz:*

**'Our new group, our action group, is structured. I mean, we haven't got a constitution, but we have got an organisation and structure.'**

From the perspective of these women, similar to that advanced by women at Highhill, the area group lacked any clear focus. They believed that the issue which should have

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<sup>5</sup> *I attended this meeting, held at Redhills Hall, the Durham NUM Headquarters, on October 15, 1984. The whole of the meeting was devoted to trying to find a solution to the amount of work landing on the shoulders of Anne Suddick, who played a central role in co-ordinating the support group network. In lieu of a formal committee to share jobs out, it was decided that volunteers should support her.*

galvanised all remaining support groups was that of victimised miners. That this was an important ingredient of the split was confirmed by *Kate*, who in her capacity as national organiser had had long talks with the women. She found that **'the problem was that they only wanted to fight on mining based issues.'** Once having broken away from the area group, as they did after the abortive AGM, Valley View consolidated their identity as a miners' wives action group and focused their energies on fund raising for sacked miners.

*Michelle:*

**'I mean when we set up this group, we've proved we can do things. We've raised £1000 for Christmas and we gave every sacked miner's family £15 each ... mainly it's fund raising, but we get involved in other things. A lot of the girls that's in the action group are members of the Labour Party, most were in it before the strike.'**

*Jessie:*

**'See I think that's the ideal situation because as well as the specific issue of sacked miners, there's got to be a wider political involvement ... I didn't expect everyone to join, but if a mass of miners' wives had joined like Liz and I have, I think it would have made a hell of a change to the Labour Party.'**

Not all women in the group were as active as *Jessie* (a local County Councillor in Durham) and *Liz* (a Woman's Officer in her local Labour group), but they shared the philosophy that the way forward for working class women was to get inside the formal political structures of power. As *Liz* put it, **'it's the only way that women can go forward.'**<sup>6</sup> So, for the women of Valley View, WAPC and its constituent support groups should get on with the priority objective of combating pit closures and supporting sacked men, encapsulating their identity as 'miners' wives', whilst at the same time women should seek a broader political platform to represent working class women's interests.

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<sup>6</sup> *This philosophy may have been influenced by the links they had with SEAM, which was spearheaded by Heather Wood, a local Government worker and member of the Labour Party, who became a Durham County Councillor in 1985.*

When Valley View broke away from the area group on the grounds that its structure and agenda '**squeezed miners' wives out**', they nevertheless wanted to remain affiliated to WAPC with their own delegate. In their experience '**every obstacle was put in our way**'. WAPC, unable to approve the break which had occurred, eventually conceded that the group could have a vice-delegate, a compromise which the Castlehill Group (all that was left of the area group) accepted with more or less grace. It made no difference to the complete break down in relationships between the two groups. The concept of collective action, which brought women together after the strike, had suffered a severe blow from which it never recovered.

This example of a decisive split in a local network was undoubtedly less common (I heard of only one similar case in Nottinghamshire) than the gradual drift away of groups which were folding anyway. However, it was indicative of disagreements at grass roots level about the focus and direction of the women's action. It also illustrated a fundamental dilemma for WAPC, both nationally and locally - namely how open should remaining networks be to 'outsiders'? Given the history of the Durham area group which had brought together a wide range of supporters (Labour Party, Trades Councils and University activists to name but a few) with support groups on the front line of the struggle, it was perhaps not surprising that sensitivities would arise about the role of 'outsiders' in the post-strike era. The Highhill and Valley View groups were very clear that miners' wives fighting on mining issues should be at the forefront, with sympathetic supporters taking a back seat. Women in the Castlehill Group were more ambivalent.

### **The Castlehill Support Group**

My first contact with this group was two months after the split had occurred.<sup>7</sup> The agenda, emerging as the meeting went on, was wide ranging - including fund raising for sacked miners, plans for the forthcoming Beamish Picnic and the Durham Miners' Gala, support for an Anti-apartheid demonstration in London ('**they supported us during the strike so we should support them now**' from the Chair), an invitation to the Ruth First memorial lecture and a call for support for a local women's peace

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<sup>7</sup> *The split was discussed amongst the women (eleven women and five men in attendance) at the end of the meeting. It was clearly a live issue and continued to be so for a long time.*



protest. My experience of the group from then on, was of similar broad agendas and of a small group of (mainly) women finding it difficult to disperse their energies across all of the causes that came up. From time to time the group, acknowledging that it was thin on the ground, found itself struggling with the ideal of 'interconnectedness' which sprang from the area group's history and the loyalty felt towards others who had supported them through the strike. Women were also acutely aware of this as one of the issues which had driven Valley View and other support groups away.

*Joan:*

'You see, I think its nice to be involved in other things like anti-apartheid and things like that, but we did start out as a miners' group to help sacked miners. I think if they want to do things like that, have another meeting, but keep one for the sacked lads. I mean this group was big and that's why it dwindled last year because they said, 'we're here to help the sacked lads, and there's nothing mentioned about them' ... I think that's why a lot have dwindled away, I definitely think that ... they won't come back to the area group while it's talking about anti-apartheid and Greenham and things like that, because it's got nothing to do with miners ... at the same time we did feel beholden to a lot of people, they helped us a lot, so when we got back on our feet we kept the links.'

This tension between keeping a focus on mining issues and being more open was one with which the group wrestled until its demise in 1991. For some members of the group, moving outwards from pit closures and sacked miners was entirely appropriate. Others experienced this as a diversion of the group's main purpose or were ambivalent about it.

*Belinda:*

'I think we've learnt so much, I mean I didn't realise about nuclear power stations and nuclear disarmament, and having been down to Greenham, I think we've realised a lot - anti-apartheid, lots of things ... I think we're a lot more sympathetic to other people and to their sufferings and to their causes and to what's happening in other countries ... Sometimes we feel a bit pressurised and we have a bit grouse, but we enjoy it.'

*Clare:*

'... and that's part of the split up as well. They didn't think we should branch off into things like that. They thought we should be there solely for raising funds for the sacked lads and it shouldn't waver from stop pit closures ... totally monotonous, and I'm pleased it did branch out because they are combined, I mean for example nuclear power stations.'

*Catherine:*

'... before I thought you have to keep going for the sacked men, but nobody's bothered. Me, I'm like other people, I've forgotten slightly, but there's nothing left to motivate you any more.'

*Mary:*

'Well I definitely think we're not doing enough to support the sacked men. We should be thinking of more ways to raise money. Say what you like the other group have done a lot more.'

The shadow of the Valley View women, and in particular their feats in fund raising, fell on meetings at Castlehill on a fairly regular basis, so much so that some argued that it blocked the group from developing. When women reflected on the split, it was with a mixture of hostility and regret, the experience of lost unity and strength still vivid in their minds. Most felt that the group left behind had never recovered.

*Judy:*

'There was all this rumbling for a few weeks and it started to crumble, and when they went we just all dropped on the floor like a ton of bricks ... people that you would have risked your life for and hopefully they would have been behind you ... I couldn't believe they did it. To me they did exactly what the UDM did to the NUM ... we had functioned as a group, we got out there and did something and that wasn't all them or all us, it was a mixture of both, but now I feel, I think it drained us when they left.'

*Shirley:*

'I definitely regret it because it was great, it was nice to see everybody together ... they were strong as well, very strong and political, really good to what we've got now like!'

*Belinda:*

'I was put up for some position on the committee but I didn't tow the line so I got flack, I didn't vote the way they wanted me to. The ill feeling lasted a long time and it sticks in your mind. It's not the same but we should get on with what we want to do.'

*Jill:*

'I felt desolate when the women walked out. There were so few of us after the strike that it seemed a pity that people could not get on, on a personal level. It was not only personal, but political in terms of structures ... one woman was pushing the idea that only miners' wives should be allowed to hold office or do anything very much in the group and I disagreed with this openly in the meeting ... I felt it was wrong to argue that the Treasurer should not have taken his redundancy, because he was trying to make a new start ... He would have probably been willing to stand down, except that he was faced with all this innuendo ... I thought it was reasonable that they wanted a women's group but I was upset on his behalf because of the hurt he suffered.'

From the perspective of the Castlehill women, the split emerged not simply as a conflict about group priorities and structures, but was a power struggle around personal loyalties. Those who remained behind continued to be loyal to the few men, including the Treasurer, who remained in that office for a time. The group retained an open stance to non-miners' wives, although contrary to the perception of other women in the study, the regular members included only three such women at any one time. This openness extended only to people who had been actively involved during the strike. But of some significance to those who broke away, the most powerful positions (Chair/Co-ordinator and Delegate to WAPC) continued to be filled by non-miners' wives. These women were respected by those remaining in the area group because of their extensive support work during the strike, and if from time to time

some members regretted that the group lacked a higher miners' wives profile, they mostly agreed that this was not a main priority.

*Catherine:*

**' ... to me whether you're a miner's wife or not makes no flaming difference. It didn't during the strike and it shouldn't afterwards. I mean a lot of groups during the strike without non-miners' wives couldn't have survived.'**

After the split, the Castlehill Group still drew its membership from villages surrounding Durham, although not from any surviving support groups. No longer at the centre of a network of such groups, its identity changed from an area group (although still regarded as such by many other political groups and organisations) to a small, independent support group. This transition was experienced by all concerned as difficult. The only project which drew on the earlier network was spearheaded by a young male student, a long-standing member of the area group from his student days. This concerned active opposition to open-cast coal mining, in which verbal testimony of the potential harmful effects on the health and living standards of communities, was presented at Inspectorate hearings by miners' wives living in threatened areas (typically members and former members of the area group). Other projects developed by the group, such as the play which women wrote and performed, brought in helpers from outside. But the group was thrown more and more on its own resources, an experience which, when combined with an open and diffuse agenda, women found difficult and frustrating.

*Belinda:*

**'we're all friendly but we do have difficulties when things crop up because there's not many of us. It's like a catch twenty two because before more wanted to do things, and now there's more things coming to the group!'**

*Shirley:*

**'I feel I can't take it all in, in meetings ... we're doing nothing really, but it's meeting people and finding out about things.'**

*Judy:*

'I sometimes go home and think, 'that isn't what I want, I really could have stopped at home tonight, that isn't what I've come here for', although the issues I believe in them all ... I get very frustrated because we're not doing anything ... to me its the last little link to it.'

*Catherine:*

'I don't enjoy going as much as I used to. I mean if I think if everybody was honest, its more just a night out, but saying that if it stopped what else would there be. To me its just that last little link to it ... I mean you're not fighting for anything.'

*Mary:*

'... its not going anywhere at the moment because nobody's doing anything.'

The perception that the group was 'not doing anything' was repeated by different women at different times throughout its relatively long life. Concerns that we were involved in too many different things were just as often expressed. Nevertheless frustration about the lack of clear direction and a main issue on which to fight, were compensated by friendship and strong social bonds. Like Highhill and Valley View, the group developed separately and independently, each cohesive in their own way, but no longer related to each other.

That groups continued to survive is a testament to the determination of some activists to keep going against all the odds. But, loss of unity between groups at the local level compounded the problems of WAPC in its attempts to develop a women's organisation. As we have seen, both locally and nationally, disagreements about the constituency of women in WAPC and what should be their goals in the post-strike era, replaced the earlier certainty which had drawn them together in the strike. Many agreed that they should be fighting pit closures and injustice to sacked miners (even if combined with other activities), and for some these were the only reasons for continuing to be active. However, faced with the dilemma of men who no longer recognised women's central political role in these mining based issues, the space for women's collective endeavour in fighting on those fronts was severely limited.

Moreover, there was a general pessimism, documented elsewhere in the country (*Waddington et al 1991*), that pits would close no matter what opposition was mounted. Since there was no consensus amongst women on an alternative agenda, it was perhaps not surprising that groups developed their own separate agendas. As a result the supportive networks of the strike gradually crumbled away, the solidarity (however partial) of the strike difficult to re-invoke.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the problems which women experienced in trying to take their action forward in the post-strike era. From their own accounts we become aware of a process of declining solidarity, the constraints of working class women's lives and patriarchal forces working against the development of their movement. Maintaining unity amongst those who continued to be active was problematic under these conditions. If women were to make changes in their lives as a result of new horizons brought about by political involvement in the strike, it was more likely to be through individual than through collective action, although as has already been indicated their opportunities for doing so would still be very restricted. This is a theme to which I return in the concluding chapter of the thesis.

The following chapter examines the experiences of Greenham activists as the surge of activity which had drawn them to the protest diminished and loosely based networks of groups disappeared. Given the much greater autonomy claimed by women engaged in Greenham than by those who were active in the miners' strike, the tensions which arose in feminist support groups depict a fading idealism about gender unity. However, the process of 'women-strength' giving way to fragmentation in relationships was common to both.

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## CHAPTER VIII

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### BEYOND PROTEST : GREENHAM SUPPORT GROUPS : A FADING IDEALISM

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#### Introduction

The last chapter concluded that amongst the many problems which beset Mining Support Groups after the strike had ended, was a blurring of focus for their continued action. Although there were aspirations that the groundwork of women's concerted struggle in the strike had prepared the way for the development of a working class women's movement, WAPC appeared increasingly remote to the dwindling and scattered groups of women who continued to meet around varying agendas. From the perspective of women in the study, the strike had partially interrupted the constraints of their lives but it had not created the conditions for women to emerge with a united voice afterwards.

This chapter will explore the ways in which Greenham supporters conceptualised the difficulties which they experienced in keeping their action going. The process of change in relation to the Greenham protest is not so easily encapsulated by an ending, such as that which marked the end of the miners' strike. Of some significance to Greenham women in the study was the period beyond 1984, after the height of a protest which had earlier drawn large numbers of women to actions at the perimeter fence. Most described changes at Greenham as a continual process, but felt that the initial focus of the action as a creative women's peace protest became more blurred after the days of the big actions were over. With the exception of one Greenham group, all those to which women in the study had belonged had died out by early 1985. Liddington also documents the process of declining support at the Greenham camp, from late 1984 into 1985, her own 'Women for Peace Group' fading at the same time as groups in the North East (*Liddington 1989, p278*). Here, the focus will be upon women's experiences of the fragmentation of support groups, grounded in their understandings of increasing complexities surrounding peace protest and gender unity.

The study indicates a gradual erosion of the optimistic feelings of unity amongst women, which the big actions had engendered. Earlier discussion of the data suggested that this notion of unity was always potentially ephemeral because of the polyvalence of Greenham. However the energy of collective women-power was also

something which most women in the study felt had characterised their initial experiences of Greenham, feeding ideals of a common womanhood. Amongst the women in the study, it was those who were most attracted to this aspect of Greenham who in the end were most disillusioned about their own and other women's capacity to keep alive Greenham feminist principles of women-bonding in support groups. Amongst the difficulties experienced were confusions about the focus of activity in such groups which endeavoured to combine peace and feminist action, and some difficult problems around the feminist ideal of working autonomously and without structure. Problems of women relating to women, and therefore a process of questioning a commonality amongst women, were seen by some to be important aspects of the disintegration of support groups.

This process was suggested to me by 'feminist peace activists' who had experienced difficulties in 'bringing Greenham home', and the study was further enriched with rare insights into the interior life of a feminist Greenham group, offered by women who wanted the opportunity to participate in a self-reflective study. A large part of the chapter is devoted to the recollections of this group, whose last political act was to engage in the research which coincided with their constructive decision to end the group. What they and other feminist peace activists in the study suggest, is that their groups foundered as they mutated into feminist consciousness raising groups, whose *raison d'être* was nonetheless grounded in the women's peace movement.

The data support earlier work on the women's movement(s) which concluded that attempts to combine action with consciousness raising was problematic (*Carden 1974*). Carden's research on Women's Liberation Groups in America uncovered a process whereby consciousness raising by itself worked, but when groups tried to combine it with action, disagreements arose on how best to achieve this and produced problems in organising for action. Where Greenham groups moved from initial feelings of unity around creative peace activities towards consciousness raising, similar problems to those identified by Carden were experienced.

Apart from confusions which developed about what the prime purpose of the groups might be, the process of consciousness raising itself was experienced by women in this study as complex and difficult. Again this echoes problems experienced by women who were caught up in consciousness raising groups in the late 1960s and early 1970s, where the process of relating the personal to the political proved to be both painful and limiting as a strategy for combating women's oppression (*Zimmerman 1984*,



*Rowbotham 1979*). The ideal of moving through the personal to the political as the basis of feminist praxis was reasserted and relived by many of the groups which sprang up as part of the Greenham support network, although not all women who participated were drawn into this process.

## **Varying Experiences of Greenham Support Groups**

### **A. 'Peace Women'**

As noted in Chapter V, women in the study who defined their relationship to Greenham as peace campaigners, looked back on their experiences of women-only support groups as being surprisingly positive, within their central concern to concentrate on the cause of peace and the tasks required to support it. The energising effect of working with women in new ways was described very much in terms of a secondary gain, and such experiences did not assume an importance over and above the prime purpose of protesting for peace. As such, 'peace women', worked in a variety of peace groups which included men, as well as in women-only groups which they joined in order to support Greenham. None became involved in Greenham groups which aspired to develop into consciousness raising groups. Where the support groups of which they were members showed such tendencies, they left to work with other peace groups. As the focus on Greenham as a site of peace protest waned, they concentrated their energies on other anti-nuclear campaigns closer to home.

#### ***Penny:***

**'The support fell away and a lot of the younger women moved away and some of us older ones were involved in other activities. I left the group because first of all the group had changed its nature to a certain extent (becoming more feminist), but I was also organising meetings for CND and I was press officer for CND in my area, and I found that the three jobs were taking up too much time and I was getting confused and not operating effectively, so I cut down and concentrated on the press job.'**

#### ***Sally:***

**'Greenham will always exist as an idea, I mean Greenham as a word, its like Chernobyl, a word that ten years ago was just a word, but now has a bucketful of meanings for everyone. We have**

**Albermarle up here now, so people who needed Greenham as their focus, now if they go to Greenham instead of Albermarle, they'll be going because its Greenham, and not because it is an airbase that they must protest against, so I think it has changed.'**

'Peace women' in the study experienced little difficulty in coming to terms with the breaking up of support groups, because for them, widening the Greenham web had always meant extending their peace work in a variety of directions, including more vigorous involvement with local CND groups. Always ambivalent about Greenham feminism, they regarded this as a more highly developed aspect of the protest in the period beyond 1984-5, and one with which they personally did not wish to engage.

#### **B. 'Socialist feminists'**

Socialist feminists, ambivalent about Greenham feminism for different reasons, also preferred to support Greenham and the peace movement in a variety of ways, which could include working with men. However, they had all been involved at some time in their lives with women's groups and most were still involved in community based women's groups, such as locally funded arts projects and women's self-help groups. Their peace work had brought them into a range of women's groups which got involved in the Greenham protest, but they were mainly pragmatic groups which focused on the peace effort. A few became briefly involved in Greenham groups which were developing into feminist consciousness raising groups, but they did not stay long because they felt that such groups had 'lost their way' and had become too introverted. A common source of disillusionment with these brief flirtations with feminist groups was the feeling that below the surface, were hidden agendas and differential power structures.<sup>1</sup>

#### ***June:***

**'It felt foreign to me, it didn't feel right. In a way there was a hidden agenda and you'd come in and there was a lot of people there who had a preconceived idea of what was going to happen and why it was going to happen. I found a lot of it self indulgent**

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<sup>1</sup> *The women are referring to two Greenham support groups in the area, one to which I had also belonged and which died by early 1985, and the other to the group which emerged in 1985 and is the subject of detailed discussion later in the chapter.*

as well. There's a lot more important things for people to be concerned with than sitting around contemplating your navel which puts me off a lot of things that are going on. I didn't stay in it long.'

*Maureen:*

'I enjoyed it, I really liked the first meetings, but they got a bit lost, because of two people who I won't mention, one who pushed her desires to the centre and just dominated, and one who wouldn't give anything, and the meetings just fell apart between the two poles. I liked the blend, the little bit of support and help and consciousness raising and then there was also peace as an anchor, but then that got a bit lost. The group just fell away. I'm not part of a group any more, I think that's a shame but I don't have time.'

*Dianne:*

'I wasn't in the group long, I couldn't always get to the meetings and I didn't find the group supportive ... There was a hard core who were involved in several other groups, one at work, one a women and research group out of work, and also a fairly informal group which met outside of work, so that held them together I think more than the rest of the group and they were influential ... I think the group operated as if you can switch off other roles that you play, like being a mother, which I think is a more traditionally male thing. Women do lead such fractured lives. It seems to me such a strange idea that you can switch off part of you and forget about it and it also undervalues a lot of what women do ... I can remember an earlier experience with the women's centre. It terrified me and made feel defensive and then angry. The women there were young professional women, single with no children and they had a much easier life than me actually and I thought why am I defending myself to them ... what I was looking for was support but what I was getting was, 'well sorry sister', and that put me off hard line feminism. The group folded six months later. I think it got to such a point, it was one of those consciousness raising groups that couldn't develop outwards, that had become so enamoured of its own consciousness raising that it had become powerless, and couldn't do anything or let anything out really.'

*Julia:*

'I went to a few meetings and I went to Greenham with the group once. I think by the time I got there a lot of things had happened which had coloured my view of Greenham, things which were my reason for leaving the group. I thought it functioned very well for the core people and there were two women in the group who were very powerful. There was this laid back feeling, everybody would do what they had done before, and there was also this kind of deliberateness about it which made it seem unnatural to me. It was 'we're all women, we're all feminists, we function informally, we don't need to be organised' ... but I felt on the periphery of it. It's the denial that there's any power structure that irritated me, because I knew that certainly in the group that I saw there was one ... it's more difficult if you're not prepared to acknowledge what is happening which is what seemed to me what was going on in that Greenham group. It was almost as if we were all going to be carried through on a great big pink cloud of feminist consciousness, and to me it just wasn't like that. There were all kinds of hidden agendas and the way this group was functioning seemed to me to be very dishonest.'

Given their priorities for a politics for women which combined socialist and feminist goals, it was perhaps not surprising to discover that 'socialist feminists' would experience feminist Greenham groups as somewhat retreatist and would leave such groups as a result. However the issue of hidden agendas and power structures in such groups was also raised by women in the study who were more committed to the Greenham feminist agenda. It was also acknowledged as a source of difficulty at the Greenham camp, which meant a fairly constant struggle against what Freeman had earlier termed 'the tyranny of structurelessness', a process which she described as arising in groups which overtly work without leaders and hierarchies, but in which hidden power structures emerge and cause tensions (*Freeman 1974*).

'The camp has always been a place of difficulty, a place of very strong-willed women of high, strong passions, who believe very strongly in things that, actually are very different ... Then there was also a certain

tyranny to the structurelessness of Greenham.' (*Johnson in Liddington 1989, p283*)

### **C. 'Feminist Peace Activists'**

Immersed in the feminist ideology of the Greenham camp, 'feminist peace activists' experienced greater disappointment and disillusionment than other women in the study, when they had to come to terms with the gradual fragmentation of support groups, several of which they had been active in setting up. All but one of these groups (four in all), had died by early 1985. They had all progressed from an initial focus on peace protest to an interest in consciousness raising. As these women discussed their experiences of declining support from other women and their own disengagement from support groups, it became clear that it had been a difficult and painful process for them personally. This was partly because they felt some responsibility to keep the Greenham action going, by drawing other women into it, but also because they experienced some difficulty in promulgating the Greenham spirit away from the special atmosphere of the camp.

#### *Jennifer:*

**'It's been a very hard time in terms of Greenham as far as the local group is concerned, because I felt as though from having a really strong, active group, I with a couple of other people had been flogging away, trying to keep things going for a while and feeling really let down and unhappy and disappointed that women seemed to be losing interest, and then realising that this was probably not the case. It is a case of women doing other things and it's counter-productive to be going on a guilt thing.'**

#### *Linda:*

**'It seemed so far divorced from what was actually happening down there. There was something missing I think ... I don't think the group knew what to do. It was difficult to keep that initial activity going on that level ... I can remember feeling quite depressed and disillusioned and disappointed when I began to realise that things were moving on ... I suppose it was a big wrench to accept that I had moved on ... I felt that I had lost something really big.'**

*Joss:*

'I think it was very hard to bring Greenham alive in other places because you felt that was the focus. Some women talked about it as their home, it was the focus because that's where the two sides met and you can meet in anger and confrontation or you can meet in a different way. For me the women were really then doing new stuff, looking at things newly, and using women's things to do it ... It was fine when the motivation was up, when I first came back and we cut the fence, and then it just became a bit of an effort as gradually you began to see the numbers fall off ... It was nice in a way, belonging to a consciousness raising group but I wanted our support group to be an activist group as well ... in the end I felt it's not doing anything for anybody and I'm not prepared to keep it going so I won't go.'

*Eileen:*

'Another thing about the group, we'd go to Greenham and experience something there which we could never ever experience when we met here. It was as if that was lost, the closeness, and also groups always seem to think they have to be doing something and we never seemed to do it up here.'

The problem of capturing the spirit of Greenham and bringing it alive on the home front was one which all 'feminist peace activists' described. It was identified as one reason why groups lost their way as they mutated into consciousness raising groups which failed to blend peace action with feminist goals. But the major source of discontent was the way in which groups changed and hidden power structures emerged. The testimony of several women suggested that a common pattern in such groups was for a core to develop, for the group to become less open, and for women's relationships to become less harmonious.

*Charlotte:*

'I think the group changed quite radically over a fairly short period of time ... the personal relationships that was the biggest factor, I wanted to distance myself ... I made a conscious decision to leave the group and then I lost contact with a lot of close friends ... I think it stopped being a group that everybody could have a

place in and participate in, and I think, I guess, there was a sort of hierarchy which was probably already there, and certain networks that were much stronger, with much stronger connections reared their ugly heads ... the group used to get me down, I don't know what it was there for in the end.'

*Lindsey:*

'I found the way decisions were made very difficult. It had been led from up front by one woman's enthusiasm and in a way she dropped out of that role ... and then it was supposedly a leaderless group and I'm still not sure about that, I felt that one or two women were pushing it the way it had to be, it all had to be low key, I felt I could not express my point of view or it would be trodden on, or I would be accused of being too strong and it never seemed to be discussed ... I got fed up with the decision making, I feel it might be easier to go with a few friends. The group trips required a lot of effort and it was always the same few who did it. There was this task group and a hidden power structure ... (referring to her experience of the Greenham group and an earlier women's group) The Greenham group died naturally, the women's group didn't. Both experiences have led me to be very, very wary of leaderless women's groups.'

*Eileen:*

'One of the remarkable things I found about the Greenham group, I think it changed, but in the first six to twelve months, was that everybody was being given the opportunity to say their piece and what they were saying was valued. Maybe that wasn't a good thing because we didn't question or criticise. But that changed. I think we went through a bit of a crisis after a year, when the group nearly fell apart. There were lots of upsets and they were never openly discussed. Perhaps there were people vying for some kind of recognition in the group, there was some anger about that, and there was a core developing and I was part of it. Being part of the core, I felt differently than those who weren't or to newcomers, and also the group was becoming more intense but not really tackling the issues.'

***Linda:***

**'It faded quite quickly really, it didn't hold together as long as we thought it would ... there was really just a core of us who moved on really ... I can remember a woman who came along who, it had cost her a lot to come, I found out afterwards she had to lie to her husband to come along. She said she was going out for a drink, and she actually got dressed up to come along. She'd never been to anything like that before and it was all new to her, and we were just sitting around and in the middle of the meeting she said, 'why is it all women?', and because we were so involved and that was accepted by us, that it was brushed aside almost, and when I look back, I think I would do it differently now.'**

It seemed to me that what had effectively collapsed in the groups of which these women were members, was not just the earlier frenetic energy of women caught up in protest, but also the idealisation of women's relationships within a concept of women's common identity. As was suggested earlier in the thesis, 'feminist peace activists' came to the conclusion that they could better pursue feminism on individual pathways.

Critical reflections (at times self-critical) on the difficulties of living out the Greenham feminist experience within the complex dynamics of women's relationships in support groups, helped point me in the direction of further researching group process. The rest of this chapter draws upon a participative study of a group in the process of dying, which confirms and elaborates some of the problems identified by individual women in the study.<sup>2</sup>

## **Recollections of a Greenham Group**

### **A. Origins of the Group**

The women who came together to form this group were initially concerned with organising trips to Greenham to participate in the Greenham protest and did not set out to be a women's consciousness raising group. Underlying this stated purpose there were undoubtedly different motives for wanting to be involved, but these were not

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<sup>2</sup> *At the request of the women in this group, no names are used.*



really apparent in the early days of the group. The group saw its origins in a visit to Greenham by four women in September 1984. Two had been before individually. Subsequently other women joined and by December 1984, two mini-buses were needed for the next trip to Greenham. During the time between these two trips, weekly meetings were held to make a banner of embroidered patches, an activity which served as a preparation for the next visit to Greenham and was important in establishing the group.

**'I remember it was interesting about the banner. We all sewed these individual patches that said something about us and this was quite clearly to take to Greenham to put on the fence, but we were reluctant to leave it there.'**

**'I think it was also because people felt it sort of belonged to us. We'd put a lot into it in terms of the experience we had together when we were making it. It was difficult to let go.'**

The group emerged at a time when group activity in this area had virtually died, suggesting a second wave of Greenham support. In reality there were links between women who got involved at different times, a good example of the Greenham principle of 'widening the web'.

**'... and I can remember ... talking to you Monica about, you were telling me about the last big one in September, but even then it didn't seem possible, you know, I thought it must just be because you were politically active, you know, a sociologist. (much laughter) Then when A. came back with such enthusiasm and B. was inviting people around to the house to come to Greenham with people that I knew, it totally changed - made it accessible.'**

The importance of personal contact in forming this group was confirmed by other members, both in terms of contacts with women who had been to Greenham before and in terms of the other networks which brought women together in this group. For some, these networks were overlapping, but for others it meant joining a group where they felt anxious about fitting in because of their personal perceptions of how the group was constituted. For some the group seemed dominated by social workers, for others by college lecturers, and for those not then in paid employment it seemed to be

made up of women who had jobs. These varying perceptions were within an agreed view of the group as predominantly middle class, by achievement if not origin. Those who felt out of it to begin with, recollected how they became reassured by the friendly atmosphere of the group. For women who joined later, the group agreed that the perception of different networks, possibly reflecting different power bases within the group, persisted, and were somewhat off-putting.

**'I always feel I'm still quite a newcomer to this group in terms of people who've obviously known each other for a long time and who have quite a lot of connections going back in different ways and I actually don't feel that. I know that other people do primarily through work and then started to get to know people beyond that ... to me it feels as if there are several different kinds of groups of people or groups of people who know each other and relate outside of this group.'**

There were others who came and did not return, and from time to time the group had been expanded by women who came only for a particular trip to Greenham. It was probably characteristic of all Greenham groups that existing within them were several smaller groupings based on friendship networks, and additionally a floating membership of interested women. Given that the only purpose might be to introduce new women to Greenham on an organised trip, a membership of this kind would be welcomed. The participants in this group felt, with hindsight, that whilst it had been important to draw in new women, a shifting membership did not help their efforts to develop into a consciousness raising group. As they moved in that direction, it was acknowledged that it probably was not perceived as open to newcomers. Those remaining in it at the time of the research were predominantly the same women who had consolidated their friendship around the sewing of the banner.

## **B. Changes at Greenham**

The group partially recounted its history in terms of the changes occurring at Greenham. In September 1984, the four 'founder' members had returned feeling inspired by the numbers of women there, the decoration of the fence, the spontaneous action, and with a romantic image of Greenham confirmed.

**'I seem to remember sitting there thinking 'what on earth will we do all weekend sitting here', and then this women passed and whispered something, 'come to the gate at 8, bring something to make a noise' and we were really excited by this.' (A. also recounts a story told to them by a women in response to their question of 'what's Greenham all about?') '... she said how she'd been walking round the fence with some friends and they got to this bit of fence that was near the road and they found this bird that had been knocked out and they sat there and they were holding the bird in their hands and a soldier came by and said 'come on I'll take the bird and ring its neck, that's the kindest thing to do', and they said 'No, we want to do it our way', and they held the bird in their hands and after a few minutes the bird fluttered and flew away, and that was her description of Greenham.'**

**'... the romance of that was very exciting and it fitted the kind of mood amongst the women, the waves of different things, different voices rising, falling, silence, it was very moving.'**

By contrast in December when the group organised the next trip, there were fewer women at Greenham, the soldiers were aggressive and abusive and the weather was cold and wet. Those going for the first time recalled the stark and hostile imagery.

**'... it was almost like black and white images, you know, those towers which looked almost as if they were made out of meccano, just scaffolding crudely put together and the fence - there it was bashed and battered, and the posts were leaning over and it all looked like playing at something, yet it was very sinister...'**

**'The whole scenery, because of the rain and everything, was like something out of the Somme ... for me the banner was the only positive thing that had been achieved that weekend, with having to cope with being there and wondering about well, ' Christ how blooming futile it is', and 'what am I doing here?''**

By the following July, the contrast between the early big actions and Greenham as it had become was even more evident to the group.

**'... that was the thing that just hit me, a massive, massive contrast because in December '84 it was such a big gathering, loads of people there. The bunkers themselves hadn't been constructed at this stage so it looked different on the inside ... and coming back to this complete desolation, walking round the fence in July I could feel myself sinking, thinking 'where is everybody, have they gone home for the weekend?', and then feeling enthused when there were people around.'**

The significance of the change at Greenham for this group, and perhaps for Greenham supporters more generally, was the dawning realisation that they would have to decide upon and carry out their own actions - the days of the large orchestrated actions which drew groups together in support of women who lived at Greenham were over.

**'I think the thing about action has changed ... you who went on the first trip described the way messages came around and then all this synchronised gong-bashing and silences and things, so by the time the likes of me came along we had this idea that someone, somewhere, would be organising all these actions and of course it didn't happen like that and it was probably about three trips later on when I, at least, was getting a bit frustrated because you know we'd been brought up on this folklore of these wonderful actions and it has gone. (R. recounts how eventually frustrated by expectations of mass actions and invasions of the base which did not happen, some of the group decided to go in to the base and were arrested). It was that feeling that we have got to do the actions ourselves and be responsible for it.'**

**'Yes, instead of waiting for someone else to initiate it. And that was quite a strange experience, because before it certainly had been the feeling that others were initiating and we were following. We went on looking for it until we decided to do it for ourselves.'**

With hindsight the group felt that this had put additional pressure on them, especially in view of the members' unstated assumptions about how a feminist group ought to operate. These included competing and at times conflicting expectations for the group to work collectively but also to allow space for individual expression. There was also a tacit acceptance that the group should be non-hierarchical and structureless. The

research provided a means for women to uncover some of these assumptions and to assess the difficulties which had arisen for the group as it became more involved in feminist issues.

### **C. Group Processes**

From what was said in all three meetings of the group, it was evident that the experience of being in it was both enjoyable in some respects and frustrating in others. The group recalled, with much good humour, the reasonably high level of organisation it had developed with regard to food, drink and camping supplies for trips to Greenham and their debates about the ideological soundness of taking wine and engaging in intoxicated singing around the camp fire at Greenham. They recalled the group commitment to taking vegetarian food and their realisation that women had conformed to this because of vague notions that Greenham was a vegetarian place, or that all others in the group were vegetarian, or as somehow the right thing for Greenham supporters to do. They remembered their comic sense of relief in challenging the group's self image by rushing in for sausage, egg and chips on the return journey from Greenham, and the anxiety which one woman felt for revealing to the group that she carried aspirin, on the supposition that the group was committed to natural remedies.

Reflections on the way in which women had conformed to a set of taken-for-granted assumptions, also revealed the capacity for misunderstandings which could arise where it was assumed that everyone had been party to a decision and understood the reasons for it. An example here concerned a conflict over whether the group should go into a Little Chef for a meal on a return journey from Greenham when searches for other cafes had failed. The main reason for the conflict, that Little Chefs had been blacklisted in the past by some Greenham supporters because at Newbury women were refused entry, had only become clear for one of the women a year later! These recollections were mostly humorous self-critical reflections on the images imported from outside about how a feminist Greenham group ought to behave, but they also touched upon problems of communication in the group and in particular upon difficulties in communication surrounding decision-making.

#### **D. A Norm of Indecision**

The process of making decisions in the group, particularly in terms of what to do at Greenham, was one which everyone had found frustrating. We decided that this was best described as a norm of indecision, which partly sprang from conflicting ideologies about collective versus individual action, and partly from confused and unstated ideals of feminist organisation. The questions of whether the women should stay together as a group at Greenham or get involved with other women living there, and whether actions at Greenham should be confined to group actions or taken spontaneously by individuals were ones that emerged repeatedly. As an example of frustration over decision making, the group discussed their problems over deciding where to pitch their tents at Greenham.

**'I think we tear ourselves apart don't we? Like how we decide where we are going to camp - are we going to be separate? I mean the number of times we've said 'we are going down to camp with the women', you know, and when we get there we hide around the corner.'**

**'Well how would it have been when we were down there, if two of us had decided that we would like to pitch our tent with one of the other groups, and three had decided to pitch their tent away from the other groups ... ?!'**

**'I would have thought that if we were working in the group the way we wish to work and the way we generally try to work, I would have thought that's O.K., you know, because if we're into doing our own thing but being a group, you're not doing anything upsetting to anyone by not camping with them and you are doing what is important to you.'**

**'I mean I don't know whether you are doing anything to upset people or not.'**

**'I think on past experience, I mean it would depend how it was approached, I think knowing our group, that there might be a feeling that it was some factions wanting to be more imposing than others, because we take so long to make up our minds what we want to do, it may be seen as 'oh well I'm going to pitch my tent**

**over there!', you know, unless it was decided on the way down that some of us may go separately, because we do tend through thick and thin and indecisiveness to want to stick together as a group!'**

**'I think if someone was strong enough to say 'this is where I want to pitch my tent', we'd all fall down!'**

**(Laughter)**

**'... I think it's very difficult to go against what appears to be the majority opinion without feeling that you're rejecting the group.'**

For some women this feeling that the group had somehow developed the expectation of 'sticking together' was constraining. One woman had stayed at Greenham twice without the group and had found it easier to integrate with the women who lived there and to get involved in an action which occurred on one of those occasions when the base went on nuclear alert. For her it was **'the difficulty of wanting to be closer to the women down there but also wanting to be part of the group I go down with'**, leading to the feeling that she did neither successfully in the end. For others it raised questions about spontaneous actions and responsibility to the group - questions which they thought were easier for women who went earlier to the big actions at Greenham because the format of the actions were decided and groups were expected to work together and to take responsibility for members.

#### **E. The Problem of Collective Decision Making**

Further discussion concerning the group's inertia in decision making, revealed that it was rooted in anxieties about who could or should take decisions. Here the women confronted the dilemmas arising from their assumption that decision making should be through a collective process. One dilemma lay in pushing a point of view lest it offended the ideal of collective decision making, the effect of which was that the group found discussion which might lead to a decision very difficult. If a decision was taken by some members of the group, it had the effect of offending others in the group who were not party to it.

**'You see I think this brings up an issue of our understandings of the power of the role of leadership in the group and I'm not quite**

sure what kind of role of leadership we are likely to be aiming at. I don't know that we've ever discussed that, but I sort of see leadership in this group as being something that is actually, should in theory anyway, be open to anyone to take up, but the difficult thing for me is, there are times when I have perhaps, times when I can remember when I have tended not to accept what might appear to be a good decision. I have done that because I have not felt involved in that decision. I have felt denied a voice in a sense, and it's times like that my kind of reaction is to say 'oh well bugger it!'... in my experience there are times when we assume that a decision has been made by the group and in fact it has not.'

'But part of that, is because a decision has to be made on the spot, and you sort of make the decision without finding out whether everybody is there and whether everybody's listened to you and you're sort of impatient to get something done yourself and then somebody like you comes along and says 'well I don't know anything about this so I'm not going along with it' and that sort of breaks down. I mean surely the important thing is that a decision has been made.'

'But making a decision without, I mean I know it's difficult, ('but it's difficult to get everybody there at the same time'), I know it's difficult to get everybody to decide but to assume that to make a decision, whatever the decision is O.K. ...'

'But there are other decisions that are made by default aren't there? You know, that we will not discuss which gate we're going to, for example, and then in the end it comes down to the driver who parks at a particular gate ... there's not actually a decision made or it's been made by someone else, you know, and I haven't had a say in it and that's by default.'

'I mean it quite often does happen that someone will try to seek a decision maybe ... and no one for whatever reason will say anything. Now I don't know why that is and I'm probably just as guilty myself and it annoys me just as much as it does other people in the group.'



**'Because there seems to be something wrong in saying, actually saying, what you think. ('yes', 'yes', general agreement) It seems very difficult to say 'this is what I think', because we feel that is somehow selfish, it's not collective decision making, and I've sometimes felt that.'**

This discussion brought about an understanding that what the group had taken to be a failure of communication, arose from the value they had placed on working in a structureless way, resting in tacit assumptions about how women ought to behave in feminist groups.

## **F. Feminism and Group Structure**

The Greenham camp was developed and built upon the philosophy of non-hierarchical organisation, and it was therefore hardly surprising to find support groups incorporating the ideal of leaderlessness as key to their aspirations to become feminist groups. In this group it became apparent that women had gone along with this without feeling totally happy about it, particularly as it had never been openly discussed. Women had felt that they should not be assertive or even decisive because in doing so they would have offended the feminist goals of the group.

**'I was used to doing things, having been in organisations and women's organisations that were organised and too organised, were hierarchical. I was used to more structure and I was totally at sea, the fact that the group was trying not to have any structure, and I thought initially it was all a mistake and they just weren't organised (much laughter), not realising that it was deliberate, that people could actually do this sort of thing deliberately, ('people were working very hard at it') ... and the other picture I have was of A. with her feet out of the tent all morning reading the book 'No Bosses', and thinking 'what the hell is all that about', and her telling me what it was about and realising that the group wasn't as inept as it seemed, you know I would have come away with this impression of these dead inefficient women if somebody hadn't said 'well this is what it's all about'. Everybody else was so busy working it through, they probably never thought to say to other people, they expected you to know what they were doing.'**

**'I mean, I think it worries me sometimes when the kind of whole philosophy gets mixed up with never making a decision, or never actually saying what you want to do, or never taking on a leadership role. Its like saying that there are times when you can listen and you can let other people take over and can share those things, but the danger is you can actually get into a situation and feel not allowed to make sure you contribute those things any more because it might be seen as too assertive or aggressive or whatever.'**

**'I think there was a lovely example of that when a few of us went by car and it began to reach, sort of felt as if it had all been a bit quiet and I think it was really that the two or three of us who had been before were being ever so careful cos the women who hadn't been before, we sort of felt we didn't want to dominate them. But they were probably looking to us for some sort leadership if you like which we were being very careful to keep sort of low, so that in the end there were so many little things that we could have been more assertive about, but having said that I find this group challenges that all the time, you know, so that I often do feel silence is inevitable.'**

**'And I was trying not to be assertive because it was my car and because I was new! I was trying desperately hard to shut up and say nothing and leave it to everybody else because I know I've got a tendency to take over and always try not to do all those things.'**

**'So what you do is to sit back and try not to lead?'**

**'Yes that's all I can do, but I mean I think that can get very much mixed up with feminist values and everything else.'**

This discussion revealed to the group, the extent to which they had equated feminism with a certain way of working in the group which some had found unclear, and others frustrating. In retrospect they felt that the group's inertia in making decisions arose from anxieties and confusions about how to operate without upsetting the taken-for-granted rules about how good feminists should behave. This had lead to

individual women worrying about being too assertive or aggressive and to most retreating from the possibility of conflict. It might of course be argued that collective decision making is a difficult process wherever it is attempted. However in this group it seemed that women were trying to operate it without admitting openly that some women were more influential and powerful in the group anyway. This was acknowledged at the final meeting of the group.

**'I also think Monica, what you described as seeming like barriers to those who are new are some very strong connections between women in the existing group which can be very off-putting to newcomers. But of course those are its strengths, are what keep it going and yet they are also these hidden power structures within the group so that they are often the driving force, and yet they are also these unnamed sort of powerful forces that can be quite difficult to pinpoint or challenge openly. I see it a bit like the tyranny of structurelessness'**

**'Especially when no one wants to take the role of leadership. I think you've documented really accurately what we all did.'**

**'The group acted on lots of assumptions about how a women's group should work. We did actually try to talk about leadership and it was not ok!'**

**'That was coming very strongly from some women in the group, what the style of leadership should be.'**

No one contested that there had been powerful and influential women who had worked beneath the surface of the group, and with hindsight it was thought that the problem went even deeper. It revolved around the issue of whether the group should act collectively or whether it should allow freedom of expression - notions of sisterhood jostling for a place alongside liberal ideals of 'women's space' and personal choice, aspects of feminist philosophy which the group had tried unsuccessfully to resolve.

## **G. Sisterhood and Personal Choice**

The question of whether the group should act with one voice or should be more concerned to allow individual choice and personal development had proved difficult to

untangle. But everyone felt that it had been a continuous source of tension, which had only been discussed at a subterranean level in two's and three's, and had been impossible to deal with at a group level.

'I get incredibly frustrated sometimes with, I don't know, it's something to do with how much we go as a group and how much we go as individuals and I think that's something we're perhaps working on. I think it also links up with who is powerful in the group and who is having a leadership role and whether it is open or not. I seem when we've been to Greenham, to have spent quite a lot of that trying to become more brave and independent and I think, you know, a lot of that's distilled around, like the sort of issue, like if we go as a group I suppose I think we should take some decisions as a group, you know if we're going to do anything we might get arrested for, and if we say well we're all responsible for ourselves it doesn't seem to work. We've never really thrashed it out or talked it through, but it's some sort of difference which comes when I'm pushing for something to be done as a group and when you're (said to two other women in the group) sort of saying 'no, everybody's got to be responsible for themselves' and we reach a deadlock in communication at that point.'

'But trying to operate this collective way of working, I mean I think it's incredibly frustrating and irritating and sometimes I feel absolutely mad and I can see other people around me getting irritated and people finding it really quite difficult to say, you know, when the thing is in process, 'this is intolerable'. We tend not to confront it, ('we laugh about it'), we laugh about it that's right, and I think I often deal with it in the group by going off on my own.'

'But you are able to go off on your own. I think for me, I mean I've found the way the group works incredibly difficult to cope with and I suppose I just couldn't understand how we could get there and not decide what to do, and some people would wander off and I felt 'argh!' I needed the group to all be together and all decide what we're going to do and then I'd know where I was.'

The group's inability to make decisions arose then, not only from confusions surrounding the ideal of working in a structureless way, but also from disagreements about collective and individual responsibility. This was very difficult to solve because it reflected conflicting notions of what the group should provide for its members. These in turn reflected the needs of some members to find space within the group for freedom of expression and the needs of others to work in unison.

**'But also, some of these things about making decisions ... but also it's about expectations as to what kind of decision needs to be made correctly, you know, and when I go to Greenham I expect everybody to be involved in some kind of action, I mean we had some discussion about this and some understanding that we're on the whole together in that, and that kind of thing I can understand, but there are other things I'd like to bring up about going to Greenham, I mean I can't stand being with a crowd of people all the time and I just enjoy walking off and walking round the base and not particularly walking with anyone and everybody kind of thing, I really enjoy that very much just being by myself.'**

**'Its easier as well!' (laughter)**

**'But somehow or other, I feel that that's not the kind of Greenham mentality, you know, it should all be about sisterhood to the Nth degree and I find that intolerable.'**

**'But that's not giving space is it? So it's intolerable, its smothering.'**

**'Yes, but there's a point of view that somehow or other I threaten other issues because I like to go off on my own.'**

**'It's a confusion of feminism always having to be about sharing things and negotiating everything and caring for everybody.'**  
(general agreement)

From the above discussion, it became clear that underlying the desire to work in a feminist way without structure and without leaders, were different and conflicting ideals of feminist practice. Throughout our discussions, there were references to the

freedom of expression that the group had provided or should provide - giving individual members space. On the other hand, the alternative view that the group either tended to stick together or indeed should work more collectively was also strongly expressed. From these two perspectives the group either felt ineffective because of indecision or too constraining when the issue of collective planning arose. Of course it might reasonably be argued that groups are always experienced in this way and that this becomes more apparent in groups which have several objectives. In this case, the problem was intensified by the dual purpose of the group to carry out actions in support of the peace protest and to develop a feminist way of working.

## **H. Feminism and Peace Action**

The group's experiences of changes at Greenham, which they felt had compounded their problems in functioning, threw into sharper relief questions as to whether Greenham was primarily about protesting for peace or about feminism. Clearly that issue had been around since the time when Greenham became a women only protest early in its history, but as the group talked about their reasons for going to Greenham in the period after the big actions, they articulated the view that for women who went on the big actions the reason for being at Greenham was much more obviously to take part in a peace protest. By the time that they got going, they felt that the link between Greenham and feminism was more to the fore. But the model of taking part in a creative and dramatic anti-nuclear protest was still a potent image of what Greenham had been, leading the group to question how effective a protest it might still be.

**'I think it's very important to go there and to be counted and to keep up the pressure which is why I keep going, but that is an aside in a way because we're not really achieving very much, we're not achieving that, I think, because of so few people coming and people can quite happily call it a non-event. I don't think it's quite that, but the explorations we've done into women's issues have been absolutely wonderful. It's really changed the focus, the great anger is still there but I don't feel I'm being effective, but I feel as if I'm learning and getting masses out of exploring women's issues. (Responding to a suggestion that a real change had occurred at Greenham along the lines of her experience) Yes, and I think that came out at the workshops when we were there last December. We went to these workshops and I expected to find out a lot more**

about Greenham and what it's really about, and it was all women's issues. I mean we never got round to discussing nuclear energy, nuclear weapons or anything else, did we?'

'I think it started as a straight political act, part of the protesting tradition ... and it has become more complicated thinking about what I want to do and also making decisions for yourself, and now I feel much more confused about it all. But in fact it's been a significant period. It's given me lots of time, lots of things to think about, but I'm still left with, I want a political activity. I'm still left with the feeling that I ought to be somehow doing something about these cruise missiles besides getting all these gains for myself.'

'I always felt slightly guilty about going, because although the peace issue was important to me, I'm not sure that, except for once or twice, I had any real conviction that the women at Greenham could do anything very significant about it and therefore going to Greenham for me was a good weekend which I enjoyed and that seemed to dominate the action.'

'I don't share B's pessimism quite ... I think you have to stay there and live with it almost like water dripping on a stone, just keep on at it, but I mean I also go for a good weekend.'

We agreed that going to Greenham could be an enjoyable experience both in terms of getting away from responsibilities at home and more importantly from being with other women, and for most women in the group, this had become more important than the peace protest. For some women it was important to go to be reminded of the nuclear issue, to get in touch with it again, but even then the meaning of going could be elusive, leading one woman to confess 'I don't know what I get from it or why I go at all.'

Apart from such confusions, the group were also concerned with what pacifism at Greenham might mean, particularly in contexts other than within the confines of the camp. Most had experienced some anxiety, at least initially, about controlling their own feelings of aggression at Greenham, based on the belief that they would be tarnishing the image of Greenham women if they did not. But a more contentious issue which emerged was whether pacifism as practised at Greenham was really about

expressing women's strength and whether that could translate into women's lives elsewhere.

**'I find myself more and more confused about the effectiveness of this kind of protest and the link between women and pacifism and I've wanted to say this in the group several times, I don't think I could say it if there were certain women here, that I feel violence sometimes is a more effective way of making change happen in people's lives.'**

**'I think the danger is when pacifism is linked with soppiness, you know it can sometimes be, and I think, like, the sort of strength of women at Greenham for standing up for what they believe in and not just being reactive but in structuring situations the way they want, you know like Rebecca singing in front of a lorry, you know that sort of symbolic singing in front of the soldier, that sort of absolute strength and not socking them in the face or kicking them in the goolies, you know that sort of strength I see as what women have got at Greenham, and what I would like to hope we do bring back and that we don't end up fighting all our battles in the same way that men do. That's not to say I never feel violent.'**

**'I'd like to talk about Greenham and pacifism, I'd quite like to talk about feminism and pacifism and I'd quite like to take up what you were saying about women at Greenham showing strength, and I suppose what I was saying before was that I don't experience myself showing any strength at all when I go to Greenham, and I think I can see women who aren't able to go to Greenham having to show much greater strength than any of us ever have to show.'**

**'I wasn't saying that strength is only at Greenham. I'm talking about a way of women behaving all over the place.'**

**'But also I mean for me going to Greenham isn't a sacrifice or isn't something that is difficult but maybe what it does do is, some of the things that happen there give me strength, to go back and have the other battles which are a lot more difficult.'**



From this discussion surfaced tensions which the group recognised to have been affecting their functioning for some time. Disagreements about the significance of Greenham for feminist practice had apparently laid buried beneath the surface of a group which had begun to fragment around them. For some members of the group Greenham had become less relevant as it was seen to have isolated feminism to its own location. But for others it was still a potent source of women's strength, providing a model for feminist practice elsewhere. Yet all were agreed that this had proved hard to achieve in the context of their group.

## **I. Greenham and Sexual Politics**

Exploration of what Greenham was about, concluded that in the end there were many different reasons for going which reflected pacifist and feminist concerns but which were not constant or indeed all that clear. The Greenham experience had changed over time because Greenham itself had changed. However, women felt that a more significant change in terms of the way the group functioned was that individuals had changed on a personal level, but not all to the same extent or in the same direction.

**'I think when I first went to Greenham, one of the early visits when we shook the fence and then went inside and got arrested, you know I really thought I was taking this sort of, making a political stance, and I think it's sort of dawned on me since then that I wasn't at all, and that in fact I took much greater risks nearer home in my work, and I'm also aware of women who don't go to Greenham because for them it would be too risky. The risk for me is nothing, not like the risk for black women or the risk for a women who in going would be disobeying her husband's instructions, and then I become a bit cross with Greenham for what me and others are playing at and pretending to do. I can't feel, I can't get caught on to it again because of those sort of feelings that I would just be playing at something, singing silly songs.'**

**'It doesn't seem to me to be anything like going and singing silly songs. I think things are much more serious than that.'**

'I feel a bit angry about what you've said A, because it means a lot to me, but then in some ways you see I agree with you ... but I feel angry that you are saying or suggesting perhaps that women who go down to Greenham are playing at it, that you know 'what are they going down there for when there's real issues up here that we should be getting involved with', and that maybe true but surely that depends on each individual women and where their commitment lies and I'm angry that you don't recognise that.'

'I sympathise with a lot of what A is saying, and some bits I don't agree with, and perhaps that's because I haven't evolved that far yet, perhaps in six months time I'll be echoing her, but I don't feel that she has spoken on my behalf, she's speaking about her views.'

'But there are lots of us involved in other issues which are important to us and it's, I mean, that you're talking personally but you seemed at some point to ...'

'Well yes I did refer to others. I referred to others in the group, and what I was trying to describe was my reaction about your last weekend. I was very keen to hear about it. I still feel part of the group, so very keen to hear about, it but when I heard about the weekend I couldn't get excited about it or put very much meaning on it.'

'Because you weren't there.'

Debate on whether Greenham was significant to the development of feminism was contentious. Some members of the group had developed the more radical view that Greenham was perhaps not the most effective site for feminist action at all, a view which others found offensive. This reflected wider debates about whether Greenham had diverted women from the central battles of feminism to be fought elsewhere. Given that the group had been founded on a fairly loose assumption that Greenham and feminism were connected without giving any voice to what that might mean, real differences of opinion had proved difficult to confront.

## **J.      Consciousness Raising: The Personal and the Political**

Challenging the taken for granted link between Greenham and feminism was experienced by the group as very threatening. They felt that one of the strengths of Greenham had been to bring together women with differing feminist persuasions or even to introduce women to feminist ideas, and some members shared the personal benefits which they had gained as a result. However, what was less clear to the group until the study, was the inevitability that differences in feminist philosophies had emerged to affect group life - even if these had surfaced from time to time and caused tensions. The group's inability to confront such differences openly, was regarded as the key reason why the group had become less effective over time.

**'I remember one gruelling meeting which was the first time I think as a group that we had started to talk about why we went to Greenham, and what it meant to us, it got really heavy, and we seemed to lose a lot of impetus then.'**

**'I think every time we've tried to move towards some of these issues we've tended to back away from that again. I mean perhaps it's because it's too difficult, or perhaps it's because we're not prepared to have the group operate in that way, not actually confronting things or dealing with these issues but just simply enjoying one another's company.'**

**'I've certainly found it much easier to talk to people individually as somebody coming in quite late on. In the big group I think I've always felt there has been two levels of discussion going on, one has been almost skirting around some of the more personal things ...'**

Because the group found it impossible to discuss their differences collectively, they concluded that they had failed to relate the personal to the political, and therefore to develop as a consciousness raising group. As we explored this further, it became apparent that it was strongly associated with conflicting ideas about the idealisation and meaning of women's relationships which Greenham was seen to uphold.

**'When we go to Greenham, quite clearly Greenham is not only about peace issues but it's about women-identified-women and in lots of different ways that's very clear. We note how women relate**

to one another and yet it's not an issue that we've ever acknowledged in any way, except implicitly in this group, or seen as a political issue that maybe might have anything to do with us, apart from the peace issues at Greenham. It's something that people share in small groups in two's and three's, but we've never really owned that as a Greenham group.'

'I agree with what you've said, and the group as a whole has not been a forum for that sort of discussion. I suppose I'm just giving a rather feeble reason that while you're questioning and thinking about a lot of things, it's fairly difficult to discuss them in more than two's or three's but it means in doing that, then there isn't a group consciousness of it happening.'

It is possible that if the group had been set up primarily as a consciousness raising group from its inception, the politics of personal experience and change would have been more openly discussed in the wider group. As a counterpoint to somewhat harsh judgements on the group's failures, some women were keen to point out that it had been successful in opening a door for them into the world of sexual politics. In that sense, the Greenham experience and the group in particular had been a means to personal consciousness raising. The disjuncture, between a shared view that the group had not progressed into collective consciousness raising and yet that it had provided the means to individual development, was explained by the different and changing needs of members.

'... maybe this group was struggling around, maybe there was a stated agenda around trips to Greenham and support around that, but actually it seems like lots of people looking for lots of things in this group without making that explicit, and a lot of time getting some of those needs met but not all of them.'

'All groups go through a honeymoon period and then the differences start to emerge and that is what happened here.'

As the group worked on uncovering such differences, it became apparent that they revolved around varying and potentially conflicting views on the meaning of women's relationships to women within it. Of all the problems which the group examined to

explain their growing feeling that there was little left as a basis for continuing, this emerged as the most important.

#### K. Feminism, Womanhood and Sexuality

Social class was briefly examined as a potential source of difference in women's feminist ideals and their feelings about Greenham, but was agreed to have little resonance as a source of tension for a group whose members regarded themselves as middle class by achievement if not by origin. If anything, the group felt that the shared middle class orientation of its members had been a binding factor, providing support for those who felt particularly constrained by middle class lives in work and in the community.

Of greater importance for the group as a potent source of tension were differences in gender relations which, although partly shelved when the women came together, were seen by some to affect the extent to which the group had been able to operate in any deep sense as a women's group. Once again there was agreement that the problem had been as much about avoidance of the issues as it was about the issues themselves. The group had tacitly accepted the Greenham ideal of a special relationship between women, without ever having examined what that might mean to those involved. At one level, they all agreed that they had found pleasure in each others company, but should women's relationships mean something more than this?

'Some people have chosen to live with a man and not get married, some people have chosen to live with a man and not have children, some people have chosen to get married and have kids, some people have chosen to move out of marriage, and some people have chosen to live with another women and these seem to be, well they're areas I would be interested in exploring with other women because I think they're important in terms of different experiences that women bring into a group, and we have in this group I think in fact people who perhaps represent all those different aspects.'

Although this was not discussed systematically in terms of women's chosen relationship(s), it became clear that two areas of difference had covertly affected the group's functioning. The first concerned attitudes and feelings about the role of

motherhood, and the second, women's sexuality. Part of the discussion on motherhood turned upon whether it was felt that children were or should have been left outside of the group, both literally and metaphorically.

**'I don't think I'd have felt half as happy and half so comfortable in this group four years ago, five years ago when my youngest was a baby, it's the dependency of the child that makes the difference ... now I feel free to pursue things for me not as a mother but issues for me, and this is where I feel so happy with this group because it's a great forum for me now. People are quite sympathetic about problems of not being able to meet deadlines because of children or not being able to get away, I've found that better than expected, but perhaps this is where feminism I suppose in a way falls down with women with young children, but I have known women have babies, friends of mine and they've gone to see their old work friends and it's not worked because the women are so inward looking.'**

**'I've felt fairly comfortable in the group and I think part of the comfort was because I'm a white, middle class mother and I think a lot of the talk has been a comfort for me because I felt, I've never been very comfortable as a mother. I mean, I think it's partly the place I live, it's more a middle class traditional society where the messages I got from other mothers was that I wasn't doing the right thing, and to me it was an eye opener to meet these other mothers who thought like I did and that maybe it was O.K. to not always get absolute satisfaction out of this mothering which I never did.'**

**'One of the things I find sad, is women not being able to get support from this group as a mother. I mean I would have hoped that women who didn't have kids could still actually be sensitive to, and understanding to, and give something to those people who did, and know what that meant and what that cost and that to me is part and parcel of the whole thing of being a woman.'**

**'I would want to turn that around from what you were saying women ought to ... I've grown up in a world where having children**

is valued and central to just about everything and constantly find myself in groups of women who don't appear to have any sensitivity to what my life experience is like as a women without children, but who talk about their particular set up, and that's something that really makes me angry. It seems that women are centred on children and too bad if you are outside of that, there's no provision here for that. I get a bit pissed off with having to be understanding to women who have children and to have to tolerate all the chat that goes on about kids from different kinds of circles. I think I feel it less in this group than I have done in others although it is around, but I've been more acutely aware of it in other settings.'

These varying views on motherhood revealed to the group how they might have been divided if ever it had become a too intrusive issue. That it had not was largely due to shared assumptions made about feminism focusing on women in their own right - Greenham as it were providing a model of strong women unfettered by family bonds, and the protest providing a means to briefly escape the constraints of motherhood. Consequently the strains felt by some mothers in the group, as they struggled to make sense of contradictory pulls towards women's relationships and their family obligations, were ones with which they had to deal at a personal level.

'I certainly enjoy myself when I go and go to enjoy myself and also very much to be with other women, that's fairly fundamental, and also to have time away from the family and my husband and I suppose work, but also to sort out quite a few personal issues to do with trying to put together living and being a wife and mother in a nuclear family, and yet very much enjoying friendships with women and that contradicts quite a lot for me and actually promotes quite a lot of personal conflict so sometimes at Greenham it's to try to sort that out and sometimes it's quite disruptive going.'

#### **L. Heterosexual Norms and Women's Sexuality**

But if motherhood as an aspect of women's identity was not part of the open agenda of the group, it was regarded by some members as never far removed, because it was intimately bound up with the group's avoidance of challenging the heterosexual norms

which were imported into it, and which were seen by some as a convenient cover up for closet lesbian relationships in the group. As the group developed, it had become open knowledge that relationships between women varied in intensity and held different meanings for women in the group, but the issues which this might have raised were not openly addressed.

**'I know that sexuality is an issue for lots of people in the group, and that being a member of this group and going to Greenham has raised issues at least, maybe that originated from the fact that there were people beginning to think about them, and I suppose what's a bit frustrating is that I feel women's relationships to women, women's attraction, sexual attraction to women, it feels a bit devalued. I feel that M and I have been open about our relationship from the start, and never has it been made generally explicit, there's just some implicit acceptance of it or tolerance or something. I would be quite happy to talk about these sorts of issues, but feel there's never been permission for that. In my head I know all the reasons why that is so but it feels a bit difficult to accept. I know that heterosexuality is a veneer and that it doesn't reflect reality, yet we go on pretending that's the pattern, that is the norm, it's that kind of feeling, there's a lot of mixed feelings and I wouldn't want to make it look too stark, but, what's all the nodding for?'**

**'It's just so true what you were saying. You must know full well that there are those of us who are passing as heterosexuals and who aren't necessarily and you must know that from your experience in the group and from individuals kind of talking about it.'**

**'We're quite happy to talk about issues say like kids and couples and I mean in a way it's cheating your involvement in the group, the fact that there isn't honest recognition that there are other differences that should be included as a part of the group.'**

There was wide agreement that previous consideration of women's relationships within the group and issues concerning sexuality had been dealt with only at the level of twos and three's, some women not party to such discussion at all. Some felt that these were



personal issues which were too difficult to discuss collectively, but others argued that it had been more a problem of putting such sensitive issues on the agenda. In retrospect this was seen as a complex matter in which the whole group should have taken responsibility rather than expecting lesbians to take the initiative.

**'We'll talk about our kids and we'll talk about our husbands and heterosexual matters. Someone has put it on the agenda, it's alright, but when it comes to talking about lesbians and lesbian relationships, that's, I'm often acutely aware that it's up to lesbians who are open to put it on the agenda, that no one else does. I'd like to think that the fears of inequality are to do with that, rather than to with decisions like any kind of open messages from others that it's not O.K. It's more to do with non-decisions and having to change the agenda and that responsibility lies with the group.'**

**'But I mean we're talking about different levels. I mean we're talking about putting it on the agenda and also talking about how personal it is compared to the comparative haven of nuclear family kind of set-ups. In some ways one could argue that it's a luxury to do that. I mean, I feel I'm putting it on the agenda every day of my life by the way I live and I often feel 'why the hell should I always have to be the token lesbian who puts things on the agenda for everyone?' I think that's a responsibility we should share.'**

**'I agree with that, you can put things on the agenda from a position of respectability or from a position of powerlessness, a position of non-respectability which is a very different point from which to start.'**

**'I feel that by putting this on the agenda now, the whole focus is on us as something different so again it sets us apart and it misses the whole thing about relationships between women.'**

The broader discussion of how women might define lesbian relationships, and the possibility of all women's relationships containing an erotic element, were raised as key elements of any discussion which the group might usefully have had. But the research had come too late in the life of the group for women to deal with the strong emotions

which had now emerged. The two women in an open lesbian relationship put this into perspective by arguing that the problem was not simply that 'there were pressures around' not to discuss these kind of views in the group, but also that others in the group who could have given support had failed to do because of lack of openness.

**'It's only just struck me that you must experience quite a frustration with women like me who tell you that they're lesbian and yet enjoy positions of power and advantage. You see me enjoying the advantages of appearing to be heterosexual in a heterosexual role, and you must experience, you must get terribly frustrated with me.'**

**'I mean when I've been in that situation with women in this group, I mean, there are times when I've felt very angry about it because I've felt that I get all the rubbish that society throws at me, and I feel like people around me should be standing up beside me and coping with that and supporting me and I would support them, a sense of anger about that. And there's also a sense of relief at not being involved in the complexity of their situation, and yes there's a sense of feeling, trying to get in touch with that experience which is slightly different to mine and also feeling quite separated because I feel anger that we're not standing together.'**

**'... the whole thing about this particular group and the whole thing about Greenham is the relationships between women, I mean that's what Greenham is about and so not to include the sexual element is to leave aside something fundamental ... if you use a very broad definition of what you mean by sexuality, if you're using a very broad definition of emotional contact between women it was the issue which held people together so that was around all the time ... in making Greenham the task, the purpose of the group is relationships between women although it was not discussed in terms of sexuality. It was a central issue and we were avoiding it and I'm not sure what we could have done about that.'**

In retrospect the group felt that their capacity to develop as a consciousness raising group had been deeply affected by a failure to explore in any depth the meaning of womanhood. At a surface level they had operated with a concept of women enjoying

being together, and this had been sufficient for some members and had held the group together for some time. But beneath this uncontentious interpretation of women-bonding were differences in women's relationships to women, leading to feelings that those who challenged the heterosexual norms of society were made to feel invisible yet again, and had not received the support which they might have expected in a feminist Greenham group. The research was productive in raising such issues but not in resolving them.

## **Conclusion**

This self-examination of a Greenham group, at the point at which it was poised ready to disintegrate, revealed some of the difficulties which may beset similar groups who begin with optimistic, though unstated, ideals of feminist practice. It echoed the voices of other women in the study who had become disillusioned with Greenham group experiences, but took us deeper into problems which arise from assumed commonality of experience and interest amongst women.

For some supporters of Greenham, this assumption was flawed because it failed to take account of differences of class interest amongst women, and therefore of broader political strategies required to combat oppressions. As we have seen, some women found Greenham feminist groups to be self-indulgent, exclusive and suspect. In the latter respect what were seen to be romantic and unrealistic ideals of non-hierarchical organisation were challenged. Those attracted to Greenham feminism also came to question whether such ideals were easily accomplished, as power dynamics and differences of interest amongst women emerged in their groups. Although rarely coming up against class or race differences within groups which mainly brought together white middle class women, other differences in women's needs, feminist philosophies and sexual relationships meant that women-bonding around a concept of a common womanhood proved difficult to sustain.

The in-depth analysis offered by one Greenham group clarified the mix of radical and liberal feminist political ideas which emerged from the women's culture of the camp, at least as they were developed by some supporters. Consistent with radical feminist thought was an emphasis on a pro-women separatist strategy - women's autonomy as it were to be realised collectively. However, within that common understanding, women in the study invoked liberal ideals of individual autonomy, choice and self-determination. In practice, these somewhat contradictory feminist ideals, presented

dilemmas as to whether groups should work collectively or should provide supportive settings for women to find personal freedoms. Whether because of the timing of the study, when collective action had died away, or whether because Greenham had attracted women (as I suggested in chapter V) who regarded feminist development as a matter of choice and personal responsibility, 'feminist peace activists' became disillusioned with collective endeavour and moved instead to personal feminist journeys. Their options for doing so were greater than for women in mining communities, who, for different reasons, had experienced a loss of solidarity. The concluding chapter of the thesis elaborates this theme as part of a general summary of what feminism can learn from these examples of women's experience of protest and its aftermath.

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## CONCLUSION

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### COMMONALITY AND DIFFERENCE

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#### Introduction

Drawing heavily from accounts of women activists in the miners' strike and in Greenham, this thesis has explored the processes of engagement and disengagement in protest. If protest creates exceptional conditions for women to aspire to unity, the period of fragmentation which follows might be considered to exaggerate problems and barriers to collective action amongst women. However, the contrast is valuable for throwing light on more general debates in contemporary feminism, now searching for new understandings of women's varied and at times conflicting experiences of oppression, whilst seeking to retain a common voice for women.

'Such an understanding needs to encompass the manifest contradictions between our recognition of 'the disintegration of the representative subject of feminism' and the continuing need for a coherent voice with which to articulate political demands on behalf of the group called 'women'. (*Hirsch & Keller 1990*)

#### Feminism: Universality and Difference

The respective stories by Greenham women and women in the miners' strike have been treated largely separately in the body of the thesis. One line of contemporary feminist argument suggests that we should leave it at that, the study merely affirming a relativistic plurality of women's experiences and interests. A decision to do so would position the study (even though it was not conceived as such) close to a developing body of post-modernist and post-structuralist feminist work 'whose intention is to destabilise' the universality of theory with 'an analysis of the local, specific and particular' (*Barrett & Phillips 1992, p1*)

Although a wide and varied field, post-modernism advocates provisional rather than absolute truth and eschews objectivity and certainty. The political consequences of this epistemological position are still a matter of debate, but logically imply an impasse in taking any critical stand on difference. Indeed to do so, post-modernists argue,

would risk accusations of belying our own partiality and subjectivity which have 'been formed within a multiplicity of discourses, many of them conflicting and contradictory' (*Pringle & Watson 1992, p69*). At the extremes of this position, all that is left for women to share is their uncertainty, both in themselves and in others.

'Over time I've stopped being depressed by the lack of feminist accord ... We can clutch aspects of the identity we like, but they often slip away. Modern women experience moments of free fall. How is it for you, there, out in space near me? Different, I know. Yet we share - some with more pleasure, some with more pain -this uncertainty.'  
(*Snitow 1990, pp36-37*)

Snitow's imagery is seductive, but ultimately unsatisfying. It literally leaves questions of differential power and problems of overcoming difference up in the air. Not only does it 'deny the possibility of causality and macro-social concepts' (*Walby 1992, p48*), but it also neatly avoids the difficult and admittedly complex problem of feminist strategy. The preference to envisage the world in this ungrounded way has been viewed as conservative and inward looking, providing no effective challenge to inequality and injustice.

'At its worst ... it constitutes an impenetrable jargon-ridden rhetoric of oppression that, by denying all validity to such concepts as 'right', 'justice' and 'reason' ends up with a total relativism that is unable to differentiate between freedom and slavery and that therefore denies legitimacy to feminist attempts to change society.' (*Bryson 1992, p229*)

More positively, feminist post-modernist perspectives remind us that we should not take for granted commonality of experience, and that generalisations made on the basis of white middle class women's interests are deeply flawed. Attention to diversity opens up the meaning of womanhood and could lead to a more inclusive feminism. But 'total relativism' is as unhelpful as universalism in defining political goals for feminism. The conceptual development of this study of women in protest brought class differences between women to the fore and also exposed different political/feminist philosophies held by middle class Greenham supporters. These themes in the data led me to interrogate three dominant traditions of feminist thought in order to uncover their assumptions about women's experience and their prescriptions for political strategies. As discussed in chapter III, liberal, radical and socialist feminist theories have all been guilty, for different reasons, of obscuring

varying forms of women's oppression and the ways in which they are constituted. However, such a critique need not point in the opposite direction towards an assumption that women can find no common ground.

'You and I have talked about bonding as two women who have known each other now for six months. On the one hand, we have many shared working-class experiences that helped us to feel close, but we also experience race as well as status as something which disrupts that feeling of bondedness. All of these feelings exist simultaneously ... It is because we have something in common and because we started off confronting differences with one another, that we can now talk about it.' (*Childers & hooks 1990, p70*)

Although complex, one way forward is to develop a better understanding of the tensions between *commonality* and *difference* of experience. Crucial to this enterprise is an understanding of the structural underpinnings of women's lives. As I argued in chapter II, this does not necessitate a move towards abstract monolithic structures which have little meaning to the specific, but neither is it necessary to throw out concepts which attest to material constraints. Arguably, without such concepts, 'we are returned to a type of primitive positivism, forbidden to move beyond immediate sense data', a method 'weakened by its refusal to question, reconceptualise, or even sift and compare data' (*Segal 1987, p31*). If we do not engage with data in these 'forbidden' ways, it is impossible to develop and elaborate our understandings of the ways in which women's (and men's) oppressions overlap and differ.

### **Commonality and Difference: Tensions in the Study**

Adopting methods consistent with grounded theory, through which the conceptual development of the study was closely related to data, a tension emerged between particular gender and class experiences, interests, and strategies of women in each protest, and 'an aspiration or impulse towards universality' (*Phillips 1992, p27*). The latter was evident in recollections of women-strength and of unity amongst women at the height of their respective protests, and in their attempts to join hands across protest.

Collective action by women, as in the case of the protests included here, remind us of the possibility of breaking through the constraints and divisions of everyday life. What

women had in common in relation to Greenham and to the miners' strike was their claim to a political ideology which, though not necessarily 'feminist', asserted women's right to a voice in struggle. Thus, in one sense, women activists were invoking some commonality of experience by challenging their traditional exclusion as women from a male-defined world of political action (albeit that male defined world was not uniformly understood or experienced identically). In each case, the protests were compelling examples of the collective power and creativity of women to redefine the political arena.

Experience of 'women-strength' was the ground on which Greenham women left the peace camp and offered support to women activists in the miners' strike and reciprocal visits were made by mining support groups to the perimeter fence. These efforts of women to search for ways of working together and supporting one another, were all the more remarkable if we consider the fragmentation of feminism, 'the women's movement', and left wing politics in the early to mid 1980s. The study also demonstrates that such moments of concerted action cannot be taken as evidence of identical interests amongst women. The tension between invoking 'women' as a category and the realisation that women's lives are divided in important ways, was one which emerged forcibly from the data. Although difficult to resolve, this tension is at the heart of debates about the future direction of feminism.

'In the reworking of contemporary political theory and ideals, feminism cannot afford to situate itself *for* difference and *against* universality, for the impulse that takes us beyond our immediate and specific difference is a vital necessity in any radical transformation.' (Phillips 1992, p28 *emphasis in the original*)

In keeping with this vision, it might be argued that analysis of difference, far from destroying aspirations towards universality, more adequately prepares the ground for its expression. To put this simply, we need to be more aware of the obstacles between us, as well as those which we share, if we are to find common ground (Spelman 1990). But we must also be prepared to accept that the priorities of women in struggle vary. As Bryson has argued, 'modern feminist theory ... must recognise ... the inadequacy of any one-dimensional attempt at change and the impossibility of isolating gender issues from other structured inequalities' (Bryson 1992, p266). The study offered considerable support for such an approach to developing feminist theory.



Running through the alternative visions of women's political action in chapters IV and V, were varying experiences of class and gender relationships, which affected aspirations to sustain collective action. Women activists in the miners' strike stood 'side by side' the men, even when recognising the traditional domination of men in mining communities and, in various ways, contesting it. Solidarity, even if regarded as an over-romanticised ideal of the strike, was defined as strength between women, and between women and men. As working class women, caught up in a struggle to preserve their communities, it would have been surprising to have found them 'going it' entirely alone.

By contrast the Greenham protest excluded men, although some of its supporters did not regard peace as a separate women's issue and indeed continued to work with men in other peace groups. However, the feminism which emanated from Greenham argued for a separatist politics for women. Amongst some Greenham supporters there was an understanding that a separatist politics was unrealistic for many women and that it led to exclusive practices. Moreover, it was not fully supported by all because it prescribed a too narrow view of what women's politics should entail. 'Socialist feminist peace activists' in particular, were concerned that the Greenham protest should not be seen as the only site of feminist struggle or as somehow superior to community based women's struggles. Such women were not impressed by a feminism which threatened to lose touch with enduring problems for women in a class divided society.

The problems which women experienced in attempting to support each other in protest, were explored in chapter VI. As was suggested, by reference to several instances, women's aspirations to make links foundered around class difference, particularly when, as happened at the LINKS conference, Greenham feminists dominated the proceedings and imposed a philosophy of women's common interests. This was deeply resented by women from mining communities and other Greenham supporters on their behalf. It was a vivid example of what can happen when difference is both ignored and denied a voice and where one group of women exercised power over other women. In spite of this, some women continued to forge individual relationships across class lines. This suggests as an area for further development, research which explores the conditions under which class (and other dividing structures) disrupt women's endeavours to work together for change.

## **Inequality and Power in Women's Relationships**

Commitment to dialogue which both respects difference and opens it up, has been suggested as the means to affiliation (*hooks 1984*). Dialogue will not, of itself, alter the structured inequalities which underpin different experiences of oppression. The complexity lies not just in making the effort to understand the lives of others, but in recognising the power and privilege which some groups of women have over others. It has been argued that the purpose of dialogue should be to empower all women, but this is a difficult task when some start from more powerful positions.

'Since women themselves hold power over other women, empowering women in general will mean some women losing their power over others. Power is not a zero sum game in which one person's gain has to be another person's loss, but where women are divided by class, by race, or by global inequalities, then empowerment of subordinate women will mean, that for example, dominant, white, heterosexual, middle class women will lose their superiority in relation to other categories of women. Putting the strategy of empowerment into practice raises uncomfortable problems for feminists.' (*Ramazanoglu 1989, p178*)

Without the structural analysis advocated by Ramazanoglu, which demands attention to questions of inequality and power in women's relationships, feminism will fail to open its boundaries to those women whose struggles have been enacted either on its margins or outside. These issues have often been obscured by focusing exclusively on men's controlling power over women. The study indicates that any temptation to hold on to romantic images of women's relationships, as somehow solidified through their shared powerlessness in relation to men, is to miss a more complex reality.

As was discussed in chapter VII, the fragmentation of mining support groups and conflicts which arose between women in the post-strike era were closely associated with the reassertion of traditional patterns of life in mining communities, lack of support from the NUM, and the consequent receding ground on which women could unite around a common objective (which most thought should still express their interest in fighting pit closures and protecting their communities). Solidarity amongst women, was, then, deeply affected by men, who, if not visible at meetings when conflicts between women arose, were always there in the wings. In this sense the data confirmed what has been argued elsewhere. However, because this was a study of

women who were actively striving for a political voice in a traditional men's stronghold, it exposed some of the problems which women experienced in organising as women.

In the accounts of members of mining support groups of post-strike power struggles and feelings of disempowerment resulting from what they perceived to be elitist and exclusionary practices towards 'miners' wives', their target was other women as well as men. These and other concerns about the dangers of opening WAPC to 'non-miners' wives', who might take it over, are instructive illustrations of problems of power sharing in women's political action. Of course this was not the whole story of women in mining communities who found some measure of comradeship in their own autonomous groups, but it shows the importance of extending our understanding of power as a dynamic in women's relationships. To relegate this to monolithic propositions about patriarchal control is to define women as victims solely of men, and to obscure the difficulties which women meet in attempting to work collectively.

Non-hierarchical and autonomous organisation has been widely adopted by many women's groups under the broad umbrella of the modern 'women's movement' as the means to resolving issues of power and inequality in women's relationships. In the sense that this model emerged, and has been sustained, as a political expression of women's rejection of masculine power structures, it has suffered from an implied idealisation of women - gender unity, as it were, ensured by women's softer, more nurturant qualities. This was an important aspect Greenham - a self conscious attempt to demonstrate alternatives to male values. Most Greenham supporters in the study were to some extent attracted by working in more democratic ways with women. They found it to be an energising and productive means of drawing themselves and other women into the peace protest.

However, as Chapter VIII indicated, assumptions (particularly strong in radical/cultural feminist theories) that women 'naturally' bond together, require more careful study. From the perspective of those who were involved in feminist Greenham groups, the emergence of hidden power structures and agendas was problematic. What was interesting, in terms of feminist practice, was the extent to which women retreated from such problems, either by leaving groups or by choosing not to confront the issues. It might be argued that Greenham feminism, which these groups sought to extend, was ultimately weak because of its inherent idealism. In this respect, the study lent support to those who argue that the paradox of feminist perspectives which insist

on women's common identity or capacity to transcend difference, is their tendency to descend into individualism (*Segal 1987*).

'... the political is limited to the personal and all conflicts among and between women are flattened. If sisterhood itself is defined on the basis of personal intentions, attitudes and desires, conflict is also automatically constructed on only the psychological level.' (*Mohanty 1992, p82*)

The practical limitations of women working together on such a basis was uncovered by the detailed self-examination of one Greenham group in the study. The group revealed how within a set of assumptions about feminist ways of working, they had found difficulty in dealing with 'hidden' tensions through open dialogue. Much of their analysis of such tensions was focused on the internal functioning of the group at the interpersonal level. When we came to consider whether differences in women's lives outside of the group might explain some of the problems inside, we got close to examining the gender structures which had intruded (class was not seen to be divisive because of the middle class constituency of the group). In particular, heterosexual values imported into, and tacitly accepted by the group, were experienced as disempowering by lesbian members. This is a further illustration of what was more transparent in relation to mining support groups, that analyses of power dynamics in women's relationships cannot be isolated from broader structures of inequality in society. However, such analyses should not simply, or only, be reduced to the problem of patriarchy.

'A feminism which emphasises only the dangers to women from men ... denies all the contradictions and tensions between the sexes, both in and between social groups, although these are exactly what we need to locate in order to push for change more effectively.' (*Segal 1987, p37*)

Questions of power and inequality which cease to idealise women (however uncomfortable they may be) require further analysis in a developing feminism which has moved some way from a pre-occupation with commonality, towards a realisation that women's lives differ. At one time thought of as diversionary questions, their importance lies in identifying barriers to links which women might make across oppressions, for the purpose of developing more sensitive and tolerant models for developing alliances (*Ramazanoglu 1989*). If such enquiry leads only to a hierarchy of oppression, then we avoid tackling the complex 'problems of unity, of alliance across

what is difference and troubled choices between competing demands' (*Phillips 1987, p14*). But a feminism which acknowledges these as central problems would also become a more inclusive body of thought which would recognise that women's struggles are not uni-dimensional. Perspectives which obscure the structural constraints on women's lives, as if where we stand is more a matter of choice than circumstance, deny the reality of many women's lives.

### **Women Activists: Beyond Collective Action**

The radicalising effects of grass roots mobilisation on 'ordinary women' in the period beyond, requires further study. As Rowbotham has observed, it is a problematic area, 'because 'history' loses track of grass roots activists; ordinary life takes over' (*Rowbotham 1992, p300*). Moreover, personal change is a complex and continuous (sometimes discontinuous) process and therefore difficult to capture. Much of it may remain hidden as women make adjustments to lives which might appear to be relatively unchanged. More difficult than such problems is the definition of what counts as political or feminist consciousness.

The feminist line of argument that sees 'one of the most radical and subversive things we can do - is to reclaim our minds, to think outside patriarchal structures' (*Spender 1984*), implies a limited (and unrealistic) definition of authentic feminist consciousness and action. It is perhaps more appropriate to consider changes which women make or want to make within the structural constraints which they face. Take the example in the study of the miner's wife who became interested in Chile and Greenham women during the strike, who joined the Labour Party and a local charity organisation afterwards, who changed a job with more money for something she had always wanted to do - all against the odds of a husband who at one time she would not have dared to disobey. Her change from 'ordinary housewife' was as dramatic, when taken in context, as that of a middle class Greenham supporter who gave up a well paid job and material possessions to devote her life to work in Nicaragua.

Within a study limited by a relatively short time span between protest and women's lives beyond, I have focused on women's recollections of their involvement in political action, and what happened to their collective endeavours subsequently. In this framework, changes in political consciousness experienced by women are woven through and embedded within the text such that they are integral to each protest. Although this inevitably obscures the specific context of each individual woman's life, it

supports a broad generalisation that class makes a difference in the pathways that may be chosen when collective action fades.

The small mining support groups which survived (albeit in isolation from one another) continued to provide a regular forum for women to meet and work on their own agendas - something which did not exist prior to the strike. A minority of women in the study joined the Labour Party as a direct result of their involvement in the strike and typically became very active members who were convinced that working class women should participate in setting the agenda of Labour politics. Such examples of continuing political involvement were too few, both in this and other studies, to claim a sweeping radicalisation of women (*Waddington et al 1991; McIntyre 1992*). Undoubtedly, many did seek a quieter life after the hardship of protracted struggle. Those who entered Higher Education and found new jobs were few in number. Such avenues were not easy to find for women in mining communities.

Women who experienced an awakening of feminist consciousness through participation in Greenham found its feminist ideals elusive. Typically they turned away from any form of collective politics and left both peace and women's groups, somewhat disillusioned, and, with a conviction that liberation was a matter of choice and individual responsibility. Pathways chosen included therapy; re-assessments of relationships with women and men; entering lesbian relationships (and in two cases leaving them); revised careers; and retreats into private worlds (one woman became a Bhuddist, four lived briefly in communes). Such women moved on from Greenham with a desire to integrate feminist ideals into their personal lives but with no clear reference points for doing so. Others, not so affected by Greenham feminism, continued to be active in peace work and in community based projects. It may seem an obvious point to make, but the Greenham women in the study had a wider range of options for the terms on which they engaged in protest and the pathways they selected subsequently than did women activists in the miners' strike.

## **Conclusion**

This study does not claim to offer a definitive or closed interpretation of women's involvement in protest or their journeys beyond. It argues for a more inclusive feminism and one that is engaged with struggles which spring out of women's differing interests. In many ways it confirms earlier socialist feminist insights which argued that we should struggle for equality in relationships even as we strive to better understand

the structures of inequality which disrupt this aspiration (*Rowbotham, Segal & Wainright 1979*). If in the process we lose romantic notions of sisterhood, we may yet recover more realistic means of affiliation and cooperation. Central to this task is the analysis of tensions which arise in women's aspirations to collective action - something which the women in this study have brought to the fore.

## **APPENDIX 1**

### **WOMEN ACTIVISTS IN THE MINERS' STRIKE: BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS**



## WOMEN ACTIVISTS IN THE MINERS' STRIKE: BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

The following details are limited representations of the biographies of twenty women who participated in individual interviews. They focus on the position of women at the time of the study. No details are provided for women who participated only in group discussions. Information is provided for each woman as follows:

Fictitious names, arranged alphabetically;

Support Group (if any);

Age group;

Paid work at the time of the study;

Children;

Membership of political party (if any)

*Ann*: Highhill Group; 40-50 age group; not in paid work (worked as a part -time cleaner during the strike); 5 grown up children

*Belinda*: Castlehill Group; 30-40 age group; working full-time in a work's canteen (lost previous job in pit canteen when the local pit closed); 2 teenage children

*Clare*: Castlehill Group; 20-30 age group; not in paid work; 1 baby; joined Labour Party during the strike

*Catherine*: Castlehill Group; 30-40 age group; part-time work in a shop, exploring HE courses; 1 grown up daughter

*Dot*: Highhill Group; 40-50 age group; not in paid work; 2 grown up children; joined Labour Party after the strike

*Doreen*: Castlehill Group; 20-30 age group; recently trained and started work as a Restart tutor; 3 children of school age (not from a mining family although now married to a miner)

*Evelyn*: Highhill Group; 20-30 age group; not in paid work; 1 baby

*Janet*: Highhill Group; 50-60 age group; not in paid work; 3 children, 1 still at school

**Jenny:** Castlehill Group; 30-40 age group; part-time work in a shop; single mother 1 grown up son

**Jill:** Castlehill Group; 50-60 age group; 3 grown up children; part-time lecturer; member of the Independent Labour Party (not from a mining family)

**Joan:** Highhill Group; 50-60 age group; not in paid work; 5 children, 3 still at school

**Judy:** Castlehill Group; 30-40 age group; not in paid work; 4 children at school;

**Mary:** Castlehill Group; 50-60 age group; recently found part-time work in an a residential home for the aged; 3 children, 1 still at school; joined Labour Party after the strike

**May:** Highhill Group; 50-60 age group; not in paid work; 4 grown up children

**Phyliss:** Meadow Vale Group; 40-50 age group; not in paid work; 2 grown up sons; joined Labour Party after the strike

**Sandra:** Highhill group; 20-30 age group; not in paid work/looking for part-time job; 2 pre-school children

**Sheila:** Castlehill Group; 30-40 age group; working full-time in a factory; no children

**Shirley:** Castlehill Group; 40-50 age group; not in paid work; 2 grown up children

**Susan:** Castlehill Group; 20-30 age group; not in paid work, looking for a full-time job; no children

**Veronica:** Seascape Group; 40-50 age group; working full-time in nursing; 2 grown up children; joined Labour Party during the strike

**APPENDIX 2**

**GREENHAM SUPPORTERS: BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS**

## GREENHAM SUPPORTERS: BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

The following details are limited representations of the biographies of twenty two women who participated in individual interviews. They focus on the position of women at the time of the study. No details are provided for women who participated only in group discussions. Information is provided for each woman as follows:

Fictitious names, alphabetically arranged;

Age Group;

Education;

Paid work;

Children;

Political Party (if any)

**Carol:** 30-40 age group; graduate; not in paid work (out of choice); no children; member of the Labour Party

**Charlotte:** 30-40 age group; graduate; working full-time as an educational psychologist; pregnant with first child

**Clair:** 40-50 age group; private school educated; dress-making from home; 2 grown up children

**Daniel:** 40-50 age group; working full-time as a community artist; 2 grown up children; member of the Labour Party

**Dianne:** 30-40 age group; graduate; working full-time in social work; single parent, 2 school aged children

**Eileen:** 20-30 age group; graduate; working full-time in administration/ preparing to leave for a full-time MA course; no children

**Fiona:** 30-40 age group; graduate; working full-time in community work; 2 school aged children

**Gwen:** 30-40 age group; graduate; working full-time in social work; single parent, 2 school aged children; member of the Labour Party

*Janet:* 60-70 age group; teacher trained; retired; 2 grown up children

*Jennifer:* 50-60 age group; social work trained; not in paid work (out of choice)/ preparing to return to Nicaragua as full-time volunteer worker; no children

*June:* 20-30 age group; graduate; working full-time in welfare advice agency; no children

*Joss:* 30-40 age group; graduate; working part-time (out of choice) as community psychologist; no children

*Julia:* 30-40 age group; graduate; working part-time WEA teaching; 2 school aged children

*Linda:* 20-30 age group; graduate; working full-time in teaching; no children; ex-member of the Labour Party

*Lindsey:* 30-40 age group; graduate; working full-time in research; 3 school aged children; recent member of the Labour Party but thinking of leaving

*Maureen:* 30-40 age group; graduate; working full-time in lecturing; 2 school aged children; member of the Labour Party

*Pam:* 30-40 age group; graduate; not in paid work; 4 children, 3 under school age

*Pat:* 30-40 age group; teacher trained; working part-time (out of choice) in teaching; pregnant with first child

*Penny:* 50-60 age group; mature graduate; working part-time in marketing; 3 grown up children

*Sally:* 30-40 age group; graduate; working part-time (out of choice) in teaching; no children

*Sue:* 40-50 age group; graduate; working part-time in teaching; 3 school aged children; member of the Labour Party

***Vicky***: 30-40 age group; graduate; working full-time in private nursing home; 3 children

## **APPENDIX 3**

### **GREENHAM COMMON PROTEST:**

#### **MAIN EVENTS**

From: Harford and Hopkins eds 1984

## Dateline

1981

*27 Aug* 'Women for Life on Earth' march leaves Cardiff.

*5 Sept* March arrives at Greenham.

*21 Dec* First action: women stop sewage pipes being laid.

1982

*18 Jan* Women keen outside House of Commons on re-opening of Parliament.

*20 Jan* Newbury District Council serves notice of intention to evict camp from common land.

*Early Feb* Camp becomes women only.

*21 Mar* Equinox Festival of Life.

*22 Mar* First blockade of base by 250 women. 34 arrests.

*Mar-May* Spot blockades.

*27 May* First eviction from common land. Camp re-sited on MOT land. 4 women arrested.

*28 May* Eviction trial. 4 women imprisoned.

*7 June* 75 women die symbolically outside London Stock Exchange to point up profits made from arms race as President Reagan visits Britain. 7 women arrested.

*6 Aug* Hiroshima Day. Women place 10,000 stones on Newbury War Memorial.

*9 Aug* Nagasaki Day. 8 women enter base to present Commander with the 1000th origami crane, a symbol of peace.

*27 Aug* 18 women occupy the main gate sentry box until arrested.

*29 Sept* Eviction from Ministry of Transport land.

*5 Oct* Obstruction of work to lay sewage pipes. 13 arrested.

*15 Nov* Sentry box action trial.

*17 Nov* Sewage pipe action trial. 23 women imprisoned.

*12 Dec* 30,000 women link hands to encircle the base.



13 Dec 2,000 women blockade the base. Some enter to plant snowdrops.

1983

1 Jan 44 women climb the fence to dance on the Cruise missile silos.

17 Jan At reopening of Parliament 73 women occupy the lobby of the Houses of Parliament to emphasise demands that the issue of Cruise missiles be debated.

20 Jan Second camp set up at Green Gate.

22 Jan First attempt to set up the Blue Gate camp. 3 arrests.

7 Feb Over 100 women enter base as snakes. Secretary of State for Defence, Heseltine, visits Newbury. Action at Council chambers.

15 Feb Silo action trials. 36 women imprisoned.

22 Feb High Court injunctions and eviction hearing adjourned when 400 women present affidavits stating that Greenham is their home.

25 Feb 6 women climb on to roof of Holloway women's prison to draw attention to the racial, class and economic injustices for which the imprisoned women are victimised.

8 Mar International Women's Day.

9 Mar High Court injunctions and eviction hearing. Injunctions awarded against 21 women.

24 Mar Visit of NATO Generals to base – women blockade.

28 Mar Holloway action trial. Women give evidence of inhumane treatment in prison. Charges against the 6 women dismissed.

31 Mar CND blockade the base.

1 Apr 200 women enter the base disguised as furry animals to have a picnic. CND link-up – 70,000 form a human chain linking Aldermaston, Burghfield and Greenham.

27 Apr Citadel locks action. All gates padlocked by women.

1 May Children's party on the common and inside the base.

12 May Eviction from common land at Yellow (main) Gate. Women's cars illegally impounded.

24 May International Women's Day for Disarmament. Silent vigil and fasting at Greenham.

31 May Women dressed in black enter base to scatter ashes as US Cruise technicians arrive.

25 June Rainbow Dragon Festival. 2000 women sew 4½-mile serpent tail that weaves in and out of the base.

- 4-9 July Week of blockades. Women enter to make personal rituals. Christian exorcism performed. Culminates in removal of 50 ft of fence. New camps set up at Orange and Blue Gates.
- 24 July Women die symbolically in front of the public, politicians and military buyers who have come to view war hardware on display at an Air Tattoo at Greenham.
- 25 July 7 women cut hole in fence and paint women's peace symbols on us spy plane 'Blackbird'.
- 6 Aug Hiroshima Day. Arrival of 20 'Stop The Arms Race' marches from all over UK. Silent vigil and fasting at Newbury War Memorial.
- 9 Aug Nagasaki Day. Die-in at Yellow Gate. Women's outlines painted on road.
- 18 Aug 'Blackbird' trial. Charges withdrawn by MOD. One woman imprisoned for contempt.
- 5 Sept Second birthday celebrations. Women obstruct laying of fuel pipes into base. 27 arrests.
- 6 Sept Sabotage of fuel pipe workers' machinery.
- 29 Oct Halloween. 2,000 women take down 4 miles of fence. 187 arrests with increased violence from police and army.
- 1 Nov Heseltine tells House of Commons that 'intruders' near missile silos run risk of being shot at.
- 9 Nov Start of Federal court action in New York against President Reagan and George Bush to ban them from employing Cruise missiles in Britain. 24-hour vigils begin at all 102 us bases in Britain.
- 13 Nov Demonstration to honour the memory of Karen Silkwood, 9 years dead.
- 14 Nov First of the missile-carrying transporters arrive at Greenham. Night watches begin to check on Cruise activity. 18 peace activists in Turkey sentenced for 5-8 years' imprisonment.
- 15 Nov Blockade of all gates leads to 143 arrests.
- 11 Dec 50,000 women encircle the base, reflecting it back on itself with mirrors. Parts of the fence pulled down. Hundreds of arrests as police violence escalates - beatings, broken bones, concussions.
- 20 Dec Camps at all gates but one. Violence from soldiers, all-night harassment to prevent sleep, horrendous language amounting to verbal rape. Bricks and stones thrown at benders.
- 27 Dec 3 women spend 3 hours undetected in air traffic control tower.

*31 Dec* Final gate (Indigo) camped. New Year's party.

1984

*1 Jan* Women weave giant web, symbol of strength and fragility, to float over base lifted by helium-filled balloons.

*5 Mar* MOT, NDC and MOD combine forces to commence programme of evictions, starting at north side of base in preparation for Cruise convoy deployment.

*9 Mar* 12.30 a.m. 100 policemen with dogs converge on 12 women at Blue Gate to prevent them alerting other camps that part of a Cruise convoy (only 3 vehicles) has left the base. Despite police efforts women manage to clock the convoy's route an hour later.

## **APPENDIX 4**

### **MINERS' STRIKE 1984-5**

#### **MAIN EVENTS**

From: Stead 1987

## Chronology of the Strike

*February 1984:* Polmaise colliery closure announced, overtime banned in Scotland, over 4000 miners strike.

*March 1984:* National Coal Board announces closure of Cortonwood colliery and cutback of 4 million tonnes of coal in the forthcoming year, with a loss of 20 000 jobs.

Miners' strike begins, March 9.

First women's group meets in Barnsley, sets up Women in Support of Miners. Letter setting out opposition to closure sent to local press.

David Jones killed while picketing at Ollerton in Yorkshire, March 15. Kent miners on their way to picket stopped by police and turned back at Dartford tunnel.

Lancashire miners join strike.

Barnsley Women Against Pit Closures formed. They organise picket at Grimethorpe NCB headquarters. NUM executive split on whether or not to hold a ballot.

*April 1984:* NUM executive at Sheffield changes rules so that only 50% vote is needed to decide on strike action. Special delegate conference in Sheffield endorses NEC decision and ratifies strike action 'in accordance with rule 41'.

Barnsley Women Against Pit Closures decide (April 22) to hold a national women's rally and march through Barnsley on May 12.

*May 1984:* 3 men injured and 65 arrested at Ravenscraig steel works (May 8) when mounted police break up the miners' picket line. Scottish miners' leaders press railway workers to stop carrying iron ore for the steel plant from the Scottish port of Hunterston.

Barnsley Women Against Pit Closures launches women's march, with delegates from coalfields all over Britain. Arthur Scargill leads the march and speaks on the platform at the Civic Hall rally (May 12).

In Mansfield, Notts, 40 000 people march in support of the strike (May 14).

Anne Scargill is arrested at Silverhill colliery (May 16).

Leon Brittain, Home Secretary, admits that plain-clothes police are operating in Nottinghamshire to protect working miners.

First meeting since the strike began takes place between the national union and the coal board (May 23), and breaks up in less than half an hour.

5000 picket Orgreave coking plant: 82 are arrested, including Arthur Scargill, and 62 injured (May 30).

Approx. 3200 police, some in riot gear, from 13 forces, are drafted into Orgreave.

*June 1984:* Two convoys of lorries meet 3000 pickets at Orgreave. Nineteen arrested, 20 people injured, including 5 police officers (June 1).

First House of Commons debate on the strike. 12 000 miners and supporters march from Kings Cross to Westminster, 100 are arrested (June 7).

Bruce Kent, CND leader, addresses Scottish Miners' Gala at Edinburgh (June 9).

Joe Green, miner, is crushed to death by a lorry while on picket duty at Ferrybridge (June 15).

10 000 pickets turn out at Orgreave, 93 are arrested, Arthur Scargill is injured (June 18).

Kent Women's Demonstration (June 23).

Jean McCrindle writes to the *Sunday Times* proposing an NUM Associate Membership for women.

*July 1984:* Home Secretary endorses use of criminal rather than civil law against miners.

NUM and NCB talks last nine hours, with agreement to meet again (July 5).

Government withholds estimated £6.8 million in tax refunds due to striking miners (July 13).

Court appearance of 10 Barnsley Women Against Pit Closures arrested on picket line (July 13).

First National Women Against Pit Closures conference held at Northern College, Barnsley (July 22).

*August 1984:* National Women Against Pit Closures rally in London. A petition handed to the Queen (August 11).

Miners drifting back to work, but slowly.

Forty arrested when 3000 pickets cover five pits that have reopened (August 21).

Second dock strike called, following unloading of coal from coke ship *Ostia* by British Steel workers at Hunterston (August 24).

Action at Port Talbot steelworks – 100 South Wales miners occupy 3 cranes 120 feet high (August 31).

Sit-down protest at Hatfield Main in Yorkshire (August 31).

Striking miners visit Greenham Common peace camp throughout the month.

*September 1984:* Mass picket of 3500 at Kiverton Park. Three-week-old National Dock Strike called off (September 18).

Bishop of Durham calls for Ian MacGregor's resignation. At one Scottish meeting MacGregor arrives with a green plastic bag over his head.

NCB avoids strike by NACODS union, responsible for safety cover in the pits, by offering them a compromise package (September 26).

*October 1984:* Costs of strike now estimated at £600 million.

Unemployment figures reach 3284 million – 13.6% of national work force (October 5).

NUM and NCB agree to meet with ACAS as chair (October 8).

Twenty-two people arrested for coal picking in Grimethorpe (October 14).

Greenham Common women donate food to Women Against Pit Closures.

Deadline expires for NUM to pay £200 000 fine and court attempts to seize NUM funds (October 25).

Strike threatened by NACODS called off by executive after accepting NCB proposals.

Coal stocks at power stations down – only 4–10 weeks' supply at Ferrybridge (October 29).

NCB offers miners a back-to-work bonus. Christmas appeals for miners' families start.

*November 1984:* Mines Not Missiles rally held in York (November 3).

NCB claims drift back to work a success, but Arthur Scargill says strike still solid (November 6).

Dublin court rules £2.7 million NUM funds to be frozen (November 7).

It is announced tht only £8 174 of an estimated £10.6 million NUM funds are in the hands of the sequestrators (November 9).

National Conference of Women's Action Groups at Chesterfield (November 10–11).

1900 return to work. Mass picket at Cortonwood (November 12).

Benefit concert held in London (November 25). First meeting to form Barnsley's second, alternative, women's group. Visit by Barnsley women to Greenham Common, with WAPC members from other areas.

David Wilkie is killed by a concrete block smashed through the roof of his minicab (November 30).

*December 1984:* Ian MacGregor speaks in favour of privatising the pits (December 5).

Toys start to arrive for miners' children for Christmas:



from I G Metal in Germany; three lorry-loads from Belgium; £100 000 worth of toys from France. Children also go abroad for Christmas holidays in Europe.

The national Christmas appeal for miners and their families is published in the British press.

*January 1985:* Mass picketing continues at Yorkshire Main and Grimethorpe collieries, and at Kiverton Park.

Return to work continues only slowly.

Challenge in High Court to government's right to deduct £16 from supplementary benefits paid to miners' families fails (January 22).

Energy Secretary refuses Welsh Church leaders' request to hold independent enquiry into the future of the coal industry.

Peter Heathfield, NUM general secretary, meets NCB industrial relations team (January 29).

NCB announces that since March 1984 620 men have been sacked from the mines and only 38 reinstated.

*February 1985:* Second Yorkshire Area Women Against Pit Closures conference held at Northern College (February 2).

Joint appeal by NUM and NACODS executives to NCB to reopen negotiations (February 8).

Brenda Greenwood wins case when she is charged with causing an obstruction and threatening behaviour likely to cause a breach of the peace (February 19).

Miners' Rally held in London. Speakers include Tony Benn, Denis Skinner and Ken Livingstone (February 24).

NCB claims 1464 new faces back at work (February 26).

Appeal for striking miners and their families published in the national press (February 27).

*March 3 1985:* NUM ends the strike. Special delegate conference in London votes 98-91 to return to work on March 5 without a settlement.

*March 5 1985:* Women and children join the miners' marches back to the pits, behind bands and banners.

Kent miners stay out on strike and continue to picket other coal fields to demand amnesty for sacked miners.

*March 9 1985:* International Women's Day rally at Chesterfield is attended by 25 000 women.

With acknowledgments to research by Barnsley Women Against Pit Closures: *People's History of Yorkshire* No. 12, Barnsley Women Against Pit Closures, Arc and Throstle Press, Todmorden.

## **APPENDIX 5**

### **COLLIERY CLOSURES 1985-7**

From: Stead 1987, p.169-170

## Colliery Closures 1985-87

*Note: This list does not include partial closures or mergers.*

### 1985/86 (27 mines closed)

<i>SOUTH WALES</i>	Bedwas	Closed 31. 8.1985
	Celyn South	Closed 6. 9.1985
	Markham	Closed 20. 9.1985
	Treforgan	Closed 30. 9.1985
	Penrikyber	Closed 8.10.1985
	Abertillery	Closed 9.10.1985
	Aberpergwn	Closed 7.10.1985
	St John's	Closed 22.11.1985
	Garw	Closed 13.12.1985
<i>NORTH EAST</i>	Brenkley	Closed 25.10.1985
	Sacrison	Closed 15.11.1985
	Herrington	Closed 22.11.1985
	Horden	Closed 28. 2.1986
	Bates	Closed 25. 2.1986
<i>NORTH YORKS</i>	Ackton Hall	Closed 5. 7.1985
	Savile	Closed 28. 8.1985
	Fryston	Closed 6.12.1985
	Glasshoughton	Closed 28. 3.1985
<i>SOUTH YORKS</i>	Yorkshire Main	Closed 11.10.1985
	Brookhouse	Closed 25.10.1985
	Cortonwood	Closed 25.10.1985

<i>BARNSLEY</i>	Emley Moor	Closed 20.12.1985
<i>WESTERN</i>	Wolstanton	Closed 18.10.1985
	Haig	Closed 26.11.1985
	Bold	Closed 15.11.1985
<i>SOUTH NOTTS</i>	Moorgreen	Closed 19. 7.1985
	Pye Hill	Closed 9. 8.1985

### 1986/87 (14 mines closed)

<i>SCOTTISH</i>	Comrie	Closed 19. 9.1986
	Polkemmet	Closed 10. 6.1986
<i>NORTH DERBY</i>	Whitwell	Closed 27. 6.1986
<i>SOUTH MIDS</i>	Whitwick	Closed 4. 7.1986
	Birch Coppice	Closed 28.11.1986
<i>NORTH YORKS</i>	Kinsley Drift	Closed 11. 7.1986
	Ledston Luck	Closed 31.10.1986
<i>SOUTH YORKS</i>	Cadeby	Closed 7.11.1986
<i>KENT</i>	Tilmanstone	Closed 24.10.1986
<i>NOTTS</i>	Hucknall/Babbington	Closed 31.10.1986
<i>SOUTH WALES</i>	Nantgarw	Closed 7.11.1986
	Cwm	Closed 28.11.1986
<i>WESTERN</i>	Bersham	Closed 12.12.1986
<i>NORTH EAST</i>	Whittle	Closed 9. 1.1987

According to British Coal, on 9 March 1985 there were 172,363 mineworkers on the colliery books. On 14 February 1987 there were 114,974.

## **APPENDIX 6**

### **WOMEN AGAINST PIT CLOSURES:**

#### **STATEMENT OF AIMS**

Agreed at National Conference of Women's Organisations Meeting,  
Chesterfield, 10-11th November 1984

From: Publicity Leaflet issued by Women's Co-ordinating Centre

# OUR AIMS

- 1** To consolidate the National Women's Organisation and ensure victory to the National Union of Mineworkers in their present struggle to prevent pit closures and protect mining communities for the future.
- 2** To further strengthen the Organisation of Women's Groups which has been built up during the 1984/85 miners' strike.
- 3** To develop a relationship between the National Union of Mineworkers and the Women's Organisation at all levels.
- 4** To campaign on all issues including those which affect mining communities, particularly peace, jobs, health and education.
- 5** To promote and develop education for working class women.
- 6** To publicise all the activities of the National Women's Organisation at all levels.



## **APPENDIX 7**

**WOMEN AGAINST PIT CLOSURES:**

**PAPERS FOR EXTENDED MEETING**

**Sheffield, 17th October 1987**



## WOMEN AGAINST PIT CLOSURES

### A WAY FORWARD

It is now almost two and a half years since the strike ended and although the struggles of the NUM, on behalf of which we came into being, far from being over are increasingly intensifying under the relentless onslaught of the Tory Government, it becomes more and more difficult to keep W.A.P.C. alive and yet it is even more imperative that we do.

This meeting is to debate and come up with a positive solution to this problem. Since the strike ended over 50 more pits have closed with the consequent loss of 70,000 to 80,000 jobs. Little wonder then that our numbers have vastly depleted. For those of us still active the issues have become more acute, convincing us that we must still have a voice. In the two and a half years that voice has been heard in many different campaigns and far ranging issues: Justice Campaign (295 miners remain sacked), local and national politics, and community orientated enterprises covering a wide range of topics (education, transport, housing, health etc.) not to mention Trades Union struggles and women's issues. Our international links also have been strengthened and increased in many ways with visits and exchanges, and always with our awareness of the value of international friendship and co-operation towards world peace.

We can be very proud then that we have kept our movement ticking over and the name of W.A.P.C. is **STILL NOT FORGOTTEN**. We are all here to ensure that the way forward will be one that reflects our pride in what we achieved during the strike as a body of formally un-organised women, galvanising many communities in this country and abroad into solidarity action on a scale unprecedented in the women's movement here, and that it sets alight a new, strong women's movement that, whilst furthering our own struggle for the coalfield areas which we can never abandon, also takes us into a decisive role within the larger Labour movement and calls into action many more women in every area and from every sphere who wish to come together into action against the Capitalist system and the Tory Government which has caused such devastation in our communities and threatens the whole future of thousands of working class people.

We have said many times that our movement was not aligned to one particular party, and this should still be the case. We should welcome all parties who agree with our aims and objectives and they will be able to participate in our movement on those terms which will be set by us. As for not being a trade union, although during the strike we were alternately lauded and derided for being a "support system" of women for a predominantly male trade union (and an overwhelmingly chauvinistic one at that), there were thousands of us who would have 'died' for that Union and sincerely felt that we did for a short period 'belong'. To those of our members who felt "associate membership" was never an issue for us, our rejection by the NUM vindicated their opinions, but to many others it was a bitter blow in the face of our tremendous loyalty. Now that associate membership is a fact - it is doubtful that many will take it up. Though this should not put us off the support that the NUM desperately needs in its continuing fight against further pit closures, against the inhuman application of the new disciplinary code (through our support for the overtime

ban). Against the devisive actions of British Coal to blackmail areas into a six day week and continental shifts as a means of destroying many more jobs and along with that, the national agreements of the Union. The survival of the National Union is even more at stake now with the British Coal being pressurised by the Tory Government to slim down for privatisation with the imposition of the company union known as the UDM, and even more competition from cheap coal and nuclear energy. There cannot be a union in the history of the British Labour movement that has had to withstand such a combined and concerted onslaught, or one that has shown such courage in sustaining itself and become the inspiration for many other struggles.

**WE CAN SURELY NOT ABANDON THIS AS OUR MAIN STARTING POINT . . . . . but we must put the building of our movement and the broadening of our programme as being of equal importance OTHERWISE WE SHALL NOT BE THERE AT ALL TO CONDUCT ANY STRUGGLE.**

Many women who were involved have said **WE SHOULD NOT DISBAND**. Many are looking for a lead in a way forward. **MANY MORE HAVE SAID** "we'd like to join you if only . . . . . One thing is sure, you would not be here today if you still did not believe we have a future. **THAT IS THE BEST REASON FOR THIS MEETING TO COME TO A POSITIVE CONCLUSION RESULTING IN A NEW WAY FORWARD FOR W.A.P.C.**

## NOTES FOR WORKSHOPS

### Proposition

1) That we stay as we are:

with the same statement of aims ?

with the same structure ?

with the same name ?

What ideas does your workshop put forward for increasing:

membership

activities

raising funds for the organisation

2) We change ourselves into a new women's movement (see additional notes):

a) open to all women

b) with a change of name

3) Do we change our name:

incorporating W.A.P.C. in title ?

choose an entirely different one ?

ie. National Union of Women (incorp. W.A.P.C.) known as NUW  
(W.A.P.C. inc) or new W.A.P.C., or Women's Union. , )

What are your ideas ?

**APPENDIX 8**

**INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS:  
AREAS FOR EXPLORATION/INDICATIVE QUESTIONS**

## INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS: AREAS FOR EXPLORATION/INDICATIVE QUESTIONS

Individual interviews were conducted as conversations rather than as question and answer sessions. Questions were formulated early on in the study as indicative of emerging areas for exploration and not as the basis of a traditional interview schedule. None of the interviews followed either the order or the precise form of questions detailed below and in all cases they were augmented and adapted in the context of women's individual experiences and lives.

### A BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

Age; educational background; current and past paid employment experience; marital status; numbers and ages of children.

### B INVOLVEMENT IN GREENHAM OR MINING SUPPORT GROUP

When did you first get involved?

How did you get involved?

Were you influenced by anyone or anything in particular?

What did the protest mean to you/ what was it mainly about?

What sort of activities did you take part in/ continue to take part in?

If you are no longer involved what made you change direction?

Has being involved changed you or your life in any way?

Have you encountered any particular obstacles to making changes in your life?

How effective have these protests been and in what ways?

What do you consider to be particularly important about what you and other women have done in support of Greenham/Miners' Strike?

#### **C      WOMEN'S ORGANISATION/ SUPPORT GROUPS**

What has working with other women in a support group meant to you?

Do you think that women work differently together than with men?

In your experience have women encountered any problems in working together?

Do you think women should work alone or together with men for social change?

Have you ever thought that women supporting Greenham/ Miners' Strike could have organised more effectively?

What sort of organisation do you feel is needed to keep the action going?

#### **D      GENDER RELATIONS**

What have been your experiences of working with men in the cause of peace/ miners' strike?

In your personal experience how supportive have men been in this protest/ any other political groups you have been in?

Did men in your household help by carrying out domestic duties, including looking after the children, if any?

What has been your experience of non-violent direct action at Greenham and/or on picket lines in the Miners' strike?

What do you feel are the most appropriate forms which women's protest could take?

Have your relationships (particularly any close relationships) with men changed as a result of your involvement in protest?

Have your relationships with women changed in any way?

Have there been any lasting tensions/conflicts with family/close friends as a result of your involvement?

Do you think men and women are different in the way they think and behave?

Do you see all men as basically the same or do they differ in important ways?

Are there any significant differences amongst women and were these apparent in any way during the protest?

What do you think of the view that men are more aggressive than women?

## E WOMEN AND POLITICS

Were you ever involved in any women's groups or activities with women before getting involved?

Have you ever been involved before in any political groups/activities of any kind?

Are you a member of a political party or would you contemplate joining?

Has being involved in Greenham/ Miners' Strike changed your views of politics in any way?

Has it changed your views of women's role in politics?

Were you involved in some way in both protests and if so how?

What are your views on women's participation in Greenham (directed at women in mining communities)?

What are your views on women's participation in the Miners' Strike (directed at Greenham women)?

What did you make of the way the media reported on women's actions in Greenham/ Miners' Strike?

What was your personal experience of policing during the protest?

Do you feel that women were treated differently than men by the media and by the police during the protests?



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