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Gender, Feminism and Unsung Workers: The Early Years of the Law Centres Movement 1970–1980

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Introduction

This chapter examines the early history of the Law Centres movement in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. More specifically, it considers the role that women played in shaping the way that Law Centres worked and the work they did. The discussion draws on a four-year project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council which is being conducted by the authors in partnership with the British Library, the Law Centres Network and Queen's University Belfast.¹ The Enhancing Democratic Habits project aims to produce an in-depth account of activist lawyering in Law Centres from the 1970s to the present day. It has two key goals: to produce an oral history sound archive and a national collection of Law Centre reports, both of which will be deposited at the British Library on an open access basis. In this contribution to the celebration of Rosemary Auchmuty's life and work we use data collected during the first phase of the research to ask a series of questions that are relevant to her body of work on feminist legal history. We address three main questions. How can uncelebrated women be found? What roles did women play in Law Centres? And what impact did they have?

Several of the themes which emerge from the first stage of the Enhancing Democratic Habits project reflect ideas that have emerged from Rosemary's work on women's history and the methodologies associated with marginalised legal lives.²

¹ AHRC grant AH/T007710/1. In the course of the project, we will conduct five case studies which focus on particular Law Centres. Anna Bryson and Kieran McEvoy will take the lead in conducting the Northern Ireland case study.

² R Auchmuty, 'Early Women Law Students at Cambridge and Oxford' (2008) 29 *Journal of Legal History* 63; R Auchmuty, (2011) 'Whatever Happened to Miss Bebb? *Bebb v The Law Society* and Women's Legal History' (2011) 31 *Legal Studies* 199; R Auchmuty, 'Recovering Lost Lives: Researching Women in Legal History' (2015) 42 *Journal of Law and Society* 34.

Firstly, she has argued that feminist legal history remains largely undeveloped in the United Kingdom (UK).³ We argue that Law Centres' role in foregrounding the problems faced by women forms a relatively unexplored part of the history of radical lawyering and the history of women's liberation more generally.⁴

Secondly, Rosemary has urged historians to adopt a broad definition of legal biography which moves beyond those women who qualified as lawyers to include those engaged in legal work.⁵ This has a particular resonance for Law Centres, where community workers often worked alongside lawyers in identifying legal problems and appropriate responses to them. Thirdly, her work has emphasised the need to set subjects in a wider context than the world of law. This has been made possible in the Enhancing Democratic Habits project because of the use of the life-story method which focuses on capturing holistic accounts of lives that include details of family life, education, political beliefs and outside-of-work activities. Finally, Rosemary's work with Erica Rackley encourages us to avoid the siren call of anecdote and myth when delving into personal and community histories.⁶ As will become clear, this is an issue which has dogged earlier histories of the Law Centre movement which, we argue, have failed to recognise the particular contribution made in their 'origin' stories by women workers. We argue that looking at the Law Centres movement from a feminist perspective provides an excellent opportunity to add nuance to existing 'canonical' accounts of its early years. These accounts have tended to focus on the achievements of a relatively small group of men and rarely mention gender except when talking about women as clients or the women's groups that were represented on the management committees of Law Centres.⁷

This chapter involves an analysis of 10 long interviews with Law Centre 'pioneers' and a discourse analysis of 25 annual reports produced in the first 10 years of their history.⁸ Oral history and life stories have been identified as

³ R Auchmuty, 'Early Women Law Students' (n 2); R Auchmuty, 'Spinsters and Trade Unions in Victorian Britain' (1975) *Labour History* 109–22; E Rackley and R Auchmuty (eds), *Women's Legal Landmarks: Celebrating the History of Women and Law in the UK and Ireland* (Hart, 2018).

⁴ See, for instance, M Jolly, *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the UK Women's Liberation Movement, 1968–Present* (OUP, 2019). It is noticeable that despite the importance of legal reform to second-wave feminists, there is only one lawyer in the Sisterhood and After project www.bl.uk/sisterhood. See also M Stephens, *Community Law Centres: An Appraisal* (Avebury, 1990); A Byles and P Morris, *Unmet Need: The Case of the Neighbourhood Law Centre* (Routledge, 1977).

⁵ Auchmuty, 'Recovering Lost Lives' (n 2). See, for instance, her discussion of Lilian Orme in Auchmuty, 'Spinsters and Trade Unions' (n 3). In this context see also F Batlan, 'The Birth of Legal Aid: Gender Ideologies, Women, and the Bar in New York City, 1863–1910' (2010) 28(4) *Law and History Review* 931–71.

⁶ E Rackley and R Auchmuty, 'The Case for Feminist Legal History' (2020) 40 *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 878.

⁷ See, for instance, C Grace and P Lefevre, 'Draining the Swamp' (1985) 7 *Law and Policy* 97; FH Zemans and A Thomas, 'Can Community Clinics Survive? A Comparative Study of Law Centres in Australia, Ontario and England' in F Regan et al (eds), *The Transformation of Legal Aid* (OUP, 1999); R Smith, 'Clinics in a Cold Climate: Community Law Centres in England and Wales' (1997) 35 *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* 895.

⁸ Our thanks go to Max Zahnd who worked as a postdoctoral fellow for the first year of the project and assisted in developing a coding framework for the reports on which this analysis loosely draws.

particularly appropriate to feminist and radical engagements with history.⁹ As an extended form of oral history interview, the life-story method gives the interviewer scope to explore the broader context of an interviewee's life including family background, education, motivations, personal interests, activities and political affiliations. Life-story interviews also tend to be much longer than other forms of interview, lasting up to 12 hours and taking place over several sessions. In common with other oral histories, the focus has traditionally been on recording the 'unheard voice'.

In the sections which follow, we seek to explore three key issues which disrupt existing accounts of English Law Centres. In the first section we describe our attempts to bring the stories of the women who helped to establish Law Centres to the fore. We then consider the roles that women played in Law Centres with particular reference to the opportunities offered to them and the day-to-day working of collectives. In the final section of the chapter, we consider how women began to change the work undertaken by Law Centres and the broader network of female activists that women in Law Centres collaborated with across organisations. In doing so, we draw attention to the manner in which women began to influence the activities of Law Centres and the ways in which structural inequalities were perceived. In presenting the voices of those involved in the early years of the movement we draw on interviews with female workers, but also on the accounts provided by the men who worked alongside them in their efforts to realise systemic change for impoverished communities.¹⁰ The picture we paint is one of radical activists giving voice to and responding to the subordination of women in broader society and within their own networks. The women we interviewed might identify as radical, socialist or liberal feminists.¹¹ What is fascinating about their accounts is the way in which they render visible the emergence of second-wave feminism and the ways in which it began to take root within progressive politics.

⁹ See Jolly (n 4); M Jolly, P Russell and R Cohen, 'Sisterhood and After: Individualism, Ethics and an Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement' (2012) 11 *Social Movement Studies* 211. But see also J Scanlon, 'Challenging the Imbalances of Power in Feminist Oral History: Developing a Take-and-give Methodology' (1993) 16 *Women's Studies International Forum* 639; S Gluck, 'Has Feminist Oral History Lost its Radical/Subversive Edge?' (2011) 39 *Oral History* 63; K Fobear, 'Do You Understand? Unsettling Interpretative Authority in Feminist Oral History' (2016) 10 *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 61; M Jolly and L Huibo, 'Hearing Her: Comparing Feminist Oral History in the UK and China' (2019) 45 *The Oral History Review* 48.

¹⁰ R Auchmuty and E Rackley, 'Feminist Legal Biography: A Model for all Legal Life Stories' (2020) 41 *Journal of Legal History* 186. They argue that feminist legal biography is not just about uncovering the lost lives of women but the relationship between the sexes. They anticipate that biographies of men require consideration of the ways in which men maintained their dominant position in law and society. In this chapter we outline a number of ways in which men have also contributed to the liberation of women.

¹¹ On the issue of origin stories and how different types of feminism emerged, see Jolly (n 4); P Bartley, *Women's Activism in Twentieth Century Britain: Making a Difference across the Political Spectrum* (Palgrave, 2022).

Finding Women and Rethinking the Concept of ‘Pioneer’

The first year of the Enhancing Democratic Habits project has been dedicated to conducting a series of life-story interviews with early Law Centre activists involved in the setting up of the first 10 Law Centres.¹² This is a group we originally referred to in our grant proposal as ‘the pioneers’. It soon became apparent that the very idea of a ‘pioneer’ was more problematic than originally anticipated, not least because this characterisation tends to isolate the individual rather than viewing their work in the broader context of the group or movement.¹³ Our initial review of work in the field found that a familiar group of men tended to be discussed in the literature on the early years of Law Centres. Examples of those regularly referred to include Michael Zander, who has been credited with initiating the debate about setting up Law Centres,¹⁴ or Tony Gifford, the co-founder of North Kensington Neighbourhood Law Centre. Amongst this group, Peter Kandler, the first Law Centre solicitor at the first UK Law Centre, has variously been described as ‘the driving force’¹⁵ of ‘his’ Law Centre¹⁶ or a rock-n-roll lawyer.¹⁷ To some extent the story of Peter Kandler’s many achievements has become a foundational story of the movement which continues to be told.¹⁸ Important though the contributions of these men have been to the field, the authors were aware of the danger of this project reinforcing the ‘great man’ approach to legal history.¹⁹ Indeed, the iconic photograph of North Kensington Law Centre reproduced at Figure 1 remains of interest to feminist historians because of the four women pictured about whom so little has been written.

¹² 13 in England and Wales, and two in Northern Ireland.

¹³ Auchmuty and Rackley (n 10).

¹⁴ Stephens (n 4).

¹⁵ O Boycott, “‘We are the A&E of Law’: The First UK Law Centre for Poor People Turns 50” *The Guardian* (London, 28 July 2020) www.theguardian.com/society/2020/jul/28/we-are-the-ae-of-law-the-first-uk-law-centre-for-poor-people-turns-50.

¹⁶ K Schuyt, K Groenendijk and B Sloot, ‘Access to the Legal System and Legal Services Research’ in B Blegvad, C Campbell and C Schuyt (eds), *European Yearbook in Law and Sociology* (Springer, 1977) 98.

¹⁷ T Kingsley, ‘Meet the “Rock n Roll” Lawyers of Kensington who Started in an Old Butcher’s Shop’ *West London News* (London, 11 June 2020) www.mylondon.news/news/west-london-news/meet-rock-n-roll-lawyers-18395890.

¹⁸ See eg M Prescott, ‘50 Years of the NKLC’ (2020) *Socialist Lawyer* 48; O Subhedar, ‘From a Butcher’s Shop to the Tory Cuts’ (2018) *Socialist Lawyer* 19; P Kandler, ‘North Kensington Law Centre: Reflections 40 Years On’ (2010) *Socialist Lawyer* 29; Byles and Morris (n 4 above). See also A Gifford, ‘The Founding of the North Kensington Law Centre’ (North Kensington Law Centre, nd) nkcl.org.uk/the-founding-of-the-north-kensington-law-centre. When discussing its own history, North Kensington Law Centre’s website focuses on Peter Kandler, Tony Gifford and James Saunders along with six other male members of the organising committee. Of the two women who are mentioned one is Pansy Jeffrey, the head of the local Citizen Advice Bureau and the other is Kate Gifford, identified as the pregnant wife of Tony who assisted by writing letters to funders.

¹⁹ Auchmuty and Rackley (n 10).



Figure 1 Photograph taken outside North Kensington Neighbourhood Law Centre²⁰

Our point is not to disparage the incredibly important work that men did in contributing to the establishment of Law Centres and improving the lives of women, men and families. Our argument is merely that the time has come for the particular contribution and perspective of women to be researched, understood and celebrated.

At first sight, the focus of the existing literature on men might appear justified when discussed in the context of the legal profession of the early 1970s. When Law Centres were set up, just under 3 per cent of solicitors with practising certificates were women.²¹ By way of contrast, our analysis of early Law Centre reports (1970–1980) shows that women made up approximately half of all Law Centre staff, playing the role of community workers and administrative staff, as well as solicitors.²² The role of community workers is particularly important in the present context as many were recognised as having a much more in-depth knowledge and

²⁰ An original of this photograph is held by the Law Centres Network.

²¹ '75 Years of Women Solicitors' (*BBC News*, 19 December 1997) news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/40448.stm.

²² It has been difficult to identify the exact roles that women played in Law Centres as their job titles are often not included in annual reports. The authors surmise that this reflects the collective spirit of many Law Centres and formal recognition that no job was more important than another.

experience of the problems of the poor than many solicitors of the time.²³ Female community workers remain critical to our sample because of the fact that they were women in law rather than women lawyers.

Our interest in untold stories of women's legal activists has prompted us to search out the details of those who have been marginalised in the histories produced to date. Tracking down the women involved in the first 10 years of the movement is not without its problems. Many Law Centre reports from the period have not survived, and finding up-to-date contact details for those we are able to identify can be difficult in a search that goes back 50 years. We have, however, actively sought out references to women workers, volunteers or management committee members in our analysis of annual reports and other archives and encouraged male and female interviewees to talk about the women they worked alongside.²⁴ We have also extended our sample frame beyond the traditional notion of a pioneer as a person at the very beginning of an initiative and increased the relevant time period to the first 10 years of the movement. This gave us the flexibility to include more women in the sample of interviewees. This has not solved all of our problems in identifying uncelebrated women. Trails peter out and women from the early years have sometimes changed their names upon marriage. We have also discovered that those who were not lawyers, or who did not become lawyers, have been more reticent about recording life-story interviews on the basis that they do not consider their stories important enough.

Despite these setbacks it has been possible to unearth a range of new and interesting data about women in Law Centres. It soon became clear once interviews commenced that an extensive range of women are known and remembered within activist networks. Four excellent examples of interviewees can be given,²⁵ starting with Pamela Ditton who was the second solicitor and first ever female Law Centre solicitor in an English Law Centre. She was appointed just six months after North Kensington Neighbourhood Law Centre opened and developed a huge breadth of experience, going on to be one of the first workers at another Law Centre in Islington. Despite her absence in existing histories of UK Law Centres, Pamela has also gone on to do 'great things' at the Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service.²⁶ Jane Hickman, who worked as a lawyer at North Kensington Neighbourhood Law Centre and Balham Neighbourhood Law Centre in the 1970s, went on to act for the women at Greenham Common Peace Camp in the early 1980s, representing them in the UK courts and in their case against

²³ P Leask, 'Law Centres in England and Wales' (1985) 7 *Law and Policy* 61. It seems that other community workers were radical young graduates keen to advocate for the disadvantaged. During the 1960s, students started taking a more avid interest in campaigns for social change: see R Smith, *Justice: Redressing the Balance* (Legal Action Group, 1997).

²⁴ The relative invisibility of women was compounded when we turned our attention to seeking out women of colour.

²⁵ We have the express consent of all four women to include their names in this paper.

²⁶ J Faine, *Lawyers in the Alice: Aborigines and Whitefellas' Law* (Federation Press, 1993).

United States President Ronald Reagan.²⁷ With Ben Rose, she subsequently set up her own firm which became one of the leading criminal defence and human rights firms in the country. In 2007, Jane was also appointed by the Lord Chancellor's Department as a Commissioner at the Legal Services Commission.²⁸ Angela Mason, who began her Law Centre career as a community worker at Camden Community Law Centre in 1973, trained as an articled clerk in the late 1970s at Battersea Law Centre and practised as a qualified solicitor at West Hampstead Law Centre in the early 1980s. Later, in 1992, Angela was to become the Director of Stonewall, where she led a number of successful gay rights campaigns, including campaigns in favour of the lowering of the age of consent for gay men, against the ban on gays in the military, and in support of gay adoption and civil partnerships. From 2003 to 2007 she was the head of the Government Equalities Office and received a CBE for her 'services to homosexual rights' in 2007.²⁹

Other women who continued to work at the coalface have also made a mark. Included in this group are women such as Wendy Pettifer who began her career as a community worker at Manchester Law Centre. She later qualified as a solicitor and, after working in private practice and at the College of Law, she became the senior housing solicitor at Hackney Community Law Centre in 2009.³⁰ Even after her retirement, Wendy remains a committed activist and campaigner: in 2016 and 2017 she worked as a volunteer lawyer at the Calais Jungle.³¹ As the project develops we hope to reveal many more accounts of the women, including women who never qualified as lawyers, who fuelled the early Law Centres.³² Women such as Baroness Martha Otito Osamor and Baroness Margaret Prosser, whose fascinating histories we are currently exploring.

The Involvement of Women in the Early Years of Law Centres

Accounts of the lives of individual female legal activists remain important to our project but run the risk of isolating the individual at the expense of the collective.

²⁷ For a history of the Greenham Common protest, see E Woodcraft, 'Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp 1981–2000' in Rackley and Auchmuty, *Women's Legal Landmarks* (n 3).

²⁸ See 15 September 2016 statement on the Hickman & Rose website, 'Hickman & Rose Founding Partner Retires' www.hickmanandrose.co.uk/hickman-and-rose-founding-partner-retires/.

²⁹ L Ward and T Branigan, 'Level's Best' *The Guardian* (London, 14 November 2007) www.theguardian.com/society/2007/nov/14/guardiansocietysupplement.equality.

³⁰ Hackney Community Law Centre, 'Wendy Pettifer retires from HCLC' (24 June 2016) www.hclc.org.uk/2016/04/wendy-pettifer-retires-from-hclc/.

³¹ Wendy Pettifer, 'About the Author' www.lovelines.net/about/.

³² Some women in this category such as the politician Harriet Harman have already come to the attention of the public and list their involvement in Law Centres in their personal profiles: See further 'About Harriet' www.harrietharman.org/about_harriet.

This tension has been recognised by other feminists³³ as raising a series of ethical issues about whether we can understand movements through an accumulation of individual narratives. It has been persuasively argued that individual interviews also serve to engender a political understanding of the personal,³⁴ but tensions still ensue in selecting who to talk to and determining who can represent a movement that is ideologically defined as communal. The issue of the group versus the individual is especially important when researching early Law Centres, many of which came to operate as collectives.³⁵ This way of working involved an active decision by workers to remove the sorts of hierarchical structures associated with class and gender differentials in broader society. In a review of the first 10 years of operation, North Kensington Neighbourhood Law Centre explained:

Just as the centre's relationship to its surrounding community has evolved toward a model of democratic control, so too has its internal organisation as a workplace. Although differences in experience and prior training were always recognised, the goal became gradually to share responsibility and to conduct in-service training to ensure that knowledge is pooled.³⁶

Receptionist and secretarial roles were phased out in some centres in which 'self-servicing' became the norm.³⁷ These collective structures were often accompanied by pay parity which benefited non-legally qualified staff, who, at the time, were more likely to be women.³⁸ Finally, decisions about case work, campaigns, appointments and the organisation of the office involved everyone coming to a consensus rather than managers imposing decisions.

It is important to note that these equalising measures, aimed at levelling out the hierarchy between lawyers and community workers, managers and administrators, attracted criticism from the communities in which early Law Centres were based.³⁹ Local residents and some Law Centre workers expressed concerns that administrative and secretarial roles offered opportunities for employment for local women who lacked the expertise and experience required to compete for the diverse professional roles in Law Centres.⁴⁰

The dynamics of collective working, and its benefits and limitations, are rarely examined in any depth in the existing literature on UK Law Centres⁴¹ or the

³³ Jolly et al (n 9).

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ The idea of the collective became less feasible in subsequent decades.

³⁶ North Kensington Law Centre, 'The First Ten Years, 1970–1980' (North Kensington Law Centre, 1980) 16.

³⁷ Leask (n 23); C Robinson, T Chakraborty and C Dabiezis, *18 Years: Coming of Age, 1970–1988* (North Kensington Law Centre, 1988).

³⁸ See, for instance, North Kensington Law Centre (n 36). Subsequently, low pay for solicitors in the sector was raised as an issue in terms of the recruitment and retention of experienced solicitors: Leask (n 23). By this point, far more women were working as qualified lawyers in Law Centres.

³⁹ Leask (n 23) 71–72.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*; M Prosser and G Watts, *Your Seat is at the End: My Story* (Feather Duster Publications, 2010).

⁴¹ See, for instance, Byles and Morris (n 4); Stephens (n 4).

annual reports of Law Centres themselves, meaning that we have had to rely on interview data to produce insights into the everyday experiences of the collective from both women and men. It was argued in interviews that the shift away from traditional workplace dynamics often aided the personal development of the women concerned. In the words of one female Law Centre worker:

[T]he way Law Centres were organised did facilitate women being involved and taking, having space to take a more active role than they would have done in a very formal hierarchical setting, where they would have just acted as legal secretaries or receptionists. (Interviewee 8, Female)⁴²

And a male worker from another Centre argued that playing a more active role could also encourage activism:

I could see when the collective was formed that in fact, after they got over their initial nerves, certain of the women who'd been secretaries really blossomed in terms of their personality and doing case work and helping people. It really encouraged them to take part and be an activist. (Interviewee 1, Male)

The overwhelming demand for services often meant that those with less formal qualifications were encouraged to increase their skills. By way of example, in a review of the first five years of operation, Camden Community Law Centre reflected on its recognition that receptionists needed to be provided with in-house training to enable them to move beyond merely greeting people to taking full statements, giving basic advice and signposting people to services – and even to visiting people in remand homes and prisons.⁴³ Law Centres also provided broader opportunities for solicitors. One interviewee described how her increasing interest in employment law led to her becoming the shop steward at the Law Centre and her appointment as a delegate to the local Trades Council. By the mid-1970s, she was the convenor of the local Trades Council Equal Opportunities Sub Committee and became involved in actively seeking out local situations in which women were being underpaid for work of equivalent value to that of men.

New opportunities for women to develop as caseworkers or community workers and, in a number of cases, to become legally qualified were clearly prospects which would not ordinarily have been available to them in the more traditional setting of private practice. However, the lack of a formal hierarchical structure did not mean there was no structure or hierarchy. For some workers, power relations

⁴²There is some indication that the people recruited into these roles were sometimes graduates attracted by the radical potential of the Law Centre. Walter Merricks, for example, qualified as a solicitor in 1970, but he is listed as the reception worker in North Kensington Neighbourhood Law Centre, 'Annual Report, 1972' (North Kensington Neighbourhood Law Centre 1972). In 1973, he became the first Director of Camden Community Law Centre (see further J Rayner, 'Class Warrior' *Law Society Gazette* (London, 3 June 2019) www.lawgazette.co.uk/people/class-warrior/5070436.article). He is also listed as 'Solicitor (Director)' in Camden Community Law Centre, 'Half-Yearly Report, 1973' (Camden Community Law Centre, 1973).

⁴³Camden Community Law Centre, 'Annual Report and Five Year Review, 1977–78' (Camden Community Law Centre, 1978).

transformed into something more informal and opaque.⁴⁴ In the words of one female worker:

I personally felt that the structurelessness opened up a different sort of power structure. But it wasn't really that different, in that the most dominant people, usually the white males, still retained the power, whilst kind of pretending that they didn't. (Interviewee 4, Female)

For this worker, the lack of structure led to a situation where time was wasted, particularly in meetings:

But it did evolve into a really tortuous complex decision-making process, whereby sometimes we would spend, I don't know, about half a day if not a whole day just talking about the politics of the Law Centre, the contradictions between state funding and wanting to facilitate people's power or whatever, to enhance the growth of the community to make their own decisions.

The possible inefficiencies of collective working arose in other interviews as well.

Nevertheless, interviewees were often supportive of collective organisation, possibly due to their left-wing political values. Responses sometimes suggested that it was not so much a lack of structure that was a problem, but the longstanding influence of broader societal expectations about how women should behave and be. By way of example, several male interviewees noted that female administrative staff were often reluctant to be involved in collective decision making. In the words of one:

we had the staff meetings – everyone together and you'd alternate the chair. Well it was pretty obvious that some of the support workers didn't like that. And in retrospect you say, 'But we insisted on it.' Well who is the 'we'? Who is making the decision? The majority, but they were the minority. So there's the element of coercion, isn't there? And I don't know, you're doing it for what you think are the best of motives, but if they're sort of shit scared of having to go into the meeting, it's not really very helpful. (Interviewee 7, Male)

Despite these limitations, Law Centres were often remembered as comfortable places for feminists and lesbians to work at a time when they were commonly met with discrimination and hostility in wider society.⁴⁵ Manchester Law Centre is worthy of note as a pioneer in this field, publishing a Gay Rights book called *The Law and Sexuality* in 1977. An interviewee reflected on how the Law Centre was a place where she was able to openly express her sexuality:

Being a lesbian was something as well. I mean, that was, it wasn't just acceptable in Law Centres, it was, you know, it was a badge of pride. Nobody dared say anything ... Which

⁴⁴ C Landry et al, *What a Way to Run a Railroad: An Analysis of Radical Failure* (Comedia Publishing, 1985).

⁴⁵ See further R Auchmuty, S Jeffreys and E Miller, 'Lesbian History and Gay Studies: Keeping a Feminist Perspective' (1992) 1 *Women's History Review* 89; R Auchmuty, 'The Rhetoric of Equality and the Problem of Heterosexuality' in L Mulcahy and S Wheeler (eds), *Feminist Perspectives on Contract Law* (Routledge-Cavendish, 2005).

was lovely, because there was a lot of prejudice otherwise out in society. So it was a safe haven. (Interviewee 2, Female)

Attention has often been drawn to the important part that working with other activists who were comfortable with challenging traditional ways of doing things played out in creating less stereotypical ways of working. As the same interviewee explained:

I just couldn't imagine being in a traditional law firm with all of that – you would have had to wear a skirt and a suit and stockings, as it was, suspenders and stockings every day, high heels, lipstick ... And if Law Centres hadn't been there, I just think what the hell would have happened to me? (Interviewee 2, Female)

These accounts provide a clear sense of the ways in which the progressive politics of Law Centres allowed traditional hierarchies to be broken down and a more diverse range of voices to engage in decision making. But what impact did this have on decisions about the type of work undertaken by Law Centres? Did the type of work that was prioritised demonstrate equal respect for the rights of women and their unmet legal needs?

How Did Feminist Values Impact on the Sort of Work that Was Done?

The work undertaken by Law Centres was determined by reference to their aspirations, the formal constraints placed upon them and pragmatic concerns about their level of resourcing. Alongside other advice centres and activists, early Law Centres aspired to play a central role in addressing unmet legal need and filling in the gaps left by other solicitors. In the early 1970s, areas of unmet legal need where legal aid was not available, or where it was routinely refused in the Magistrates' Court, included proceedings before Rent Tribunals, Rent Assessment Committees, Social Security Tribunals and Industrial Tribunals; all of which adjudicated on issues which primarily affected poor people.⁴⁶ Law Centres also aspired to serve the poor in other ways. Rather than focusing solely on case work, as private solicitors firms did, they were commonly driven by a desire to have an impact on the systemic issues that caused or exacerbated poverty and discrimination.⁴⁷ For these reasons, Law Centres demonstrated a keen interest in campaigning for change and educating local communities. By way of example, Benwell Community Law Project chose

⁴⁶North Kensington Neighbourhood Law Centre, 'Annual Report, 1971' (North Kensington Neighbourhood Law Centre, 1971).

⁴⁷Stephens (n 4). The case work they did nonetheless remained an important part of their work and often allowed workers to identify recurring problems in the neighbourhood that could form the basis of a campaign: see Hackney Advice Bureau and Law Centre, 'Annual Report, 1976–1977' (Hackney Advice Bureau and Law Centre, 1977).

to tackle the need for systemic change through close collaboration with working class organisations such as trade unions.⁴⁸ This approach was facilitated in the early years of the movement by the fact that Law Centres were supported by government grants and charitable donations rather than being reliant on legal aid, which only funded specified clients.

Constraints were, however, imposed on Law Centres' work. At the time, the Law Society rules prohibited solicitors from advertising, fee-sharing and cost-cutting. Law Centres needed to do all three: they had to advertise their services to the local community; their fee-sharing arrangements fell outside of the normal partnership model; and, by providing free legal services, they were undercutting other solicitors. Thus, in order to provide free legal services, Law Centres needed a Law Society waiver of their breach of these rules. In the early years of their development, their case work activities were not restricted by the Law Society as long as Law Centres were seen as responding to unmet need. However, as the number of Centres grew, so did fears within the profession that Law Centres were competing with private practice for clients. As a direct result of these fears, the Law Society sought to use conditions attached to the grant of the waiver to limit the areas of law in which they could work. Despite the claim by Law Centres that their work increased popular awareness of legal process,⁴⁹ conflict over the grant of the Law Society waiver eventually led to a compromise whereby Law Centres were prevented from working in the areas traditionally occupied by private practice lawyers such as divorce, serious accidents, personal injury compensation claims and much adult crime.⁵⁰

The overwhelming demand for the services offered by Law Centres from the outset also imposed constraints on what they could achieve and meant that hard decisions had to be made as to what kinds of work should be prioritised.⁵¹ In some instances, the gender dynamics of the work being done were highly visible. The appalling misconduct and flagrant racism of the police exposed by Law Centres meant that many of them focused on criminal defence work,⁵² more particularly to supporting young (often black) men, who were more likely to come into contact with the criminal justice system than were women. In other instances, the gender dynamics of Law Centre's case work were more subtle. Most Centres fell quite quickly into a portfolio which included a focus on housing, social security, employment, juvenile crime and consumer issues. Some of this work such as housing problems relating to security of tenure, harassment, disrepair, fire safety, unfair rents and illegal evictions could be viewed as impacting on men and women

⁴⁸ Benwell Community Law Project, 'Annual Report, 1975' (Benwell Community Law Project, 1975).

⁴⁹ North Kensington Law Centre (n 36); Robinson et al (n 37).

⁵⁰ M Zander, *Legal Services for the Community* (Maurice Temple Smith, 1978) 88–93; Smith (n 23).

⁵¹ See eg North Kensington Neighbourhood Law Centre (n 46); Camden Community Law Centre (n 42); Camden Community Law Centre (n 43); Balham Neighbourhood Law Centre, 'A Case for Change: Annual Report, 1975–76' (Balham Neighbourhood Law Centre, 1976); Brent Community Law Centre, 'Annual Report, 1976' (Brent Community Law Centre, 1976).

⁵² Leask (n 23).

equally and was commonly presented in this way. The fact that the traditional caregiving role of women and their relative lack of financial independence meant that women undoubtedly experienced the fear and consequences of such events more keenly was much less frequently reflected on in the early Law Centre reports analysed for this project. The note of a meeting of women Law Centre workers organised by Pam Ditton between 1973–1975 makes the point that the gendered dynamics of legal issues often went unseen by male workers:

Most law centres have adopted a blanket exclusion of matrimonial law. We don't think that this is either fair or logical. To date the law centres have been very deeply involved with housing problems – but who has a greater housing problem than the married woman attempting to leave or get rid of her husband after a marriage has broken down, and avoid the trap of losing her children into care and not being able to get a flat without them? The problem of battered wives is a very real one – and one that the police refuse to involve themselves in. There is the problem of the cohabitation rules and its effect on social security payments – should we be fighting harder against this? And also the currently controversial immigration policy which directly discriminates against women. The legal problems of women are countless and we only raise headlines in the hope of provoking discussion.⁵³

It is certainly the case that hardly any consideration was given in early annual reports to the systematic abuse suffered by women through domestic violence. Early reports are largely silent on, or do no more than make passing reference to, the need to use injunctions to protect 'people' in fear of assault or molestation in the context of 'family problems'.⁵⁴ References to battered wives, women assaulted by their 'men friends' and 'family problems' now seem out of step with contemporary discourse around the topic and suggest the ways in which these problems were isolated from recognition of larger structural inequalities in society. The limited response of Law Centres may, in part, be a reflection of the fact that a small, but growing, number of private practice solicitors had now started to do this work. What is significant, however, is that, unlike other areas of work in which case work examples frequently prompted a strategic or policy response, cases involving emergency injunctions were not seen as being worthy of broader campaigns or educational initiatives:

But we didn't have feminist politics in the Law Centre. You know, that, there was no institutional recognition in Law Centres of, of the oppression of women as such. And the work that was done on domestic violence was done because there was a legal need, not because there was a perception that there was a political position there. (Interviewee 2, Female)

The significance of the neglect of domestic violence as a systemic issue went beyond the discussions of Law Centre priorities. It also gave rise to problems at case level

⁵³ 'Women in Law Centres': this document was given to our collection by Pam Ditton and dates from between 1973–1975. This quotation is taken from page 5 of the unnumbered document.

⁵⁴ See, for instance, North Kensington Neighbourhood Law Centre (n 42).

when conflict arose between defending male perpetrators of abuse, protecting the wider community against brutality and being a feminist lawyer. As one of our female interviewees explained:

I do remember very, very traumatically, one of the [criminal defence] cases was a GBH where a man had stabbed his girlfriend through and through with a sword. And my job was to get him bail. (Interviewee 2, Female)

The same interviewee described how at one point she was driven by such dilemmas to write a paper on why the Law Centre should not continue to defend men in rape cases.⁵⁵ These attitudes towards domestic violence began to change significantly in the mid-1970s as awareness of violence as a feminist issue became more widely understood. An interviewee who worked at two different Law Centres in succession in the early 1970s, contrasted them in this regard:

And right from the beginning ... in [my second Law Centre] there was a very strong feminist approach to issues that I have no memory of back in [my first Law Centre] in, at the beginning. In [my second Law Centre] we certainly took on domestic violence issues and I remember just talking, talks within the, among the workers about the contradiction about acting in criminal cases for male perpetrators when the victim is a local woman and the dichotomy this raises. (Interviewee 10, Female)

Gendered differences in recollections of the importance of domestic violence to the work of Law Centres are evident from interviews despite the occurrence of the problem in local communities. There were instances where male interviewees made no reference to these issues when describing the initial work of a Law Centre or had little recollection of domestic violence work, apart from mentioning links with the local Women's Aid. This provided a direct contrast to the accounts of female community workers who identified their collaboration with Women's Aid as a central element of their work from the outset. A possible explanation for the lack of awareness of the broader societal context within which feminists understood violence against women and rape is the politics of the left in the 1970s. Structural Marxism was a particularly important lens through which the role of Law Centres was viewed by legal activists. This approach primarily diagnosed the ills of society as a tension between the working classes and the capitalist state, rather than as a struggle between the sexes.

While the literature on these issues in relation to Law Centres is limited, there are some useful parallels to be drawn from the extensive research on the

⁵⁵ This became less of an issue because of the constraints of the rules under which Law Centres were able to operate as not-for-profit organisations. In the early 1970s rules 1, 2 and 3 of the Solicitors Practice Rules prohibited touting, advertising, cost-cutting and sharing of profit costs. The 'Law Society waiver' allowed Law Centres to provide free legal advice but required that they did not work on adult crime cases as this would take work away from other practitioners in private practice who relied on legal aid.

Community Development Projects (CDPs) of the 1970s.⁵⁶ This formed part of a national government Urban Programme aimed at tackling poverty in disadvantaged communities. There are a number of similarities between Law Centres and CDPs. A number of early Law Centres actually emerged from CDPs, taking some of the CDP staff with them, and their working methods and desire to challenge the orthodoxy around the causes of, and solutions to, deprivation were very similar.⁵⁷ It has been argued that the predominant focus in CDPs on class-based analysis led to the marginalisation of structural issues around gender or race.⁵⁸ Further, even when CDPs engaged with women's rights, they did so in the workplace, but did not consider the position of women within the domestic sphere and the oppressions they faced there,⁵⁹ leading some to label the Marxist-based analysis of social problems in CDPs during the 1970s as 'gender-blind'.⁶⁰

Our research on the early years of Law Centres indicates that a number suffered from similar failings. In addition to the above description of the ways in which priorities were set, this is also indicated in the ways in which annual reports discuss the problems faced by generic 'workers' or 'people'. In doing so they render invisible the fact that some problems such as low pay and poor conditions often had a disproportionate impact on women clustered in certain industries or were part of a system based on institutionalised sexism.⁶¹ Interviews also revealed the ways in which the focus on class-based structural causes hampered the ability of Law Centres to recognise and respond to domestic abuse. As a male lawyer explained:

[P]artly we saw it as sort of difficult to, you know, difficult to organise collectively, the [domestic violence] cases. ... But maybe we shouldn't have been as complacent about the services that were available. And there was a very good firm of solicitors who set up

⁵⁶ There were 12 local Community Development Projects (CDPs). The CDPs are associated with a radical approach to community development. See eg K Popple, *Analysing Community Work: Its Theory and Practice* (Open University Press, 1995); S Banks and M Carpenter, 'Researching the Local Politics and Practices of Radical Community Development Projects in 1970s Britain' (2017) 52(2) *Community Development Journal* 226–46; J Green and A Chapman, 'The British Community Development Project: Lessons for Today' (1992) 27 *Community Development Journal* 242; M Loney, *Community Against Government: The British Community Development Project, 1968–78: A Study of Government Incompetence* (Heinemann Educational Books, 1983).

⁵⁷ J Burdett, 'Professional Accountability and Community Control in Legal Services Provision: A Study of Community Law Centres in England' (PhD thesis, London School of Economics, 2004); Loney (n 56); M Carpenter and B Kyneswood, 'From Self-Help to Class Struggle: Revisiting Coventry Community Development Project's 1970s Journey of Discovery' (2017) 52 *Community Development Journal* 247; K Popple, 'Rise and Fall of the National Community Development Projects 1968–1978: Lessons to Learn?' in R Gilchrist et al (eds), *Reflecting on the Past: Essays in the History of Community Youth Work* (Russell House Publishing, 2011); Green and Chapman (n 56); J Green, 'Action-Research in Context: Revisiting the 1970s Benwell Community Development Project' (2017) 52 *Community Development Journal* 269.

⁵⁸ Carpenter and Kyneswood (n 57); Popple (n 56); Popple (n 57).

⁵⁹ Green and Chapman (n 56); Green (n 57).

⁶⁰ Green and Chapman (n 56) 254; Popple (n 56) 37.

⁶¹ See, for instance, Lambeth Community Law Centre, 'Annual Report, 1978–79' (Lambeth Community Law Centre, 1979); Brent Community Law Centre, 'Annual Report, 1979' (Brent Community Law Centre, 1979).

specifically to do that kind of work very near the beginning of the Law Centre in [local area]. And I think we thought, 'Well that work is appropriate for ... you know, the Legal Aid system kind of works with that.' And gave it less priority. (Interviewee 3, Male)

In common with several Law Centres, this interviewee explained that their Law Centre identified domestic violence as being managed elsewhere, therefore choosing to support the work of the local Women's Aid at an organisational level, rather than prioritising working directly with women suffering domestic violence in order to try and improve the law or the legal response to the problems they faced.

It seems unlikely that the shifts in attitude which occurred from the mid-1970s onwards would have occurred without women being given the opportunity to engage in debates about the issue within Law Centres. As one of our male interviewees acknowledged:

But I didn't think in terms of domestic violence till I was educated by people like [female solicitor, Interviewee 2]. And that will go for practically every lawyer I can think of. We didn't think in those terms. That women were being brutalised. And we didn't think in general terms. And I didn't know that it was so widespread either; I didn't have any idea, until the publicity by women's movements and by women's refuges and so on about what was happening. I had no idea it was that widespread. So if we did get a domestic violence case, you know, as far as we were concerned it was just an occasional one. (Interviewee 1)

These reflections by a male activist many years after Law Centres were first established demonstrate how far debate has evolved within society generally, and within radical networks in particular. This is not to say that the failure to recognise violence against women is a problem that has gone away.⁶² What it does do is suggest the difference that giving women space to raise these concerns in a collective environment can make *within* movements. In the section which follows we delve deeper into the resources that women drew upon in making their fellow activists aware of the gendered nature of violence.

Beyond Law Centres: A Broader Sense of Community

Movements rarely operate in a vacuum, rather they are frequently engaged in cause coalitions or radical friendships which animate or amplify cross-movement activism.⁶³ Indeed, Rosemary herself has commented that:

⁶² See, for instance, LF Fitzgerald, 'Still the Last Great Open Secret: Sexual Harassment as Systemic Trauma' (2017) 18 *Journal of Trauma and Dissociation* 483; EA Jane, 'Systemic Misogyny Exposed: Translating Rape-gish from the Manosphere with a Random Rape Threat Generator' (2018) 21 *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 661.

⁶³ On this point see D Kelliher, 'Striking Solidarity: Friendship and the 1984–5 Miners' Strike' (History Workshop, 17 June 2020) www.historyworkshop.org.uk/friendship-solidarity-and-the-1984-5-miners-strike/.

Your paper brought back lots of memories of my feminist activist days. We were all aware of North Ken Law Centre, probably because lots of lesbian separatists lived in North Ken so we knew people there, and ... some came to my Lesbian History Group. (Rosemary Auchmuty, personal correspondence with authors)

The influence that community groups had on Law Centres varied considerably over time, but a bottom-up approach to engaging with the local community has been a defining feature of Law Centres from their inception. This is often reflected in the inclusion of the word 'community' or 'neighbourhood' in the names that Law Centres adopted. Community groups frequently campaigned for the establishment of a Law Centre and were routinely represented on Law Centre management committees once established. North Kensington Neighbourhood Law Centre reported in 1974, for instance, that it had 27 community groups on its advisory council with meetings with them taking place once a month.⁶⁴

This demonstrates that connections with the local community were clearly important to the ethos and values of Law Centres. Law Centres also encouraged disgruntled residents to set up their own community groups and gave legal advice to them, for example about issues relating to their leases, applications for charitable status and the drafting of constitutions. In some instances Law Centre workers also sat on the boards of the local community groups.⁶⁵ Umbrella groups consisting of all the advice-giving agencies in a borough were even established in the interests of sharing resources and maximising service delivery options.⁶⁶

This sense of being rooted in communities beyond a particular Law Centre is especially relevant to the story of the ways in which feminists found voice in Law Centres, and more particularly how domestic violence came to be understood. The lack of structure, referred to as a negative aspect of collectives in early sections of this chapter, emerges as a positive in this context. For some personnel, the fluid and open structure of Law Centres gave female workers the freedom to decide for themselves the issues they would tackle and their methods of doing so. For several of the women interviewed, their work in the Law Centre provided an extension of the feminist activism they had undertaken elsewhere or the other feminist networks they were already involved with. Feminist networks are particularly evident in the links that formed between women in Law Centres and the emerging network of women's refuges. As one interviewee explained:

Well, we set up, oh yeah I got involved in women's aid and set up the ... , so I got a group together around the Law Centre set, and we worked up to set up what was only the

⁶⁴North Kensington Neighbourhood Law Centre, 'Annual Report, 1974' (North Kensington Neighbourhood Law Centre, 1974).

⁶⁵Brent Community Law Centre (n 51); Brent Community Law Centre, 'Annual Report, 1978' (Brent Community Law Centre, 1978); Paddington Neighbourhood Advice Bureau and Law Centre, 'Annual Report, 1973-4' (Paddington Neighbourhood Advice Bureau and Law Centre, 1974).

⁶⁶Balham Neighbourhood Law Centre (n 51); Vauxhall Community Law Centre, 'Annual Report, 1974-75' (Vauxhall Community Law Centre, 1975).

second women's refuge in the country, so that was quite a good thing. (Interviewee 8, Female)

Another interviewee described how, before joining a Law Centre, her growing awareness of women's rights and women's oppression, meant that she and others had established and helped to run a women's refuge on a voluntary basis. In the absence of any guidance about what she should do as a community worker at the Law Centre she went on to work for, she simply continued to focus on domestic violence because it was an area in which she was already active:

So we were all, not exactly floundering but they were doing case work and my job was as a community worker so obviously I didn't have to do case work. But nobody gave me any guidance as to what I should be doing, so obviously I just developed the things that I [was] involved in. (Interviewee 4, Female)

Significantly, Women's Aid, which set up refuges for victims of domestic violence, was emerging at the same time as Law Centres were first being established. The National Women's Aid Federation was formed in 1974 bringing together nearly 40 independent refuge services as a national network and enabling women and children experiencing violence and fear in the home to travel across the country to a place of safety.⁶⁷ Several interviewees drew attention to the connections they formed with their local refuge.

Furthermore, our analysis of Law Centre annual reports in the latter part of the 1970s shows a growing awareness of deep-seated issues around domestic violence and the problems that women then faced in seeking help. Manchester Law Centre seems to have been particularly active in this regard, working closely with Women's Aid groups to get information out to women about their rights. In turn, this generated an upturn of case work involving domestic violence which the Manchester Law Centre characterised as a form of sexual discrimination. It also worked with an Asian Women's refuge group in the hope of understanding the particular isolation and oppression of Asian women.⁶⁸ In addition, Manchester Law Centre published a series of handbooks on women's social security rights, women's rights on relationship breakdown and housing and a booklet on how to get an injunction in cases of domestic violence. This proved very popular and had run to a third edition by 1978. A feminist activist who was involved in at least one of these publications explained that over 40 years later this remains an initiative which she continues to be proud of:

[I]t was the first project ever. And I was amazed because it just sold out really quickly and all these women from other Law Centres, and most of the Law Centres were in London, were ringing me up and they wanted more copies and, yeah, it was a really was a great success so that was, you know, very gratifying. (Interviewee 4, Female)

⁶⁷ See Women's Aid, 'Our History' www.womensaid.org.uk/about-us/history.

⁶⁸ Manchester Law Centre, 'Annual Report, 1977-78' (Manchester Law Centre, 1978); Manchester Law Centre, 'Annual Report, 1978-79' (Manchester Law Centre, 1979).

Around the same time, North Kensington Neighbourhood Law Centre also began to give more prominence to the issue of domestic violence in its annual reports. In part this was prompted by the increasing demand for injunctions following the Domestic Violence Act 1977. It also appears to have been motivated by growing recognition of the need for a local refuge for battered women and their children which female workers at the Law Centre were instrumental in setting up.⁶⁹ Increasing reference is also made in the reports of other Law Centres to working with Women's Aid,⁷⁰ and it is also noticeable that Women's Aid groups gradually began to be represented on the management committees of Law Centres.⁷¹

Another legal issue that particularly affected women and came to have increasing importance for Law Centres during the 1970s was care proceedings within public family law. At that time, there was no legal aid for parents in care proceedings, meaning that it constituted a category of unmet legal need which private practitioners had no financial incentive to address. As the 1970s progressed, a growing number of annual reports show this as a developing area of work.

In 1975, attempts were made to establish a women's Law Centre to deal with the generic issues being experienced by female clients across Law Centres. A meeting called to discuss women's issues attracted women from across the Law Centres movement and a number of feminist barristers. A working group was established, but after driving the initiative for a year, the group was unable to obtain funding. From the perspective of our interviewee, not only did the group have insufficient geographic focus to garner the support of a local authority, it was also evident that the Lord Chancellor's Department did not see a women's Law Centre as a priority. Rather than giving up entirely, the working group focused on what was possible and instead its members set up Rights of Women, to provide a legal resource for women suffering, or at risk of suffering, violence and abuse. Rights of Women was initially entirely run by volunteers, but, at the time of writing, it is a well-established 'women's legal rights organisation' with a particular focus on tackling violence against women and girls. It has a core paid staff group of 14 and numerous volunteer lawyers who provide telephone advice to women.⁷²

As the 1970s progressed, Law Centres became instrumental in expanding the forms of support available to women. In some Law Centres, this included lawyers and community workers assisting women with obtaining domestic violence injunctions or referring them to local legal aid firms to act on their behalf.⁷³

⁶⁹North Kensington Neighbourhood Law Centre, 'Annual Report, 1978' (North Kensington Neighbourhood Law Centre, 1978).

⁷⁰Balham Neighbourhood Law Centre, 'Inside Story: Annual Report, 1974-75' (Balham Neighbourhood Law Centre, 1975); Balham Neighbourhood Law Centre (n 51).

⁷¹See Manchester Law Centre, 'Annual Report, 1977-78' (n 68); Manchester Law Centre, 'Annual Report, 1978-79' (n 68); North Kensington Neighbourhood Law Centre (n 69); Camden Community Law Centre (n 42).

⁷²Rights of Women, 'Helping Women Through the Law' www.rightsofwomen.org.uk/about-us/what-do-we-do/helping-women-through-the-law.

⁷³An interviewee described self-help initiatives that were tried and failed because women were usually too scared of their abusers to represent themselves in court.

By the late 1970s Paddington Advice and Law Centre was reporting that the demand for help from large numbers of women subjected to domestic violence but also attempting to manage housing, money, welfare benefit and child support problems was something that they ‘could not, and should not, ignore.’⁷⁴ In this way, Law Centres played an important role in raising awareness of the issue of domestic violence and opening up new forms of work to the profession. In the words of one interviewee:

Because I think what Law Centres did was they opened the door to people to access legal aid because before hardly anybody did; people didn’t know they could get legal aid for things, people didn’t challenge their landlords or their employers or their violent husbands. And I really think that was a pivotal role for Law Centres in the 70s was opening that door. And then other lawyers thought, ‘Oh yes, we can make money out of legal aid, we can do this’, you know, we can, we can professionalise this and that’s what happened. (Interviewee 4, Female)

The passing of the Employment Protection Act 1975, the Social Security Pensions Act 1975, and the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 galvanised Law Centres to encourage women to mount cases under this new legislation⁷⁵ and to raise awareness of the new rights for female workers amongst trade unions,⁷⁶ predominantly female workforces and in schools.⁷⁷ An example of this sort of activity was that North Kensington Neighbourhood Law Centre received a grant from the Commission for Racial Equality and the Equal Opportunities Commission to undertake research on structure, pay and conditions in the hotel and catering industry.⁷⁸

The change in attitudes and growing recognition of the emergence of second-wave feminism in the first decade of the Law Centres movement received symbolic recognition when Manchester Law Centre set up a dedicated Women’s Rights team in 1978. By 1980 they had devoted 13 pages of their 54-page annual report to the subject of women’s rights, support for setting up a rape crisis counselling service, working with local women’s and prostitute’s rights groups, ongoing assistance to the Women’s Aid centre and plans to devote more time to work on financial dependence.⁷⁹ Looking beyond the sort of class-based structural inequality favoured by prominent pioneers, they asserted their belief that women’s rights had to be understood within the broader context of the women’s movement:

⁷⁴ Paddington Advice and Law Centre, ‘Annual Report, 1978–80’ (Paddington Advice and Law Centre, 1980) 8.

⁷⁵ Camden Community Law Centre (n 42).

⁷⁶ Brent Community Law Centre (n 51).

⁷⁷ Camden Community Law Centre (n 42); Brent Community Law Centre, ‘Annual Report, 1978’ (n 65); Manchester Law Centre, ‘Annual Report, 1977–78’ (n 68). For a history of the Sex Discrimination Act, see A Morris, ‘Sex Discrimination Act 1975’ in Rackley and Auchmuty (n 3).

⁷⁸ North Kensington Law Centre (n 36).

⁷⁹ Manchester Law Centre, ‘Annual Report, 1979–80’ (Manchester Law Centre, 1980). For a history of women’s refuges and rape crisis centres, see F Kaganas, ‘First Women’s Refuge 1971’ and A Diduck, ‘First Rape Crisis Centre 1976’ in E Rackley and R Auchmuty (ed), *Women’s Legal Landmarks: Celebrating Feminist Legal History* (Hart, 2018).

One thing we are agreed upon is that women's rights and the women's liberation movement should be closely linked. This might seem obvious but in America women's rights have become big business which lines the pockets of professionals who have no connection with the women's movement ... To try to avoid this split between women's rights and the women's movement we want to work with existing women's group acting as a resource to enable them to achieve their aims to help women start new groups around areas of particular concern.⁸⁰

Significantly, the new team at Manchester recognised that their decision to work within the women's movement meant that the issues they prioritised might not always be strictly legal, but might touch upon forms of inequality and injustice not covered by law. Examples of the type of work meant by this are given in the following year's annual report: an educational course on women and health and a campaign regarding the setting-up of a Well Women Clinic in Levenshulme.⁸¹ It was recognised that these activities were outside the usual remit of the Law Centre, but health was considered an important issue for women in the area. The above summary shows the broad scope that Law Centres were able to encompass through their work at the time.

Conclusion

Seeking out women involved in the nascent Law Centres movement can add considerable nuance to existing histories of progressive political movements and the role that feminists have played in creating and sustaining them. What we have striven to show is the important, and largely untold, story of how women, feminists and in time men within Law Centres were successful in transforming debates about gender within their own networks and beyond. The progressive politics of Law Centres meant that some forms of structural disadvantage, most notably that suffered by young black men, were identified from the inception of the movement, but their radicalism did not extend in the early years to an appreciation of the structural disadvantage routinely experienced by women. It took the hard and often uncomfortable work of women, supported by their connections with other feminist networks, to bring the woman question to the fore. As more women joined Law Centres, they became increasingly influential in them, and the particular legal problems faced by women and their unmet legal needs became more visible. This is a story we will continue to unravel in subsequent publications. For present purposes, we do not intend simply to offer a progressive account of history in which we end by reflecting on how the lot of women has improved. In some ways, contemporary practices and attitudes, such as those currently reflected in statistics about gender-based

⁸⁰ Manchester Law Centre, 'Annual Report, 1978-79' (n 68) 14.

⁸¹ *ibid.*

violence, racial discrimination and misogyny within the police force or figures relating to the prosecution of rape, are depressingly similar to those faced by women in the 1970s. What this reveals to us is that the struggle goes on. This is a theme that, sadly, it seems we are likely to revisit many times in the course of this project.