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Introduction: Women's Grassroots Activism: New Histories of Female Activism in Twentieth-Century Britain and Ireland

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Abstract

This special issue examines women's grassroots activism in Britain and Ireland from 1918 to the late twentieth century. Emerging from the AHRC-funded network 'Agency and Advocacy: Locating Women's Grassroots Activism in England and Ireland, 1918 to the Present', it brings together eleven articles that explore how women organised within voluntary associations, community groups, workplaces, and social movements. The collection challenges protest-centred definitions of activism by highlighting a broader range of practices, including education and information sharing, community service, and craftivism. In particular, this Introduction and the collection more widely argue for a greater emphasis to be placed on 'quiet' forms of activism. Contributors demonstrate how everyday experiences shaped women's pathways into collective action and political engagement. The articles reveal the importance of local contexts while also tracing connections that transcended national or organisational boundaries. Collectively, the articles argue for a more inclusive understanding of activism and activist identity, demonstrating that women's grassroots organising has played a vital role in improving the lives of women and girls across twentieth-century Britain and Ireland.

Keywords activism; grassroots; women's organisations; twentieth-century; Britain; Ireland.

Wordcount: 9061

Introduction: Women's Grassroots Activism: New Histories of Female Activism in Twentieth-Century Britain and Ireland

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I

This special issue (SI) of eleven articles from early career and established scholars explores women's grassroots activism in and across Britain and Ireland after 1918. This work is inspired by the workshops, seminars and a two-day conference held between August 2023 and January 2025, as part of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded international research network 'Agency and Advocacy: Locating **Women's Grassroots Activism** in England and Ireland, 1918 to the present'.[1] Adopting the principles of participatory research, a method which ensures research is co-designed and co-produced by academics and the individuals and communities who are the focus of the study, the AHRC Women's Grassroots Activism (WGA) network collaborated with representatives of non-party political national and local voluntary women's organisations active across the island of Ireland and in Great Britain. These were the National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI); Soroptimist International Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, South East Region (UK) and Tunbridge Wells and District Club, Kent (SITWD); the Irish Countrywomen's Association (ICA), and the Federation of Women's Institutes of Northern Ireland (WINI).[2] Together these organisations represent over 200,000 women with members coming together for friendship, education, leisure, crafting, and to engage in activism. Many of these organisations have international connections and some have consultative status at the United Nations. The overarching aim of the WGA network was to identify how grassroots women's organisations, working to enhance the lives of women and girls since the early 1900s, can co-identify strategies to safeguard their future activities and activism for the next one hundred years.

Working collaboratively, the WGA network co-produced a five-episode podcast series with members sharing experiences of grassroots activities and campaigning. In addition, the *Women's Grassroots Activism Toolkit 100+* was published, offering fresh insights into grassroots activism by women and guidance on ways to sustain this work.[3] The SI is inspired by the long histories of activism characterising these voluntary women's groups. Their activities highlight the continuities, consistencies, and connections that shape the experiences of women organising locally and nationally in Britain and Ireland.[4] Moreover, these histories embody multifaceted 'vocabularies of activism', foregrounding lesser-known grassroots interventions by women.[5] In considering these stories of activism, our contributors re-evaluate and re-define what female activism looks like in different places and at different times. The WGA network has therefore created opportunities for new and inclusive histories of activism by women to emerge, extending scholarship in this field of historical research.[6] This, in turn, shines a light on diverse activist experiences occurring outside of formal politics in twentieth-century Britain and Ireland.[7]

Social movement theory interrogates decisions made about how and when to engage in activism. As Donna Della Porta and Mario Diani argue, 'for social movement actors, choices concerning the forms of action to adopt are important but difficult decisions, involving strategic calculations but also considerations of values and culture'.[8] Protest is regarded as a form of action typical of social movements because, 'unlike political parties and pressure groups', social movements and voluntary associations 'have fewer channels through which to access decision makers'.[9] Accordingly, social movements engage in expansive 'repertoires of activism' which change over time in response to differing circumstances. Charles Tilly defined these 'repertoires of collective action' as the 'whole set of means' that a group has 'for making claims of different types on different individuals'.[10] This SI draws on social movement theory to broaden understandings of activism undertaken by grassroots voluntary

women's organisations. However, we extend these ideas further to encompass the lived experiences of individuals coming together as members of local and national women's groups.[11] This stimulates new debate about how everyday experiences shaped and continue to shape the 'repertoires of activism' espoused, including forms of action omitted from traditional understandings of protest within histories of the women's movement.[12]

To do this, we utilise the concept of 'communities of experience', alongside scholarship drawing attention to forms of activism that eschew 'the vocal, antagonistic and demonstrative forms of protest'.[13] 'Communities of experience' arise when people 'who recognise similarities in their experiences, who share and negotiate these experiences and their meanings with one another, and who start to identify themselves as a group, [bind] together with a sense of shared experience'.[14] The grassroots women's organisations featured in this SI, for example Soroptimists, rural women's groups, religious associations, tenant groups, disabled women, and women's refuge collectives, drew together members with common experiences in their everyday lives. These women came from different class backgrounds, age profiles, and lived in different places. While some of the articles feature grassroots women's groups that were somewhat racially diverse, it is worth noting that – particularly for more rural and traditional organisations – the majority historically had a predominantly white membership. Elsewhere, however, several scholars have recovered a rich history of – mostly urban – Black and Asian grassroots women's activism.[15] As in all organisations, hierarchies of experience could and did emerge.[16] For instance, in the Mothers' Union (MU), middle-class women held authority over working-class members, and groups within the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) have frequently been criticised for prioritising the experiences of white, middle-class women.[17] Jessica White reflects further on these tensions in her Viewpoint for this SI.

The grassroots 'communities of experience' featured in this SI sought out pathways to activism in a wide variety of ways. They did this by identifying 'repertoires of activism' which most aligned with their own group's 'values and culture'.[18] These expressions of activism go beyond traditional understandings of 'what counts as activism'. Deborah G. Martin et al. convincingly argue that women's activism can also be understood 'by focusing on the crucial role played by *individuals embedded in communities* in shaping the social networks and relations necessary for social change'.[19] They suggest that these networks 'begin in informal and localized interactions and may evolve into more formalized, institutional social movements'.[20] Emerging at the grassroots enables 'small acts of social networking or social change, actions that may not in themselves create direct political action but that foster the social relationships that may enable future political action'.[21] Furthermore, as some contributors to the SI demonstrate, these initially small networks successfully transcended political, religious, and geographical borders between Ireland, north and south, and with Britain.[22] Shared experiences of gendered oppression and other issues also had the power to overcome differences of class and race, as explored by authors in the SI and elsewhere.[23] This brings into sharp relief the power of shared experiences, coupled with feelings of belonging, as the grounds for effective activism.

Seeking to enhance the lives of women and girls underpinned the small acts of 'quiet' activism performed by women's grassroots organisations. Here, the work of Paul Griffin is useful. Griffin argues that unemployed workers centres in the 1980s demonstrate how more traditional types of movement activism (campaigning, organising, demonstrating, and mobilising) sit alongside 'a quieter politics of *non-movement* (advice, listening, interactions, and friendships) which might build empathetic and dignifying political spaces'.[24] Additionally, Linda Pottinger suggests 'quiet' represents the 'small everyday, embodied acts, often of making and creating, that can be either implicitly or explicitly political in nature'.[25]

Such expressions of activism, which include offering friendship, education, guidance, solidarity, practical help and support, risk being overlooked as they are 'normally considered too insignificant to count as activism and yet do create progressive change in the lives of women, their families and their communities'.[26] As this SI illustrates, 'quiet' forms of activism did change women's lives, locally and nationally, and were built into the plethora of spaces in which women's activism occurred.[27] While often unnoticed by both contemporaries and in the historiography compared to, for example, 'loud' protests and direct action, taking part in 'quiet' activism ensured that some members of grassroots women's groups developed a greater sense of belonging in their communities and, as a result, became active (sometimes politicised) citizens.

This bigger and more inclusive history of women's activism is further extended when viewed through the lens of the grassroots. Melissa Estes Blair, writing in the context of 1960s and 1970s North Carolina, USA, has argued that long-standing local women's clubs 'provided activist histories to their members – knowledge about the most effective ways to conduct local activism and what kinds of programs were most likely to find success'.[28] Their tactics, like those featured in this SI, included varied 'repertoires of activism', as well as offering unique spaces for women to come together for friendship, solidarity and to share their everyday experiences. These activities took place in tandem with the organising work of local WLM groups and represented a wide 'vocabulary of activism' articulating the needs and concerns of different generations of women. In Britain and Ireland, older grassroots women's associations and newly emerging WLM groups also worked side by side, within their own 'communities of experience'.[29] Self-identifying as feminist or rejecting feminism, these groups tapped into collective ways of knowing and shaped 'repertoires of activism' around their own 'values and culture'.[30] Drawing on these everyday experiences, and using them as

pathways to activism, grassroots women's organisations epitomise the assertion that the personal is always political.[31]

II

Many of the articles in this SI demonstrate that women's activist priorities, motivations, methods, solidarities, and organisational structures were often shaped by the peculiarities of place (including demography, local political cultures, and socio-economic specificities). In her study of WLM groups in several different English towns Sue Bruley argues that the movement had many unifying national characteristics. However, the way certain campaigns, issues, and ways of organising 'played out across the country differed according to local contexts'.[32] While this historical observation applied to the loosely structured, horizontalist WLM, many other women's organisations at various points across the twentieth century also had similar agency at the grassroots. More long-standing women's groups like the NFWI, Soroptimists, ICA and MU, for example, have often been understood as formal organisations with hierarchical and nationally-defined structures. Yet, regional and local institutes, clubs or guilds had considerable autonomy to interpret national campaigns or debates and locate them in their communities.[33]

The SI highlights this diversity in different ways, building upon a rich wider scholarship on women's localised grassroots activism.[34] Anne Logan and Caroline Auckland's article draws attention to the similarities and differences in Soroptimist housing activism in both Manchester and Tunbridge Wells demonstrating how each club interpreted Soroptimist objectives in different ways. National government legislation could also play out differently at a local level. Suzanne Jobling's contribution highlights the workplace as a site of grassroots activism, giving insight into the different ways sex discrimination legislation worked in practice, and how women challenged workplace sexism across various

employment contexts. Looking at the practical ways that activism has been structured and organised in different places reveals the need for historians to interrogate and widen definitions of grassroots activism. Rather than viewing the local or grassroots as an antecedent to the national or international, articles in this SI illuminate how these boundaries are often more porous, complex, and fluid.

Funding also poses a further challenge to existing conceptualisations of grassroots activism. Some of the activism case-studies in this SI were entirely organised by members of the community, with little to no external support. Others, however, had the relative financial security of national organisations, charity status, or even – in the case of Soroptimist housing associations, for example – state or local authority funding. As with differences in structure, sources of funding do not necessarily minimise the grassroots character of certain groups or activities. Rather, they can help us understand how activists reconciled and navigated complex (often conflicting) relationships between local and national, grassroots and institutional. In many cases, funding depended heavily on regional specificities, including local political landscapes and government priorities.[35]

Comparison of Rachel Collett and Krista Cowman's study of Liverpool and Kate Wilson's study of Glasgow demonstrate how similar experiences could engender different activist responses, in part due to funding constraints. In both cases, the unique isolation and lack of welfare provision experienced by working-class women in post-war housing estates in the 1970s provided the motivation for gendered community-based activism around childcare. Because Liverpool was chosen as one of the government's five Educational Priority Areas in the late 1960s, families in the Netherley estate benefited from the resulting state and charitable funding, as well as the expertise of socially-engaged researchers and educationalists. By contrast, without funding or explicit links to wider activist networks in

Glasgow, Wilson's article shows how childcare activism in the Castlemilk estate was developed and run entirely by members of the community.

Close attention to specific local conditions also illuminates how and why women were drawn into activism more effectively at the grassroots. Contributors to the SI point to the centrality of community and the challenges of everyday life in explaining women's politicisation and turn to activism. Issues such as housing and childcare were, of course, not limited to women, but women were often most affected and used their experiences to improve things for themselves, their families, and their immediate communities.[36] Indeed, as Ruth Davidson has argued, this was often more successful at a local level.[37] Exploring how women's activism functioned at the grassroots allows us to understand how locality shaped methods and structures of activism, which, by necessity, had to fit around women's lives and the spaces they inhabited or regularly frequented.[38] In addition, this opportunity to organise in grassroots groups could provide a more accessible entry into activism given that many women faced barriers to engaging in party politics at both local and national level.[39]

Paying attention to the different 'repertoires of activism' reveals a wider array of women's public participation, moving beyond more conventional spaces and action. Adding to a rich scholarship on women, craft and activism, Grace Heaton's article, for example, draws attention to 'craftivism' as a 'gentle' way for women outside radical political movements to engage with campaigns in an accessible manner. Contributions by Jo Hogarth Raineau, Wilson, and Collett and Cowman provide examples of practical activism that responded to the needs of working-class communities and were more effectively integrated into the everyday, facilitating women's politicisation and raising confidence for further activism. This builds on existing scholarship, including Anna Bocking-Welch et al.'s work on petitioning as an accessible form of women's grassroots activism and Collett's work on women's self-help health groups.[40]

The complex dynamic between the local, national and international aspects of women's activism reinforces the need to expand and recast the women's movement, taking into account the wider continuities, solidarities, and overlaps between various women's groups, campaigns, and organisations over a longer period of time.[41] As several authors in this SI have shown, focused research on grassroots organising highlights a more complex, interconnected constellation of women's activism. This often transcends not only formal organisational boundaries, but also perimeters of age, class, race, religion, geography, and national or political affiliation. Caitríona Beaumont et al.'s article, for instance, draws attention to the important cross-borders friendships and solidarities within women's grassroots voluntary associations in Ireland and Britain, challenging dominant national narratives of Anglo-Irish relations that focus heavily on political conflict and religious divisions. Similarly, Collett and Cowman's article provides an alternative perspective to characterisations of the WLM as classist, highlighting the overlaps and support between ostensibly middle-class feminists and working-class mothers in Liverpool around issues of childcare, education, and housing. These interventions contribute to a growing historiography around activist networks of solidarity, further demonstrating how seemingly disparate groups could unite around shared experiences, common causes, or against mutual enemies. As scholars such as Bruno Walter Renato Toscano, Collett, and Diarmaid Kelliher have shown, activism could be grassroots and localised in scope, while simultaneously making far-reaching translocal and transnational connections.[42] These solidarities, according to Evan Smith et al., 'were not just abstract but were generative and transformative', often encouraging people to see problems as interlinked and leading to further politicisation.[43]

The importance of space in women's activism, particularly its role in facilitating such solidarities and helping form collective identities, has also been identified by several authors. Hogarth Raineau's article highlights how women's refuges provided physical spaces for a

diverse range of women to come together and effect practical change at a local level. These engaged feminists, members of older women's organisations, social workers, and working-class women in the community. Other authors in the SI have drawn attention to the ways in which everyday spaces could be transformed into political sites of resistance. This enhances our understanding of activism beyond explicit 'loud' manifestations such as strikes, street marches and public meetings. Contributions by Wilson, Collett and Cowman, and Logan and Auckland all highlight how the home – and women's domestic roles within it – could be reclaimed and repurposed by women for their needs or the needs of their community. This was often done to challenge the failures of the state, or to prefigure new ways of living or organising. Jobling's article explores women's role in transforming workplaces across the UK and Ireland through pursuing equal pay or sex discrimination cases. She highlights how women drew attention to their everyday gendered employment experiences, changing employment equality from a legal concept to a viable workplace reality. Other authors have shown how activism was not simply limited to a physical site but could also create 'communities of experience'. For instance, Beckie Rutherford's article demonstrates how 'information activism' provided an activist space and hub for isolated or marginalised disabled women, facilitating a shared politicised identity through print cultures. These interventions contribute to a growing literature on gender, space, activism, and activist networks, and further demonstrate how grassroots activism can be defined as both local, national, and international.

III

By focusing on local spaces and women at the grassroots, this SI asserts that these are not just generative of forms of activism but can shape activists themselves and how historians, political scientists, and social movement scholars perceive their actions. In doing so, we seek to redefine what an activist is, consider the multiple pathways to becoming an activist, and

recognise the overlaps between women's grassroots activists and more formal political structures. Recent academic work has sought to broaden and complicate who is labelled an activist in studies of activism and protest.[44] When this question is viewed through the lens of women's grassroots activism, new and expansive communities of women activists emerge. Using this innovative approach disrupts common characterisations that the work of women in local groups is humdrum rather than transformative. These 'quiet' modes of women's activism, for example education, training and community service, have sometimes been used to query the validity of women as activists.

Encompassing a wider definition of female activists raises another significant question, that of activist identity. Not all the women who were members of grassroots organisations participated in the same way or took part in all activities, and many would not have recognised their involvement as campaigning. In her contribution, Heaton draws a distinction between choosing to participate in various forms of activism and being an activist. She acknowledges that, for many women, a separation or inconsistency could, and often did, exist between what they did and how they labelled themselves. Articulations of activist identities were often formed in relation to the organisations women belonged to. For instance, women who joined local voluntary groups might commonly label themselves in terms of their positions within their chosen organisation (for example, as an 'ordinary member', 'officer', or 'secretary') and see their engagement as a form of service. Many of the women councillors featured in Anna Muggeridge's article described their voluntary activism as service. Therefore, we are attentive to the ways in which women have used the term activist (or not) and suggest that there is a spectrum of activist nomenclatures. In recognising this disjuncture of identity, we nonetheless argue that everyday practical and 'quiet' expressions of non-party political activism by grassroots women are historically significant and as historians we recognise these women as activists. These often-quotidian pathways to an activist life are

evident in this SI. Many of the articles use local studies and biographical sources to reveal these pathways. Karen Hunt argues through such an approach 'we can begin to see how the extraordinariness of activism arises from and relates to the ordinariness of daily life'.[45] The process of becoming an activist can be one of gradual accumulation from a small personal issue through self-education and local action, to more conventional political engagement.

It would also have been surprising to some women that they would be drawn into the wider women's movement and potentially viewed as feminists.[46] Should those who joined voluntary women's groups be characterised as having a feminist disposition? Historians of women's activism have taken different positions on this issue. For example, Beaumont argues that groups publicly rejecting a feminist orientation (for example, the NFWI, the Soroptimists or the MU) should not be labelled feminist.[47] Conversely, Maggie Andrews suggests that those advocating for improvements in the lives of women have an inherent feminist allegiance. She therefore regards the NFWI as 'the acceptable face of feminism'.[48] By asking 'could women be feminist without feminism?', Lynn Abrams contributes to this debate, highlighting the women's 'self-help' groups established in the 1950s and 1960s that rejected feminism, but were crucial in laying foundations for the WLM.[49] These deliberations have resulted in a new, broader definition of the women's movement. As Beaumont argues, the term women's movement needed to be liberated from its exclusive association with feminism.[50]

In this SI, we argue that women's grassroots activism cannot always be encompassed within an explicitly feminist framework. For instance, in Collett and Cowman's study of Liverpool and Wilson's study of Glasgow, working-class women framed their activism around achieving tangible change for their communities, eschewing labels of 'feminist' despite implicit connections with WLM ideas, structures, and networks. This echoes recent work by Natalie Thomlinson and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, who have highlighted how working-

class women activists in the 1984-5 miners' strike also denied 'political' labels and emphasised their 'ordinariness', often in opposition to WLM feminists.[51] Yet, as articles by Collett and Cowman and Hogarth Raineau in this SI show, the boundaries between 'practical' community-based activism and 'abstract' feminist ideas or causes were often much more fluid and complex. Foregrounding such localised action, undertaken by both feminist and other women's groups thus allows us to expand and complicate histories of the women's movement. This enables us to demonstrate how the concept of the 'personal is political', most often associated with the WLM, is not limited to feminist activism but can be applied to a wider range of activism that emerged in tandem with (and sometimes connected to) feminism.[52]

IV

Researching historic activism necessitates an eclectic approach to sources and methodology. From the beginning, our WGA network adopted principles of participatory research. These necessitate the full and active involvement of relevant communities in all aspects of project creation, including research design.[53] In a pilot project, the core WGA team worked with current members of the SITWD, part of the worldwide Soroptimist movement.[54] Both parties – the SITWD representatives and the academic researchers – worked collaboratively by committing to the project and to the reduction in power imbalances inherent in social research with human participants, in which academics typically make the key decisions about what is to be researched and by what method. In the WGA pilot, the partners endeavoured to practice distinctively feminist research methods and ethics by working on women's activism with/by women activists.[55]

The pilot quickly brought about the emergence of archive preservation as a central theme of the research.[56] When discussion turned to SITWD's history, its (almost forgotten) local

housing association, which ran from the 1960s to the 1990s to accommodate elderly, single women, was identified by workshop participants as a 'substantial local project' of historical interest.[57] Subsequently, Logan (University of Kent) and Auckland (SITWD) agreed to jointly research the subject of Soroptimist-run housing associations in England. The resulting, co-created article is presented in this SI. Logan and Auckland continued to use principles of participatory research for their shared endeavour by formulating research questions and deciding on methodology together – it was Auckland, for example, who suggested the inclusion of oral history in the article – while dividing the archive work and writing between them. Their collaboration was facilitated by mutual respect, common interests, and previous experience of working together on a research project.[58] Nevertheless, inevitably there are aspects of research which remain entirely in the academic partner's hands, for example, formalities such as research ethics procedures and publishing arrangements, which potentially could skew power towards researchers with institutional support. On the other hand, non-academic partners might retain greater access to (and control over) key local research resources, particularly where archival materials remain in private collections. Therefore, however desirable participatory research may be from the perspective of feminist praxis, it is not straightforward to practice, even in the most propitious circumstances.

The question of access to archival resources at local level is essential for our full understanding of women's activism at the grassroots. The organisational records of various non-party political women's organisations are central to our wider awareness that such groups have a history that is a huge component of the women's movement.[59] The Women's Library at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) houses the organisational records of many groups, including the NFWI. Such records — minutes of national executive committees, press cuttings or 'in house' journals or magazines, annual reports, financial records, or documents relating to regulation — tell us much about how these organisations were run 'at the top' as well as their

formal governance. They also tell us about the campaigns and issues that such groups prioritised at specific moments in time. Yet, the Women's Library collections are not comprehensive, with some groups' material, notably Soroptimists, largely absent.

However, local records from clubs can and do change the narrative from national executive committees' records. They are especially important for an understanding of activism at the grassroots, notably within the context of more formal organisations. Minutes of meetings, for example, while ostensibly bureaucratic and procedural can serve as agendas for action, detailing what activities would be undertaken, when, where, and by whom. Everyday local activism can be hidden in wider national records and revealed only through careful study of what was going on at club/institute/guild level. Without this, we have only patchy, partial understanding of what grassroots activism was, and how it worked within communities. Within this special issue, Hogarth Raineau, Muggeridge, Collett and Cowman, and Beaumont et al.'s contributions demonstrate the importance of using local archival records to challenge national narratives and temporalities.[60] Because local groups might have different priorities, they also disrupted national hierarchies of recordkeeping.

While few would dispute the usefulness of such local records, accessing these can be complex. To begin, the survival of group records can often be patchy. Where these do survive, this is commonly in county record offices throughout the UK; as part of the WGA workshops, participants viewed the recently deposited records of Stourbridge Soroptimist club at Dudley Archives and Local History Centre, which dated back to the club's establishment in the interwar years. Records included formal minutes and reports but also photographs and embroidered banners. When we viewed these with current members of the Soroptimists (in Stourbridge and elsewhere) they were struck by similarities with contemporary meetings – both in terms of their structure and some of the themes and topics discussed.

However, many organisations do not have formal archiving policies, particularly smaller clubs or groups which may not be affiliated to an (inter)national structure in the way that Soroptimist clubs in the UK and Ireland are affiliated to the Soroptimist International Great Britain and Ireland (SIGBI). As a result, important records may languish in members' attics, garages, or understairs cupboards. As these are understandably not housed in archival-standard preservation materials, they run the risk of degrading and becoming unusable; more significantly they can feel like a burden for the individual member who has decades of history they do not know what to do with sitting in their home. One co-produced goal of the WGA network was to empower contemporary women's organisations to make decisions about their own heritage through workshops led by qualified archivists. As a direct result, Soroptimist Northern Ireland now has an archives policy and are in discussions to deposit records at the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI).

Nonetheless, there will be many clubs or organisations whose archives have long since been lost or destroyed. Significantly, too, some organisations simply did not keep bureaucratic records; this was particularly the case for many WLM groups who actively sought to move away from these more formal ways of organising. Accordingly, historians have long used a tapestry of sources to explore histories of activism, and especially women's activism, which might otherwise remain hidden. Oral history has been, and remains, particularly significant here. It is unsurprising that so many articles in this collection draw upon oral histories and other 'sources of the self', such as letters, diaries, and memoirs, which, as Heaton articulates in this SI, possess unique potential for historians wishing to understand past activism and the subjectivities of activists. Several contributors to this volume utilised oral history interviews, including Logan and Auckland, Wilson, Collett and Cowman, Hogarth Raineau, and Rutherford.

Historians of women in particular have used oral history as a means of more fully capturing women's experiences, especially in the absence of more traditional sources. Yet, oral history is not simply a means of understanding what happened at a particular moment, but also interpreting and contextualising it.[61] As Ryan et al. remind us, 'participants are not offering us snapshots of the past… [and] remembering is not a passive process'.[62] Interviewees will inevitably make sense of their memories of the past not only in the context of the present, but also with reference to the 'after', that is, their experiences subsequent to the time which is being remembered. For example, Wilson mentions that for some of her interviewees, activism as young women in Castlemilk's Jeely Piece Club catalysed a lifetime of work in community politics, experiences which inevitably influenced their testimony. As Ryan et al. remark, 'oral history researchers are not attempting to capture the past, instead they are interested in how the past is represented and retold'.[63] Oral history, too, can be used to broaden activist narratives looking beyond certain 'moments' of activism, as many of the articles in this collection do, expanding our chronologies and continuing to 'flatten the curve' of the wave metaphor characterising histories of the women's movement.[64]

However, it is not just oral history that might serve to broaden our understandings of what activism is and was, particularly at the grassroots. Material culture is especially significant in highlighting both causes on which women have been active and indeed marking out those who 'belong' (formally or informally) to a club, movement or campaign. Throughout the project, we were struck by the visibility of much women's activism. In formal clubs, institutes, guilds or groups, this was often through badges, chains of office or banners which quite literally identify someone as being part of the group. Women's groups have long used colour to signify activism, for example in the women's suffrage campaign. A contemporary example is the 'Orange the World' campaign to end violence against women and girls in which organisations such as the NFWI, ICA and Soroptimists participate.[65]

Material culture is not simply about representations of belonging. Activism produces placards and banners onto which slogans and demands are publicised. Zines or other informal publications provide creative outlets as well as further detail on specific campaigns. Songs are written, and, frequently, 'craftivism' enables women in particular to repurpose an artform long understood as feminine and domestic to be used in forms of protest.[66] Heaton's article in this SI draws particular attention to this, and many of the other articles in the collection draw directly on the ephemera of groups and organisations to recover their histories. The 'stuff' of protest might be easily thrown away (or, at most, kept in attics or cupboards by individuals); it is heartening to see that, in the present, museums are making active efforts to collect items from contemporary protest movements. The People's History Museum in Manchester, UK, for example, has launched a Collective Action campaign to collect items from contemporary protest in the UK, while in Ireland, the National Museum of Ireland undertook 'rapid response' collecting around the 2018 'Repeal the 8th' campaign to amend the Irish constitution and legalise abortion.[67] Such collections will undoubtedly prove vital for future research into histories of grassroots activism.

V

This SI makes significant interventions across disciplinary boundaries concerned with activism, protest, and gender in twentieth-century Britain and Ireland. This is achieved by highlighting women's local activism and activists at the grassroots in particular moments, places, and campaigns. Taken collectively, as we argue here, our contributors demonstrate that women's grassroots activism is more complex and multifaceted than has previously been understood. The SI reinforces the importance of examining locally-based, non-party political activities, campaigns, groups and organisations. While historians have long been attentive to the local, this has often been in the context of a wider national campaign or linked to a political party. For example, there are now a plethora of local studies of the women's suffrage movement which highlight the specificities of the campaign in particular places, which have

nuanced and sometimes challenged our understanding of the 'national' campaign.[68] But as many of the articles in this collection demonstrate, it is not just in high profile campaigns or louder moments that women have been active at the grassroots.

As more research covering multiple locales, different timelines, and more diverse groups of women is undertaken, understandings of what women's grassroots activism represents and who can be considered an activist will further develop. This work will need to be inclusive of a wider variety of women's groups, including groups representing the interests of women of colour and their expressions of activism around the everyday.[69] Additionally, new studies can also reveal the under-researched overlaps and interactions between non-party women in grassroots organisations with those who engaged in formal party politics.

As we have demonstrated, there is value across academic disciplines in recognising individuals, groups, and organisations as activist even if they might not have used this label to describe their work, service, or activities. The articles in this SI, which chronologically span the period from the 1920s to the 1990s, do highlight that in the earlier twentieth century the terms activist or activism was not frequently used by women themselves. At other times, the terms activist and activism have been understood within narrow boundaries which might not encompass certain groups or modes of activity — very often those connected to 'quiet' forms of activism and to women's domestic work. This question — of how, when, where and why we might apply these labels, and the differences between 'being an activist' and 'doing activism'— are contested and explored next by Heaton, whose following contribution to the SI offers further interrogation of the vernaculars of twentieth-century women's activism.

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[1] Project Reference: AH/X008606/1. https://gtr.ukri.org/projects?ref=AH%2FX008606%2F. (accessed July 10, 2026). Caitríona Beaumont (Principal Investigator), Anne Logan (Co-Investigator), Rachel Collett (network co-ordinator), Ruth Davidson and Anna Muggeridge (core academic research team).
[2] The NFWI, established in 1915, represents women in England, Wales, and the Islands (Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man). The Soroptimist International Great Britain and Ireland (SIGBI) officially formed in 1934 with a London club first charted in 1924 and clubs opening in Belfast in 1932 and in Dublin in 1938. SIGBI's Tunbridge Wells and District Club opened in 1946. The ICA (formally known as the United Irishwomen) was set up in 1910 and in 1932 the WINI opened its first local institutes in Northern Ireland. See also Anne Logan and Caroline Auckland and Caitríona Beaumont et al.'s contributions to this Special Issue.
[3] *Women's Grassroots Activism Toolkit 100+* (London: London South Bank University, 2026) https://learn.lsbu.ac.uk/womens-grassroots-activism-toolkit (accessed July 10, 2026).
[4] The organisations featured in this special issue operate in the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and Great Britain.
[5] Kevan Harris and Jillian Schwedler, 'What is Activism?,' *Middle East Report*, 281 (2016): 3.
[6] This builds on the now rich body of work documenting histories of extra parliamentary female activism in Great Britain and Ireland. See, for example: Lynn Abrams, *Feminist Lives: Women, Feelings, & The Self in Post-War Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023); Maggie Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism: The Women's Institutes as a Social Movement,* 2nd ed. (London: Lawrence & Wishart Ltd., 2015); Paula Bartley, *Women's Activism in Twentieth Century Britain: Making a Difference Across the Political Spectrum* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022); Jenny Beale, *Women in Ireland: Voices of Change* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1987); Caitríona Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens: Domesticity and the Women's Movement in England, 1928-1964* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013); Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014); Linda Connolly, *The Irish Women's Movement: From Revolution to Devolution* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2003); Rosemary Cullen Owens, *A Social History of Women in Ireland 1870–1970* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2005); Ruth Davidson, *Women's Welfare Activism: Everyday power and politics in twentieth-century Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, forthcoming); Maryann Gialanella Valiulis and Mary O'Dowd, *Women & Irish History* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1997); Myrtle Hill, *Women in Ireland: A Century of Change* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 2003); Beth Jenkins et al., eds. *Gender in Modern Welsh History: Perspectives on Masculinity and Femininity in Wales from 1750 to 2000* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2023); Margaretta Jolly, *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the UK Women's Liberation Movement, 1968-Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019) and Pat Thane, *Women's Liberation: Gender Inequality from Suffrage to Austerity* (London: Polity, 2026).
[7] Histories of women's engagement with formal politics in twentieth-century Britain and Ireland include, for example: Clarisse Berthezène and Julie Gottlieb, eds., *Considering Conservative Women the Gendering of Modern British Politics* (London: Routledge, 2020); Mary Clancy, 'Aspects of Women's Contribution to the Oireachtas Debates in the Irish Free State, 1922–37', in *Women Surviving: Studies in Irish Women's History in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, eds., Maria Luddy and Cliona Murphy (Dublin: Poolbeg Press, 1990), 217–23; Krista Cowman, *Women in British Politics, c. 1689-1979* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Ruth Davidson et al., eds., *Women, Power, and Politics in Britain, 1945-1997* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming); Pamela M. Graves, *Labour Women: Women in British Working Class Politics, 1918-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Brian Harrison, 'Women in a Men's House: The Women MPs, 1919-1945', *The Historical Journal* 29, no.3 (1986): 623-654; Alan Hayes and Diane Urquhart, eds., *Irish Women's History* (Irish Academic Press: Dublin, 2000); Patricia Hollis, *Ladies Elect: Women in English Local Government 1865-1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Karen Hunt, 'Labour woman and the housewife', in *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1918–1939* eds. Catherine Clay et al., (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 238–251; Lyndsey Jenkins and Stephanie Ward, 'Women and the Labour Party: Gender and the Writing of British Political History', *The Political Quarterly* 94, no. 2 (2023): 251-257; Lyndsey Jenkins, '"The voice of the true British housewife": The politics of housewifery at Labour's women's conferences, 1945–1959', *Women's History Review* 33, no. 4 (2024): 492-516; Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement since 1914,* 3rd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Pat Thane, 'Women of the British Labour Party and Feminism, 1906-45', in *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Harold Smith (London: Edward Elgar, 1990); Diane Urquhart, *Women in Ulster Politics 1890-1940: A History Not Yet Told* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2000).
[8] Donna Della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction* (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2009), 165.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Charles Tilly, *The Contentious French: Four Centuries of Popular Struggle* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 2.

[11] Utilising social movement theory to interrogate histories of female activism has been used effectively by sociologists, for example: Connolly, *The Irish Women's Movement;* Louise Ryan, 'An Analysis of the Irish Suffrage Movement Using New Social Movement Theory', in *Social Movements and Ireland*, eds. Linda Connolly and Niamh Hourigan (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006). See also: Caitríona Beaumont, Mary Clancy and Louise Ryan, 'Networks as "Laboratories of Experience": Exploring the Life Cycle of the Suffrage Movement and its Aftermath in Ireland, 1870-1937', *Women's History Review* 29, no.6 (2020): 1054-1074.
[12] For example: Olive Banks, *Faces of Feminism: A Study of Feminism as a Social Movement* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981); David Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge: The Movement for Women's Liberation in Britian and the United States* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1983); Sue Bruley, *Women in Britain Since 1900* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999); Barbara Caine, *English Feminism 1780-1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement* and Elizabeth Wilson, *Only Half Way to Paradise: Women in Post-War Britain: 1945-1968* (London: Tavistock, 1980).
[13] On communities of experience, see: Ville Kivimäki et al., 'Communities of Experience', *Digital Handbook of the History of Experience* (2023, online). https://sites.tuni.fi/hexhandbook/theory/communities-of-experience/ (accessed July 12, 2026). See also: Caitríona Beaumont, Eve Colpus and Ruth Davidson, eds. Introduction to *Everyday Welfare in Modern British History: Experience, Expertise and Activism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2025), 1-26. On alternative forms of activism, see: Laura Pottinger, 'Planting the seeds of a quiet activism', *Area* 49, no.2 (2017): 215-222.
[14] Kivimäki et al., 'Communities of Experience'.
[15] Jessica White, 'Black Women's Groups, Life Narratives, and the Construction of the Self in Late Twentieth-Century Britain', *The Historical Journal* 65, no. 3 (2022): 797-817. See also: Beverley Bryan et al., *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* (London: Virago Press, 1985); Saffron East, 'Antiracism in Southall, c.1968-c.1982', (PhD diss, University College London, 2024); A.S. Francis, 'A Luta Continua: The Political Journey of Manchester Black Women Activists, 1945-80', in *Many Struggles: New Histories of African and Caribbean People in Britain,* ed. Hakim Adi (London: Pluto Press, 2023); Natalie Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement in England, 1968-1993* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) and Oliva Wyatt, '"The Enemy in Our Midst": Caribbean Women and the Protection of Community in Leeds', in ed. Hakim Adi, *Many Struggles.*
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[18] Della Porta and Diani, *Social Movements,* 165.
[19] Deborah G. Martin et al., 'What Counts as Activism?: The Role of Individuals in Creating Change', *Women's Studies Quarterly* 35 no.3/4 (2007): 78-94.
[20] Ibid., 78.
[21] Ibid.
[22] See, for example, articles by Suzanne Jobling and Beaumont, Susie Deedigan and Martin Walsh in this SI.
[23] See, for example, articles by Rachel Collett and Krista Cowman, and Jo Hogarth Raineau in this Special Issue. See also: Rachel Collett, 'Capenhurst Women's Peace Camp (1982-3) and after: local nuclear resistance, grassroots feminisms, and transnational solidarities', *Modern British History* 36, no. 3 (2025); Stevenson, *The Women's Liberation Movement*; Sheila Rowbotham, 'Cleaners' Organising in Britain from the 1970s: A Personal Account', *Antipode* 38, no. 3 (2006): 608-625; Jessica White, 'Child-centred Matriarch or Mother Among Other Things? Race and the Construction of Working-class Motherhood in Late Twentieth-century Britain', *Twentieth Century British History* 33, no. 4 (2022): 498-521.
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[25] Pottinger, 'Planting the seeds': 215.
[26] Martin et al., 'What Counts as Activism?': 79.
[27] For more on 'non-movement' activism in women's spaces, see, for example: Collett, 'Capenhurst Women's Peace Camp'; Krista Cowman, '"The ideas of women's liberation existing in bricks and mortar": UK Women's Centres in the 1970s and 1980s', *Labour History Review* (forthcoming); Lucy Delap, 'Feminist Bookshops, Reading Cultures and the Women's Liberation Movement in Great Britain, c.1974-2000', *History Workshop Journal* 81 (2016): 171-196; Kristen Hogan, *The Feminist Bookstore Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Rosie Levine Hampton, 'Infrastructures of solidarity: the spatial politics of the left in 1980s Scotland', (PhD diss., University of Glasgow, 2025); Daphne Spain, *Constructive Feminism: Women's Spaces and Women's Rights in the American City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016).

[28] Melissa Estes Blair, '"A Dynamic Force in Our Community": Women's Clubs and Second Wave Feminism at the Grassroots', *Frontiers* 30, no. 3, (2009): 31.
[29] See, for example, Caitríona Beaumont, 'The "Silver Thread": Hazel Hunkins-Hallinan (1890-1982), the Six Point Group, and New Understandings of Intergenerational Female Activism in England, 1960s-1980', *Women's History Review* 34, no. 4 (2025): 603-619; Collett, 'Capenhurst Women's Peace Camp': 8-9, 15-16.
[30] Della Porta and Diani, *Social Movements,*165.
[31] The idea that the personal is political is most often associated with the WLM and 1960s social movements, but, as we argue in this SI, this idea can be applied to a much longer history of female activism. For further discussion of the personal is political in the context of women's activism, see: Beaumont et al., 'Experiential Expertise'.
[32] Sue Bruley, 'Women's Liberation at the Grassroots: A View from Some English Towns, c.1968-1990', *Women's History Review* 25, no.5 (2016): 723.
[33] See, for example, Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism* and Mavis Curtis, *The WI: A Century in the Making* (Stroud: Amberley, 2015).
[34] See, for example: Maggie Andrews, 'Worcestershire's Women: Local Studies and the Gender Politics of the First World War and its Legacy', *History* 104, (2019): 851-870; Sarah Browne, '"A Veritable Hotbed of Feminism": Women's Liberation in St Andrews, Scotland, c.1968-c.1979', *Twentieth Century British History* 23, no.1 (2012): 100-123; Bruley, 'Women's Liberation at the grassroots'; Collett, 'Capenhurst Women's Peace Camp'; Rachel Collett, 'Socialist-Feminist Revival in the Merseyside Women's Liberation Movement: New priorities, strategies, spaces and solidarities after 1978', in *In Solidarity, Under Suspicion: The British Far Left from 1956*, eds. Daniel Frost and Evan Smith (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2025); Ruth Davidson, 'A local perspective: the women's movement and citizenship, Croydon 1890s-1939', *Women's History Review* 29, no. 6 (2020), 1016-33; Emily Flaherty, 'The Women's Liberation Movement in Britain, 1968-1984: Locality and Organisation in Feminist Politics', (PhD diss, University of Glasgow, 2017); Sue Innes, 'Constructing women's citizenship in the interwar period: the Edinburgh Women's Citizens' Association', *Women's History Review* 13, no. 4 (2004): 621-47; Bridget Lockyer, 'An Irregular Period? Participation in the Bradford Women's Liberation Movement', *Women's History Review* 24, no.n4 (2013): 643-57; Anna Muggeridge, '"Work in the Housewives' Service, like that of a household, seems never to be done": the "practical politics" of the Women's Voluntary Service in the Second World War', Women's History Review 33, no. (4), (2024): 474–491.
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[37] Davidson, 'Communities of Care', 69.
[38] Davidson et al., 'Women's post-war political activism in Britain': 534.
[39] Pat Thane, 'What difference did the vote make? Women in public and private life in Britain since 1918', *Historical Research* 76, no. 192 (2003): 268—285.
[40] Anna Bocking-Welch et al., 'Women's campaigning, petitioning, and grassroots activism, 1945-1997', *Women's History Review* 34, no. 4 (2025): 564-81 and Collett, 'Socialist Feminist Revival in the Merseyside Women's Liberation Movement': 202-4.
[41] Davidson et al., 'Women's post-war political activism in Britain': 531-2.
[42] See, for example: Collett, 'Capenhurst Women's Peace Camp'; Collett, 'Socialist-feminist Revival in the Merseyside Women's Liberation Movement'; Diarmaid Kelliher, 'Solidarity and sexuality: lesbians and gays support the miners 1984-5', *History Workshop Journal* 77, no.1 (2014): 240-62; Diarmaid Kelliher, *Making Cultures of Solidarity: London and the 1984-5 Miners' Strike* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021); Stevenson, *The Women's Liberation Movement*; Bruno Walter Renato Toscano, '"Work locally but think globally": The Alliance Against Women's Oppression and transnational multiracial grassroots activism in the 1980s', *Gender & History* 38, no.1 (2026): 390-405.
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[47] Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens*, 1-3.

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[53] Budd L. Hall, 'In from the Cold? Reflections on participatory research from 1970-2005', *Convergence* XXXVIII , no. 1 (2005): 5-24.

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[63] Ibid.

[64] See, for example: Jolly, *Sisterhood and After*. The idea of 'flattening the curve' draws attention to the ongoing activism by women between the so called first wave (the suffrage movement), the second wave (the WLM), and the third wave (1990s feminism), and suggests that the wave metaphor is now outdated. See, for example: Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement*, 3-6; Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens*, 215-219; Collett, 'Socialist-feminist Revival in the Merseyside Women's Liberation Movement', 183; Karen Offen, *European Feminism, 1700-1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

[65] *Women's Grassroots Activism Podcast Series* (2025), https://historyhub.ie/womens-grassroots-actvism-podcast (accessed September 1, 2026).

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[69] See, for example: White, 'Black Women's Groups'.