

Women still in Profile

Variant Round Table Discussion

Social & Cultural Projects: Women's Strategies in Glasgow.

Introduction

Paula Larkin, Variant (PL)

Following an approach to review Frock On women's music events, we thought it a positive move to bring women together who were working in different areas in social and cultural projects in Glasgow, to discuss the issues that concern them. Participating were: Sandy Brindley from Rape Crisis Scotland, Rosie Ilett from the Sandyford Initiative, Adele Patrick of the Glasgow Women's Library, and Anne Kastner who has knowledge of the Frock On events.

Rosie Ilett (RI)

The Sandyford Initiative came about in 2000 to bring together a range of health services that already existed and to develop new ones. Based in Glasgow City Centre, and with an additional 26 community based sites, it's not a women only service, but developed partly within the context of work done around Glasgow's women's health policy. Over the last twenty years there has been a lot of strategic multi-agency development to address inequalities in how women's health is constructed and then supported. One of the main outcomes was the Centre for Women's Health, which has been going for nine years (believe it or not). The Centre is now part of the Sandyford Initiative and is a women only space—one of its remits was/is to influence change in how health services were understanding women's health. Sandyford is about a gendered approach to health—we recognise how gender inequalities affect health. We try: to provide opportunities for women to look at their own health issues, to influence health workers, and to make changes.

Sandy Brindley (SB)

I work at the National Office for the Rape Crisis movement in Scotland. The National Office was set up a year ago, before that it was a loose network of local groups. There are eight rape crisis centres in Scotland, four of whom are part of the network that I'm within, following a split within the network between whether or not centres wanted to work on a women only basis, or to work with men and women. It's a discussion that's rooted within the history of Rape Crisis.

Rape Crisis was set up by local women who were either concerned about rape or who'd had experiences of rape. It took a feminist analysis of violence against women: that it was embedded within power structures within society. It set up as an alternative to the response women were getting at that time, particularly from the statutory agencies. Women were saying they weren't being believed, and were getting a really judgmental response. Centres have held on to the ethos of providing fundamental things, like: a non-judgmental service, that a woman herself decides what her needs are and we work with the woman around what she says she needs. Often the response a woman can get is people telling her what they think is best for her. Our view is that the woman herself knows best, she's the expert on her life. There's lots of issues about the over-medicalisation of women's reactions, which is still an issue today. Women say they go to their GP and they just get a prescription, they get antidepressants. That's not often the appropriate or helpful response.

One aim is to develop the Rape Crisis movement in Scotland—expanding the service existing centres are able to offer, as it's a limited level of service now. At the National Office, women are

telling us they can't get through to their local Rape Crisis Centre. They're trying for weeks and can't get through—the reason is limited opening hours and a waiting list, which is directly the result of the lack of funding, which just isn't acceptable. It takes so much courage to pick up the phone and make that call to a Rape Crisis Centre and no one should be getting an answer machine.

I also look at setting up new Rape Crisis Centres, as there are big parts of Scotland that have no provision at all.

Another part of the job, which has always been a part of the Rape Crisis movement, is political campaigning, especially focussing on improving the criminal justice system as women are telling us it's absolutely hellish. If a woman does report her incident to the police it can take 18 months for it to come to court—if it gets to court. Only 10% of cases make it to court and only 6% of recorded rapes in Scotland lead to a conviction. Once women get to court it's really a harrowing and degrading experience they are put through. It's clear, the Justice System is failing women that have been raped.

We're trying to challenge myths with facts, myths such as 'only a certain type of woman gets raped', 'men rape because they're sick' or because 'they've got uncontrollable sexual urges'. Centres were trying to challenge these myths in the '70s and '80s and they are still coming up decades later. A lot of work we need to do is around awareness raising and campaigning to change attitudes and structures.

Anne Kastner (AK)

I've been an observer of what Frock On have been doing for the last year and a half. The events stem from an all female collective that centres on around a dozen women who live in the same building in the West End of Glasgow. Their cultural events involve workshop days, music events, self defence groups and so on. Posters around Glasgow initially alerted me to them, and I felt a lot of people would welcome this kind of activity as it seemed to be a move forward—it's something they've said themselves, "they wanted to make feminism cool again". They take their events or workshop days to places around Glasgow, bringing feminism into the community rather than people having to look for it themselves, so it was quite a help. But they weren't getting the type of publicity they should. Nothing about it appeared in the media that I could see. So I decided to write something about this, and that's what my personal concerns are, how feminism is represented within the media now.

Adele Patrick (AP)

I'm the life long learning co-ordinator at Glasgow Women's Library. The Library is an organic women's project which evolved out of Women in Profile. When I see the Frock On projects I get nostalgic because cultural inertia or the lack of foregrounding of women doing exiting things is a trigger for women to mobilise. That's what was happening in '87 with Women in Profile. The trigger was the announcement that Glasgow was going to be City of Culture 1990. We were cynical enough to think that it might not be a pluralistic cultural celebration.

(Laughter)

We started organising and held a series of events during 1990. Lots of women got involved, but most of the women at that time, including myself, had no history of real work in women's organisations. So there was a period of reflection after 1990. Myself and Kate Henderson (now involved in Frock On) and other women were reflecting on what we wanted to evolve out of that. We actually took on premises during 1990

and those particular constituencies of women were using the physical space almost as a locus for information exchange. One of the ways we started to conceptualise ourselves as a sort of Library was from having other women from Women's Libraries in Europe visit. Also, one of the projects we coined in 1990 was Castlemilk Women House—Rachael Harris, Cathy Wilkes, Julie Roberts, Clare Barclay and other women were steering it. As part of Women House's evolution, we had visited the Women Artists' Slide Library in London where information on the Californian and English womanhouse models were available. It was sensational to see such a volume of stuff on women artists but that model wasn't particularly appropriate to Glasgow, being solely academic and research centred. We had seen a huge traffic of women who wouldn't normally use libraries come into our original Women in Profile premises. We wanted to combine those two elements, of collecting relevant information mainly made up of things that women might donate themselves, but also making it as accessible as possible. The library was launched in 1991, and in 1995 we moved here. It strikes me as ironic and pleasing that a lot of the projects represented here have been forged in a period where you wouldn't imagine such projects would arise, be sustained, expand. If we look at our counterparts in England you're going to see a different story the last couple of decades.

Now, we have a library resource over three floors in the city centre; we're home to the UK's National Lesbian Archive and Information Centre; we're home to a young lesbian and bisexual peer support project LIPS, that has itself developed into a peer education project; an adult literacy, numeracy project for women; a life long learning programme; and Pat Crook is also the co-ordinator of the Scottish Executives Women's Organisations Data Base—there's a database now based in the library. We're trying to provide an array of learning opportunities for women. We still have a strong arts core, both Literature and Visual Arts—we had Elsbeth Lamb doing visual arts course recently, and Raman Mundair has begun work as our Writer in Residence this month. She has worked in a variety of media. After this period of growth, we feel more confident about the plurality of use—there are lots of women with different histories and diverse experiences using the library.

PL: Clara Ursitti, an artist and lecturer at Glasgow School of Art, who couldn't be here, brought up the issue that a lot of women artists/students don't see their work in any feminist context, and yet she sees historical feminist influences in their work. The reaction is "it's not feminist" or they think that's all been dealt with. In preparing a lecture on women only exhibitions in Scotland, Clara couldn't find out this information. The Scottish Arts Council who would probably fund a lot of these exhibitions/events didn't seem to have any. Would the Women's Library?

AP: I think a starting point would be visiting or contacting the Library since many women's projects over the years have not been funded and documentation is not necessarily archived by mainstream collections and libraries

RI: A lot of the stuff that happens around women's issues or in community settings is not necessarily disseminated or collected, or doesn't get publicity. So there might be events going on that women don't know about or be able to refer back to them as historical experiences. That's why things like the Women's Library are important, but that still relies on people donating or alerting the library's attention to it. There's been a different kind of history in Glasgow in terms of a lot of women's organisations that's different from say London, because of the way public funding has happened. With the Greater London Council there was a strategic and policy driven desire to

resource and build up women's capacity through women's organisations, and obviously other organisations were supporting different groups within the community. That made a huge impact over a certain period. When the GLC was disbanded that had an effect on what has continued ever since. Not just on women's organisations but on a range of community or cultural organisations. But there has been a different experience in Glasgow. There has been bits of funding in the last 10 years that has supported in different ways bits of activity, not to necessarily build a huge women's infrastructure.

AP: In issue based territories, for example women and health, I see an evolution of thinking. There have been open minded individuals in the

comfortable about borrowing them or asking about books on child abuse or something. But somewhere like the Centre For Women's Health obviously would give supportive information, if asked nobody would be shocked or indicate that this was something they hadn't come across before in terms of somebody speaking to them about it. It was about access to information and forms of support within a women only space. The library in Sandyford is now part of the City Council Library Service, so anyone can now access anything in the Sandyford library via any of the City Council libraries.

As we've developed the Sandyford Initiative some of those things have evolved in a bigger way, so the counselling service within the Centre has

(Laughter)

There is an importance to having literacy education groups, another step would be internet access. I know you're getting a couple of terminals downstairs in the Women's Library, that's an empowerment tool, if you can get hold of these tools that allow women to communicate with each other.

SB: There's been discussion for a long time in Glasgow about the need to improve services for women and men—but a lot of the discussion is focused on women because the majority of rapes are committed against women—to improve the response they get because at the moment it's very fragmented. If a woman goes to the Police she will invariably get a male Police Casualty Surgeon, to



Council who have been in, or may have cut their teeth in, women's politics. And there are some good women in the area of the arts. But, frankly it is going to be those areas where women can be perceived in that kind of 19th Century role almost, that can still lever funding more easily. I know that the language we're talking about and the discourse that has evolved is not couched in that way but philanthropic rather than feminist orientated support even in the territory of prostitution or women's health is still an issue in the funding discourses. I think the barriers would be, for example, if Frock On wanted to establish a centre. The Women's Library certainly hit these difficulties early on in its history where, as far as the Council are concerned, you don't fit into social work, you don't fit into education, into health, and it's almost a luxury that we can't afford. I don't think there's a fully developed discourse in terms of the funding.

PL: Can women drop into the Glasgow Women's Health Centre and the Sandyford Initiative, what are the resources?

RI: It's evolved over time—in a way that a lot of the things we've talked about have. The Centre was set up to see what areas of unmet need there were and to do things to address that. A need for women to access counselling as one issue of women's emotional and mental health was a huge issue—women's experiences, negative mainly, of accessing mainstream mental health services. The Centre started at that point to develop a counselling service within a context of providing individual support for women, but it's also about drawing to the attention of mainstream mental health that these are the issues that are coming in and these are the kind of factors that are affecting women. You've got to take some cognizance of that when you're providing a service. It's no point in us just providing service to every woman because they're going to access other services and need to have an appropriate response when they do that.

The Centre started developing a lending and reference library for women. Similar ideas to the Women's Library—that women wanted to access information that would improve their health, would address issues they were concerned with, or increase their well being. They didn't feel they would necessarily be able to find them in City Council libraries, or that if they did they'd feel

got more funding and it's now able to influence a lot of the developments within mainstream primary care. There's a lot of mental health developments now within the local healthcare co-ops. What CWH have been doing is literally influencing some of that development in terms of the competencies, awareness of issues that we will be expecting trust counsellors within primary care to have. There's a whole journey now of counselling being recognised as a National Health discipline and a properly graded profession.

SB: I was really interested in Frock On and representations of feminism but also about how we make feminism accessible. Thinking about it in terms of how you actually get access to the women's movement is one issue, a further issue is how feminism is represented, which then means that quite a lot of young women are not wanting to touch it, because of how they perceive feminism.

AK: There's a problem with visibility, with people knowing that these services exist. I'm wondering how we could solve that problem? Integrating into regular services is one answer, where going into a public library is part of the whole service and not something they have to approach separately, as that often puts people off. And leaflets might only be in the actual place where the service is...

AP: It's interesting that there are women now (like Frock On and one of Lucy McKenzie's Flourish series), deciding to do women only events and that's fantastic. She's a well known young woman artist in Glasgow and had a Riot Grrl history, I want to know from Lucy what made her want to do that?

AK: It's not something I've heard about—we need better communication through e-mail lists etc. I think people operate in these little groups, that's what happened to Frock On, from this thing called Lady Fest which started in the States they then inspired people in London and then Glasgow to set up their own little groups, and it's still going on. A lot of that is to do with the internet as well. Some of Frock On's remit is to go out and to leave something there in the community and to let people continue it on their own account. But it would be better if there was an umbrella thing that you could always go back to it. It's quite hard for individuals to set up something and to sustain it.

which women are saying "No way"—that experience is really violating and has been difficult to change within the current system. Then she will have to go somewhere else to access the Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) test, and somewhere else to get any kind of physical injuries dealt with. There has to be a lot more joined-up-ness of the immediate response. There's been a model developed in countries including England called Sexual Assault Referral Centres to pull everything together for women. Women can get a forensic if she wants it, even if she does or doesn't report to the police she can still get the examination and have the forensic evidence stored, because it's a very difficult time to make a decision. If they have the option of going through the forensic, because the evidence is lost so quickly, then they can then make the decision in their own time. They also have within the Centre access to support and counselling, medical and STI tests, joining everything up. We've been involved in a planning group looking at what the models are elsewhere and looking at what's going to work for Glasgow, with a view to a pilot.

SB: There's been a lot of discussion in England of whether you should broaden out the remit of Health Centres to include domestic abuse, and child sexual abuse. It's difficult because as soon as you broaden out, more and more women get access to this service but you lose its specialism, which is difficult when rape has been so invisible.

It is an interesting time for women only services, where it feels increasingly difficult to justify in a 'women only' way. There's a lot of misconceptions about what we mean by women only services. It doesn't mean we don't support the need for services for men, or that we want to discriminate against men. What we're saying is there is a need for women only space, but I think people are threatened by that. I would absolutely support the development of services for men, but it's really crucial that we fight for and retain the right for women only spaces as well.

The issue of violence against women has been mainstreamed to a certain extent which brings its own challenges in that statutory agencies have to work from a gender neutral perspective, so it's how you fit those two things together. We're saying absolutely, you need to look at the needs of men that have been raped but we really need to focus

on the needs of women.

AK: You were saying you feel the need to justify women only services, is that something quite recent, a backlash from the '80s 'we have got feminism' type thing? Do people think because issues have been mainstreamed that they've been dealt with and don't need women centred services anymore?

SB: I've been involved in Rape Crisis for ten years, every time you go to do a talk about the work you've been doing the first question is "What about men?" In some ways I think that's a legitimate question, but other times I think we're coming here saying 2 in 5 women are raped or sexually assaulted and that's your response!

AK: Do you think that's always something that's got to be struggled against, it doesn't end and it never will?

SB: There are more challenges now. One challenge is within the lesbian community. I do feel increasingly that there are certainly in terms of Rape Crisis less lesbian women involved—why? Is it partly because it's difficult just to get access to the women's movement now, but also the impact of queer politics, that more and more young les-

bians are going into queer politics and that sometimes can conflict with a feminist approach.

AP: It's important that there are young lesbian projects that are based in a place like this [GWL] because they're going to bump up against it, literally, in the archive, or in other places, and they're going to make their own minds up about what's relevant for them just now. It should be a fundamental choice for women to make their own mind up but based on an array of information, some of which is historical, but they're making their own history as well. It's important they feel like they're forging something that has its place.

I do feel the onus of responsibility to be accessible, to be plural or to take into consideration the needs of incredibly diverse communities. I wish one of the benefits from our work might be that the audiences, users, critics, enquirers of our organisations might level the same intensity of questions at mainstream organisations, arts organisations, or other mixed groups—how accessible to disabled people, minority, ethnic and black people find these organizations?

That's a feature of contemporary women's organisations, they're not going to be complacent.

It's almost an automatic notion, how are we going to network?

SB: There has been such a focus on partnership working within local authorities in Scotland. Women's organisations are having to engage much more because these partnerships have been set up, set up partly because of the work of women's organisations!

Contact details:

Frock On people can also be contacted through their website: www.frockon.org

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