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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Organizing refuge and domestic abuse services: a feminist oral history project

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If freedom is understood as non-domination (Einspahr, 2010), then in the 1970s and 80s, Canterbury's 'Rising Sun' domestic abuse refuge embodied the requisite collective agency and participatory processes. Where consciousness raising was understood as being inadequate to address women's oppression, where working *for* or *in the best interests of* women rang hollow, genuine collaborative *togetherness* infused the social construction and rule making of the refuge. Drawing from interviews with the founders, volunteers and employees, this article's methods build on scholarly interventions that aim to recover women's lost history (Auchmuty and Rackley, 2016; Thompson, 2022), and its feminist empirical methodologies aim to resonate with that of the refuge community, understanding such work as a 'continuous process of becoming' (Whittingdale, 2021). The article traces the accomplishments of the refuge's non-hierarchical ways of working, noting the method's presented obstacles, while it expertly danced the fine line of the 'tyranny of structurelessness' (Freeman, 1972).

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Introduction

This article considers a domestic abuse charity in South-East England, that has its roots in the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s.¹ It uses oral history to situate the charity's formation, organization and evolution within this social movement, and explores how tenets of the movement influenced the founding ethos and subsequent provision of a women's centre and refuge services. The article traces how values premised on 'radical egalitarianism', and the assumption that all women were equally capable of making decisions and performing tasks (Lewis and Baideme, 1972: 87), were adhered to by the founding sisters, were never abandoned and are still embedded within the charity's evolved *modus operandi* today. Drawing on Jan Pahl's work, we identify tensions between two political positionings in the collective; those who viewed the refuge-as-social-movement and those who understood the

refuge-as-social-provision. This article shares Pahl's analysis that the competing positionalities were at once a strain and source of tension yet also, ultimately, its greatest asset (Pahl, 1979). As the refuge developed a more 'mainstream' organizational identity, the article shows how the duality within the founding collective continues to shape the charity's culture and is its key strength and resource to this day.

In Canterbury, in 1974, several disparate, small and informal women's consciousness-raising groups coordinated to deliver 'women's services' in the city. This move to activism through the blending and coming together of separate smaller local networks was not unique but typical of the women's movement within both national and international landscapes (Freeman, 1975). So, while an examination of the resulting Women's Centre in Canterbury might appear on the face of it to be an atomistic grassroots case study, there were innumerable similar assemblages replicated and operating in parallel elsewhere (Bruley, 2019). These otherwise distinct groups shared the overarching drivers and politics of the Women's Liberation Movement and knowledge exchanged informally between groups.

As Canterbury's Women's Centre rapidly became a place of refuge for women fleeing domestic violence and abuse, the article explores the organizing methods and logics of the volunteers, and later employees. The collective in Canterbury eschewed attachments to leadership and any centralized top-down control (Pahl, 1978). Their collaborative working style was loose, flexible and person-centred. They aimed to erase any distinction between the 'helpers' and the 'helped' in a series of non-hierarchical norms embodying notions of 'self-help', 'mutual support' and 'power sharing' (Pahl, 1979). Yet the article draws out the ambiguities and contradictions of the refuge embodying the organizing philosophies of the social movement, while at the same time facing pressures to mimic traditional organizational structures in the delivery of services (Pahl, 1979). Very soon the tension led to a split in the group, but the remaining volunteers who continued to deliver services never lost sight of the principles of their founding sisters; this continues to animate and sustain the commitment of those involved today.

What follows is not merely a 'celebratory history' of the vital accomplishments of this particular group in delivering services to abused women, it is intended to be a 'usable past' (Forster and Bruley, 2019). For, 'if we are to have a feminist future, we need a feminist past upon which to stand and build' (Gilmore, 2013). By giving voice to this local, small-scale activist group, and by recognizing their successes, others might learn from the organizational ethos and relational philosophies of the collective. Moreover, the article plays its part in diversifying women's history and shows how social and political change can be stimulated from the bottom up (Gilmore, 2013).

Method

This article draws on conversations with 11 women in 2024 who were the original founders, early volunteers and longstanding employees of what is now a domestic abuse charity.² The primary empirical data pays particular attention to the founding ethos and ways of working at the refuge. While it was not, and continues not to be unusual for women staying at the refuge out of necessity to transition to volunteer time to help other arriving women, none of the women interviewed here were themselves domestic abuse survivors. The author is mindful of the absence of the voices of survivors (Porter, 2020: 151–91), which may have furnished a different yet

equally valuable perspective about evolving organizational norms and structures to those involved with refuge as part of a wider social movement.³

Moreover, all of the women interviewed were White. The wider evidence base indicates that Black and Minoritized Ethnic (BME) women staying in early refuges reported having to contend with ‘white entitlement’ (Hague, 2021a: 77), however consciously or not that was deployed, and of having difficulty in accessing refuge spaces and support that meaningfully acknowledged cultural and racial context and specificity. Even though it is clear that the women’s and refuge movements generally, and this group of women specifically, *endeavoured* to deliver anti-discriminatory services, the lived experiences of Black and minoritized women indicate that to properly understand and respond to BME women may *still* require a major shift (Imkaan, 2015). Interviewees did not elucidate on the ways in which the organizational structure and shifting power dynamics may have impacted on BME women or may have been shaped by or in response to them. Certainly when BME residents were spoken about, there was a degree of celebrating difference. For example, speaking about a cooking group that developed in the refuge, Charlotte explained that, ‘The Portuguese women cooked amazing food. That was lovely because people were happy to share their own culture and food. I don’t think we ever had any racism because they helped each other’.

It seems that for, the interviewees, in endeavouring to treat all women the same everyone was perceived to be treated unproblematically equally. Indeed, when asked about what kind of advocacy work was being undertaken in the 1990s Jackie recalled that, ‘We started getting more women who needed advocacy in terms of needing to be able to stay in the country’. Here indicating, perhaps, a less ethnically diverse cohort of women prior to the 1990s, but also indicating the way that the helpers endeavoured to adapt and evolve on demand. It is possible that for some interviewees there was perhaps an unspeakability about race that led to their silence, even a pervasive racism but, for this author, perhaps the most likely reason that race was not raised as a salient theme in contributing to the power structure of the house was because they endeavoured to treat all women, irrespective of background, with respect and good intention. It is not possible from these interviews to comment further on the likely gaps in support or possible injustices that BME women experienced as part of refuge life.

The primary data is supplemented by the ethnographic research and qualitative interviews undertaken by Jan Pahl with women at the refuge in the 1970s (Pahl, 1978; 1981). By using oral history as method, women’s lives and the significance that they ascribe to events and their ways of being and doing are valued and foregrounded; women are acknowledged as ‘agentic subjects’ (Whittingdale, 2021: 13) whose feelings, attitudes and values give meaning to what happened (Anderson and Jack, 2015). By transcribing personal reflections, reminiscences and recollections of past moments, however large or small, we reveal how this group of women navigated, negotiated, organized and experienced the world around them. Situating these women’s narrative accounts within the existing literature allows us to build a more fine-grained picture of the women’s movement from the 1970s and onwards.

Oral history refers to both the process of interviewing and the narrative record produced (Abrams, 2010: 2). Using oral history facilitates the uncovering of otherwise hidden histories. These personal and narrative accounts supplement positivist objective recorded history of ‘significant’ events in both this charity’s history and

the refuge and women's movements more generally. This method therefore plays a part in destabilizing notions that there is an 'official' history capable of documenting objective truths about events that are 'known' (Whittingdale, 2021: 13). By its nature, this 'known' public history will be partial, glossing over and eclipsing the personal experiences of women, particularly those working at a local level.

The article joins feminist scholars across disciplines who have been using oral history as a preferred methodology.⁴ In the context of documenting Canterbury's first women's refuge and domestic abuse services, it is apt not only that the project's end goal was feminist (recording women's hitherto hidden histories) but also that the research process honoured feminist ethics. Thus, during the interview process the researcher aimed to shed agendas, dissolve any hierarchy between researcher and participant and, in the spirit of the feminist commitment to 'give back', acknowledge the co-production of the resultant knowledge (Whittingdale, 2021: 4).⁵

Thinking reflexively, the author notes their own partiality and social situation in producing this selection of data. The author, a White middle-class female academic, was told about the women's longstanding commitment to the charity as volunteers and members of the board and proposed to document their contributions. The author had no prior involvement with the charity. The author acknowledges that she has made methodological choices as well as ethical ones in terms of selecting data from the interviews for this article. This has been a journey of negotiating competing values, assumptions and ideological commitments and of translating them into concrete choices (Whittingdale, 2021: 12). If 'feminist methodology is a process of becoming' (Whittingdale, 2021: 1) then for this researcher, the project's method has been re-energising and has been experienced as a (re)connection with the 'passion and zeal' (Hague, 2021b: 5) that spurred the early domestic abuse and women's activists.

The 1970s: from consciousness-raising to women's centre

For many women, being part of the women's movement and later the refuge movement offered a way of putting feminist ideals and feminist ways of organizing into practice (Pahl, 1985: 25). The trajectory that the women's movement in Canterbury took was typical; it began with the instigation of consciousness-raising groups before moving into more direct action. The Women's Liberation Movement had early defined its main goal and its main method as 'consciousness raising'; that was the coming together of loose and informal small groups to share experiences and to glean personal insights from the supportive environment (Freeman, 1975; Griffin, 1994). The purpose of 'consciousness raising' was to understand the problems created by a patriarchal society and to educate the group participants that experiences were structural not merely individual. The social conditions of the 1970s were such that consciousness-raising groups had wider impact; the media paid interest to the ideas generated and began to do the job of disseminating them (Freeman, 1975).

In Canterbury, one such consciousness-raising 'radical women's group' (Pahl, 1978: 3) began meeting in May 1974 at the University of Kent to discuss diverse themes that included, *inter alia*, 'communes', 'women in higher education', 'lesbianism' and 'women and madness'.⁶ These discussion groups had no discernible hierarchy and this supported the view that everyone's voice carried equal weight. Having this egalitarian approach facilitated open dialogue, idea sharing and experiential solidarity. The approach was fundamental to the movement's ethos and was an effective way

of understanding the barriers that women were facing on a daily basis. Politically, this non-hierarchical way of working signalled a reaction against traditional modes of organization. It communicated a rejection of an overly-structured society where structure was synonymous with the under-privileging of women's status, where all forms of leadership were equivalent, and unequal power distribution could not escape domination and exploitation (Voigt, 1990: 6).

Yet, for many, once the women's movement had gained its early years' momentum through consciousness raising, the purpose of such groups was no longer prescient; there had already been intense press publicity, the issues were aired, the unfairnesses voiced and consciousness raising was becoming obsolete (Freeman, 1972). Writing at the time, Freeman articulated the need to move on: 'The movement must go on to other tasks. It now needs to establish its priorities, articulate its goals and pursue its objectives in a coordinated fashion. To do this, it must be organized locally, regionally and nationally' (Freeman, 1975: 162).

In Canterbury, after 18 months of meetings, it was increasingly felt by some that the mere diffusion of ideas would not see change ensue nor be implemented. A number of women interviewed for this project voiced their frustration: 'We all got sick of consciousness raising' (Kathy); 'Consciousness-raising groups they were called. That wasn't active enough for me. I didn't stay in them very long. I moved on to being active. The point for me was that something had to be *done*' (Paula).

Tess, interviewed at the time, commented on the insularity of 'the more intellectual sort' of women's [consciousness-raising] groups and complained that, 'I was a bit put off by it. They weren't out to reach the grassroots. They were ... sitting round discussing within their own circle' (Pahl, 1979: 29). Consequently, on 3 November 1975, after several failed attempts to secure premises for a Women's Centre through official channels at the local council, a number of students from the university group began squatting in Errol House in Stour Street. The students issued a call to Canterbury's networks of politically-conscious women to help with the running of the centre which was envisaged, 'not just [as] a refuge and a meeting place, but [somewhere to offer] advice and support, and services such as pregnancy testing and abortion counselling; to show films ... to base campaigns, and also a place for discussion groups and education' (Pahl, 1979: 29).

The following day, 4 November, and subsequently on 11 November, two public meetings were held.⁷ Attending those meetings were several divergent, informal and leaderless women's groups and individuals, including the university's consciousness-raising group, all keen to deliver services for women from the squat.

1974–1979: organizing Canterbury's refuge: collective consensus and the rejection of hierarchy

As the women in Canterbury stepped into pragmatic action, they continued to organize themselves loosely. Members of the original group admitted that initially:

We didn't discuss it enough – we should have had a bit more organization, a bit more planning in the first place. We all of us thought we vaguely knew what we wanted from the Women's Centre – we all had these phrases like 'self-help' – in actual fact we didn't discuss it properly. We just went ahead and did it. (Pahl, 1979)

Figure 1: Errol House, the squat on Stour Street. The sign on the shutter reads 'Canterbury Women's Centre'



Source: inCant, April 27, 1976.

In fact, the direction and priorities of the centre were almost immediately dictated by demand when abused women, and then abused women and their children, began to arrive at the door.⁸

As such, the refuge aspect of the enterprise 'became more and more dominant and the other activities never got off the ground or ceased to be important' (Fitton, 2015).

As the Women's Centre became predominantly a refuge for abused women, and even when the house was very full as a result of its 'open door', there was still no clear agreement between the women as to the mechanisms of its day-to-day running. There was, at least, a shared and firm resolve not to allocate roles or form a hierarchy with a nominated leader(s). Non-hierarchical ways of working had been widely embraced by the broader movement as offering new promise, and the approach was considered forward-thinking.⁹ Accordingly, at Canterbury's Women's Centre, decision making was consensual with sometimes up to thrice-weekly meetings which everyone at the house attended. Meetings facilitated collective day-to-day decision making and the resolution of grievances; provided an opportunity to discuss wider women's issues such as equal rights, reproductive rights and social security; and were occasions to plan fundraising activities (Pahl, 1978). As was typical of collectives at the time, division of labour was rotated; and extensive informal face-to-face contact between members was the norm (see also Newman, 1980: 143). The ideology of egalitarianism persisted as a fundamental rallying point that resisted capitulation to the bureaucratic requirements of the 'straight' world.¹⁰ Reflecting, Kathy expressed that: 'It was an unfamiliar way of doing things. This kind of, "we are all equal here!" There was no labelling' (Kathy).

There may have been no assigning of roles but nomenclature was very important to the women in signalling the philosophy. By referring to a 'Women's Centre' rather than a 'refuge' the women indicated that more than accommodation was being offered at the squat. 'The women in the house' described the women who had fled their abusive relationships. Any other term, such as 'clients', 'residents', or the now outmoded 'battered women', risked stigmatizing the women who had experienced the abuse. The preferred 'women in the house' phrase expressed the galvanizing principle of the movement: these women had not suffered a personal problem that distinguished them from anyone else, they had experienced the effects of the way

men and women's relationships in general were socially structured. There was no 'them' and 'us'.

The 'workers', 'helpers', 'support group', or 'volunteers' could not themselves agree on their preferred name. This difficulty reflected the confusion of the organizing group but also reflected how embedded in the centre they were. There was no 'person in charge', 'committee' or 'warden', as the prevailing value was that any distinction between the 'helped' and the 'helpers' was artificial given that 'we all need the refuge' (Pahl, 1979: 30). Kathy explained that: 'Women arrived and were often puzzled to find that, not only was there no one in charge but there was no one whose job it was to tell them that there was no one in charge ... and it gradually dawned on them'. Word choices mattered because they expressed a collective ideology and reflected the founding group's view that having no hierarchy deeply mattered.

As the refuge rejected authority figures and leadership, the women trusted that a number of overarching principles would nevertheless guide the centre's decision making through consensus. Three months after the centre opened, the women produced a pamphlet in which they clarified the shared vision. Firstly, the centre worked on the premise of 'self-help', meaning that if the 'residents' took some responsibility for and contributed to the running of the house, they would be less likely to persist in any sense of dependence and would gain confidence from that: 'If a window gets broken, any of us that could put in a pane of glass would get a pane of glass and put it in. This place is supposed to be run by women for women' (Moirra in Pahl, 1978: 53). Principles of self-help also manifested in residents raising funds through jumble sales, baking and selling raffle tickets, while others demonstrated the principle by lobbying councillors and vigorously participating in meetings. Overall, women reported that their experience of self-help was positive and did lead to increased self-belief. For Judy, however, the benefits of self-help were tainted: 'It does make women more independent because there is so little support' (Pahl, 1978).

Secondly, the pamphlet detailed a 'mutual relationship of support' between those living at the refuge and those that volunteered their time. For women who grasped the idea of 'mutual support', they understood that they could contribute to the care of more recently arrived women. Indeed, it was important that the helpers appreciated that the best source of advice often came not from themselves but from other residents. In this way, a woman might come to realize that her problems were no longer hers alone. Friendship, trust and informal caring were the foundations of the 'mutual relationship of support'. In turn volunteers might fundraise, give advice, play with the children and decorate.

The pamphlet also confirmed the necessity of having 'no-one in-charge' (Pahl, 1978). This 'power sharing' or absence of hierarchy meant that residents were often unclear about who was a helper and who had fled abuse, because the delineations were deliberately kept ambiguous (Pahl, 1978). 'Power sharing' also meant that standards of cleanliness were prone to deterioration: 'Oh my goodness, I remember we used to have house meetings in the sitting room. This grotty, filthy sitting room that women would never clear up. It was grim, the refuge in those days, living there was grim!' (Hannah).

'Radical egalitarianism' was easily workable in consciousness-raising groups where numbers were small, where there were no complex tasks to complete, and where there was no need for expertise nor long-term planning or prioritization. Despite having moved into pragmatic action, the Women's Centre was resolute in its commitment

to leaderless ways of working. Instead of working *for* women, those in the house who had not fled abusive relationships worked *with* the women with genuine collaborative *togetherness* infusing the social construction and rule making of the refuge. A set of House Rules pinned to the wall was illustrative: 'THESE ARE NOT A SET OF RULES: THEY ARE GUIDELINES TO HELP MAKE THE RUNNING OF THE REFUGE EASIER FOR EVERYONE' (Fitton, 2015). Such a declaration speaks to the notion that 'guidelines' would be accepted out of free will and community first, individual wants and needs second (Voigt, 1990).¹¹

The founding group rejected *any* structures in the refuge that conveyed differentials in power and influence, irrespective of how formal or informal those structures were (Voigt, 1990: 63). This radical feminist egalitarian ideology was also their practice and they were resolutely wed to this way of doing and operating. This accords with a visionary politics associated with radical feminism which declares that the 'theory is only as good as its practice' (Voigt, 1990). For them, hierarchy was the organizational form of patriarchy and leadership was inextricably linked to power abuse. As the root of the problem, pyramid-shaped structures were to be rejected at all costs. These women therefore tenaciously clung to the notion that the interests of the individual and the collective were synonymous and that levelling differences between the women, regardless of skills, abilities or experiences, 'helpers' or 'helped', was fundamental. For them, if conventional respectability was achieved at the cost of compromising these values, then the 'feminist inquiry is rendered an empty, enervated exercise, essentially timid and accommodationist. The challenge ... after all, is not whether you can *do* it, but whether you can *live* it' (Kolodny, 1988: 461).

1974–1981: from 'radical egalitarianism' to 'pragmatic collective'

After one year operating out of the squat, some of the volunteers successfully petitioned the Council of Social Responsibility (a social work arm of the Church of England) and the local Health and Housing Councillor at the city council to give the Women's Centre a more permanent residence (Pam). The city council granted interim access to a disused miners' manager's house in a nearby village until, in 1979, more permanent accommodation was made available to the group by the Council of Social Responsibility, in the form of a disused pub on the outskirts of the city. This has remained the refuge's permanent location ever since, while therapeutic and community services are now delivered from elsewhere.

Eighteen months after settling into the disused pub, two key original founding members left. These two women had clung resolutely to principles of collectivity over any pyramidal organization; they might be characterized as women who considered the refuge-as-social-movement (Pahl, 1979). In their wake a new 'support group' or 'committee' took on and began to oversee the project. While the committee included some of the original activists and helpers from the squat, these women had begun to recognize that assigning certain roles and responsibilities within the refuge might carry advantages. The 'committee' thus comprised a group of feminists that considered the refuge-as-social-provision and, as such, instead of condemning any hierarchical organization as an 'instrument of male power', they took a more pragmatic view that if tasks were to be accomplished and actions accountable, dispensing entirely with ordering structures was inefficient.

When a collective divides in this way, it might be easy to point to differing personalities in the group rather than querying whether the organizing theory of egalitarianism and leaderlessness was at fault. Identifying the reasons for a breakdown of the initial model is facilitated by looking at the work of Newman (1980). Newman identifies two factors that typically contribute to the disintegration of radical egalitarian principles in collectives that can lead to the emergence of organizational hierarchy (Newman, 1980: 143). The first is when subsets of the group begin to meet more often than the group as a whole. While it is not possible to comment directly on this in relation to the Canterbury refuge, it is clear from the interviews that as time went on the two women who left came to dominate and that dissenting factions emerged. Kathy explained that these two women, who might be ascribed to the refuge-as-social-movement side of the group, 'became so powerful that everybody either floated off or deferred to them' (Kathy).

Writing at the time, Pahl explained that some of the 'workers' became increasingly displeased with the way the original ideas were being implemented. They began to spend less time at the centre and their power and influence diminished in kind (Pahl, 1978). Pahl identified these to be the women who took the view that tasks and jobs could be assigned among the women. Paula explained:

The non-hierarchical thing became rather complicated and you did get dominant personalities and they didn't always do all the right things. Women at the time were very keen on trying to do things more by consensus than by having a manager or a hierarchy. But it starts to get difficult because you do end up with people who dominate the group who run the organization. And then, don't want to be questioned about it and then that doesn't work. (Paula)

Kathy also reflected on the ostensible incongruity of the refuge-as-social-movement side of the group; at once holding on to non-hierarchical ways of working yet in their commitment to this principle in fact emerging as authoritarian. Without structure there are no mechanisms to challenge emergent dominant personalities nor hold them to account. Kathy commented that '... the tyranny of structurelessness was, in the long term, the downfall of the refuge in its first manifestation' (Kathy). Before the 'committee' established itself, it seems that there was evident ill ease in relation to the dominant personalities among subsections of the larger group.

The second aspect that leads to the downfall of a purely egalitarian or collective model of operation, according to Newman (1980), is when the group comes to depend on funding from other external hierarchical institutions. The Canterbury refuge accepted financial support and assistance from the Council for Social Responsibility. Heather spoke about the regular meetings they had with these funders:

It was their building and they wanted to know how it was functioning. How it was working. They were kind and sympathetic. Each year one of the reverends would be Father Christmas at the Christmas party! But they wanted to know about the structure; how it was run; and were there any problems. (Heather)

Paula and others recollected that differences between the Council's expectations and the nonconformist, laissez-faire approach of the two dominant women prompted

them to leave in ‘acrimonious’ circumstances (Eleanor, Karen, Kathy and Paula). It was then that the remaining collective began to formalize the operation to ensure accountability to the funders: ‘We were worried about how is this going to be managed? How the money was going to be dealt with? How formally? It is then you start wanting structure. I wanted more professional people to be in there from a social work point of view too’ (Paula).

The refuge-as-social-provision side of the group were thus answerable to ‘straight’ external sources of support (Newman, 1980), and thus the ‘support group’ or ‘committee’ evolved the refuge’s constitution and began to shape responsibilities for those involved. The women’s movement has never been monolithic and the radical egalitarian, laissez-faire refuge-as-social-movement approach gave rise to dissent in the Canterbury collective. While it seems that all the women interviewed for this project were politically sympathetic to the motivating ideology that rejected hierarchy, the same women were increasingly alert to its shortcomings. The refuge-as-social-provision women recognized that there were competing demands and expectations from funders, and that a level of efficiency, effectiveness and accountability had to be demonstrated. Moreover, the new committee recognized the therapeutic needs of the residents, and were of the view that offering professional counselling services and other tailored support services were vital.

1980s onwards: a principled pragmatic collective

The new committee took the view that ‘neither absolute hierarchy nor absolute structurelessness is a valuable form of organizational life’ (Voigt, 1990: 3). This, it is argued here, has been the great success of the refuge, and later charity. This is because, despite the introduction of a level of bureaucratization and role assignment, the committee has refused to discard the original founding ethos of egalitarianism, collaboration and consensus in their ways of working. It was important for the committee that the founding ethos be echoed and practiced by the people they went on to employ. Non-hierarchical ways of working are two-fold: first among the employees themselves as they relate to each other and the committee; and second as the principle translates to building relationships and interactions with the women they support. The committee first hired two paid ‘managers’ at the refuge from 1981, and Michelle described this collegial culture that remained true to refuge-as-social-movement principles:

It was very much run as a non-hierarchical organization. As part of the management committee [and later Board of Trustees] I never felt that we were, as it were, ‘managing’ in an institutional way. It was more that we were facilitating and asking questions and trying to be of use. It seemed to me that that was the basis on which it had been established originally and that was very very central to how we saw the work that we were doing. It should be non-judgemental, non top-down. We were working with women who were in situations which we could equally have encountered. That philosophy was very very strong for all of us, I think. (Michelle)

Newman has suggested that even where leadership emerges in a group, where the ‘decisive power remains with the entity of the collective’ the model might be

considered successfully egalitarian (Newman, 1980). Such a model, as seen in the case study, sees leaders more as collaborators and coordinators, and merely the 'first among equals'.

Even into the early 1990s when Alice joined the refuge as a paid counsellor, cooperation and mutual respect between the committee, staff and women in the house was abundant:

Although, Hannah and Jackie were project managers at the time, when I came on board with Sue, we were all equal. The same with the management committee, it wasn't like, 'they are the trustees'. It was very much a flattened hierarchy, working together. It was really important that that translated into the [work with the] women in the refuge too. This is your home. We respect that we are here having a window into your lives, but we are working together in partnership. Someone coming into the refuge, the first person that welcomed them might be another woman in the refuge. It was very much, 'we', as women; if one woman was abused then all women are abused. So, those real, strong feminist values really came across strongly in the refuge. (Alice)

Charlotte, a paid helper, relished the opportunity to learn from the other employees and the committee, who had expertise from years of working with abused women and who also had professional insights from their work as social workers, probation officers, teachers and psychotherapists: 'It was great to have specialists. During our staff meetings, we would have the child counsellors there – we were all sharing and learning together how to support the families. It became really holistic' (Charlotte).

Alice shared the view: 'It was so inspiring because we would always have dialogue, meetings, communication about the trends we saw, to understand what we needed to focus on to improve responses. It was organic. As an organization, we were always learning. It never settled.' Describing her work as a 'manager' with the women in the house, Jackie also recounted the absence of hierarchy,

Our office, for example, had armchairs and not office chairs, there weren't just chairs for me and [the other manager] there were chairs for the women and they would just come in and smoke; everybody smoked, of course! We had an open-door policy. The [office] door was never closed Women wouldn't just come in because they had something specific to talk about, they would come in because they just needed to talk to somebody. (Jackie)

Charlotte agreed: 'It was incredibly welcoming. It was very homely'. Committee member Michelle was full of respect for the approach:

The staff would sit down and have a laugh and a joke and have a chat as part of their working relationship [with the women]. It was not, 'if you need to see me about a problem then I will be in my office at 2.30 every afternoon'. It wasn't like that, it was a much freer, more responsive way of being with women, with other women. It was fundamental to the way that you talked to somebody and not just a statement in your policies. That's how it was. (Michelle)

Decision making about how the refuge was run, and what needed to be prioritized, continued to be collaborative and inclusive with the women in the house: 'We would have these house meetings and try to find a consensual way of talking about things and making decisions' (Hannah). Charlotte gave an example, the refuge, she said, '... was led by what the women there needed. For example, at a house meeting, the women had said we can't afford to take our kids out and so Jackie and Hannah fundraised for an Activities Worker'.

The Activities Worker did not have a directly or explicitly therapeutic role. They were employed, at the women's instigation,

... so that the children could have a good time. We were stuck on [a busy road] – and I could see that the children hadn't got anything to do. That meant that once a week, the children all went out. They went to the zoo, the cinema, to play football or bowling...'. (Jackie)

Jackie explained that these trips and activities came to play a vital role in teaching the children that they were worth something, and while the residents had not articulated the idea in these terms, it was the effect of putting their idea into practice.

The refuge and support services became a charity in 1985 and, while there emerged an identifiable internal structure, it might best be described as fluid, multi-directional and flexible, rather than rigid and pyramid-shaped. Michelle elaborated:

We couldn't have worked any other way, actually, because it would have been a negation of what we were trying to achieve if we had. You were working *with*, not *for*. It wasn't that there were no moments where the management committee had to intervene and say, 'look, we need to have better record keeping for this', or 'we need to be more specific if we are going to fund raise for that', or, 'what our outcomes are going to be?'. I remember when we started to say that we needed to gather better data – that wasn't a judgement on the people that were working there. They were incredibly busy. It was more a recognition that we needed to fundraise and then recruit, so that we have somebody who can put these processes in. It would have been unreasonable to expect people who are working day-to-day to also be able to do that kind of overview and analysis. (Michelle)

The refuge operated in this way until 2003. Alice explained what the funding arrangements had been hitherto:

When a woman came to a refuge with her children they were allowed to apply for 'Transitional Housing Benefit'; around £50 rent per week. There was no other income. Some women had three or four children and they were all in one very small room with shared bathrooms and a sitting room – it was communal. (Alice)

She went on to explain that: 'When "Supporting People" [money] was introduced [in 2003], it was the first time the government had put any money into refuges ... suddenly you were going to get £600 [per family]. The Housing Association took the refuge back into direct management – it was awful'.

Motivated by the sudden profitability that ‘Supporting People’ money now offered, the Housing Association, who had always leased the building to the refuge, took on the new role of directly managing the employees at the refuge. The effect was to draw out the stark contrast between the hitherto holistic feminist *modus operandi* that had put consensus front and centre, and an organization that was financially motivated and traditionally organized with bureaucratic institutional management priorities:

It was the clash of cultures. I thought it was so important for the women to have the ‘by women for women’/feminist model – [the Housing Association had] a very corporate model ... they wanted the profitable side, the accommodation side. They weren’t interested in the therapy, the counselling, the groups. It was like a different culture. For example, they brought in male Out of Hours support workers. He would be walking around the corridors at night. You would have women obviously wanting to take their hijabs off and relax. (Charlotte)

Charlotte explained that the Housing Association were unconcerned about how having a man in the house was inappropriate and could potentially cause emotional damage and anxiety for the women. Charlotte’s comment also provides some insight into how those working in the refuge were mindful of cultural sensitivities and specificities in a way that was clearly not prioritized by the Association. Moreover, she noted that they did not consult the women in the house before making the appointment, which represented a sharp departure from the collaborative decision making that had preceded.

Today, even though the charity no longer runs the refuge (after a lengthy transitional period), it continues to provide extensive community services to women who have experienced abuse. Crucially, laced through the charity’s working practices as they deliver this social provision to the women and children who need it, are the values and principles of self-help, mutual support and power sharing (or non-hierarchy).¹² Crucially, women who have sought help from the charity continue to be valued for the expertise that they can share:

We’re survivor centred and so we encourage women to contribute in whichever way feels comfortable for them. Some women will come and speak at events with us, others take part in our focus groups, others might give us feedback in a one-to-one phone call. One member of the Survivor Forum recently joined our Board. Having former service users on the Board is great. (Eleanor)

This legacy of collective working has been ensured by the longstanding dedication of many of the original founders who remained as volunteers for decades. Eleanor confirmed how the values persist:

We now have a framework of our vision and values and one of those is obviously feminism. Also, Collaboration. And, Excellence. I think that we are a values-led organization. And particularly having Collaboration and Feminism as part of those makes us quite different to other similar organizations. It

runs through our approach to problem solving, working with our clients, working with each other. (Eleanor)

Conclusion

Establishing Canterbury's first Women's Centre in 1974 relied on the passion, zeal and inspiration of a small number of women who had previously belonged to separate conscious-raising groups in the city. Their enthusiastic dynamism was propelled by a strong affiliation with the national women's movement. Characteristically for any nascent organization, and especially for organizations with their genesis in a social movement, their organizing structure was loose, organic and fluid. Overriding principles of 'self-help', 'mutual support' and 'power sharing' prevailed, while hierarchy was rejected as the best instrument to coordinate the operation. For this feminist group, assigning roles and leaders was synonymous with imbalanced power differentials prone to dynamics of domination and subordination; these were dynamics that had not traditionally served women, and the group did not want to replicate them.

Yet, as the collective became more established, embedded, and known as a local resource, some of the founders began to question whether unequal power distribution was an absolute evil and began to recognize that benefits could flow from organizational structure: from naming a committee to developing procedures to demonstrate to funders that they could work both efficiently and accountably. If an organization is to have outward objective credibility, this formalization of roles might be argued as a prerequisite; indeed it has been argued that 'no feminist organisation with any sense of task accomplishment was able to dispense entirely with ordering structures' (Voigt, 1990: 7). Certainly, those who considered the refuge was a 'social provision' appreciated the advantages that more formal arrangements could bestow.

Nonetheless, for an organization like Canterbury's Women's Refuge (and later the domestic abuse charity that it became), the value of having its roots in a social movement was not only in stimulating its genesis. Its importance persists in the deep, shared, organizational and feminist philosophies that continue to shape the charity's ongoing operation. It is precisely the tension between believing the refuge to be an extension of a social movement, where radical prefigurative vision is acted upon, and conceiving the delivery of domestic abuse services as a 'social provision', where helpers support those in need and where reliable and responsible administration is dispensed, that ultimately sustains the commitment of the workers today. While some have suggested that intra-movement differences are conflicting, we might better perceive their differences as essential complementarity and as a key strength (Freeman, 1973: 797).

The Refuge movement has moved on from the 'white heat' of the 1970s, and the sector overall has experienced a diminution of 'the Collective' (Hague, 2021a: 137). Just as elsewhere, services at the charity have had to formalize following the development of the regulatory environment: local authority funding requirements; government demands for managers to be qualified experts; and expectations for a single point of contact to access funding (Hague, 2021a: 138–40). Consequently, the sector has experienced a professionalization and specialization of service delivery (especially for BME and minority groups); multiagency coordination is the norm, and domestic abuse charities are consulted by government as experts. While some

have argued that the ‘brave politics of collective working’ has been sacrificed (Hague, 2021a), this article has drawn out how the ethos can nevertheless persist when collaborative values are practised.

Within Rising Sun, the CEO explained that she has inherited a feminist culture, and she paid tribute to the legacy of the charity’s founders. In modern terminology, the CEO articulated principles of collective working as being ‘survivor-centred’, working in a ‘needs-led’ way, challenging victim-blaming, understanding victimhood not only at an individual level but also within the wider societal context and the norms and expectations placed on women. She also articulated a flattened hierarchy in the charity’s internal working arrangements which is visible in their recruitment processes (where many of the team are involved in selection), in terms of the supportive relationship between board members and employees, and in terms of the relationality between colleagues who demonstrate daily the feminist ethic of care, warmth, mutual support and empathy (Eleanor). The CEO is a first-among-equals. Michelle commented that:

We never take for granted that because somebody has worked in a similar environment, that they necessarily understand exactly how Rising Sun is. We make sure that everybody feels they get the culture. It isn’t ordinary at all. There is a lot of attention paid I think to the wellbeing of staff. It isn’t easy to work in this field. (Michelle)

Exploring the oral histories of these women, and setting out their paths to successful delivery of domestic abuse services, is not intended to provide a model, template or guideline for future activism. Rather these histories might serve as waymarkers and sources of inspiration as we navigate strategies in new terrain. Moreover, these accounts might have a reciprocal effect for researchers; of rekindling the embers that fuel our work. As Kolodny put it:

By recovering the full diversity of our history as we lived it – and not as some cursory overview homogenized it – we may at the same time recover our original energising politics. We will remember anew the intimate link between intellectual inquiry and the consequences of that inquiry for how we act in the world. And we will proclaim again that theory devoid of activist politics is not feminism but, rather, pedantry and moral abdication. (Kolodny, 1980: 464)

Ahmed has written of the wear and tear of living a feminist life, and of how refusing to be silent about injustice is a complicity with ‘the Master’s House’¹³ (Ahmed, 2017: 27). The work of a feminist researcher (or activist) – the political labour of ‘noticing’ and ‘calling out’ – can render her depleted, even shattered (Ahmed, 2017: 32, 143). Yet in this fragile state of embodied exhaustion, feminists might find moments of relief, indeed *must* find those moments to retain motivation. Becoming a feminist researcher (or activist) is a continuous and ongoing self-reflexive practice, and the production of knowledge is an inherently personal process of self assembly (Ahmed, 2017: 27; Whittingdale, 2021: 24). Yet in pursuance of the survival of hope, feminists need each other; survival is a shared project. In using oral history as feminist methodology, the recounting of the preceding story of sisterhood serves as a revitalizing and galvanizing

reminder that ‘... feminism needs feminists to survive’ (Ahmed, 2017: 236) and, in Heather’s words, ‘women together can do great things’.

Notes

¹ ‘Women’s Liberation’ or ‘second wave feminism’, refers to the upsurge in feminist activism, agency and mobilization in many developed countries between c.1965 and 1985.

² The author has attributed pseudonyms to the women. Eight of the women were in their 70s, three were younger. Two of the women were involved when the women first squatted in a building in 1974, one of these women only retired from working with the charity in 2022. Two women became involved in 1975–1976 when the refuge moved to the old miners’ house; one retired in 2022 and the other left in 1986. One of the interviewees became involved when the refuge moved to a disused pub in 1979–1980; she left paid employment in 2002 but remained as a volunteer for years thereafter; the other left in 2011. Four other women interviewed became involved as employees and trustees from the early 1990s; three each accrued 30 years’ service and one accrued eight years; two of these women remain involved today. The CEO has been in position since 2019.

³ Obtaining accounts from survivors was, regrettably due to resourcing, outside of the scope of this project.

⁴ For example, aside from historians, scholars in the fields of ethnography, sociology, healthcare and psychology use oral history as research practice (Abrams, 2010: 2).

⁵ Co-production here refers to how the content of the interviewees’ accounts (as transcribed and checked by participants) drove the emergent themes, arguments and observations I make in this article.

⁶ The group’s topics are detailed in Jan Pahl’s 1974 and 1975 diaries, kindly shared for the project.

⁷ These were held at the Sydney Cooper Centre on St Peter’s Street; as detailed in Jan Pahl’s private appointments diary, kindly shared for the project.

⁸ Per Jan Pahl as quoted in Fitton (2015).

⁹ During a conference celebrating ‘The Women’s Liberation Movement at Forty’ some older women expressed their considerable resentment at being talked *at* from a podium rather than being talked *with* in a circle of chairs, while younger women were more amenable to such academic conventions; see Philips, 2010: 293.

¹⁰ The distinction made between radical egalitarian or consensual models of organization and ‘straight’ organizations is made by Newman (1980), where ‘straight’ refers to hierarchical or pyramid-shaped configurations.

¹¹ There were three key ‘rules’ or agreements in the house: there were to be no men beyond the office; children were to be in bed by 8.30; and no woman should ever be turned away; Pahl, 1979: 48.

¹² The charity continues to recognize that survivors are the experts in their own lives. They help women to recognize their strengths and harness their abilities. Internally, employees, trustees and volunteers are always learning from each other and the women they support. As an organization they listen to survivors’ voices to understand their strengths, areas for development, biases and attitudes (paraphrased from the charity’s website).

¹³ Here Ahmed makes reference to *The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House* (Lorde, 1984).

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Conflict of interest

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