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# **“Not An Encounter Group”: Democracy and Women’s Committees**

**Wendy Stokes**

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## **Abstract**

The following thesis describes the membership, goals and activities of five women's committees which were studied between 1992 and 1995. The committees were located in local authorities in different parts of England., selected to provide a degree of diversity. One goal of this thesis is to add to the body of knowledge about women's committee, but, more importantly, the thesis is intended as an analysis of the connection between the committees and theories of democracy and representation.

Some years before the formation of women's committees a renewed interest in the possibilities of democracy arose among both academics and politicians, which was to influence the constitution of the committees. Some of the ideas which were introduced for discussion between the 1960s and the present involved a reconsideration of familiar ground; others were truly innovative. Much of what was discussed entailed a break from representative democracy as it was understood and practised. Amongst the most interesting ideas were proposals to combine representative and direct mechanisms, to extend democracy into economic and social life, to introduce the representation of groups, and to develop the deliberative element of democracy. All of these ideas had implications for women, and feminists investigated their potential for change.

Women's committees were introduced in some local authorities from 1982, where both the women's movement and the new urban left of the Labour Party played a part in their creation. The committees were both a result of new thinking about democracy and possessed of the potential to foster further ideas and strategies. They were also firmly feminist, although the nature of their feminism, and the relationship between that and their democratic impetus, was complex. This study puts together existing research into women's committees, fresh research into five committees, and research into democratic theory. It argues that the committees were both feminist and democratic initiatives, and that they demonstrated the possibility of putting into practice some of the theories described. It also illuminates the problems addressed by the committees, some of which are problems for democracy.

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Introduction**

The title for this thesis was provided by a member of one of the five local government women's committees involved in the research. Towards the end of an interview in which she had talked about how the committee might involve more local women directly, and how members co-opted from the community might be helped to feel more at ease, she said, "but what you have to remember is, at the end of the day, it's a local government committee, not an Encounter group!". The significance of the dilemma she implied became increasingly clear during the study of the five committees and the wider context of what might be called the women's committee movement. As will be shown in the following chapters, the committees were constantly confronted by a range of expectations on the part of their members, the local councils, and different sections of people on the outside. Some people had very high expectations about what the committees could deliver for women; others had very clear expectations about the dangerous, subversive and sectional interests that the committees would pursue. Some people simply thought that the committees were the wrong way to go about things because they risked providing no advantage to women or left-wing goals while using up time, energy and good will.

Whatever the expectations projected onto them for good or bad, the committees were part of local government. This meant that they were constrained by the conventions and regulations of local government, and that their goals had to be balanced against other legitimate goals for the community. What their goals were and how they pursued them are

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central to this thesis, which can be understood in part as a contribution to the analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of women's committees, and their impact on public policy. The more specific objective of the thesis, however, is to examine the committees as experiments in new forms of democracy and representation. As will become apparent, those involved in women's committees shared a strong sense that the committees were extending the possibilities of democracy and opening up new modes of representation. As will become equally apparent, they were also intensely aware of the difficulties of this process, which were confirmed by the many tensions, even contradictions, they encountered in seeking to achieve a more adequate representation of women's concerns.

During the 1980s, some fifty women's committees were set up in Labour dominated councils across England, Scotland and Wales. These represented about 9% of the total local authorities.<sup>1</sup> They were charged with responsibility for promoting women's welfare and interests, opposing discrimination against women, encouraging equal opportunities, supporting women's groups, and opening up council procedures to women.<sup>2</sup> The committees

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<sup>1</sup> J. Edwards "Local Government Women's Committees", *Local Government Studies* Vol. 14 (1988) p 39-52; "Local Government Women's Committees", *Critical Social Policy* No. 24 (Winter 1988/1989) p 50-64 and "Women's Committees: a model for good local government", *Critical Social Policy* No. 24 (Winter 1988/1989). Details of numbers of committees and how these were compiled are given in Chapter Two.

<sup>2</sup> B. Webster, "Women's Committees : a model for good local government", *Local Government Policy Making* (November 1983) p 27-34. Accounts of the establishment and development of women's committees are given in the following: J. Watson, "Takeover Town Hall", *Spare Rib* 129 (April 1983); S. Roelofs, "Can Feminism Win?", *Spare Rib* 134 (September 1983) p 6-8; K. Flannery and S. Roelofs, "Local Government Women's Committees" in J. Holland (ed) *Feminist Action* No 1 (London, Battle Axe Books, 1983) p 69-91; S. Goss, "Women's Initiatives in Local Government" in M. Boddy and C. Fudge (eds) *Local Socialism: Labour Councillors and New Left Alternatives* (London, Macmillan, 1984); S. Button, *Women's Committees: A Study of Gender and Local Government Policy Formation*, Working Paper No 45 (University of Bristol, School for Advanced Urban Studies, 1984); B. Campbell, "Town Hall Feminism", *New Socialist*, (November 1984); S. Perrigo, "Socialist Feminism and the Labour Party", *Feminist Review* No 23 (Summer 1986) p 101-108; M. Mackintosh and H. Wainwright, *A Taste of Power: the politics of local economics* (London, Verso, 1987); J. Edwards, "Local Government Women's Committees", "Women's Committees: a model for good local government?", "Local Government Women's Committees", and "Women's Committees in the Balance", *Everywoman* (May 1988); D. Parkin, "Women's Committees: Exercises in Widening Democracy", *New Democratic Forms in Europe* (Amsterdam, Transnational Institute); S. Halford, "Local Authority Women's

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were comprised of councillors, representing the balance of political parties within the council, and local women co-opted into service. Their work was often complemented and supported by women's or equalities officers. By the middle of the 1990s many of the committees had been merged into general equality committees, or shut down. Figures compiled by the Women's Local Authority Network in 1995 suggest that there were only four full committees and nine sub-committees left.<sup>3</sup>

The creation of women's committees followed hard on the heels of a renewed interest, both amongst academics and active politicians, in the potential of alternatives to the accepted practices of representative democracy. The past thirty years has witnessed a formidable amount of theorisation on issues of democracy and representation. Some of this has gone over familiar ground, but much of it has introduced new possibilities and dimensions. Notable amongst these are: the reformulation of the relationship between participatory and representative democracy; the feminist interrogations of the democratic tradition; the explorations of group representation in the context of recent identity politics;

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Initiatives 1982-1988" Working Paper No 69 (University of Sussex, Local and Regional Studies, 1988); P. A. Fisher, *Women Empowered? A Examination of Local Government Gender Structures* (Unpublished dissertation, South Bank Polytechnic, 1989/1990); A. Coote and P. Patullo, *Power and Prejudice: Women and Politics* (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990); P.M. Bottomley, *The Political Interactions of Women's Initiatives in Local Government* (Unpublished thesis, Department of Urban Planning, Leeds Polytechnic, May 1990); A. Boyle, *From Solidarity to Action: Can Public Policy be an effective way of progressing radical change for women in society?* (Unpublished thesis, University of Southampton, 1988-1991); S. Halford, "Feminist Change in a Patriarchal Organisation: the experience of women's initiatives in local government and implications for feminist perspectives on state institutions", in M. Savage and A. Witz (eds) *Gender and Bureaucracy* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1992); J. Lovenduski and V. Randall, *Contemporary Feminist Politics: Women and Power in Britain* (Oxford University Press, 1993); J. Edwards, "Equal Opportunities and Public Policy: An Agenda for Change", *Public Policy and Administration*, Vol 8 No 2 (Summer 1993) p 54-67. See Chapter Two below for further details of the committees establishment and responsibilities.

<sup>3</sup> Correspondence with Marilyn Taylor of the Women's Local Authority Network. This was formerly known as the National Association of Local Government Women's Committees (NALGWC) and is usually referred to as such in the following chapters. See Appendix A for details of committees in 1992 and 1995.

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and the recovery of notions of deliberative democracy.<sup>4</sup> Taken together, these have posed more questions than answers, for the most important insights in the recent literature have been those that presented conundrums and dilemmas of democracy. As will be shown, certain of these questions were of particular relevance to women's committees.

The value claimed for participatory decision-making prompts the question of whether it benefits marginalised people and interests, or whether it, in fact, provides another outlet for those who already possess a voice in politics. Connected to this is the question of whether the difficulty of sustaining broad-based participation compromises the legitimacy of participatory democracy. Feminist critiques of democracy force us to ask whether it is possible to re-shape democracy in women's favour within a democratic framework, or whether the changes required are so fundamental that they require un-democratic measures to be taken. Group-oriented democracy is offered as a counter to inequality deriving from group-identity; however, it gives rise to the possibilities of group fragmentation on the one

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<sup>4</sup> For example: (participation) C. Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*, (Cambridge University Press, 1970); B. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984); J. Burnheim, *Is Democracy Possible? The Alternative to Electoral Politics* (Cambridge, Polity, 1985); P. Green, *Retrieving Democracy: In Search of Civic Equality* (London, Methuen, 1985); C.C. Gould, *Rethinking Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 1988); (feminism) C. Pateman "Feminist Critiques of the Public/Private Dichotomy" in S. I., Benn and G. F., Gaus (eds), *Public and Private in Social Life* (London, Croom Helm, 1983) and "Equality, Difference, Subordination: the Politics of Motherhood and Women's Citizenship" in G. Bock and S. James (eds) *Beyond Equality and Difference* (London, Routledge, 1992); C. Pateman, and M. Shanley, *Feminist Interpretations and Political Theory* (Cambridge, Polity, 1991); A. Phillips, *Engendering Democracy* (Cambridge, Polity, 1991) and "Universal Pretensions in Political Thought" in M. Barrett and A. Phillips (eds), *Destabilising Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates* (Cambridge, Polity, 1992); S. Mendus, "Losing the Faith: feminism and democracy" in J. Dunn (ed), *Democracy the Unfinished Journey* (Oxford University Press, 1992); (group representation) I.M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton University Press, 1990), "Polity and Group Difference: A Critique of the Ideal of Universal Citizenship" in C.R. Sunstein (ed) *Feminism and Political Theory* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1990), "Justice and Communicative Democracy" in R. Gottlieb (ed), *Tradition, Counter-Tradition, Politics: Dimensions of Radical Philosophy* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1994); P. Hirst, *Associative Democracy*, (Cambridge, Polity, 1994); (deliberation) J. Fishkin, *Deliberation and Democracy: New Directions for Democratic Reform*, (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1991); C.R. Sunstein, "Preferences and Politics" *Philosophy and Public Affairs* Vol 20 No 1 (Winter 1991) p 3-34.

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hand or the ossification of group identity on the other. In either case, there is the potential for a new type of representative to emerge, identified with the defining characteristics of the group, but no more "representative" than her traditional counterpart. Deliberation seductively promises a way out of the deadlock of conflicting interest which so often arises in majoritarian democracy, but is it able to resolve the real and large disputes over ends and means which occur in communities of diverse interest, or does it rely too heavily on the discovery of a phantom "common will"?

My research into women's committees in English local government started from these dilemmas, and looked into the experience of the committees as a way of clarifying the possibilities of - but also the limits to - democratic innovation. The background against which the women's committees operated was provided by the conventions of liberal, representative democracy. Within these conventions citizens elect representatives from particular localities, usually on the basis of their party programmes; these representatives then form governments, at national and local level. Citizen activity is not, of course, confined to this, and the liberal right to freedom of association also provides space for people to organise into interest or pressure groups. Although these groups do not have the legitimacy of elected representatives, they serve as a medium through which citizens can press more specific concerns.<sup>5</sup> In the more complacent models suggested by theorists of democratic pluralism, the pressures exerted by one group will be neatly balanced by the countervailing

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<sup>5</sup> This despite Schumpeter's insistence that "voters outside of parliament must respect the division of labour between themselves and the politicians they elect", to the extent that they should refrain from "instructing him about what he should do [...]" also less formal attempts at restricting the freedom of action of members of parliament - the practice of bombarding them with letters and telegrams for instance [...]" J.A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London, Unwin University Books, 1966) p 295.

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pressures exerted by another. The pressure group representation of sectional interest will then enhance rather than distort the democracy.<sup>6</sup>

Women's committees emerged from these conventions. Unusually, they were expected to act as a pressure group within local government, monitoring and influencing the policies and procedures of other committees. They went further than this, however, and called on local councils to establish particular mechanisms to ensure that women's concerns were not overlooked. Critics of pluralism have long noted that a free market in pressure group activity tends to reinforce existing inequalities in power, favouring the already organised over those more dispersed, and the economically powerful over the economically weak.<sup>7</sup> Establishing a women's committee within the framework of local government can, to some extent, be regarded as a response to this. In the absence of specific committees charged with responsibility for representing women's interests and concerns, public policy would remain too much influenced by the more established or more vocal interests. Only direct public intervention on behalf of the less advantaged would produce a more even-handed effect.

This is already quite an innovation into a pattern of democracy dominated by party competition on the one hand and self-organising pressure groups on the other. But the description still fails to capture the full extent of the challenge represented by women's committees. Councillors on the committees were all too aware of the ways in which local

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<sup>6</sup> For example, R. Dahl, *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1961).

<sup>7</sup> P. Bachrach and M. Baratz, "The Two Faces of Power" *American Political Science Review* Vol 56 No 4 (1962) p 942-92; G. Duncan and S. Lukes, "The New Democracy" in S. Lukes (ed), *Essays in Social Theory* (London, Macmillan, 1963) p 30-51.



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government could fail to notice minority concerns, and the relative absence of women from significant positions. To counter these tendencies and to ensure that the committees acted **for** local women but not **instead** of them, they drew on notions of participatory democracy, with the idea of enabling women to empower themselves. This in turn introduced new modes of accountability and representation into the framework of local politics. Increased participation was vital, but reliance upon a high degree of direct decision-making was unrealistic. Public forums were therefore supplemented by mechanisms to maximise publicity, discussion, consultation and accountability. Reliance upon the participation of willing and available members of the public risked falling into the trap identified by Anthias and Yuval-Davis of having the same few able people (and their interests) appearing at every political forum.<sup>8</sup> The committees therefore sought to identify significant interests and sections of women, and to ensure that these were represented.

In their adoption of such strategies, the committees went beyond pressing sectional interests to embark upon a critique of the content of politics and the practice of democracy. In seeking out different groups in the community and encouraging them to organise, they questioned assumptions about political interests; in their pursuit of issues that had been considered peripheral to the agenda of local government, they questioned assumptions about the content of politics; and through their efforts to make the political process more responsive to women, they confronted dilemmas in the development of democracy. Questions of representation, mediated by debates current in feminism, were pertinent here. The committees had to confront the question of what it meant to represent women. Arising

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<sup>8</sup> F. Anthias and N. Yuval-Davis, *Racialised Boundaries* (London, Routledge, 1992).

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from this were the problems of which women could be, or ought to be, represented and how that could be achieved. Conceptions of representation which move away from the free-market of interest group competition, offer more consciously planned assemblies that reflect the significant characteristics of the population, or the representation of important groups.<sup>9</sup> Feminism, however, questions the ability of any woman to represent another, while intuition tells us that deciding what are the "significant" cleavages requiring representation will be a process fraught with danger.

### **The Women's Committees Participating in the Research**

The committees and sub-committees of five local authorities took part in the project: Bristol, Islington, Leeds, North Tyneside and Oxford. These were selected in order to get a fair spread of types of committee and location. Details of the selection process and the research are given in Appendix F. It is important to note that these committees were all situated in urban areas. Three of them, Bristol, Leeds, and Oxford were city councils, also known as shire districts; North Tyneside was a metropolitan district; Islington was a London borough. All five were second-tier local authorities when the women's committees were established: Bristol, Leeds and Oxford were districts within the shire counties of Avon, West Yorkshire and Oxfordshire; Islington was a London borough within the area administered by the Greater London Council (GLC); and North Tyneside was a metropolitan district within the metropolitan county of Tyne and Wear.

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<sup>9</sup> J. Burnheim, *Is Democracy Possible?*; I.M Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*.

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Despite a shared position as second-tier authorities, shire districts and metropolitan districts possessed somewhat different powers and status. The major spending departments of local government are education and social services; whichever level takes responsibility for these has the greater spending power and the higher status. In the case of the shire counties, these responsibilities fell to the county councils, whereas in metropolitan counties they fell to the districts. In the case of the GLC education was managed by the outer London boroughs and the Inner London Education Authority while social services were the responsibility of the boroughs. Since the abolition of the GLC and the metropolitan county councils (MCCs) in 1986, most of the responsibilities of the GLC have been taken over by various special purpose authorities and joint boards, while education is now the responsibility of the boroughs. The metropolitan districts, including North Tyneside, have acquired some of the responsibilities of the MCCs, with the remainder taken over by joint boards.

The significance of this is that Islington and North Tyneside councils had greater responsibilities and possessed greater spending power than Bristol, Leeds and Oxford councils. The women's committees of these areas therefore had input to different areas of policy. Although the areas involved in the research were all urban, they also differed in nature. Bristol was a prosperous city in the west whose recent history had been marked by conflict generated by ethnicity and differential wealth. Islington was a London borough with a densely-packed, heterogeneous population, troubled by urban poverty but also the home of many members of the middle classes. Leeds was a northern city which had survived the most recent economic problems well. It countered the loss of old industries by hosting new high-

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tech businesses and promoting itself as a 24-hour city where activity never stopped. Nevertheless, there were tensions between the prosperous and the poor, marginalised residents of the large council estates. Leeds had a history of feminist, lesbian and left-wing organisation which pre-dated the women's committee and set the scene for its creation. Newcastle was an old industrial city and the region had been profoundly affected by the demise of the coal and ship-building industries. Oxford was best known for its university and tourism, yet it was a large city which had had to cope with the loss of its car industry, the assimilation of different ethnic groups and tensions deriving from the contradictions between the prosperous centre and the poor estates on the periphery.

Thus the areas and committees chosen, although similar in many ways, also possessed significant differences. Their similarities and differences were such that they represented a fair sample of the committees in England.

### **A Rationale for the Fieldwork**

The fieldwork undertaken for this thesis was planned around discovering the connections between the claims made on behalf of different approaches to democracy and representation introduced above, and women's committees. The committees were generally assumed to be feminist initiatives yet, given the contradictions within feminism, this was by no means a simple assumption. In addition, therefore, the fieldwork was directed at uncovering the complexity of the committees' relations with theories of feminism and the practices of the wider women's movement. The survey took in five women's committees in

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different parts of England and can be tentatively claimed as representative of other women's committees. Despite regional differences, all women's committees arose in urban areas. The committees and officers communicated with each other both informally and through the auspices of the National Association of Local Government Women's Committees (NALGWC). The latter included themed quarterly meetings hosted by different local authorities at which papers were presented for circulation and a number of different forums met.<sup>10</sup>

As a result of communication and co-operation around their creation and the procedures, the committees shared many common aims, practices and projects. They also shared a common (damaging) image in the columns of the mainstream press and were collectively supported and criticised by the minority press.<sup>11</sup> They all also experienced conflicts with the Labour party, their uncomfortable political home, and the Conservatives.<sup>12</sup> As the research for this thesis proceeded the committees chosen became more representative of the whole, for the unfortunate reason that the whole became smaller. Rather than being five of nineteen (fifteen in England) in 1992, they became five of fourteen (nine in England) by 1995. I do not make any grand claims to generalise from this survey to the whole women's committee movement; however, I suggest that some conclusions may be tentatively transposed out of the small group into the larger.

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<sup>10</sup> In 1992, for example, the themes were violence against women (two meetings), child care and housing; closed workshops were created for black, disabled and lesbian women to discuss their particular concerns.

<sup>11</sup> Described in more detail in Chapters Two and Six.

<sup>12</sup> Described in more detail in Chapters Two and Six.

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The fieldwork placed more emphasis on qualitative than quantitative material. The body of the research took the form of a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews.<sup>13</sup> The questionnaire included both closed and open questions, and gave the respondents opportunities to add their own ideas. The interviews were semi-structured, guiding the interviewees through particular themes but allowing space for them to introduce ideas. Committee documentation and newspaper archives were examined, but the greater part of the research took place amongst people rather than their papers. Although people can forget and memory can distort events, personal accounts relay nuances of events often absent from agendas, minutes and reports, which tend to omit, add and gloss, thereby shaping the view of history presented. This decision was strengthened when an interviewee expressed her regret that in the enthusiasm of the moment very little of what her committee had done in its energetic heyday had been properly recorded.<sup>14</sup>

This choice was made in part because the challenge set by the synthesis of theory and fieldwork is most effectively met by a flexible and open-ended approach to information. The theoretical contention that democracy is enhanced by participation, for example, could in principle be met by a count of participative arenas, numbers involved, and proposals implemented. However, the result would be a narrow, and possibly misleading, picture unless a number of hidden factors were introduced. These might include subjective material, such as the intentions of those who established the arenas, the responses of people involved, and assessments of what did **not** happen. Non-events are as telling as events to the

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<sup>13</sup> These are included in Appendices B and C.

<sup>14</sup> Interview 15 (28.4.95).

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understanding of a political process: where participation did not take place, for example, who was not involved, and what was not included in the debate.<sup>15</sup>

A second factor was that there are issues specific to undertaking research on women. Until recently the greater part of research focused upon men and things which concerned men. Hence research into voting patterns related to class, where class was determined by male occupation. When women were included, even when they were the main subjects, research tended either to dismiss them when they differed from men, or to focus on discovering why they were different from men, with the underlying assumption that the male data was normal and the female deviant.<sup>16</sup> This has changed, largely in response to a feminist critique, but also because in an information-driven society the inapplicability of research based on men to a population of women became apparent.<sup>17</sup>

Feminist critiques of methodology have pointed out that women have been excluded from research both overtly and covertly. Women are overtly excluded when a project only addresses men, but they are also excluded when they are subsumed into a general category of "people" from which their distinct interests are absent. Moreover, they continue to be

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<sup>15</sup> The importance of what does not happen is emphasised by S. Lukes in *Power: A Radical View* (London, Macmillan Press, 1974).

<sup>16</sup> For example, work on the development of morality, as analysed by Carol Gilligan, "Woman's Place in Man's Life Cycle" in S. Harding (ed), *Feminism and Methodology: Social Science Issues* (Milton Keynes, Open University Press, 1987) and in *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1982); criticism of widely held assumptions about women's political affiliations by M. Goot and E. Reid, "Women: if not apolitical then conservative" in J. Siltanen and M. Stanworth (eds), *Women and the Public Sphere: A Critique of Sociology and Politics* (London, Hutchinson, 1984); and criticisms of studies of work such as those by R. Brown, "Women as employees; social consciousness and collective action" and R. Feldberg and E.N. Glenn "Male and Female: job versus gender models in the sociology of work", both articles in Siltanen and Stanworth (eds).

<sup>17</sup> For example, the discovery that research into heart disease, conducted on men, did little to illuminate the causes or progress of heart disease in women. I. Sharpe (ed), *Coronary Heart Disease: are Women Special?* (London, National Forum for Coronary Heart Disease Prevention, 1995).

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excluded when the terms of research do not take account of concerns which lie outside of the traditional boundaries of the public sphere.<sup>18</sup> There is a need to discover how research can be framed which can take account of particularities of a female experience; an approach to research which permits the subjects to influence the agenda is therefore desirable.

An approach wherein women are allowed to speak for themselves, with only a minimum of guidance from interviewers, has been favoured by many feminist researchers.<sup>19</sup> Importantly, those researchers have adopted a critical stance with regard to the empirical values of objectivity and neutrality. Feminist researchers have taken on board more general criticisms made of scientific methodology. These include the observation that all research is loaded with value-judgements, even if they are obscured; that neither researchers nor the instruments they contrive can be wholly neutral; and that researchers have an effect upon the people they are surveying. Along with other critics, they have concluded that the researcher's perspective should be declared and the complexity of their interaction with subjects acknowledged. Ann Oakley, for example, maintained that her relationship with the women she was studying was part of the research.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See Carol Gilligan "Woman's Place in Man's Life Cycle"; R. Feldberg and E.N Glenn "Male and Female: job versus gender models in the sociology of work" in J. Siltanen and M. Stanworth (eds), *Women and the Public Sphere*; J. Siltanen and M. Stanworth "The Politics of Private Woman and Public Man" in J. Siltanen and M. Stanworth (eds); K. B. Jones "Towards the Revision of Politics" in K. Jones and A. Jonasdottir (eds), *The Political Interest of Gender: developing theory and research with a feminist face* (London, Sage, 1988).

<sup>19</sup> M. Mies "Towards a Methodology for Feminist Research", and J. Finch "It's Great to Have Someone to Talk to: ethics and politics of interviewing women", both articles in M. Hammersley (ed), *Philosophy, Politics and Practice* (London, Sage, 1993); A. Oakley "Women's Studies in British Sociology: to end at our beginning?" *British Journal of Sociology*, vol 40, no 3 p 442-470.

<sup>20</sup> A. Oakley *From Here to Maternity* (Harmondsworth, Penguin 1981), *Women Confined: towards a sociology of childbirth* (Oxford, Martin Robinson, 1980), "Interviewing Women: a contradiction in terms" in H. Roberts (ed), *Doing Feminist Research* (London, Routledge, 1981).



## Introduction

If the researcher is to abandon the assumption of scientific objectivity and neutrality, she will want to re-think her position in relation to her subjects. The relationship has been construed as one of unequal power: the researcher has an agenda which she imposes upon the subject, who is largely unaware of the items on that agenda or her place in it.<sup>21</sup> Research informed by feminism seeks to undermine that imbalance by informing the subject about the nature of the enquiry, inviting her help in shaping the research, and making the researcher's perspective apparent to her. Thus the relationship is one of respect and partnership.<sup>22</sup> This is desirable in any research, but is particularly so when the subjects are women. Women throughout society lack power in relation to men and Britain is cross-cut with distinctions of class and ethnicity; treating female research subjects with respect is therefore part of a wider feminist project to acknowledge women's latent power. Further, since much research is carried out by people of a relatively high social status upon people of a relatively low status, respect and partnership go a small way to subverting such distinctions.

Two questions arise out of this, one specific and one general. The specific question concerns the relationship between the female researcher and the female subject and the potential for unintentional - or intentional - exploitation. Janet Finch described the worries that surfaced as she reflected upon her research and questioned whether women had confided in her more than was wise because they identified with her, and whether they had given her

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<sup>21</sup> M. Mies "Towards a Methodology for Feminist Research"; A. Oakley "Women's Studies in British Sociology".

<sup>22</sup> For example, Stanley and Wise, "'Back to the Personal': or our attempt to construct 'feminist research'", in G. Bowles and R. Duelli Klein (eds), *Theories of Women's Studies* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981).

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more of their time and extended to her more facilities than was entirely fair.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, at points in my own research I wondered whether women were trusting me more and revealing more than they might have intended because they assumed (more or less correctly, but that was not quite the point) that I shared their beliefs. This question can only be answered by researchers themselves and their commitment to being honest with their subjects and trying to avoid exploiting them.

The more general question is whether taking this approach provides better information - or at least as good - than any other, and whether it enhances knowledge. I believe, and studies undertaken in the spirit described seem to confirm, that information gathered in this way does add to the pool of knowledge.<sup>24</sup> It does not replace other types of research: it is still necessary to count heads and perform regression analyses; however, even these relatively mechanical procedures can be enhanced by feminist awareness. A feminist approach to data collection through surveys and interviews should produce good data and do so ethically.

For these reasons greater emphasis has been placed upon qualitative than quantitative material in both the fieldwork and the resulting thesis, although quantitative measures have been introduced where appropriate. In general, the research methods adopted encouraged participants to add their own interpretations and criticisms of the project, and the resulting study tries to handle the data findings with respect for the intentions of the participants. Care

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<sup>23</sup> J. Finch, "It's great having someone to talk to: ethics and politics of interviewing women".

<sup>24</sup> For example, the interview data included in P. Norris and J. Lovenduski *Political Recruitment: Gender, Race and Class in the British Parliament* (Cambridge University Press, 1995) illuminates the processes of selection.

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has been taken, for example, to present the opinions of interviewees in context. Further details of the research process are given in Appendix F.

To say this is not necessarily to endorse a strong position on whether there is a specifically feminist methodology. The issue of feminist methodology has been contentious, especially when allied to the assertion that feminist research should entail a feminist agenda.<sup>25</sup> Some writers have gone beyond a feminist critique of dominant methodologies to derive a conception of those methodologies as "male" by virtue of their perceived rationality, rigidity, and emphasis on the quantifiable.<sup>26</sup> This is connected to a critique of modernity or liberalism for its valorisation of reason and individualism, which are characterised as "male" qualities, which are opposed to a "female" world view which emphasises connection, interrelation, and context.<sup>27</sup> Thus an approach which has a principled bias in favour of unstructured interviews and against statistics is reached.

The arguments for the existence of a distinctive feminist methodology are persuasive but not convincing.<sup>28</sup> Questioning the validity of research methods is important, and insisting upon the limitations of statistical approaches is vital in the face of inducements to reinforce the "scientific" credentials of the social sciences. Similarly, it is important to emphasise the

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<sup>25</sup> For example, in M. Mies's article "Towards a Methodology for Feminist Research".

<sup>26</sup> See J. Bernard "My Four Revolutions: an autobiographical history of the ASA" *American Journal of Sociology* 78(4) (1973) p 773 - 91.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, J. Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman* (Oxford, Martin Robertson, 1981), and S. Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: towards a politics of peace* (London, Women's Press, 1990) for this approach and M. Dietz, "Citizenship with a Feminist Face: the Problem with Maternal Thinking", *Political Theory* Vol 13, No 1 (Feb 1985) p 19-37, for a critique. An analysis of culture in binary terms is often identified with French feminism, for example, see T. Moi, *Sexual-Textual Politics* (London, Methuen, 1989).

<sup>28</sup> See M. Hammersley "On Feminist Methodology: A Response" *Sociology* Vol 28, No 1, (February 1994) p 293 - 300; S. Harding's introduction to her *Feminism and Methodology: Social Science Issues*; and V. Randall "Feminism and Political Analysis", *Political Studies* 39, 1991, p 513-532.

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significance of interviews and open-ended questionnaires in the face of limited resources which tend to constrain these relatively slow and expensive modes of research, just as it is vital to be aware of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, and to respect participants. However, this is not necessarily a feminist methodology. It is, rather, an approach to research informed by feminism which is, for all researchers, good practice. Further, although the more intimate approaches to research may be preferred in principle, statistical approaches make significant contributions: the emphasis should be upon the weighting of different types of research and the use of appropriate means.

The contention that the goals of feminist research should be circumscribed by a feminist agenda is a separate issue. It has been proposed that feminist research should always take an active part in promoting feminist goals and should avoid analyses which could be damaging to women.<sup>29</sup> This is posed as a critical alternative to a position of scientific neutrality. The reality or possibility of a perfectly neutral position has been criticised from philosophical and practical perspectives. A common response to this is for researchers to declare their points of view and acknowledge that they are present in their research. This seems appropriate for feminists undertaking research, and for research with women. Promoting research which avoids critical analyses of women and feminism will not advance political change, nor will it encourage the adoption of feminist critiques by the mainstream. This approach is understandable within a mind-set which dismisses all existing practices as

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<sup>29</sup> See M. Mies "Towards a Methodology for Feminist Research": "The contemplative, uninvolved 'spectator knowledge' must be replaced by *active participation in actions, movements and struggles* for women's emancipation. Research must become an integral part of such struggles." p 69; and, "If she is committed to the cause of women's liberation, she cannot choose her area of research purely from a career point of view but must try to use her relative power to take up issues that are central to the movement." p 73.

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male, however, the theoretical approach underpinning the present research rejects simple dichotomies and maintains that criticism is vital if women's initiatives are to be perpetuated and accepted. The specificity of methods (as long as they are fair and non-exploitative) is less important than the spirit in which they are deployed. In order to get a close appreciation of women's committees for this study several research methods were adopted: a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, informal discussions, observation of meetings, collection of committee documentation, and collection of material from newspaper archives.

### **Democracy and Women's Committees**

In line with this overall approach, a synthesis of theory and practice is central to the following chapters. The democratic significance of the five committees that took part in the research is drawn out and at the same time the ways in which their experiences illuminate the dilemmas of democracy are uncovered. The chapter following this introduction gives a brief history of the women's committee movement, placing it in the context of women's historical involvement in local government, developments in local government in the 1980s, and the women's movement. The committees grew out of the new urban left of the Labour Party, and the women's movement, but neither of these sections of the political community was wholly at ease with them. Following the example of the women's committee of the Greater London Council, the committees adopted clearly feminist terms of reference and practices that were influenced by both democratic and feminist thinking. Throughout the 1980s the committees suffered as the media grouped them with "loony left" initiatives and central government let

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loose a stream of legislation aimed at controlling local government. They entered the 1990s chastened but active. The subsequent five years saw many changes as committees merged into Equal Opportunities committees, closed down, or embarked upon major reorganisation programmes. The five committees taking part in my research are still active and their example forms the basis of the next six chapters.

The third and fourth chapters are not concerned directly with the committees, but instead with the theories of democracy and representation which are relevant to them. Democracy is the subject of Chapter Three, specifically participatory democracy. The argument for participatory democracy focuses on the contention that democracy can be more than a means by which to select a government. It is argued that a democracy which demands a relatively high level of public participation will deliver a government, but, more importantly, it will also foster political efficacy amongst citizens. Further, allowing space for public deliberation will encourage greater understanding and better political decision-making. Following the logic of this argument, if power is devolved from the centre to a multitude of local forums within which citizens make decisions, those citizens will develop greater political efficacy and will be far more equal than is presently the case. If the creation of new spheres takes account of both public and private concerns, then equality between men and women will be enhanced. Feminist critics of political theory enthusiastically adopted participatory democracy in the hope that it would provide an alternative to political theories and practices which appeared to be premised upon the inequality of men and women. Despite a continuing preference for procedures which are more rather than less participatory,

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both feminist and other critics have subsequently found that they could not rely on increased participation to solve all political ills.

Where there is a large and diverse population participation is unlikely to be suitable, or practicable, for every decision. Even if decision-making were devolved into small units, the time available to - and the interest felt by - different people might have an inegalitarian effect. As Jo Freeman has pointed out in "The Tyranny of Structurelessness", power relations evolve in non-hierarchical organisations which can be particularly dangerous because they are unacknowledged.<sup>30</sup> Hence, representation is still important to democracy, and the question arises of whether it is possible to create forms of representation which are more representative, responsive and accountable. Chapter Four, therefore, addresses the possibility of re-thinking representation.

The nature of representation is interrogated through three themes: what should or could be represented; who representatives are; and where, as well as how, representation takes place. The political representation of interests has a long history; however, recent developments suggest that an interest is not always either clearly owned by a particular constituency or easily articulated. Further, interests which are connected to relatively powerless and inchoate groups stand little chance of gaining a hearing. Questions relevant here are whether women possess a clear set of interests, and whether interests which derive from a particular group identity require any special sort of representation. The value of different forms of representation is their potential for advancing equality and giving a political voice to people who have been excluded. This chapter investigates possibilities of

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<sup>30</sup> Jo Freeman, *The Tyranny of Structurelessness* (London, Dark Star, 1982).

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creating different political forums with varied forms of representation as a way of achieving a more equal and fair distribution of power and opportunity. New forms of representation and new political forums of course present their own problems. We must ask whether a politics grounded in identity can move forward without fragmenting or ossifying, and whether new political forums actually achieve better politics.

In Chapter Five the women's committees surveyed move into focus. This chapter is taken up by a close examination of the membership of the committees. The name "Women's Committee" is often taken to mean that all the members were women; in fact, most committees had some male members. The value of women-only spaces has been well-documented by feminists, and members of all-women committees supported this. Nevertheless, there were arguments in favour of having men on the committees, which are drawn out here. The position of male councillors on a women's committee was, perhaps, rather more straight-forward than that of female councillors. The men were doing much what they did on any other committee: promoting the interests of their constituents and arguing with opposition councillors. The position of the women was more complex because they could be thought of as both representing their constituents in a regular way and representing women in a special way - which was unlikely to have figured in their election manifesto.

Another facet of membership was that of the co-optees, or community representatives. These were variously appointed and variously accountable to groups outside of the council. Their perceptions of what they were doing and what the committee was doing are important here. During the period in which the research took place two of the committees were undergoing a process of considerable change. A large part of that change was focused



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on the selection, election, and role of co-optees. Questions arose over the motivation behind the changes and their probable effects which are discussed here in terms of the connection between effectiveness and representativeness. This chapter addresses the accusation that by virtue of their special membership and focus upon a specific section of the community, the committees were "undemocratic". It suggests that first, the committees were neither so narrowly composed nor so narrowly focused as might have been imagined; and, second, that in so far as they were, it was legitimate in order to redress an imbalance in democracy.

Feminism has been referred to so far in terms of the goals and procedures of the women's committees. Chapter Six addresses feminism as a theory and practice, considering developments in feminism in the 1980s and linking the committees with other feminist initiatives. The connection between the committees and feminism is investigated from a series of perspectives. Committee members' perceptions of themselves and what they were doing are central to understanding the feminism of the committees. The findings are perhaps a little unexpected, but not surprising given the derogatory connotations often attached to the term "feminist" in the popular press. The stance adopted towards the committees by the press in their local areas is also addressed here. Despite the image presented by the press, committee members clung to their notions of feminism, even when this obliged them to work harder and to take measures that would not otherwise have been necessary. Their commitment to respecting differences amongst women, for instance, drew them into an unending process of questioning and trying to improve upon their ability to represent local women. Finally, this chapter assesses the value to the committees of their connection to feminism.

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Feminist aims and democratic principles are no more than good intentions unless they shape projects undertaken and determine the effects of those projects. The final substantive chapter of this thesis, therefore, looks at what the committees actually did. Using four feminist-democratic objectives as a framework, this chapter attempts an assessment of whether the committees managed to improve democracy and achieve feminist goals. This chapter approaches the activities of the committees through the template of freeing women from constraints, encouraging women's potential, raising the profile of women and women's interests, and setting an example of practices that are democratic as well as feminist. Only a small sample of the projects taken up by the committees can be included here: over the years the range was considerable while record-keeping was erratic. The committees responded to demands from the community as they arose, often moving from one project to another with little opportunity to follow up what each project achieved in the longer term. Nevertheless, a wealth of detail is available, which strongly suggests that the committees went some way to the achievement of their objectives. At the same time, the detail of the committees' activities, in tandem with points made earlier about their membership, suggests that some of the claims for increased participation and different forms of representation can be sustained, while others require qualification.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **The Emergence and Development of Women's Initiatives in Local Government**

In the following, the history of women's engagement with local politics is described, suggesting that there had been a pattern of women's involvement in local government which created some of the conditions favourable to the committees. The early 1980s saw a flurry of activity in both local government and the women's movement.<sup>31</sup> These came together in the creation of local authority women's committees: an innovation which challenged assumptions about local democracy and democratic representation. The first women's committee was established by the Greater London Council in 1981 and the research for the present study took place twelve years later, between 1992 and 1995. In those twelve years some fifty committees were created across the England, Scotland and Wales.<sup>32</sup> However, the period was characterised by conflict in and around local government. Women's committees, as will be seen, were to some extent outside of the normal business of local government, nonetheless, they were implicated in its problems. The following discussion of the emergence of women's committees establishes the background to the present study of the democratic and feminist significance of the committees.

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<sup>31</sup> The women's movement is discussed in detail in Chapter Six. Greenham Common, women's involvement with peace and environmental issues, and the organisation of "Women Against Pit Closures" were particularly important. Women also engaged with orthodox political institutions, via the Women's Action Committee and Women's Sections in the British Labour Party.

<sup>32</sup> There were 514 local authorities at that time, therefore some 9.73% local authorities established a women's committee.

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Local government itself was going through a difficult period in the 1980s: there was conflict between local and central government, and, of particular interest here, there were tensions between local and central Labour party politicians. The committees drew upon the political initiatives of the left-wing of the Labour party at this time, and also upon feminist ideas and the experience of the women's movement. However, their connection to these two sources of inspiration was compromised. As will be shown, both left-wing groups and writers from the women's movement expressed misgivings about the committees. Despite the difficulties within local government in the 1980s and the very measured support they received, women's committees were established throughout the 1980s: the pattern of their emergence, their goals and constitution are described below.

### The Local Government Context

It is not surprising that an innovation which was to help establish the political significance of gender should arise in local government, since local politics had been open to women's participation for far longer, and to greater effect, than central government.<sup>33</sup> Women had significant access to English local government from 1869, when "women ratepayers who were widows or spinsters were statutorily included in burgess registers, and so could vote for

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<sup>33</sup> Women's involvement in local philanthropy and local government (the two were closely connected) in the nineteenth century is illustrated by P. Hollis in *Women in Public: the Women's Movement 1850-1900*, (London, Allen and Unwin, 1979) Parts 8 and 9; Hollis describes women's access to the vote in local elections in *Ladies Elect: Women in English Local Government 1865-1915* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1987).

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every type of urban local authority."<sup>34</sup> This extended the common law right that women had always had, as long as they met the general qualification, to vote in parish elections and the various elections based on the vestry, and to hold parish offices.<sup>35</sup> The 1888 Local Government Act created new County Councils for which women could vote on the same terms. However, the most significant change occurred in 1894 when the legislation to create Parish and District Councils included a clause which stipulated that marriage should not debar women - if they qualified on the property grounds - from the right to vote for these councils. Up until then married women, whether propertied or not, had been denied the vote.

By 1900, 1589 women held office as elected members of local government in comparison with only 79 in 1880. They pushed for measures including school meals and subsidised school milk, and for equal opportunities for women to be appointed to local authority posts as inspectors, teachers and doctors.<sup>36</sup> The proportion of women elected to local government continued to exceed the proportion in the House of Commons after women won equal suffrage at national level, and women councillors tended to pursue similar objectives to their predecessors. According to Coote and Patullo these ranged "from investigating child mortality to introducing free school meals, from the improvement of sewage systems to slum

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<sup>34</sup> O. Anderson, "The Feminism of T H Green", *The History of Political Thought* Vol XII, 4 (Winter 1991) p 684.

<sup>35</sup> Women made good use of the new right and soon formed between one eighth and one quarter of municipal electorates. From 1871 women could hold office on School Boards, which were of great importance at the time, and from 1875 they began to make use of the existing possibility to serve as Poor Law Guardians.

<sup>36</sup> O. Anderson "The Feminism of T H Green", p 684.

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clearance, from provision of play spaces and allotments to fighting for good and caring practices in workhouses and orphanages, hospitals and asylums."<sup>37</sup>

The new women's committees and their members both followed in this tradition of women's politics and added to it. They were committed to improving the conditions of women's lives, but also to changing local politics and local government. The committees were an anomaly within local government because their brief was not the management of a statutory duty, such as Education or Planning, but the scrutiny of other departments. They were established to monitor policies and practices, and to ensure that women's interests were brought to bear on the conduct of council business.<sup>38</sup> Their commitment to political change entailed introducing new or marginalised issues to the main political agenda, including child care, employment policies, women's access to services, and domestic violence. Their commitment to changing local government entailed engaging with the community, working across departmental boundaries and overcoming unnecessary hierarchies.<sup>39</sup>

The local government system from which women's committees emerged made little intuitive sense. The layered structure of local government varied across the country, with little obvious rationale to explain the distribution of powers.<sup>40</sup> The powers it possessed were

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<sup>37</sup> A. Coote and P. Patullo, *Power and Prejudice: Women and Politics* (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990) p 218.

<sup>38</sup> B. Webster, "Women's Committees", *Local Government Policy Making* (November 1983) p 27-34; J. Edwards, "Local Government Women's Committees", *Critical Social Policy* No 24, (1988) p 50-64.

<sup>39</sup> For example, S. Button's commentary on the shape and goals of women's committees and account of the foundation of the Haringey women's panel and forum: *Women's Committees: A Study of Gender and Local Government Policy Formation*, Working Paper 45 (University of Bristol School for Advanced Urban Studies, 1984).

<sup>40</sup> This has been under review by the Local Government Commission and changes are being implemented from 1995. For a discussion of the recent history of local government see J. Gyford, S. Leach and C. Game, *The Changing Politics of Local Government* (London, Unwin Hyman, 1989); for comments

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determined by central government, and any expansionism was curtailed by the imposition of ultra vires. The shape of local government was the result of centuries of local innovation modified by intermittent central government intrusion.<sup>41</sup> Local government possessed two functions, those of serving the interests of the local population and of administering the policies of central government. Sometimes local interest and government policy coincided, problems arose when they did not. Occasions when they did not coincide appeared to dominate in the 1980s.<sup>42</sup>

This was in large part because the national political parties, which had not been particularly involved in local politics in the early part of the century, had by this time established a dominating presence. The major political parties, with their modernised organisations and policies, were now inseparable from local politics.<sup>43</sup> This brought advantages in terms of

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on the future of local government see J. Stewart, "A Future for Local Government as Community Government" in J. Stewart and G. Stoker (eds), *Local Government in the 1990s* (London, Macmillan, 1995).

<sup>41</sup> Which increased exponentially in recent years: according to John Stewart and Gerry Stoker, "some forty Acts dealing with local government were passed between 1979 and 1987", *Local Government in the 1990s*, p 2. A significant piece of legislation, which was passed after the establishment of many committees, was Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act. This sought to put a stop to (perceived) promotion of homosexuality by local authorities, and made local government nervous about attempts to remove the stigma from homosexuality through education and funding of gay and lesbian groups and projects. Anne Marie Smith discusses Section 28 in "Resisting the Erasure of Lesbian Sexuality", in K. Plummer (ed), *Modern Homosexualities* (London, Routledge, 1992) p 200-205.

<sup>42</sup> K. Young, *National Interests and Local Government*, (Heinemann, 1983); D. Butler, A. Adonis and T. Travers, *Failure in British Government: the politics of the poll tax* (Oxford University Press, 1994); J. Gyford and James, *National Parties and Local Politics* (London, Allen and Unwin, 1983); J. Gyford, *The Politics of Local Socialism* (London, Allen and Unwin, 1985).

<sup>43</sup> As described by, for example, J. Gyford, S. Leach and C. Game, *The Changing Politics of Local Government*; K. Young, *Local Politics and the Rise of the Party* (Leicester University Press, 1975). An interesting measure of partisanship is the presence of "Independent" councillors: in the 1985 local elections "just over eighty Independent councillors were returned out of a total of over 3000", (Gyford, Leach and Game, p 27). However, in a 1980 article John Gyford sounded a warning note about overly simplistic assumptions of the nationalisation of local politics, pointing out that a number of criteria including resources and the will of people at the centre and in the locality come into play. "Political Parties and

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organisation and resources, but also confusion and conflict. The confusion resulted from the frequent failure of party ideology to shed light upon local issues, and the conflict arose as the policy battles of the centre came to be fought out locally.

It was the Labour Party which first introduced party discipline to local government, and it was Labour which instigated a new round of localism in the 1980s.<sup>44</sup> As the Conservative government consolidated its position in Westminster, Labour activists, resigned to a long period in opposition, turned their attention to local politics as an alternative platform from which to attack central government and its policies.<sup>45</sup> Local politicians were both able and inclined to do this because there had been a change in the profile of the local councillor.<sup>46</sup>

The traditional, stereotypical councillor was white, male, middle-aged and had come into local politics through local business or the professions.<sup>47</sup> Observers in the 1970s and 1980s wrote about a new breed of councillor, people who were younger than the stereotypical representative, more likely to be female or non-white, and less likely to come from traditional

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Central-Local Relations" in G. Jones (ed), *New Approaches to the Study of Central-Local Government Relations* (Aldershot, Gower Publishing Company, 1980) p 28-37.

<sup>44</sup> For example, the model of party politics developed by Herbert Morrison on the London County Council in the 1920s and 1930s, referred to by Gyford, Leach and Game in *The Changing Politics of Local Government*, p 5. On the other hand, Ken Young maintains that some Conservative leaders fought elections on party lines from the nineteenth century, that the national Conservative party influenced local politics through the London Municipal Society, and that "the Conservative and Unionist party shares with Labour and Liberal parties a responsibility for the decline of local politics", K. Young, *Local Politics and the Rise of the Party*, p 33. The rise of the New Urban Left is discussed by S. Lansley, S. Goss and C. Wolmar in *Councils in Conflict* (London, Macmillan, 1989); J. Gyford, *The Politics of Local Socialism*; J. Gyford, S. Leach and C. Game *The Changing Politics of Local Government*.

<sup>45</sup> Described by J. Gyford in *The Politics of Local Socialism*.

<sup>46</sup> Gyford, Leach and Game discuss changes in the profile of local councillors between the reports of the Maud Committee, 1964, and the Widdecombe Committee in 1986, *The Changing Politics of Local Government*, p 44-54.

<sup>47</sup> Maud Committee, Vol 1, 1967, p 13, Quoted in J. Gyford, S. Leach and C. Game *The Changing Politics of Local Government*, p 45.



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backgrounds. The new councillor, epitomised in the Labour Party perhaps by Ken Livingstone, Bernie Grant, Merle Amory or Valerie Wise, was more likely to have been in higher education, quite likely to work in one of the public services, and very likely to have an awareness of, if not an actual involvement with, the new social movements that had developed in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>48</sup>

## The Emergence of Women's Committees

The loss of the 1979 election propelled the Labour party into debate over how to both counter the Conservative government and make itself electable. Labour's power base in the manual working class had shrunk, and was likely to continue to do so because the old industries were shrinking and the profile of the working population was changing.<sup>49</sup> Labour politicians in pursuit of a constituency started to look at marginalised groups in the community and to think in terms of using them to build a coalition of opposition. According to Loretta Loach, at this point

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<sup>48</sup> Gyford, Leach and Game discuss whether these councillors were typical, or prominent because they were atypical, and conclude that they were both! Changes have occurred, but gradually, and in terms of representation, councillors continued to "mismatch" their electorates, *The Changing Politics of Local Government*, p 46-48.

<sup>49</sup> The shrinking support for the Labour party was analysed in the context of the 1983 election by Heath, Jowell and Curtice who concluded that it was a result of the diminishing proportion of the population employed in the industries which had formed the traditional base of the party's support, A. Heath, R. Jowell and J. Curtice, *How Britain Votes* (Oxford, Pergamon Press, 1985) p 171. This was contrary to the theory of class dealignment proposed by D. Butler and D. Stokes, *Political Change in Britain: The Evolution of Political Choice* (London, Macmillan, 2nd edition 1974), and at variance with Ivor Crewe's argument that Labour's policies failed to reflect working class interests, "The Labour Party and the Electorate" in Kavanagh (ed), *The Politics of the Labour Party* (London, Allen and Unwin, 1982), p 9-50. This is discussed by Sue Goss in *Local Labour and Local Government* (Edinburgh University Press, 1988) p 135-155.

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"a unique set of relations existed between old guard socialists, young revolutionaries and militant feminists."<sup>50</sup>

One result was the establishment of the Women's Action Committee (WAC) within the Labour Party, to "achieve for women what the democratic reforms had achieved for the rank and file."<sup>51</sup> The first meeting of WAC in 1980 was attended by several hundred women, and in 1981 it started putting resolutions to the national conference. These were primarily concerned with the principle of autonomy and power within the party: according to Loach the WAC wanted to recover the power that women within the Labour Party had before the first world war when there was a semi-autonomous women's organisation with its own newspaper. At the same time as the WAC was established, local Labour constituency parties were revitalising the long-established mechanism of women's sections. According to Jan Parker, there were twelve hundred of these by the end of 1981, which led to the invigoration of the Labour Women's Conference that year by "new members who were younger, more radical, unashamedly feminist".<sup>52</sup> Local organisation became increasingly important to the Labour party, as politicians saw themselves excluded from the centre for what was to turn out to be a very long time. In the paradigm case of the Greater London Council (GLC), ideas and strategies evolved in the direction of trying to provide services which took account of the diverse interests of its constituency, as well as common concerns.<sup>53</sup> Unfortunately the approach adopted by the GLC

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<sup>50</sup> L. Loach "The Pains of Women in Labour", *Spare Rib* 159 (October 1985) p 18.

<sup>51</sup> L. Loach "The Pains of Women in Labour", p 19.

<sup>52</sup> J. Parker, "Labour Women - the Battle for a Political Voice", *Spare Rib* 109 (August 1981) p 31.

<sup>53</sup> S. Lansley, S. Goss and C. Wolmar, *Councils in Conflict*, p 56-57; J. Lovenduski and V. Randall, *Contemporary Feminist Politics: Women and Power in Britain* (Oxford University Press, 1993) p 193-208; M. Mackintosh and H. Wainwright, *A Taste of Power: the politics of local economics* (London, Verso, 1987).

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and other councils influenced by the new urban left became a focus for adverse media attention.<sup>54</sup> Researchers from Goldsmiths College subsequently pointed out that "[a]ll the stories we have investigated[...] are profoundly misleading. Although loosely connected to some actual event or set of facts, they seriously distorted what actually happened in order to make it conform to a 'loony left' script."<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, the constant flow of misinformation cannot but have damaged the councils concerned.

In 1981 the GLC was the first council to establish a women's committee, following the example of the Lewisham Women's Rights Working Group, which was founded in 1979.<sup>56</sup> Subsequently, similar committees were formed in London boroughs and around the country, most of which were modelled on the example of the GLC.<sup>57</sup> Where they were established, the committees were a formal part of local government and bound by the relevant rules and regulations. The authorities in which they were to be found were those in which the influence of the new urban left within the Labour party was - or had been - strong. All of these were in urban

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<sup>54</sup> The nature and development of the new urban left has been described by the following writers, M. Boddy and C. Fudge (eds), *Local Socialism: Labour Councillors and New Left Alternatives* (London, Macmillan, 1984); J. Gyford, *The Politics of Local Socialism and Citizens, Consumers and Councils* (London, Macmillan, 1991); S. Goss, *Local Labour and Local Government*; J. Gyford, S. Leach and C. Game, *The Changing Politics of Local Government*; S. Lansley, S. Goss and C. Wolmar, *Councils in Conflict*.

<sup>55</sup> Goldsmiths College Media Research Group, *Media Coverage of Local Government in London* (Department of Communications, June 1987) p 21.

<sup>56</sup> B. Webster "Women's Committees"; S. Goss, "Women's Initiatives in Local Government" in M. Boddy and C. Fudge (eds), *Local Socialism: Labour Councillors and New Left Alternatives*.

<sup>57</sup> J. Watson, "Take Over Town Hall", *Spare Rib* (April 1983): "After the local elections in London last May, and as part of the onward march of the Greater London Council, a number of local authorities have set up women's committees"; J. Edwards "Local Government Women's Committees"; A. Coote and P. Patullo, *Power and Prejudice*, p 231-236.

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areas, the majority of which covered a large population, where social diversity was a major issue. Nothing else in central government or the political parties came close to this as a sign of how seriously women and women's issues were to be addressed.<sup>58</sup> However, the committees fell victim to the media pressure that was being exerted on the councils, and in many areas acquired a 'loony left' image which impeded their ability to pursue their goals.<sup>59</sup>

Eleven committees were recorded in 1983, two of which were outside London (Newcastle and West Midlands). Of these, three had no funding (Greenwich, Newcastle and West Midlands), and two had no specific staff.<sup>60</sup> By July 1987 there were at least forty-three women's committees.<sup>61</sup> Counting committees has become difficult of late as women's committees have been subsumed into general equal opportunities committees in some areas and dissolved in others.<sup>62</sup> In 1990, P. M. Bottomley found thirty-five women's committees and sub-

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<sup>58</sup> At the time that women's committees were being established the Women's Action Committee was set up in the Labour party and women's sections were started around the country, as described by Sarah Perrigo, "Socialist Feminism and the Labour Party: some experiences from Leeds", *Feminist Review*, No 23 (June 1986) p 101-108 and Jan Parker, "Labour Women - the Battle for a Political Voice", p 31. Nevertheless, women's committees were both novel and potentially powerful because of their links with organised women outside of a political party and because of their brief to monitor the activities of other local authority committees and departments.

<sup>59</sup> "[T]he Women's Committee is constantly described as controversial, its members denoted 'virulent viragos' by the *Daily Star*, and its grants invariably described as handouts", "Media Facts and Fictions", *GLC Women's Committee Bulletin*, Issue 25. Media reaction to the committees Included in the Women's Committee Survey is described in Chapters Six and Seven below.

<sup>60</sup> B. Webster, "Local Government Women's Committees".

<sup>61</sup> J. Edwards "Local Government Women's Committees". Edwards refers to these collectively as "women's committees", however, Susan Halford's research suggests that she may have been including committees, sub-committees and equal opportunities committees. In 1988 Halford found twenty-two women's committees, nine women's sub-committees, twenty equal opportunities committees and sub-committees, and thirteen non-committee women's initiatives. This amounts to forty-six women's and equalities committees and sub-committees. S. Halford, *Local Authority Women's Initiatives 1982-1988: the extent, origins and efficacy of positive policies for women in local government*, Working Paper 69 (Urban and Regional Studies Dept, University of Sussex, 1989).

<sup>62</sup> Described by D. Cooper in "After the Boom, the Doom and Gloom", *Everywoman* (April 1991) p 16-17; D. Parkin in *Women's Units at a Time of Change*, Occasional Paper No 5 (Work and Gender

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committees, thirteen equalities committees, seven women's working groups or forums, and five "other" women's initiatives.<sup>63</sup> The 1992 annual report of the National Association of Local Government Women's Committees (to which thirty-nine local authorities were then affiliated) recorded twenty-nine women's committees, of varying status, twenty-one equal opportunities committees (which were concerned with women's issues amongst others) and six other committees with various titles which admitted to some responsibility for women. This made a total of fifty-six out of the five hundred and fourteen local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales, or 10.89%.<sup>64</sup>

Since the example of the GLC was widely adopted, a brief summary of its structure and function will provide an introduction to the women's committees of the 1980s, although it was exceptional in its size and resources. The women's committee of the GLC had full standing status, a large support unit of paid staff, a large budget, over which it had considerable discretion, and the general support of the leader of the council, Ken Livingstone.<sup>65</sup> It came into being as the result of pressure from within the council, from female councillors. The 1981 Labour GLC Manifesto had proposed no specific policies to promote women's employment

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Research Unit, Department of Social and Economic Studies, University of Bradford, April 1992) and a recent article in *Labour Research* (March 1995) p 15.

<sup>63</sup> *The Political Interactions of Women's Initiatives in Local Government* P. M. Bottomley (Dept. of Urban Planning, School of the Environment, Leeds Polytechnic, 1990).

<sup>64</sup> Marilyn Taylor of the National Association of Local Government Women's Committees (now re-named the Local Government Women's Network) estimates that women's committees peaked in the late 1980s at about 50. What actually constitutes a women's committee presents some difficulty. In some areas sub-committees were given more power than others, and an equalities committee in one area might concentrate on women's issues while that in another might prioritise race or disability. Further, a non-committee level women's working group might, by virtue of the people involved and support within the council, exert considerable pressure.

<sup>65</sup> M. Mackintosh and H. Wainwright, *A Taste of Power* (London, Verso, 1987) p 106.

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beyond equal opportunities within the GLC itself, let alone committed itself to take on any broader, feminist issues. Only nine of the fifty newly-elected councillors were women and there was only a slight concern with women's particular interests.<sup>66</sup> Valerie Wise, who was vice-chair of the Industry and Employment Committee, set up a women's advisory group, which developed the idea of a women's committee. As Mackintosh and Wainwright note, the goal was to re-write the GLC's agenda on employment policy: no small undertaking but uncontroversial in comparison with the diverse projects which later women's committees and the GLC committee itself were to adopt.<sup>67</sup>

The committee's budget for 1983-4 was £7 million, which had increased to around £9 million by the GLC's demise in 1986: not large amounts in terms of the GLC's total budget but enormous in comparison with the resources of other women's committees.<sup>68</sup> By that time it had a staff of ninety-six.<sup>69</sup> A commitment to increasing council democracy through the direct involvement of local people in policy-making was put into practice through open committee meetings, public meetings and the inclusion of co-opted members.<sup>70</sup> In addition to councillors, the GLC committee included twenty members from the community, some of whom were

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<sup>66</sup> M. Mackintosh and H. Wainwright *A Taste of Power*, p 105-106.

<sup>67</sup> M. Mackintosh and H. Wainwright *A Taste of Power*, p 106.

<sup>68</sup> In 1983/4 Camden Women's Committee had a budget of £521,000, £70,000 for staff and £400,000 for grants; Islington women's committee had an estimated budget of £143,000, £52,000 for staff and £70,000 for grants; Brent women's sub-committee had £65,000, £30,00 for staff and £35,000 for grants; Newcastle women's issues sub-committee had no funding, not did the West Midlands Women's issues working party. B. Webster, "Women's Committees", p 28-29.

<sup>69</sup> A. Coote and P. Patullo, *Power and Prejudice: Women and Politics*, p 232. In 1983/4 Camden women's committee had five women's officers, Islington had four, Brent had 3, Southwark 2, and Newcastle and the West Midlands had none. B. Webster, "Women's Committees", 1983, p. 28-29.

<sup>70</sup> B. Webster, "Women's Committees; A. Coote and P. Patullo, *Power and Prejudice*, p 231-251.

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elected at public meetings. Eight of these had full voting rights. Six of those with voting rights were elected to represent particular groups of women: women of colour, women with disabilities, and lesbians; the remaining two were selected by the south east region of the TUC.<sup>71</sup> The twelve non-voting members were there to advise on disability, transport, older women's interests, youth service, media and the arts, peace, employment, health, and violence against women.<sup>72</sup>

In their summary of the achievements of the women's committee within the GLC Mackintosh and Wainwright concluded that "[t]he traditionally formal and bureaucratic structures of the council have been transformed and at least now the practices and policies of the council are informed by feminism. The GLC has monitored its own recruitment practices and introduced positive action programmes to promote equal opportunities both among its own employees and the organisations that it funds". However, these achievements stopped short of radical political change and, "the actual power relationships within this bastion of left democracy remain unchanged."<sup>73</sup> In the committee's defence, it was not in existence for very long, and it was path-breaking: other committees had longer and benefitted from its example.

The committees which drew inspiration from the GLC adopted similar aims and structures. The early journalism made it clear that the succession of women's committees in different areas arose out of each other, particularly influenced by the examples of the GLC and

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<sup>71</sup> Co-optees were able to vote until debarred by the 1989 Local Government and Housing Act. This was the result of a recommendation of the Widdecombe Committee, which reported in 1986, documented in J. Gyford, S. Leach and C. Game, *The Changing Politics of Local Government*, p 296.

<sup>72</sup> L. Loach "Local Government: what have women got to lose?" *Spare Rib* no 151 (February 1985).

<sup>73</sup> M. Mackintosh and H. Wainwright *A Taste of Power*, p 21

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London boroughs.<sup>74</sup> While for some authorities the establishment of committees to consider the concerns of specific groups was part of a general approach, in other areas their achievement was the result of a slow struggle for support and funding.<sup>75</sup> Councillors and council officers who were trying to establish committees, or had succeeded in doing so, communicated with each other through both formal and informal channels. In 1985 a specific coordinating body for women's committees was set up: the National Association of Local Government Women's Committees (NALGWC, now the Women's Local Authority Network, (WLAN)).<sup>76</sup> This was to be financed through the affiliation of interested councils. In 1993 NALGWC, based in Manchester, had two full-time employees. It organised regular meetings of delegates from affiliated women's committees around specific issues, held records of the activities of all affiliated women's committees, copies of relevant published articles and unpublished academic research. It also undertook an annual survey of all local authorities to ascertain where women's initiatives were taking place.<sup>77</sup> The latter was published in the form of a summary of all authorities, affiliated or not, which possessed some form of organised body catering for specifically female needs. These included women's committee and sub-committees, equal opportunities committees, and other committees which held a particular brief for women's or equal opportunities issues.

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<sup>74</sup> J. Edwards, "Local Government Women's Committees", p 51.

<sup>75</sup> Sheila Button's account of the experience of Haringey Women's Committee is illuminating with regard to the determination of the female councillors, *Women's Committees: A Study of Gender and Local Government Policy Formation*, Working Paper No 45 (University of Bristol School for Advanced Urban Studies, 1984).

<sup>76</sup> A. Coote and P. Patullo, *Power and Prejudice*, p 249.

<sup>77</sup> In 1992, for example, NALGWC organised conferences around the following, Housing Policy: Focusing on Women (January), Violence against Women: Challenges for the 90's (April), Violence Against Women in the Home: Challenges for the 90's (June), and Childcare Strategies (October).



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Following the model of the GLC committee, the co-option of local women was widely espoused and a range of consultative procedures introduced.<sup>78</sup> Where funds were available for designated staff, attempts were made to employ women with an pre-existing commitment to women's issues and to initiate flexible working arrangements both amongst staff and between staff and committee members.<sup>79</sup> The committees' brief was, broadly, to further the interests of women in their areas and in the employ of local authorities, taking account of both private and public aspects of their lives.

Although their terms of reference varied, five general aims can be attributed to most of the committees:

- \* to promote the welfare and interests of women and women's rights
- \* to work for the elimination of discrimination against women in legislation, policies and practices
- \* to encourage the adoption of positive action to promote real equality of opportunity for women
- \* to encourage and support the development of women's groups and organisations
- \* to open up council decision-making structures to women in the community, and to make them more accountable to that community.<sup>80</sup>

Their ability to fulfil these goals depended on a number of variables, which are discussed in Chapters Five and Seven. Briefly, these were the type of local authority in which the committee was situated; the status of the committee (full, sub-, or advisory); the resources

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<sup>78</sup> Eleven of the twenty women's committees and sub-committees recorded by NALGWC in 1992 had co-optees, *Directory of Women's Committees*, (Manchester, NALGWC, 1992). This excludes advisory committees, which often included members of the public.

<sup>79</sup> D. Parkin, *Women's Units at a Time of Change* Occasional Paper No. 5 (Work and Gender Research Unit, Bradford University, April 1992); I. Stone, *Equal Opportunities in Local Authorities - developing effective strategies for the implementation of policies for women* (Equal Opportunities Commission Research Series, HMSO, 1988).

<sup>80</sup> B. Webster "Women's Committees", p 27-34.

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allocated to it; the level of support from the council as a whole or powerful councillors; and the amount of support which could be mobilised outside the council. In terms of the type of local authority, metropolitan districts possessed wider responsibilities than shire districts, in particular, responsibility for education and social services. Therefore, women's committees in the former, which included London boroughs, could get involved in issues which were outside the remit of committees in the latter. On the other hand, the opposite was true of metropolitan and shire counties (the former did not control education and social services, the latter did) so opportunities were reversed for committees at this level of local government. The status of a committee was relevant to its degree of autonomy, its spending power, and its access to other resources, but, as will be shown below, this was mediated by the other factor of support inside and outside the council.<sup>81</sup>

### **"In it but not of it"? Women's Committees, Left-Wing Groups, and Feminism.**

The will to establish women's committees came from two sources: the Labour party and the women's movement.<sup>82</sup> There was overlap between the two by the early 1980s because, as Sarah Perrigo described, active feminists had moved into the Labour party.<sup>83</sup> According to

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<sup>81</sup> In "Local Government Women's Committees", Julia Edwards points out that a range of other criteria, besides official status, had implications for the efficacy of a committee or sub-committee.

<sup>82</sup> J. Lovenduski and V. Randall give an account of women's - feminist - activism within the Labour party in the 1980s, *Contemporary Feminist Politics: Women and Power in Britain*, p 137-145. The women's movement influenced the committees both in terms of their feminism and in terms of their organisational methods.

<sup>83</sup> S. Perrigo, "Socialist-Feminism and the Labour Party: some experiences from Leeds", *Feminist Review* No 23 (June 1986) p 101-108.

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Perrigo, this had come about for three reasons: a perceived need to gain strength through building alliances with other movements; a desire to widen the constituency of feminism amongst working class and ethnic minority women; and the confidence to claim a place in formal politics. The move was encouraged by the belief that the Labour party was in the process of change towards becoming more democratic and accountable, which would make it more hospitable towards both women and feminism.

The women joining Labour realised that they had to convince groups within the party. As Jan Parker pointed out, "it's not good enough to say we're all in this together - the men in our movement are obstacles to change too".<sup>84</sup> Resistance within the party soon became a real problem for women; by 1985, Ann Pettifor, National Organiser of the Women's Action Campaign (WAC) was saying, "It's the resistance of Labour men to the empowering of women of their own class which can only be described as brutal. We've struggled for six years along these lines; we've struggled to get more women into parliament and each year the resistance from men gets worse and more frightening, and women are damaged more and more by it."<sup>85</sup>

Women trying to establish women's committees met with similar resistance from within the Labour party.<sup>86</sup> Sarah Perrigo gave an account of speaking about women and the Labour party at a branch meeting where "the whole subject was treated as a joke and some men loudly derided women as both workers and political beings".<sup>87</sup> Perrigo described the establishment of

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<sup>84</sup> J. Parker, "Labour Women - the Battle for a Political Voice", p 31.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in L. Loach "Local Government: what have women got to lose?", p 19.

<sup>86</sup> Lovenduski and Randall underline the opposition mounted by both the hard left and the old right within the Labour Party, adding that local authority hierarchy and traditional inertia contributed to the defeat of much of the new energy and initiative. J. Lovenduski and V. Randall, *Contemporary Feminist Politics*, p 204.

<sup>87</sup> S. Perrigo, "Socialist-Feminism and the Labour Party", p 104.

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the committee and women's unit at Leeds as "achieved without any real commitment or even understanding of the aims of equal opportunities policies on the part of Labour councillors". It was her belief that in the Leeds Labour party, "[t]here is a thin veneer of radicalism but underneath it the structures and practices remain very much as they were before, serving to conserve power in the hands of a predominantly white, male elite."<sup>88</sup>

Perrigo's experience in Leeds was echoed by the findings of Lovenduski and Randall a few years later, who noted that "there was little real sympathy for the feminist project [...] in the Labour Party".<sup>89</sup> They found that in the opinion of some politicians committees were divisive; and conclude that the problem was, in part, that "the new women's committees undoubtedly did not give a centrality to class issues, and were therefore at odds with significant parts of Labour culture."<sup>90</sup> The failure of even the Labour radicals to take on a feminist analysis is exemplified by David Blunkett's protestation, when he was leader of Sheffield Council, that he did not want "the women's movement to sap the energy of the class struggle."<sup>91</sup>

The new left of Labour was particularly prominent in London, not only on the GLC but also on a number of local councils. Despite support from individual men, the approach of some of these councillors, as described by Lansley, Goss and Wolmar, was guaranteed to conflict with that of women's committee members. Lansley et al described the calculation and instrumentalism of some local politicians, who were quite prepared to sacrifice truth and local

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<sup>88</sup> S. Perrigo "Socialist-Feminism and the Labour Party", p 6-7.

<sup>89</sup> J. Lovenduski and V. Randall *Contemporary Feminist Politics*, p 62.

<sup>90</sup> J. Lovenduski and V. Randall *Contemporary Feminist Politics*, p 74.

<sup>91</sup> M. Boddy and C. Fudge *Local Socialism*, p 255.

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achievement in pursuit of a grand confrontation with central government.<sup>92</sup> Their discussion of women in local government showed both their energy and achievements, and the obstacles. They described how the committees were fending off not only local Conservatives but also the press, members of the public, the town hall trades unions, and both old-style leftists and new-style class-warriors.

As this suggests, the alternative of support from smaller, more radical (non-feminist) political groups outside of the Labour party was not particularly forthcoming. Lovenduski and Randall found that there was little support from "the various 'liberatory' groups on the revolutionary left, who regarded feminism as, at best, a possible source of new members, and, at worst, a bourgeois diversion."<sup>93</sup> Traditionally, Marxist-socialism emphasised the class struggle above all else, maintaining that all other inequalities derived from class exploitation and would disappear along with it. Therefore, we would not expect to find much support for committees for women (or for any other group) where this train of thought was strong.<sup>94</sup> As Lansley et al concluded, "[s]upporters of Militant and romantic affectionados of the machismo politics of class war argued that these initiatives merely concerned privileged middle-class women, and had nothing to do with the practical problems of the socialist struggle."<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> S. Lansley, S. Goss and C. Wolmar *Councils in Conflict: The Rise and Fall of the Municipal Left*, p 40.

<sup>93</sup> J. Lovenduski and V. Randall *Contemporary Feminist Politics*, p 62.

<sup>94</sup> In Leeds Sarah Perrigo found "the more traditional 'hard left' of Militant supporters and others with neo-Trotskyist sympathies who see nationalisation as a panacea for everything, who are committed to an unproblematic notion of class struggle that ignores issues such as gender and race.", S. Perrigo, "Socialist-Feminism and the Labour Party", p 6.

<sup>95</sup> S. Lansley, S. Goss and C. Wolmar *Councils in Conflict*, p 152.

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Support for feminist initiatives from the Labour party and left-wing groups was therefore patchy. Nevertheless, women's committees and units were established and individual Labour councillors eased their way.<sup>96</sup> While the Labour party was resisting the committees on one side, the women's movement was pushing rather less that whole-heartedly on the other.<sup>97</sup> Although the women's movement was largely supportive, there was some ambivalence. An article in *Spare Rib* noted: "reaction in the women's movement so far has been mixed. At best the committees have been seen as the potential for a feminist revolution in local government; at worst they've been seen as irrelevant or a hypocritical attempt to co-opt us and divert our energies."<sup>98</sup> The reluctance of active feminists to welcome initiatives in formal political arenas was a premonition of some of the conflicts which would arise within and around committees. A commitment to feminist politics was interpreted as white middle-class elitism by some, while attention to small, practical measures was deemed irrelevant by others.<sup>99</sup> Feminist observers were prepared for the committees to fail, and unsurprised when they appeared to be doing so:

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<sup>96</sup> Sarah Perrigo stressed the support of the leader of the Labour group in Leeds, S. Perrigo, "Socialist-Feminism and the Labour Party"; my research findings demonstrate the value of support from key councillors, see Chapters Five and Seven below.

<sup>97</sup> Lovenduski and Randall point to a tension felt by women involved in the initiatives between commitment to women, especially feminists, in the community, and the practice of local government. J. Lovenduski and V. Randall, *Contemporary Feminist Politics*, p 204. The women's movement was and is far less coherent than the Labour left, therefore mixed responses to the committees were no surprise. Misgivings derived from a concern not confined to the issue of women's committees: a fear that the impetus of the women's movement might be diverted and dispersed within the ossified structures of institutionalised, male-defined, class politics. Such misgivings also occurred in other countries. In Australia, for example, Hester Eisenstein found that the invitation extended to "femocrats" by the state bureaucracy was received with deep reservations by the women's movement, and that feminist bureaucrats were treated with suspicion by the wider movement. H. Eisenstein, *Practising Feminism on Two Continents*, (Boston, Beacon Press, 1990); "Femocrats, Official Feminism and the Uses of Power", in S. Watson (ed) *Playing the State* (London, Verso, 1990). Also S. Watson, "Femocratic Feminisms" in M. Savage and A. Witz (eds), *Gender and Bureaucracy* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1992).

<sup>98</sup> J. Parker "Labour Women: the battle for a political voice", p 6.

<sup>99</sup> J. Lovenduski and V. Randall mention the issue of race, *Contemporary Feminist Politics*, p 198.

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Sarah Roelofs reminded readers of *Spare Rib* that disillusion with local government as an instrument of feminist change was an inevitable outcome of trying to work within the entrenched power structure of the local state.<sup>100</sup>

The women's movement, as one of the new social movements of the time, influenced the committees in another way: with regard to the way they pursued their goals.<sup>101</sup> In the organisations of the women's, gay, peace and environmental movements, the form of action was valued as well as the content. This predisposed them to non-hierarchical organisation and non-confrontational discussion of issues, as well as encouraging a mistrust of identifiable leaders who would always speak for the membership. Women's committees and units put these principles into practice by avoiding much of the formality which was normal at committee meetings and adopting a deliberative rather than a confrontational approach to the conduct of business. They instituted egalitarian working practices in women's units and between officers and members.<sup>102</sup> This is discussed in Chapters Five, Six and Seven below.

The influence of new social movements was also apparent in the committees' and officers' relations with the public.<sup>103</sup> They made strenuous efforts to engage with the women of

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<sup>100</sup> S. Roelofs "In and Against the State", *Spare Rib* (March 1989) p 47.

<sup>101</sup> Sheila Rowbotham writes of women in the early women's movement - 1960s - as believing "that movements should create the relations desired in the future", and she contends that "[t]he aim of many women's liberation groups was to live the ideal future relations in the present", S. Rowbotham, *Women in Movement: Feminism and Social Action Since the 1960s* (London, Routledge, 1992) Chapters 24 and 25. She also described the egalitarian commitment of the movement in "Feminism and Democracy" in D. Held (ed) *New Forms of Democracy* (London, Sage, 1986).

<sup>102</sup> For a general description of the operations of new social movements see A. Melucci *Nomads of the Present* (London, Verso, 1989), for the influence on women's committees see S. Lansley, S. Goss and C. Wolmar, *Councils in Conflict*, p 144, p 153-155.

<sup>103</sup> Described by J. Lovenduski and V. Randall, *Contemporary Feminist Politics*, p 193-204.

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their constituencies through public meetings, conferences, open days and surveys, as described in Chapter Seven. Public meetings, or indeed committee meetings, might be held in remote areas or on estates rather than in the council building, and attention was paid to timing and to child care provision in attempts to make attendance possible for the widest range of women.<sup>104</sup> Further, they made controversial use of the practice of co-option.<sup>105</sup> It was common practice for local authority committees to co-opt people outside of elected council members into service, generally in order to bring in necessary skills and knowledge which elected members did not possess.<sup>106</sup> Following the example of the GLC, women's committees used this facility to include women from local groups and from particular sections of the community in order to bring in perspectives and experience which elected members did not have and to connect the committees to their constituencies.<sup>107</sup> The status of co-optees on committees varied; in some instances they were full voting members; otherwise they were present to debate but not to decide.<sup>108</sup>

### Early Assessments of the Committees

Initial assessments of the efficacy of women's committees were pessimistic. From the results of her 1986 survey of women's initiatives and gender policy in local authorities in

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<sup>104</sup> S. Goss "Women's Initiatives in Local Government".

<sup>105</sup> W. Ball, "Local Authority Policy-Making on Equal Opportunities", *Policy and Politics* (April 1987) p 101-110; see also J. Edwards, "Local Government Women's Committees".

<sup>106</sup> See Gyford, Leach and Game, The Changing Politics of Local Government, p 267-274, for a discussion of co-option.

<sup>107</sup> S. Goss "Women's Initiatives in Local Government".

<sup>108</sup> Co-optees have been barred from voting since the 1989 Local Government and Housing Act.



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England, Scotland and Wales, Susan Halford decided that some 40% of the known women's initiatives could be described as tokenistic.<sup>109</sup> In a number of authorities she found that "there have been attempts to create illusions of activity without any real commitment to the implementation of a positive programme of gender policies."<sup>110</sup> However, as Irene Bruegel pointed out, Halford included a wide range of initiatives within her brief, of which women's committees and other specifically feminist initiatives were only a proportion.<sup>111</sup> Since the committees were grouped with other types of initiative, it would be unfair to consider them damned by this research, especially since Halford reconsidered her judgement in her next project.

For a second piece of research in 1988/9 Halford included local authorities which did not have an explicit women's initiative. Now she found that "the women's initiatives appear to have done well", and that some of the non-initiative authorities were making positive developments.<sup>112</sup> She found that the resolution between the tokenism identified in the first report and the relative success recognised by the second lay in "the building [of] an effective base of support from other groups both within and outside the local authority... [which] can provide the necessary pressure on the rest of the authority to enable the equal opportunities initiative to

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<sup>109</sup> S. Halford *Women's Initiatives in Local Government: Tokenism or Power?* Working Paper 58 (Urban and Regional Studies, University of Sussex, July 1987).

<sup>110</sup> S. Halford *Women's Initiatives in Local Government: Tokenism or Power?*, p 39.

<sup>111</sup> I. Bruegel, "Municipal Feminism: Relating Gender and Class to Hierarchies, Markets and Networks", paper presented to the ESRC *Women and Welfare Seminar* (London, April 1994) p 3.

<sup>112</sup> S. Halford *Local Authority women's Initiatives 1982-1988*, Working Paper 69 (Urban and Regional Studies, University of Sussex, July 1989) p 54.

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operate effectively."<sup>113</sup> By this, she meant the links via co-optees and consultation, discussed here in Chapters Five and Seven.

At the same time the Equal Opportunities Commission conducted a survey of the prevalence of equal opportunities policies amongst local authorities.<sup>114</sup> It found that fewer than half of the five hundred and fourteen existing local authorities considered that they possessed such a policy. Of these only 103 authorities had issued a written statement of the policy to their employees.<sup>115</sup> The report concluded that adoption of a policy correlated positively with the provision of "employment conditions of assistance to women and working parents".<sup>116</sup> It gave a breakdown of the types of authority to adopt policies; when they did so; which political parties were involved; where there were equal opportunities officers; and where employee training was given. The findings broadly replicated the pattern of the creation of women's committees, suggesting that the conditions which permitted the formulation of an equal opportunities policy also permitted the foundation of a women's committee.

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<sup>113</sup> I. Stone, *Equal Opportunities in Local Authorities*, p 113, quoted by S. Halford *Local Authority women's Initiatives 1982-1988*, p 55.

<sup>114</sup> *Local Authority Equal Opportunity Policies; Report of a Survey by the Equal Opportunities Commission*, (Manchester, EOC 1988).

<sup>115</sup> *Local Authority Equal Opportunity Policies; Report of a Survey by the Equal Opportunities Commission*, p 1, two hundred and twenty-seven local authorities replied that they had an equal opportunities policy. The majority of these were either English metropolitan districts and county councils or London Boroughs.

<sup>116</sup> *Local Authority Equal Opportunity Policies; Report of a Survey by the Equal Opportunities Commission*, p 5.

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### Women's Committees in the 1990s

Towards the end of the 1980s women's committees, along with other high profile equalities initiatives, experienced a gradual diminution of public attention. This can in part be accounted for by the abolition of the GLC and the other metropolitan counties in 1986, which brought to an end the public campaigning around these authorities, and, of course, closed the GLC Women's Committee. During this period, central and local government were locked in combat over a series of measures imposed by the centre to control local authority spending, peaking with the chaos of the Poll Tax.<sup>117</sup> Attention shifted from how local government spent money to how it raised it, and did not re-focus again with the same intensity, despite public scandals at a number of authorities.<sup>118</sup> This was in a sense beneficial. My research suggests that the adverse coverage which the committees had received from local papers diminished and they were able to get on with their work with less disruption.<sup>119</sup>

The Labour party was relatively successful in the 1986 local elections - a trend which has continued into the 1990s. Further, the 1986 elections brought a wave of new left-wing

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<sup>117</sup> For an account of the Poll Tax period and its wider significance see D. Butler, A. Adonis and T. Travers, *Failure in British Government: The Politics of the Poll Tax* (Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>118</sup> The long-running finance and corruption investigation at Lambeth, and a re-organisation and redundancy row at Walsall, for example.

<sup>119</sup> Opposition in the local press had been widespread and unattractive. This was noted by Jennifer Simon the Press Officer for the GLC Women's Committee in "Media Facts and Fictions", *GLC Women's Committee Bulletin*, Issue 25, p. 10-11. Goldsmiths College Media Research Group concluded of the London papers' dealings with female councillors, "Common to many of these reports is an unwillingness to take women - and especially black women - seriously as leaders. They are systematically belittled, presented as the puppets of other (sinister) forces, or - in the case of Linda Bellos - simply consigned to the lunatic fringe.", *Media Coverage of Local Government in London*, (Department of Communications, Goldsmiths College, June 1st 1987). A description of the press and the 'loony left' period is given in J. Gyford, S. Leach and C. Game, *The Changing Politics of Local Government*, p 310-312.

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councillors including numbers of black people and women. According to Gyford, Leach and Game, this both changed the balance in councils newly won from the Conservatives and also shifted the ideological

balance in Labour authorities. This undoubtedly lent support to the existing committees and permitted the creation of new initiatives, however, the issues that had drawn attention away from the committees also meant that there was less money to fund them, and possibly less interest in continuing to do so.<sup>120</sup>

By 1989 women's committees were undergoing various processes of restructuring in response to their own experiences on the one hand, and council pressures on the other. For some this entailed no more than re-assessing their objectives and operations, for others it meant losing their distinct identity and becoming part of an equal opportunities committee, with a brief to consider a range of forms of disadvantage. The latter course was met with dismay: "[f]eminism, anti-racism, anti-sexism, anti-heterosexism, and anti-ablism are now replaced with 'equal opportunities' or as the Leader of one London Labour authority so quaintly put it, 'We are bringing everyone up to the starting line.'"<sup>121</sup>

Less drastic re-structuring was only a little more welcome. It achieved a wider acceptance for the committees because it signalled the abandonment of "silliness" in favour of a practical approach to working within council procedures. John Cunningham, for example, wrote

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<sup>120</sup> In "Labour's Left Councils: Charge of the Light Brigade", *Marxism Today*, February 1987, p 10-13, Beatrix Campbell blames the indifference of the parliamentary Labour party and the statist focus of labourism for betraying the local democratic initiatives spear-headed by women and minorities. On the same lines, a worker from the Labour party's head office at Walworth Road told me that, in her opinion, women's committees happened despite the party rather than because of it.

<sup>121</sup> S. Roelofs "In and Against the State", *Spare Rib* (March 1989) p 47.

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approvingly in the Guardian about "a sort of Mark Two committee [which] is emerging, defensive and chastened".<sup>122</sup> However, Sarah Roelofs interpreted the changes as entailing a regrettable diminution of the links between committees, the women's movement, and feminist activists in the local community.<sup>123</sup> In another article Davina Cooper expressed concern that women's equality was being removed from the agenda of local government as suddenly as it had been introduced. Although the numbers of women in positions of power had increased she worried that the critical mass necessary to ensure that achievements would not be lost had not been reached. She blamed the relative absence of women from positions of power combined with restrictions on council budgets, for the committees' loss of influence and resources.<sup>124</sup>

The loss of women's committees, including their dissolution into equal opportunities committees, suggests that the main body of a number of councils remained unconvinced that the achievement of equal citizenship for women required the creation of special facilities. This may have been due to the feeling that special measures were "undemocratic", or to suspicions about hidden agendas which privileged particular groups of women.<sup>125</sup> Certainly, few councils had enough female councillors to make a stand, and budgetary restrictions were a real consideration. It is perhaps unfortunate that the committees were strongly identified with Labour and rarely

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<sup>122</sup> S. Roelofs "In and Against the State".

<sup>123</sup> S. Roelofs "In and Against the State".

<sup>124</sup> D. Cooper "After the boom, the doom and gloom?", *Everywoman* (April 1991) p 16-17.

<sup>125</sup> Susan Halford wrote about the resistance from officers and councillors which confronts women seeking to change local government in "Feminist change in a patriarchal organisation: the experience of women's initiatives in local government and implications for feminist perspectives on state institutions", M. Savage and A. Witz (eds), *Gender and Bureaucracy* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1992); her perceptions were reinforced by the questionnaire responses and interviews in my survey.

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gained cross-party support.<sup>126</sup> Their identification with Labour - and often with particular sections within Labour - meant that they were vulnerable to conflict between and within parties. However, the national Labour party must take some responsibility for failing to take adequate interest in the committees. Despite its concern for women's social and economic position, its commitment to increasing the number of female MPs and the recent consultation paper *Implementing Quotas for Women in Local Government*, the Labour party has tended to ignore the one initiative which pressed women's interests and increased women's representation.<sup>127</sup>

Nevertheless, without being unduly optimistic, it is possible that in some cases the goals of the committees had been transmitted into the mainstream departments and the women's committees had fulfilled their function.<sup>128</sup> Despite constraints, closures, amalgamation and restructuring women's committees have not disappeared, although their numbers continue to diminish. Towards the end of 1995 there were an estimated four full committees and ten women's sub-committees in existence.<sup>129</sup> This estimate did not take account of equal opportunities committees which had a brief for women's issues. As the following chapters will

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<sup>126</sup> The women's sub-committee at North Tyneside appeared to have cross-party support but this was unusual and connected to the particular circumstances of the area and the rather traditional approach of the local Conservative party.

<sup>127</sup> Clare Short MP, *Labour's Strategy for Women* (London, The Labour Party, February 1995); *Governing for Equality: A Labour Party Consultation on Government Machinery for Women* (London, The Labour Party, February 1995); *Implementing Quotas for Women in Local Government: A Labour Party Consultation Paper* (London, The Labour Party, 1995) and *Fair Shares: Getting more women into local government* (London, The Labour Party, 1995). When contacted in December 1995 neither the Women's Officer nor the Local Government Officer at John Smith House had anything significant to say about women's committees, nor did they have any official documentation about them, although they knew of their existence.

<sup>128</sup> According to an equalities officer at Lewisham Council in 1993, the women's committee had become more-or-less defunct and the activism had moved on to other parts of the council.

<sup>129</sup> *Labour Research* (March 1995) p 15; confirmed by Marilyn Taylor of the Women's Local Authority Network, letter dated 21.11.95.

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show, the committees studied between 1993 and 1995 continued to play a significant role in local government and in the determination of a woman-friendly politics, but it was not quite the role envisaged at their inception. My research showed that there had been generational changes in committee membership as early participants moved on: sometimes because of ambitions in high politics or in other areas of women's or equalities work, sometimes because of exhaustion and disillusion. With the changes in personnel came changes in approach, often the result of learning from observation of the committee from the perspective of the council or the community.<sup>130</sup>

## Conclusion

In the following chapters, five women's committees are discussed: those of Bristol, Islington, Leeds, North Tyneside, and Oxford. These committees were the subject of my Women's Committee Survey (WCS) between 1993 and 1995. The study is not primarily concerned with describing the committees (although they are described, and details from their history have been included as well as the results of the questionnaires and interviews which formed the core of the survey), its main object is to understand the committees in the context of particular ideas about democracy, representation and feminism. Therefore, the following two

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<sup>130</sup> J. Lovenduski and V. Randall note the change in personnel and comment that "many of the councillors who now chair women's committees have come up through the Labour party and have no direct commitment to feminism", *Contemporary Feminist Politics*, p 207. My research does not entirely support their conclusion: although the chairs of the participating committees had not come out of the women's movement, they were clearly committed to women and influenced by feminism. A number of councillors, including two of the chairs, had come into politics through becoming a co-optee on the women's committee. The feminism of the committees is discussed in Chapter Six below.

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chapters deal not with women's committees, but with abstract conceptions of democracy and representation which I consider to be relevant to the committees. The first of these, on democracy, passes over the understanding of democracy as a method for selecting a government to focus upon the potential of democracy for encouraging the development of political efficacy and for distributing power throughout the body of citizens.



## CHAPTER THREE

### Democracy and Participation

As indicated in Chapter One, the purpose of this study of women's committees is to place them in the context of particular theories about democracy, representation and feminism. The main body of the study, therefore, starts here, with a consideration of certain approaches to democracy. Democracy has often been valued a means by which to select and de-select a government which has a high degree of legitimacy.<sup>130</sup> However, other substantial assessments maintain that it possesses greater potential than this.<sup>131</sup> The following discussion focuses on two qualities claimed for democracy: that of increasing political efficacy amongst citizens through the activities of political participation; and that of promoting social, political and economic equality through the re-distribution of power amongst citizens.

These qualities claimed for democracy are relevant to women's committees because they were reflected in the committees' goals: to encourage women's political participation; to ensure that issues of importance to women featured on the political agenda; and to improve women's

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<sup>130</sup> J. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London, Unwin University Books, 1966).

<sup>131</sup> For example: A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*; J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism, On Liberty and Considerations on Representative Government* (London, Dent, 1972); C. Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1970); C. B. Macpherson, *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1973); A. Gorz *Farewell to the Working Class* (London, Pluto Press, 1982); B. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984); P. Green *Retrieving Democracy: In Search of Civic Equality* (London, Methuen, 1985); C. C. Gould, *Rethinking Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 1988); C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London, Verso, 1994).

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access to the benefits and responsibilities of citizenship. They also reflect the committees' approach to organisation, which, as will be shown in Chapters Five and Seven, emphasised community participation, consultation, and fostering activism in unofficial spheres. This chapter first distinguishes between democracy understood as the selection of government and democracy as a school of citizenship, before going on to consider democracy under the two headings of Development and Equality. In conclusion, the tension between democracy and feminism is outlined. Some feminists have presented strong arguments against democracy on the grounds that it appeared to be - in theory and in practice - inextricably bound to a system which locked women into second-class citizenship. They have argued that only a radically re-thought democracy can be fair to women. Their conception of what this might be shared the values of increased political efficacy for women, a wider political agenda, and improved equality; it is, therefore, of importance here.

### **Democracy and Women's Committees**

Women's committees were established as democratic bodies. At first glance this is a rather obvious thing to say because they were a part of the mechanism of local government and, therefore by definition, part of local democracy. However, their perception of themselves as democratic rested on more than that. Although part of local government, women's committees constituted a critique of local democracy both actively and de facto. Their grounds for criticism were that local democracy was not sufficiently responsive and accountable to local populations

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in general, and that it did not take adequate account of women and women's perspectives in particular.

The general criticism was in line with a school of thought about local government apparent in the reports of both the Skeffington and Seeborn committees in the 1960s, and in the activities of the New Urban Left in the 1980s.<sup>132</sup> The goal of improved democracy is better decision-making and, in the case of local government, better service-delivery. In pursuit of greater participation and more effective representation, women's committees instituted a range of consultative forums and included representatives of local interests on the committees. They also made strenuous attempts to open their proceedings to public view - to the point of taking their meetings out into the community.

The particular criticism, that local democracy took inadequate account of women and women's perspectives, was in line with the demands of the women's movement in the previous twenty years and with feminist and feminist-influenced critiques of democracy. From this perspective, the practice of democracy was compromised by gendered inequality in the distribution of the benefits of citizenship. This was apparent in the second-class citizenship of women in terms of access to economic and social goods, as well as the low numbers of women in elected office and in positions of responsibility in the bureaucracy.

From this point of view, the committees' critique of local democracy had two targets: the delivery of services to women, and the presence of women within the local authority, both as

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<sup>132</sup> Seeborn Committee on Local Authority and Allied Personnel Services, 1968, which led to the Local Authorities Social Services Act, 1970. The Skeffington Committee produced the Skeffington Report on Public Participation in Planning, 1969, which was intended to provide guidance on the implementation of the Town and Country Planning Act, 1968. W. Hampton, *Local Government and Urban Politics* (London, Longman, 2nd edition, 1991) p 135.

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councillors and officers. Women's committees addressed the former by introducing to the political agenda issues of particular relevance to women which had been largely overlooked, including (but not limited to) child care, domestic violence and access to the full range of locally provided facilities. They also questioned the approach adopted to more general issues in order to ensure that women's perspectives were brought to bear. They addressed the latter by acting as a training ground for women coming into politics, and by instituting equal opportunities programmes and training schemes to assist women coming into local government employment and going for promotion.

Despite the committees' perception of themselves and their activities as more democratic than existing local democracy, they themselves were vulnerable to accusations of being undemocratic. Democracy, as it is often understood, is a process for shaping a polity which assumes that the members of the polity are equal and equally able to take advantage of opportunities to participate and of the benefits of membership. A feminist critique, and justification for much of the committees' activities, relies upon the contention that democracy actually depends upon and reinforces gendered inequality amongst citizens. It requires a particular reading of the term democracy to introduce elements of compensation for some members in relation to others. Only an elastic interpretation can permit the creation of a body focused on promoting the interests of a specific section of the community. Equality of citizenship - not privileging any one citizen or section over others - is fundamental to democracy, so special consideration appears to be a contradiction. Since their very existence was a special case, the committees did not just pose a critique of the practice of local

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democracy, their critique extended to democracy itself.<sup>133</sup> As such their position within the structures of local government was anomalous and often uncomfortable.

Women's committees were vulnerable to accusations of being undemocratic because they were concerned with women rather than the whole community, and were particularly concerned with women from minority groups. They were also vulnerable because men were often absent from (or in a small minority on) committees and at public meetings, and because they included women who had not been conventionally elected amongst their numbers.<sup>134</sup> Consequently, they could be accused of sectionalism and exclusivity. Support for the committees as democratic bodies rested, in the main, on the proposition that the common conception and practice of democracy privileged some members of the polity and their interests, and marginalised others. In order to correct this imbalance and facilitate true equality of membership it was in the interest of fairness to put enabling mechanisms in place, perhaps temporarily. The analysis of women's committees in Chapters Five and Seven takes up their potential for privileging some groups over other and weighs it against the inclusive measures which were taken in the spirit of democracy.

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<sup>133</sup> According to Susan Mendus "For feminists, democracy is not something which, as a matter of unfortunate fact, has failed to deliver on its promises to women. It embodies ideals which guarantee that it will never deliver unless it embarks upon extensive critical examination of its own philosophical assumptions." S. Mendus, "Losing the Faith: Feminism and Democracy", in J. Dunn (ed), *Democracy, the Unfinished Journey* (Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>134</sup> The issue of all-female committees and male membership is taken up in Chapter Five below.

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### Competing Conceptions of Democracy

Democracy is probably the great organising concept of the late twentieth century. Freedom, equality and citizenship by no means lack power, but it is democracy that has been most widely adopted in both general understanding and philosophical writing to capture the aspirations of the twentieth century. Hence the enormous literature of democracy and the insistence of politicians from a wide range of political configurations that their system is democratic.<sup>135</sup> Within the framework of liberal democracy, democracy can be interpreted as a method for the formation of a government.<sup>136</sup> Arguably, the vote we record every four years, selecting and deselecting government, is a way of governing ourselves. Certainly, writers of the middle years of this century, warned by the undemocratic effects that they attributed to mass participation in Germany, maintained that the participation of the mass of the population should be confined to the selection of representatives, who would then govern without intervention.<sup>137</sup> Although it is rare to hear anyone speak in these terms now, reticence about excessive participation is common. Perhaps it is this which is expressed in the conservative contention that politics is a tiresome task which should be kept to a minimum, and the common belief that

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<sup>135</sup> A point made by David Held in the Introduction to *Models of Democracy* (Cambridge, Polity, 1987).

<sup>136</sup> This approach has been widely accepted and largely associated with Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*.

<sup>137</sup> T. Adorno et al *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York, W. W. Norton, 1982); H. Eckstein, *Division and Cohesion in a Democracy: a study of Norway* (Princeton University Press, 1966); J. A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*.

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people who get involved in politics do so because of some psychological inadequacy or distortion.

From an alternative point of view, democracy is perceived as having intrinsic value, as well as instrumental function to the point that "democratic procedures are superior to all other types of decision-making not because they guarantee better results, but because they offer citizens the right to judge (and to reconsider their judgments about) the quality of these results."<sup>138</sup> Once democracy is credited with intrinsic value, it becomes more than a mode of selecting a government. It becomes an aspect of the daily lives of people who live in a community which they want to call democratic. Importantly, democracy has been taken up by writers and activists concerned to redistribute power to include groups and individuals usually located at the margins. For example, where eighteenth and nineteenth century feminists grounded their arguments in the promise of liberal freedoms, some twentieth century feminists have argued from the undeveloped potential of democracy for political and social change.<sup>139</sup>

There are then two ways of thinking about democracy which co-exist uneasily: democracy as choosing and legitimating government, and democracy as participation and civic development. If we believe that democracy is fulfilled by voting, we need only be concerned with keeping numbers up. If, on the other hand, we believe that democratic participation has a value in its own right, as well as the value of an active citizenry to accountable, responsible, responsive government, we must be concerned to match theory and practice. We must seek the

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<sup>138</sup> J. Keane, *Democracy and Civil Society* (London, Verso, 1988) p 26. This approach is rooted in a particular understanding of classical democracy, the writings of Rousseau and J S Mill, and guild socialism.

<sup>139</sup> A. Phillips, *Engendering Democracy* (Cambridge, Polity, 1991); S. Mendus "Losing the Faith: Feminism and Democracy".

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links between participation construed broadly, and the formation of a government; yet theories have tended to focus on either one or the other.

### Democracy and the Development of Political Efficacy

Concern with the effect of democratic participation upon the individual and thus indirectly upon the polity, dominated radical political thought between 1970 and 1985.<sup>140</sup> Historically, participatory democracy took the form of all citizens sharing in the decisions made by the polity. One influential version of this is that given by Rousseau in *The Social Contract*. Here, he presented a polity in which citizens could be made aware of a general as opposed to a particular good. If they could perceive a general good, he maintained that they would give it precedence when making decisions for the whole community. Rousseau's conception of politics and society tended towards consensus and homogeneity, whereas some years later John Stuart Mill was concerned with the acceptance and even encouragement of variety in opinion and practice. Both writers are pertinent to contemporary dilemmas and thought, although it is Mill's concern to keep different ways of life alive and to support minorities which has most resonance.

Their influence can be seen in the work of Carole Pateman, who took an early interest in developmental and participatory democracy. In *Participation and Democratic Theory* she set out to recover some of the democratic values of Rousseau and Mill, particularly the "educative" aspect of democracy. She approvingly quotes Mill's review of de Tocqueville where he

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<sup>140</sup> I have taken the publication of Carole Pateman's *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1970) and Philip Green's *Retrieving Democracy: In Search of Civic Equality* (London, Methuen, 1985) as marking the beginning and the end of the concentrated focus upon participation.



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maintains that it is of no use to have universal suffrage and participation in national government if the individual has not been prepared for this by participation at the local level. According to Mill, it is at the local level that the educative effect of participation occurs. It is here that the issues directly influence individual lives; where the opinion of an individual carries more weight than it can in the nation state; and where any individual has the opportunity of standing for public office.

Pateman wrote about a system where maximum input is required and where output includes both policies and the development of the social and political capacities of each individual, so that there is feedback from output to input.<sup>141</sup> Contrary to the belief that a high level of participation subverts democracy, she maintains that participation encourages the development of democratic proficiency. It is her contention that we improve our ability to participate by participating.<sup>142</sup> Pateman concludes that a participatory society is desirable because it will afford the greatest opportunities for the development of qualities of citizenship. A participatory society demands the extension of participation from the political into spheres outside government, particularly the economy.

Participatory democracy was an exciting approach and widely adopted by writers seeking a theory which offered an alternative to domination by the state. However, the significance of inequality to effective participation was noted. Parry, Moyser and Day pointed out (some years after Pateman's initial formulation of the argument) that in a polity structured by differences in power and resources, the political activities of the better equipped will tend to

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<sup>141</sup> C. Pateman *Participation and Democratic Theory*, p 43.

<sup>142</sup> C. Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*, p 64, 105.

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protect and augment their privilege.<sup>143</sup> Therefore, if a more participatory polity is also to be a more equal one it is important that measures to increase participation are consciously linked to measures which guarantee access. The full potential of participation will only be realised when those at the margins gain access to decision-making processes. This might require the creation of mechanisms to ensure that their voices are heard.

Writing after interest in participation had peaked, Carol Gould uses the goal of equal opportunities for self-development to justify state involvement in the distribution of opportunity. She argues that the right of all individuals engaged in a common activity to participate in decision-making concerning that activity requires the extension of democracy into the economic and social spheres. She further maintains that shared activities and decision-making are a condition of self-development.<sup>144</sup> A joint activity is defined by common purposes and as such it requires a form of participation in the common decisions which binds all the members of the group. Gould's contention that decisions regarding a common activity cannot be the simple aggregate of individuals' decisions about their own separate actions both echoes Rousseau and pre-figures the interest in deliberation expressed by such writers as James Fishkin and Cass Sunstein. These latter writers in the liberal tradition seek to stem the fragmentary tendencies of liberal individualism by emphasising the role of deliberative processes in reaching new goals and agreements.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> G. Parry, G. Moyser and N. Day, *Political Participation and Democracy in Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 1991) p 6.

<sup>144</sup> C. Gould, *Rethinking Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 1988) p 85-86.

<sup>145</sup> J. Fishkin, *Deliberation and Democracy: New Directions for Democratic Reform* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1991); C. Sunstein, "Preferences and Politics", *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol 20 No 1, (Winter 1991) p 3-34. This is of particular relevance to community representatives sitting on women's committees and is taken up below.

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In order to secure the egalitarian potential of self-development through participation Gould addresses the disputed line between negative and positive liberty and its relevance for the choice between narrow or extensive interpretations of democracy.<sup>146</sup> While we confine ourselves to extending democracy to economic and social spheres at a fairly high level of abstraction, the issue does not arise, but once we approach practical arrangements positive liberty, or "enablement", looms. Potential participants are not equally able to take advantage of abstract opportunities for a wide range of reasons. These include restraints on time, mobility, knowledge and skills. Therefore, although opportunities might be equal, what could be called (after Rawls) the worth of those opportunities to different people, rarely is.<sup>147</sup> If the individual and social benefits of participation are to be maximised, then the individual power to participate must first be maximised. Not all differences can be compensated for, but those which derive from available time and resources to participate, access to the issues and consideration of minority opinions can be resolved.

Taking up the challenge of positive liberty, Gould addresses the problems which arise when we try to balance social and political equality with particular needs. She derives democracy from equal freedom, characterised as the equal right to self-development. Democracy comprises the equal rights of individuals to participate in decisions which affect them together with the material conditions necessary to do so. These conditions include the

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<sup>146</sup> I. Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty", *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1969). An extensive literature has grown up around Berlin's essay, including the essays in D. Miller (ed), *Liberty* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991) and those in M. Sandel (ed), *Liberalism and its Critics* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1984).

<sup>147</sup> This is a paraphrase of John Rawls "the worth of liberty". The difference between an opportunity and its worth is the same as that between liberty and its worth, which he discusses in *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford University Press, 1983), p 204; N. Daniels "Equal Liberty and Unequal Worth of Liberty", in N. Daniels (ed), *Reading Rawls* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1975).

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means of subsistence and access to work. Individuals should have equal access to the means they need in order to realise their long-term purposes or plans.<sup>148</sup> The means include enough education to vote wisely and enough income to be implicated in the economic decisions of the community. Equality involves the eradication of the power differential which underlies limitations in the opportunities available to some groups, including women. However, equality of access would have to include whatever additional training and facilities women needed to compensate for gendered disadvantage. In particular, to overcome socialisation and social patterns which had discouraged them from learning skills and having confidence and ambition on a par with men.

Gould uses shared decision-making as an instrument of social cohesion. She draws a qualitative distinction between decisions on common concerns and an aggregation of individual decisions about individual actions. A common activity is defined by common purposes and requires a form of participation in the common decisions which will bind all the members of the group. Since it is impossible to know in advance which activities will contribute to self-development all shared activities must permit participation in decision-making. She holds the line between negative and positive freedoms through her understanding of individual identity as complex and invested in relationships.

The complexity of individuality is a theme which has been adopted by progressive liberals critical of the radical individualism present in liberal theory influenced by neo-liberal economics.<sup>149</sup> Cass Sunstein, for example, contests conceptions of the self-interested individual

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<sup>148</sup> C. Gould, *Rethinking Democracy*, p 32.

<sup>149</sup> W. Kymlicka *Liberalism, Community and Culture* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989); C. R. Sunstein, "Preferences and Politics".

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and rigidly determined preferences, emphasising instead the role of circumstance and other people in shaping both self and opinion.<sup>150</sup> Sunstein perceives a role for participation and development in his reconciliation of liberal values with the capacity of the state to override particular private preferences and beliefs.<sup>151</sup> His starting point is a critique of the assumption that preferences are known and fixed, from which he elaborates an argument in favour of democratic practices which encourage the development of social choices through deliberative processes - discussion, debate and disagreement - which are facilitated by the state. He suggests that since preferences are shaped by circumstances, which are often limiting rather than enriching, they should not be permitted to determine political decisions unless opportunities are available to test them against information and different points of view.<sup>152</sup> Further, he contends that the state should be able to intervene to prevent the enshrinement of preferences which derive from deprivation, misinformation or ill intent.<sup>153</sup>

Thus Sunstein envisages the development of greater toleration and a degree of shared understanding amongst citizens as a result of participation in deliberation around policy- and decision-making. Without resorting to the classical conception of an encompassing common good, he maintains that collective preferences may not coincide with private preferences for good reasons; consequently, collective preferences can only be arrived at through processes which seek to involve as many as possible from the citizenry. He further suggests that the state

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<sup>150</sup> W. Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community and Culture*; C. R. Sunstein, "Preferences and Politics".

<sup>151</sup> C. R. Sunstein, "Preferences and Politics".

<sup>152</sup> C. Sunstein, "Preferences and Politics", p 17.

<sup>153</sup> C. Sunstein, "Preferences and Politics", p 10, p 19-24, p 27-32.

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should have a more active role than that of referee, and should both establish deliberative mechanisms and override inappropriate private preferences.<sup>154</sup>

The significant contention of writers including Pateman and Gould is that participation in democratic activities leads to the development of greater individual capacities to think and act in a democratic manner in political and other arenas. "Democratic" is construed to mean taking and sharing responsibility for decisions which affect the individual and the community, bringing to bear the interests of the whole community. This is taken further by Sunstein who maintains that deliberative processes facilitate the development of the capacity of citizens to think beyond self-interest, which may be grounded in limiting circumstances, and to reach richer, more informed conceptions of the interests of the whole citizenry. Deliberation is a vital part of the developmental conception of democracy. The differentiation of collective from private interest is achieved through purposeful discussion of issues; and participative decision-making takes place in specially convened forums.<sup>155</sup>

### Democracy and the Pursuit of Equality

The discussion so far has concentrated on the potential of democratic participation to enhance political efficacy through self-development, and of deliberation to enhance collective decision-making. The issue of equality arose because of the suggestion that adding participatory

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<sup>154</sup> This is also discussed by I.M. Young in "Justice and Communicative Democracy" in R. Gottlieb (ed), *Tradition, Counter-Tradition, Politics: Dimensions of Radical Philosophy* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1994).

<sup>155</sup> J. Fishkin *Deliberation and Democracy*; J. Stewart, E. Kendall and A. Coote, *Citizens Juries* (London, IPPR, 1994).

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forums to an existing liberal democratic political system would do little to the advantage of marginalised people and interests. Instead of being brought into politics, they might be further excluded as the interests which could be clearly articulated, and the people who could voice them, came to dominate the new forums. Gould suggested that shared decisions should be reached by the people who were connected to an issue. In order for this to be effective and to promote equality rather than ossify inequality it would seem that a significant reorganisation of politics and society is required. Such a project is proposed in what has been called Radical Democracy.

Radical democracy is an extension of the belief that participation is an intrinsic good. It emphasises participatory structures and the extension of democratic decision-making from the sphere of government into economic sectors and beyond. It entails the devolution of effective power from the centre to appropriate alternative locations in pursuit of social, political and (usually) economic equality. Its approach is a response to both the mistrust of the masses described above, and the increased privatisation and diminished power of the individual in western industrial states. Radical democracy recovers some ideas which had been overshadowed by the precepts of state socialism and free-market conservatism; those of John Stuart Mill and Rousseau have been mentioned; guild socialism was another source. For many years the self-help, co-operative, localist elements of socialism were overshadowed by centralising and nationalising tendencies, however, both Carole Pateman and, more recently, Paul Hirst re-introduced the guild socialist approach. Pateman draws particular attention to G.D.H Cole's contention that the individual is most free when co-operating with others to make laws and his suggestion that participation should take place through associations which are free

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to control their own affairs and are roughly equal in political power.<sup>156</sup> Theories of radical democracy also draw on contemporary events which challenge the preconception that wide and effective participation leads to domination by the un-democratic.

The experience of new social movements - women's, gay and lesbian, peace and environmental, local, national and international - provided examples and models for radical democrats. The organisations which made up new social movements were concerned with more than the achievement of their social and political goals; their members were conscious of the organisation itself and of the means that it used.<sup>157</sup> Such organisations demonstrated patterns of inter-personal relationships and decision-making mechanisms that were consciously created as means of practising in the present the ultimate goals of the members, and as a sign to the rest of society.<sup>158</sup> For example, the women's movement, as described by Hilary Wainwright, was intensely sensitive and self-conscious about inequality and hierarchy in the creation of organisational forms. Further, feminist organisational forms were geared to overcoming passivity, self-hatred and lack of trust through participatory democracy. They followed in the

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<sup>156</sup> Quoted in C. Pateman *Participation and Democratic Theory*, p 36-41; further developed by Paul Hirst in *Associative Democracy* (Cambridge, Polity, 1994).

<sup>157</sup> However, these goals have not been translated into organised politics with great success. In their reflections upon the Icelandic Kwenna Frambothid (Feminist Party) Dominelli and Jonsdottir point out that "[c]reating the political machinery capable of transforming society in accordance with feminist objectives has also proved elusive for feminists who insist that the machinery they create for so doing remains true to the collective principles enunciated in feminist theory." Lena Dominelli and Gudrun Jonsdottir, "Feminist political Organisation in Iceland: Some Reflections on the Experience of Kwenna Frambothid", *Feminist Review* (1988) p 36. Similarly, the Green parties in Britain and West Germany had problems with non-hierarchical forms and revolving leadership.

<sup>158</sup> A. Melucci, *Nomads of the Present*.



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traditions of democratic religious groups and the anti-authoritarian currents in student movements and opposed the emergence of individual leaders.<sup>159</sup>

The radical democratic project is to change society, not simply to improve political efficacy. The goal is the realisation of equality. As such it approaches afresh the dilemmas of positive conceptions of freedom. Particularly apparent is the danger that, in order to achieve individual self-development, particular values might be imposed upon the whole community by a sector which considers itself to be possessed of true understanding. Radical democrats claim that this can be avoided if real power is devolved and is invested in self-determining groups at local levels. In a provocative book, Philip Green proposes a democratic division of labour that would include job rotation and the options of further training, further education or family care as part of the working life. He maintains that the pursuit of greater political equality inevitably entails a commitment to social equality and consequent changes in the social and economic base. He describes a system based on the minimisation of economic inequality and a restructured matrix of socially useful work including labour, training, education and full-time parenting.<sup>160</sup>

Green's analysis of the organisation of work offers a number of useful insights, which enhance the contention made earlier by Carole Pateman that the nature of peoples' working lives - not just their incomes - have vital effects on their political and social identities.<sup>161</sup> As with many writers on radical democracy, Green is explicitly concerned with gender. He is aware that the

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<sup>159</sup> H. Wainwright, S. Rowbotham and L. Segal, *Beyond the Fragments* (London, Merlin Press, 1979) p 12, 39, 75; see also A. Melucci *Nomads of the Present* on new social movements, especially the interview in the last section.

<sup>160</sup> P. Green *Retrieving Democracy: In Search of Civic Equality*, p 1-8, 53-57.

<sup>161</sup> P. Green *Retrieving Democracy*, p 54.

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open opportunity structure he envisages would not of itself spare women from having to make the choice either to shoulder a double load of work and family responsibilities or to sacrifice one of these in order to participate fully in the other.<sup>162</sup> Green maintains that only a redistribution of labour and responsibility within the family would obviate such choices. There is a pronounced tendency for the hierarchy of reproduction to impact on that of production: women are expected to do more in reproduction and therefore to do less in production.<sup>163</sup> He believes that this tendency would carry over into an open opportunity structure unless there was an impartial distribution of labour within the family. In his schema, equality in the home and workplace are preconditions for equal political influence: individuals share responsibility in production and are able to plan their lives to include further education, training and domestic commitment free from gendered prescriptions.

*Retrieving Democracy* is an attack on capitalism with the goal of a socialist, egalitarian society. Green's vision is austere and presents a world of useful work and well-spent leisure. While his criticisms of capitalist-consumerism are valid and many of his ideas exciting, taken as a whole, his solutions rely on a fixity of shared purpose that would be hard to achieve without an authoritarian structure somewhere in the background.<sup>164</sup> For example, his suggestion that there

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<sup>162</sup> P. Green *Retrieving Democracy*, p 98.

<sup>163</sup> See P. Green *Retrieving Democracy*, p 97. For a different account see R.W. Connell *Gender and Power* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1987). P.R. Sanday "Female Status in the Public Domain" in M.Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (eds) *Woman, Culture and Society* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1974) presents an anthropological account of how reproduction imposes constraints on women and what conditions - primarily imperatives which prevent men providing food - permit the acquisition of greater power.

<sup>164</sup> Robert Nozick envisages such circumstances when he criticises the possibility of perpetual redistribution. According to his criticism of distribution according to teleological principle: whenever the distribution of goods deviated from agreed principles it would need to be got back into shape, this pre-supposes some body which would determine what the pattern should be and who should pass what over to whom. *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1974).

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might be constitutional limitations on the ownership of productive industry - designed to prevent anyone from amassing enough economic power or productive responsibility to confer unequal amounts of political power on them - sits uneasily with misgivings about control of the central state.<sup>165</sup> Further, Green's ideas share a problem with other participatory and radical theories: they provide engaging models for micro-politics, but are less convincing when addressing macro-politics, the nation-state and international relations. Green exasperatingly offers the contention that in order to establish democratic equality a nation must withdraw from the international community.<sup>166</sup>

In addition to issues of central organisation and macro-politics, there is a third and more general difficulty, which concerns non-participants. Excited about the potential benefits of participating in self-government, writers, including Green, sometimes overlook two significant items: time and interest. As Michael Walzer pointed out, "Radical politics radically increases the amount and intensity of political participation, but it does not (and probably ought not) break through the limits imposed on republican virtue by the inevitable shortage of time, and the day-to-day hedonism of ordinary men and women."<sup>167</sup> He goes on to suggest that, short of the sort of rigorous training for citizenship combined with a strictly curtailed private sphere recommended by Rousseau, (and up to a point by Green) people can be encouraged to participate, but they cannot be forced. As a result, in even the most open and receptive polity

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<sup>165</sup> P. Green *Retrieving Democracy*, p 8.

<sup>166</sup> P. Green *Retrieving Democracy*, p 187.

<sup>167</sup> M. Walzer "A Day in the Life of a Socialist Citizen" in *Obligation, Essays on Disobedience, War and Citizenship* (Harvard University Press, 1970).

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there will be some people who participate only when they can stretch time, and some who participate minimally.

Walzer raises the issue of the imbalance of influence between activists for whom politics is a way of life and other citizens who prefer to "take long walks, play with their children, paint pictures, make love, and watch television."<sup>168</sup> To him, it seems inevitable that for much of the time participatory democracy will mean "the sharing of power among the activists."<sup>169</sup> For this reason Walzer insists that "[t]he militants represent themselves. If the movement is to be democratic, the others must be represented [...] participatory democracy must be paralleled by representative democracy."<sup>170</sup> He has no concrete suggestions as to what form the distribution of power might take, but maintains that non-participants have rights. Such rights include the right not to participate, and also the right to participate out of the blue when an issue hits them. He envisages non-participants taking an active, if intermittent, role as political critics, possibly to the irritation of the activists, but concludes, "[a]fter all, what would democratic politics be like without its kibitzers?"<sup>171</sup>

Therefore, as Walzer has later written, and as Parry, Moyser and Day note, "[g]iven that participation is a minority pursuit, the attitudes of the non-participants become, paradoxically, all the more important."<sup>172</sup> Thus, if a polity is to take account of inability or unwillingness to

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<sup>168</sup> M. Walzer, "A Day in the Life of a Socialist Citizen", p 234.

<sup>169</sup> M. Walzer "A Day in the Life of a Socialist Citizen", p 235.

<sup>170</sup> M. Walzer "A Day in the Life of a Socialist Citizen", p 236.

<sup>171</sup> M. Walzer "A Day in the Life of a Socialist Citizen", p 238.

<sup>172</sup> G. Parry, G. Moyser and N. Day, *Political Participation and Democracy in Britain*, p 8. In a later essay Walzer takes up the argument that the organisations of civil society are vital counters to popular powerlessness and the professionalisation of politics, "The Civil Society Argument" in C. Mouffe (ed), *Dimensions of Radical Democracy* (London, Verso, 1992).

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participate then the education must be such that people know how to do it, even if they choose not to, and the system must be open enough to let them in when they do. This takes us directly to the problems which all community initiatives and women's committees have had to address: the difficulties which arise when trying to reach the most marginal, unorganised members of the polity; the difficulty of addressing issues which no-one has articulated as an interest; and the problem of trying to sustain levels of participation.

A radical approach to democracy poses a large potential problem: that by presuming equal enthusiasm and ability to participate it might actually generate inequality. This might be different from those inequalities already in existence or it might be a consolidation of pre-existing inequalities. Therefore, without prior achievement of a considerable degree of equality the radical devolution of power and democratisation of a wide range of social and political arenas could give rise to a whole new range of problems in terms of domination and marginalisation.

## **Feminism and Democracy**

The following section takes a rather different approach to the subject of democracy from the previous two. Since this study of women's committees is concerned with their relationship to democracy and feminism, what is the relationship between democracy and feminism? The discussion in the preceding sections has shown that some proposals for a more participatory, devolved conception of democracy have included the goal of correcting gender

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inequality. In order to present the other side of the question, this section outlines feminist analyses of democracy.

The adoption of democracy as an instrument of political change for women is a problematic strategy, perhaps even more so than the adoption of a liberal vocabulary by earlier campaigners turned out to be. Currently, feminism sits uncomfortably with both liberalism and democracy. Both approaches have, to date, sat all too comfortably with differential characteristics of citizenship for men and women, which usually entailed differential power and opportunity to women's disadvantage. Nevertheless, the lure of the democratic tradition is strong. Writers worry away at the concepts, investigating whether they are inextricably bound to a hierarchy of citizenship, or whether this is an effect of history which can be thrown off (although not easily).

The feminist critique is one of the few voices raised against democracy, and probably the only voice from the egalitarian corner. Feminist critics have suggested that the problem of women's second-class citizenship is due not to any weaknesses in the realisation of democracy, but to the very nature of democracy itself.<sup>173</sup> From this perspective, the history of democratic citizenship as a device for excluding those who do not fulfil the criteria of membership is integral to the nature of democracy. Democracy is a means of defining who is and who is not a citizen and of allocating the rights and duties of citizenship. The criteria of citizenship, and the content of rights and duties, were determined long ago in keeping with the shape of a male life -

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<sup>173</sup> This problem is raised by, S. Rowbotham, "Feminism and Democracy" In D. Held (ed) *New Forms of Democracy* (London, Sage, 1986); C. Pateman, "Feminism and Democracy, *The Disorder of Women*" (Cambridge, Polity, 1990); S. Mendus "Losing the Faith: feminism and democracy"; A. Phillips, *Engendering Democracy* (Cambridge, Polity, 1992); A. Phillips, "Democracy and Difference: some problems for feminist theory", *The Political Quarterly* (January 1992); A. Phillips, "Must Feminists Give up on Liberal Democracy?" in *Democracy and Difference* (Cambridge, Polity, 1993).

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husband, father, protector - and a male of the property-owning classes at that.<sup>174</sup> Little has changed because little **can** change. There are "male" concerns and ways of doing things, which constitute the public domain where democracy holds sway, and "female" concerns and modes which constitute the private part of the world. Like the entwined symbols of yin and yang, the male and female, public and private domains determine and depend upon each other.

There have been two trends in critical feminist accounts of democracy. According to one, democracy assumed and required a high degree of homogeneity and could not tolerate difference amongst the citizenry, including distinctions of gender. Thus women could be citizens of a gender-neutral polity as long as their lives conformed to a male pattern, but once issues of care and childbirth intruded they were excluded from equal membership. The other, in which there was a tendency to blur any distinction between liberal democracy and democracy itself, held democracy responsible for political goals which were rooted in individual self-interest and political conduct which assumed bureaucracy and objectivity.<sup>175</sup> Since these individual characteristics were those ascribed to the male, feminist critiques presented democracy as both gender-neutral **and** inherently male-focused.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> C. Pateman *The Sexual Contract* (Cambridge, Polity, 1988); S. Mendus, "Losing the Faith: feminism and democracy" in J. Dunn, *Democracy the Unfinished Journey* (Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>175</sup> Conflation of democracy and liberal democracy is understandable, since for most western writers liberal democracy is their whole experience. Yet it is frustrating since the very incongruence of liberalism and democracy is a theme in other areas of political literature, particularly the radical democratic approaches referred to above, and communitarianism.

<sup>176</sup> See A. Phillips, "Democracy" in A. Jaggar and I. M., Young (eds), *The Blackwell Companion to Feminist Philosophy* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, forthcoming). Terrell Carver has pointed to an incongruity in insisting that the subject is both gender-neutral and male, "What is Male about Male-Stream Thought, or, Feminist theories of Politics and Post-Modern Theories of Gender", unpublished article (Leicester, Political Studies Association Annual Conference, April 1993).

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The political participation of women as a cohesive group with particular interests, or simply the inclusion of women's interests may be a corrective. Some feminists have gone further and proposed a politics grounded in connection, inclusion and subjectivity; values usually ascribed to the female.<sup>177</sup> The latter used families and friendships as models for an alternative politics. On the other hand, gender-neutrality, if generously interpreted, could correct the ways in which citizenship is shaped around norms of male biology.<sup>178</sup> For example, it has been customary not to make any allowance for pregnancy in employment and career development because men do not get pregnant; a generous interpretation of gender neutrality would provide for everyone to have career breaks for child birth.

Two points can be made here. First, the broad feminist critique is not far from many other critiques which do not reject democracy but seek to develop and improve upon it. Second, there are real problems with models for politics drawn from personal life. These problems can be brought to mind by reflection upon the original meaning of patriarchy, as elaborated by Filmer and contested by Locke and Wollstonecraft, and the feminist critique of exploitative family relations.<sup>179</sup> Nevertheless, I would argue that a rather weaker interpretation of the significance

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<sup>177</sup> See I. M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton University Press, 1990) and A. Phillips, *The Politics of Presence* (Oxford University Press, 1995) for the possibilities of group-based politics; S. Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: towards a politics of peace* (London, Women's Press, 1990), J. Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* (Oxford, Martin Robertson, 1981) and D. Dinnerstein, *The Rocking of the Cradle and the Ruling of the World* (London, Women's Press, 1987) for maternal thinking.

<sup>178</sup> Deborah Rhode argues persuasively for gender-neutral legislation to improve women's equality, D. Rhode, *Justice and Gender: Sex discrimination and the law* (Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 1989), *Theoretical Perspectives on Sexual Difference* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1990), "The Politics of Paradigms: gender, difference and gender disadvantage" in G. Bock and S. James (eds), *Beyond Equality and Difference* (London, Routledge, 1992).

<sup>179</sup> Feminists have often opposed traditional family structures for the ways that they oppress and exploit women, although feminist responses are now far more complex than they were twenty years ago when Shulamith Firestone wrote *The Dialectic of Sex* (London, Women's Press, 1979).



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of gender suggests that women, by virtue of particular experiences, may well bring different perspectives, including feminist insights, to bear on politics, which might lead to the introduction of new ways of doing things.

Most feminist critics do not dismiss democracy, but approach it warily, alert to all the ways in which it has been used to consolidate privilege and exclude difference. Consequently, feminists have tended to favour versions of democracy which have a strong participatory component and which are not confined to the political sphere, as conventionally understood.<sup>180</sup>

Although contemporary interest dates from the political movements of the 1960s, such demands have a history. Sheila Rowbotham argues that whenever a movement for the liberation of women has included poor and underprivileged women, the idea that political freedom and economic equality entail a community based on mutual co-operation has arisen. She describes how, when working-class British women took up arguments for suffrage in the nineteenth century, they tended to assume that the vote was linked to economic independence, trade union organisation, better maternity conditions, housing, education and the re-organisation of domestic labour. Such assumptions imply a conception of democracy which integrates a challenge to women's unequal access to state-controlled resources with women's social equality.<sup>181</sup>

However, devolution of power and increased opportunities for participation in decision-making could provide for better conditions for women to continue to be primarily

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<sup>180</sup> For example, Sheila Rowbotham in "Feminism and Democracy", describes feminists from the 1960s taking up the assertion that democracy involved issues of identity and culture.

<sup>181</sup> This included co-operative housekeeping in utopian communities, and the proposals, after the First World War, for free municipal electricity, home-helps, nurseries, laundries and municipal cinemas. S. Rowbotham, "Feminism and Democracy", p 81-82.

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mothers and home-makers, while not creating conditions of equal choice. The acknowledgement of a sphere of women's issues in which women have the power to make decisions would not of necessity empower women in any other area of life. Therefore it is necessary to evaluate carefully any proposal in terms of its impact on women, and to build into proposals that which will enable actual, rather than theoretical, equality. It is in this spirit that Carole Pateman has suggested that citizenship should include active parenthood as well as defence of the realm, that Anne Phillips has developed a theory of engendered democracy, and that Susan Mendus has recommended an "extensive critical examination of its [...] philosophical foundations."<sup>182</sup> Feminist critics diverge over equality or difference-based approaches (which are discussed in Chapter Six below), some favouring gender-neutrality, while others are optimistic about an explicitly sexually-differentiated democracy.<sup>183</sup> Anne Phillips suggests that this divergence "is perhaps best understood as a disagreement about how much difference has to be recognised in order to promote the kind of democracy where citizens can engage on matters of shared importance".<sup>184</sup>

I suggest that there is an equilibrium point at which a gender-neutral approach can achieve certain, basic goals, while taking account of gender (and other) differentiation could achieve a more finely-tuned equality. From this perspective, pursuit of equality as a principle and

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<sup>182</sup> C. Pateman, "Equality, Difference, Subordination: the politics of motherhood and women's citizenship" in G. Bock and S. James (eds) *Beyond Equality and Difference* (London, Routledge, 1992); A. Phillips *Engendering Democracy*; S. Mendus, "Losing the Faith".

<sup>183</sup> Chantal Mouffe opposes sexual differentiation, arguing that such distinctions are inappropriate to politics; Carole Pateman argues for consideration of different modes of citizenship: C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London, Verso, 1994); C. Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Cambridge, Polity, 1988).

<sup>184</sup> A. Phillips "Democracy" in A. Jaggar and I. M., Young, *Blackwell Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, forthcoming (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1996) p 10.

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consideration of difference as a practical way of applying rules are coherent. This appears to have potential for theorising the practical equalisation of opportunities, for, as Sheila Rowbotham writes, democracy based on a theory of individual rights alone does not secure a means of livelihood, nor allow for the interdependence of human beings in maintaining themselves and their children.<sup>185</sup>

### The Limits of Participation

As the ideas discussed above suggest, the reaction to orthodox representative democracy tended to pose participation, coupled with devolution, as the preferred alternative to representation and bureaucracy. Approaches deriving from participation and devolution assume that there is enough shared understanding within a political community to permit agreement upon common goals and tolerance of a degree of difference. However, reflection upon the course of the twentieth century casts doubt over the possibility of locating anything which resembles a general will. The modern ethos is individualist; if rational argument cannot arrive at an encompassing general will and the diversification of modern industrial society counts against the formation of common interests, perhaps all that can be agreed upon are the rules of the game.<sup>186</sup>

Even agreement upon the rules is tentative when incompatible ends are pursued within a political community. Conflicts grounded in belief systems which by their nature resist toleration

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<sup>185</sup> S. Rowbotham, "Feminism and Democracy".

<sup>186</sup> N. Bobbio, *Democracy and Dictatorship* (Cambridge, Polity, 1989).

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of each other, cannot be resolved by a democracy reliant on voluntarism and civic virtue.<sup>187</sup> Norberto Bobbio confronted the utopian vision of change that had emerged and suggested that the complex plurality of modern society might be better served by a competitive model of politics than by one which tried to locate common interests. While accepting that participation performed an educative function, he maintained that it was an inefficient guiding principle by which to conduct business in most areas of government. A particular concern for Bobbio, and anyone else reflecting upon the course of the twentieth century, is the role of experts. A tension exists between democratic authority, whether it be that of the public meeting or the elected representative, and the authority of expertise. While it is acknowledged that expert information and advice are needed before many decisions can be made, there is unease about the balance of power. Bobbio suggest that a degree of balance can be achieved through a mixed system, in which certain concerns are resolved through collective decision-making, while strategic areas are dealt with by representatives and experts.<sup>188</sup>

Out of the criticism of representative democracy, renewed interest in its possibilities has arisen. A modern democracy must somehow combine the insights and civic virtue of participation with the practicality of representation and the expertise of specialists. De Tocqueville's point that democratic liberty might not accomplish all its projects with the skill of

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<sup>187</sup> The obvious examples to give here are the impasse reached over the fatwa declared against Salman Rushdie by the religious leaders of Iran , the dispute between Serbs and ethnic Albanians over Kosovo and the declared independence of Chechnya from Russia.

<sup>188</sup> N. Bobbio, *Democracy and Dictatorship*, p 26. In a complex age reliance upon experts is inevitable, however, there are political judgements to be made about the balance of power between experts and the general population in decisions about what are the areas which require expert input, and what should be the weight of expert opinion against that of the public. Recent experience has made us wary of experts: consider the efficient tower blocks and housing estates, served neither by public transport nor shopping, recreation and child care facilities, ill-lit, unsafe and generally loathed.

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an adroit despotism, but that in the end it produces more than any absolute government, is still eloquent.<sup>189</sup>

## Conclusion

A number of questions arise from the foregoing discussion which are relevant to this study of women's committees. The questions revolve around whether increased participation and devolved power achieve in practice what is claimed in theory, and whether any undesirable side-effects result from such initiatives. In terms of the claims of a developmental approach to democracy, since women's committees both encouraged participation in established political procedures and sought to create new avenues for participation, did they prove the theories of Pateman and Gould and demonstrate that participation leads to the development of political efficacy? Or did their efforts show that encouraging participation in initiatives with little chance of a quick and dramatic result leads to disappointment and political disillusion? Similarly, the committees' engagement with groups in the wider community and their emphasis on public meetings and advisory forums demonstrated a commitment to deliberation, but did they prove Sunstein to be correct in that their deliberations translated into richer understanding and better decision-making?

Women's committees were part of the development of radical democratic theory by virtue of their links with the new urban left of the Labour party and their relations with women's movements. Where they had most in common with this approach was in their understanding that

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<sup>189</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p 261

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political and social identities are shaped by many factors, not just income. Their conception of equality, therefore, took in a range of criteria not just the economy. Hence their attempts to re-distribute power and to improve women's access to all sorts of arenas and facilities. Further, their attempts to break down bureaucratic hierarchies as well as their adoption of the ethos of new social movements were in the egalitarian spirit of radical democracy.

As already noted, a radical approach to democracy poses a potentially large problem: that by presuming equal enthusiasm and ability to participate on the part of all members of a community it might actually generate inequality. Such inequality might be different from those inequalities already in existence, or might be a consolidation of pre-existing inequalities. It is possible that unless a considerable degree of equality has already been achieved, the radical devolution of power and democratisation of a wide range of social and political arenas could give rise to a whole new range of problems in terms of domination and marginalisation. This is of particular relevance with regard to the difficulty of reaching the most marginal and unorganised members of the polity and of trying to sustain levels of participation. Therefore it is important to ask whether the experiences of the committees showed increased participation amongst unequal people leading to new forms of inequality. Two further questions arise from this: first, whether the difficulty of reaching people on the political margins limited the committees' democratic ambitions, and, second, whether the difficulty of sustaining levels of participation compromised the claims of both the committees and the theorists for the value of the devolution of power. These questions go to the heart of the claims made by the proponents of participatory democracy. The analysis of women's committees in Chapters Five and Seven

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throws light on these questions and addresses a larger point which arises out of them: does the creation of new democratic forums alter policies and policy outcomes?

The efforts made by women's committees to increase participation and devolve power were important. However, short of revolutionary change, the potential for these aspects of democracy in a populous modern society is limited. On top of this, the range of democratic innovations open to the committees was constrained by the regulations and conventions of local government. Further, the general public had a lot of other things to do with their time and a range of likely reasons for not wanting to commit themselves to local government; they were, therefore, not always readily available to participate. This was symptomatic of problems with participatory democracy which were recognised by theorists of democracy and by activists in other spheres.

The next chapter, therefore, engages with new thinking about representation. It investigates questions about the meaning and nature of political representation, followed by a discussion of the possibilities which arise when ideas about participatory democracy are combined with new thinking about representation. These are closely related to the goals and practices of women's committees and again pose a number of questions which this study attempts to answer in Chapters Five and Seven.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **Political Representation**

Chapter Three has suggested that although women's committees appeared to be democratic initiatives with the emphasis on increased participation, this reading both presented some problems in terms of democracy and missed the complexity of the committees and their activities. From the outset, women's committees were concerned not only with direct participation but also with issues of democratic representation. This was evident in their commitment to the introduction of co-optees from sections of the community and their creation of consultative processes which pursued responsiveness and accountability. The concern with representation displayed by the committees' reflected a renewed interest amongst political theorists, arising from the exploration of new democratic possibilities.

The renewed interest drew attention to three aspects of representation of particular relevance to any attempts to improve democracy. The first of these is the question of what is represented. Once we start to query this, associated issues arise. Notable amongst these are doubts about the ability of present methods for the selection of representatives and modes of decision-making to convey the range of interests and opinion in existence. The second aspect is the question of whether, and to what degree, it matters who representatives are. The third aspect is the suggestion that if political interests are even more complex than had been thought, then innovation is required in the determination of representative forums.



## Representation

In this chapter different conceptions of representation are analysed and applied to the questions of what is represented, by whom and in what sort of forum. The main body of literature on political representation has focused on questions arising from the selection and election of representatives through a party system or the connection between party policies and the interests of the electorate. More theoretical work has questioned the meaning of political representation and indicated weaknesses in general assumptions about what is represented. Such work has suggested that a politics of competing ideas fails to capture the diversity of interests, and that elections framed by mass political parties fail to deliver representation which is adequately sensitive to the diversity of the electorate.<sup>190</sup>

From the perspective of this study of women's committees, these three topics translate into: the ambiguities present in the electoral mode of representation; the possibility of the representation of group-derived interests; and the value of having political assemblies which reflect the significant characteristics of the electorate. The first of these pulls together the problems and the benefits of representation established through party competition and election, paying particular attention to dilemmas experienced by female representatives. The second includes the contradictions and the insights provided by a politics which focuses upon identity, while the third encompasses the desirable yet illusory nature of an assembly which resembles its constituency.

Women's committees presented a diversion from the usual practice of representation, because they were created to be an instrument for the insertion of women's interests into the

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<sup>190</sup> Particularly A. Phillips, *Engendering Democracy* (Cambridge, Polity, 1992) and *The Politics of Presence* (Oxford University Press, 1995); I.M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton University Press, 1990) and "Polity and Group Difference" in C. Sunstein (ed) *Feminism and Political Theory* (University of Chicago Press, 1990).

## **Representation**

agendas of all the other local government committees. Not only did the committees exist to represent women, they also created ways of including amongst their numbers women who were representative of a variety of interests and groups present in the community. The committees were, however, criticised for being un-representative, because they were perceived as the vehicle for minority interests. At the beginning of the previous chapter it was suggested that the democratic legitimacy of the committees depended upon a critical assessment of the term democracy; similarly, their representative-ness required a critical assessment of representation. In order to understand the committees as representative bodies we need to look at the different conceptions attached to representation.

This chapter looks first at the meaning of representation, in terms of the election of representatives, the political presence of different sections of the polity and the importance of whether a legislature reflects the significant characteristics of the population. It moves on to consider the nature of representation, in terms of what is represented, by whom and in what sort of forums. Finally, this chapter evaluates the possibility of combining forms of democracy which increase participation and distribute power with some of the new thinking about representation.

### **The Meaning of Political Representation**

#### **i. Elections and Elected Representatives**

The phrase 'representative democracy' is, in Western political thought, a synonym for 'liberal democracy'. Both terms have, in turn, become largely identified with pluralism and

## Representation

Robert Dahl's neologism, polyarchy.<sup>191</sup> Thus a number of potentially different political concepts have become inseparable from each other within the category representative democracy. These include: the liberal values of freedom and a regulated state; the representation of interests; the role of political parties; and competitive elections. Just as the rich set of possibilities contained by the term democracy became simplified in common parlance to elections (and in academic forums to polyarchy or selecting a government), so representation - a term with a range of potential interpretations - became identified with political parties.<sup>192</sup>

For most people in Britain, this has meant that the presence of their bodies and beliefs at decision-making forums is translated into a more remote choice between the comprehensive,

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<sup>191</sup> The name most associated with a narrow view of democracy, selecting a government through competitive elections, is that of J. A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London, Unwin University Books, 1966); Robert Dahl is most strongly associated with pluralism and particularly polyarchy, although he has shifted his position slightly over the years to take on criticisms of pure pluralism, *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1961), *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1971), "Procedural Democracy" in Laslett and Fishkin (eds), *Philosophy, Politics and Society* 5th Series (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1972), *Democracy and its Critics* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989). The identification of democracy with elections and parties was strongly made by the political scientists who applied rational choice theory to elections, thereby proving to themselves that it was an impossibility: K. Arrow, *Social Choice and Individual Values* (New York, Wiley, 1951); A. Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York, Harper and Row, 1957); W. H. Riker, *The Theory of Political Coalitions* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1962); R. Axelrod, *Conflict of Interest: A Theory of Divergent Goals with Applications to Politics* (Chicago, Markham, 1970). The apathy of the electorate and its significance for democracy was demonstrated by B. R. Berelson, P.F. Lazarsfeld and W.N. McPhee, *Voting: a study of opinion formation in a presidential campaign* (Chicago University Press, 1954), and the importance of minimal involvement of the masses by H. Eckstein, *Division and Cohesion in a Democracy: a study of Norway* (Princeton University Press, 1966).

<sup>192</sup> This can be seen in much of the literature on elections and voting, for example, D. Butler and Stokes *Political Change in Britain: the evolution of political choice* (London, Macmillan, 1974); V. Bogdanor and D. Butler, *Democracy and elections: Electoral Systems and their Political Consequences* (Cambridge University Press, 1983); I. Crewe "The Labour Party and the Electorate" in Kavanagh (ed), *The Politics of the Labour Party* (London, Allen and Unwin, 1982); A. Heath, R. Jowell and J. Curtice, *How Britain Votes* (Oxford, Pergamon Press, 1985); G. Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis* (Cambridge University Press, 1976); M. Duverger, *Political Parties: Their Organisation and Activity in the Modern State* (New York, Wiley, 1963); S. M. Lipset and S. Rokkan (eds), *Party Systems and Voter Alignment: Cross-National Perspectives* (New York, Free Press, 1967); and the public choice theorists listed above.

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high-level, policies of two parties, and the knowledge that their votes, cast every four or five years, possess more symbolic resonance than practical power.

Representation, as it is presently practised, may have been adequate for the limited franchise, cohesive interests and relatively small population of Britain in the early nineteenth century (when democracy was only just becoming an issue). However, it fails to capture the diverse concerns and ways of life co-existing in the populous late twentieth century. Now, people may find that no political party addresses their primary interests, or that while one party matches their economic beliefs, another meets their social convictions and a third their foreign policy concerns. In part this is a result of an ossified electoral system which inhibits the development of new parties; in part it is a result of an emphasis on national government and national parties which has increasingly made local government the lackey of central government policies and interpreted local issues according to the policies of national parties; and in part it is a result of the application of one, narrow, unchanging interpretation of representation throughout the British political system.<sup>193</sup>

Political parties select candidates to stand for election in a geographical constituency and success is a simple majority of votes cast. Unused votes and votes for losing parties are irrelevant: the proportion of the constituency to which these belonged is deemed nonetheless to be 'represented' by the newly elected MP or councillor. What exactly is being represented is inexplicit, and the relationship between the representative and the constituency, is unclear.

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<sup>193</sup> See J. Gyford, S. Leach and C. Game, *The Changing Politics of Local Government* (London, Unwin Hyman, 1989), p 1-38 on the nationalisation of local politics; K. Young, *Local Politics and the Rise of the Party* (Leicester University Press, 1975); R.A.W. Rhodes, *The National World of Local Government* (London, Allen and Unwin, 1987). Exceptions for the most part are undemocratic: the monarchy which 'represents' the nation at various national and international ceremonies, and the people appointed to quangos to 'represent' various interests.

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Reform of the electoral system to encourage the development of a range of political parties and constitutional reform to support local governments might solve some of these problems, but such changes would not necessarily clarify the nature of representation. As this brief description demonstrates, representation as a political activity is at some distance from representation as a painter, actor, writer or even a lawyer might understand the term.<sup>194</sup>

Political scientists have studied representatives - both MPs and local councillors - and have noted the disparity between their different roles: party member; advocate for constituency residents; a voice for particular interests; and an actor on behalf of the common good.<sup>195</sup> Investigations into the activities and priorities of representatives have shown that they make choices between different potential roles, and that there is conflict between the different, role-shaping, demands made upon them. In particular they have drawn attention to the choice which representatives often make to concentrate either on policy development or casework. On the one hand, this is a very personal matter but on the other it is driven by the demands of colleagues, council officers and constituents.<sup>196</sup> Illumination of the difficulties posed by

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<sup>194</sup> H. Pitkin's investigation of the different interpretations of representation in *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1972) is thought provoking on this point.

<sup>195</sup> Both the Maud, 1967, and Widdecombe, 1986, reports analysed the roles of British local councillors; William Hampton investigated the roles of Sheffield councillors in *Democracy and Community* (Oxford University Press, 1970); Kenneth Newton analysed Birmingham councillors deriving five role types: Parochial, Peoples' agents, Policy Advocates, Policy brokers, and Policy spokesman, *Second City Politics* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1976). Barron et al surveyed British local councillors and arrived at a dual typology, Policymaker and Caseworker; they also found that some councillors saw it as a hobby or part of their social life, while others saw it as a job, J. Barron, G. Crawley and T. Wood, *Councillors in Crisis: The Public and Private Worlds of Local Councillors* (London, Macmillan, 1991) p 172-180, 1991.

This ideal-type characterisation does not take account of individual aggrandisement or other psychological motivations: MP Ken Livingstone once reflected upon the reasons behind people wanting to become local councillors, "wouldn't therapy have been better?" (London, lecture at the ICA, 1987).

<sup>196</sup> J. Barron, G. Crawley and T. Wood, *Councillors in Crisis*, discuss the choices made and the different factors shaping choice, amongst which party membership, employment status and gender are significant, p 128-179.

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representation has seldom led to fundamental questions being asked about the nature and practice of representation, although it has prompted very practical questions about resources, time, professionalisation and expectations.

### ii. Political Presence

Questions that probe the meaning of representation have tended to come from political theorists, and particularly from people focused upon charting the possibilities of democratic change.<sup>197</sup> On the one hand, the presence of apparently irreconcilable conflicts within nation states around religion or ethnicity, which regular competitive elections reduced to deadlock, prompted reflection upon forms of democratic representation which could mediate such differences within a population.<sup>198</sup> On the other hand, engagement with social movements and identity politics has prompted an interest in more immediate interpretations of representation than electoral competition between two parties.<sup>199</sup> Arguments are put forward not just for the inclusion of the interests of different sections of the polity, but also for their increased physical

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<sup>197</sup> J. Burnheim, *Is Democracy Possible?* (Cambridge, Polity, 1985); N. Bobbio, *Democracy and Dictatorship* (London, Polity, 1989); A. Phillips, *Engendering Democracy* (Cambridge, Polity, 1992); J. Fishkin, *Deliberation and Democracy: New Directions for Democratic Reform* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1991); C. Sunstein "Preferences and Politics", *Philosophy and Public Affairs* Vol 20 No 1 (Winter 1991) p 3-34.

<sup>198</sup> A. Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1977) and *Power Sharing in South Africa* Institute of International Affairs No 24 (Berkeley, University of California, 1985); B. O'Leary, "The Limits to Coercive Consociationalism in Northern Ireland", *Political Studies* Vol 37 (1989) p 562-588.

<sup>199</sup> C. Sunstein, "Preferences and Politics"; J. Fishkin, *Deliberation and Democracy*; P. Green, "A Review Essay of Robert Dahl's *Democracy and Its Critics*", *Social Theory and Practice* Vol 16 No 2 (Summer 1990) p 217-243.

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presence.<sup>200</sup> In particular, in Britain, the relatively low number of women and members of ethnic minorities in both parliament and local government are noted.<sup>201</sup> The impetus behind the interest in participatory democracy was a belief that people at the margins should possess an equal political voice; the same impetus shapes the present interest in representation.

There are two issues deserving of consideration: the inclusion of interests and the inclusion of people. While there can be little argument now that the significant interests of different sections of a polity should all be encompassed (which is to leave aside for the moment how the terms 'significant interests' and 'different sections' might be interpreted), the idea that a political assembly might be selected according to anything other than the representation of ideas or policies by whichever people want to be politicians, is difficult. As a recent study of political recruitment asked, as long as the processes by which people are selected and elected are fair and open, does it matter who ends up representing the rest of us?<sup>202</sup>

### iii. Reflective Assemblies

As already noted, there is an intuitive response that who represents us does matter; that a legislature comprised of people from only one section of a diverse population would fail to

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<sup>200</sup> I. M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*; A. Phillips *The Politics of Presence*; this is taken up in greater detail in the final section of this chapter.

<sup>201</sup> Women constitute 9% of British MPs: K. Barman, "Gender and Electoral Reform" *Politics* 15(3), (1995) p 141-146; they make up 6.5% of the House of Lords: Women in Decision-Making (European Commission, 1993) p 4; and about 19% of local councillors in England, Scotland and Wales: J. Gyford, S. Leach and C. Game, *The Changing Politics of Local Government*, (London, Unwin Hyman, 1989) p 49.

<sup>202</sup> P. Norris and J. Lovenduski, *Political Recruitment: Gender, Race and Class in the British Parliament* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

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serve that population adequately, and that a legislature should in some way "mirror" the population. Yet Norris and Lovenduski's conclusions suggest that the presence of MPs who can be taken to "represent" diverse sections of the population, women, ethnic minorities and the working class, does not necessarily mean that the interests of these groups are promoted more strongly than they would have been anyway.<sup>203</sup> The importance of who representatives are has been recognised by measures taken to promote or ensure the presence of minorities and women on legislatures in the USA, Canada, Bangladesh, and the British Labour party. Norris and Lovenduski's research suggests that increasing the mirror-like quality of legislatures may be important symbolically and in terms of fair opportunities. However, it may not entail much in terms of changing the priorities or widening the scope of the interests represented if the process of liberal democracy is untouched. Thus, any innovation in the realm of representation is likely to be linked to wider democratic change.

The understanding of representation in liberal democracies has been dominated by the themes of virtual representation; the representation of interests organised around geographical constituencies; and legitimation via elections. Nevertheless, the question of who representatives are has been present, albeit beneath the surface. For example, Bentham was concerned that a diverse population should not be represented by a social elite, and demands for "no taxation without representation" and working-class enfranchisement entailed more than the take-up of the interests of diverse groups by benign, distant representatives. Like the more recent civil rights movements in the USA and southern Africa, they were concerned with the physical presence of members of the excluded groups, as well as the presence of their interests.

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<sup>203</sup> P. Norris and J. Lovenduski, *Political Recruitment*, p 224.



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While it is true that what a representative **does** is more important than who she **is** - a point emphasised by Hanna Pitkin in her investigation of representation - it is also true that people can only do things that they are aware need to be done. Representatives, like anyone else, act in ways that they believe to be appropriate, directed at goals which they perceive to be reasonable.<sup>204</sup> Since they are unlikely to adopt either policies or approaches with which they are unacquainted, it is relevant to politics that what a person perceives to be an issue and what she believes to be a reasonable goal or course of action will, to some degree, depend upon where she is positioned.<sup>205</sup> With regard to well-established issues of general relevance it is likely that most people will have received conscious and unconscious education adequate to the formation of rounded opinions which are only marginally personalised. New political issues and new perspectives on old issues, on the other hand, are most likely to arise from personal - or group - experience and knowledge.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> I am assuming good faith on the part of representatives and leaving out of account the possibilities of both individual lust for power and corruption.

<sup>205</sup> R. Darcy, S. Welch and J. Clark, *Women, Elections and Representation* (University of Nebraska Press, 1994), summarise reasons given for why there should be more women in elected office: "ideological advantage", pressing policies to which women have more commitment than men, particularly feminist goals; "women's expertise", taking advantage of the knowledge and insight into some matters which women possess and men do not; "societal benefits", society benefits from competition for office, which is constrained if half the population are not competing; "legitimising the system", in order to truly represent the population a legislature should include the various elements of the society, p 15-18.

<sup>206</sup> Some feminist writers, notably S. Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: towards a politics of peace* (London, Women's Press, 1990), D. Dinnerstein, *The Rocking of the Cradle and the Ruling of the World* (London, Women's Press, 1987) and J. Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* (Oxford, Martin Robertson, 1981) maintain that women have a radically different approach to life and politics which would alter the nature of politics if practised, this is encapsulated by the shorthand "maternal thinking"; the extent to which this depends upon something essential to the nature of women or upon the ways in which women's experiences differ from men's is not clear, nor is it entirely clear whether men could practise maternal thinking if equipped with appropriate training and experience. The position which I am adopting here is not a strong one about women's nature, but a rather weak one emphasising women's particular experiences. The same point is applicable to any group which has specific experiences which are connected to group identity and are different from the norm.

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Despite considerable changes in the course of this century, women and men - as groups, if not individuals - are differently situated with regard to many key issues. Vertical and horizontal job segregation ensure that they are differently situated economically; attitudes and experience ensure that they are situated differently in most social contexts; a conjunction of economy, tradition and biology ensure different positions in families, and norms of male and female behaviour tend to limit women's mobility.<sup>207</sup> All of the foregoing tend towards women and men having different positions in relation to a number of political issues, particularly family and employment law, the welfare state and social services.<sup>208</sup> Thus a woman may perceive political aspects of industry, employment, training, regulation, planning, social provision, welfare benefits and transport services, for example, which are invisible to a man.<sup>209</sup> Similar conditions

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<sup>207</sup> With regard to women at work see B. Chiplin and P. J. Sloane, "Sexual Discrimination in the Labour Market", A. Amsden (ed) *The Economics of Women and Work* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1980); S. Dex, *The Sexual Division of Work: Conceptual Revolutions in the Social Sciences* (Brighton, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1985) and "Gender and the Labour Market" in D. Gallie (ed) *Employment in Britain* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1988); R.E. Pahl, *On Work: Historical, Comparative and Theoretical Approaches* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1988). Feminist geographers have made interesting points on these issues. See for example J. Tivers, "Women with Young Children: Constraints on Activities in the Urban Environment" and L. Pickup, "Hard to Get Around: A Study of Women's Travel Mobility" both in J. Little, L. Peake and P. Richardson (eds), *Women in Cities* (Basingstoke, Macmillan Education, 1988).

<sup>208</sup> Attitudinal differences between men and women are often addressed in terms of a gender gap in support for different political parties. Traditionally, since Duverger's 1955 study, women were thought to be marginally more conservative than men, M. Duverger *The Political Role of Women* (Paris, UNESCO, 1955). Contrarily, American women now appear to be less conservative than men, a characteristic which has been on the increase since 1980. Martin Walker pointed out in the *Guardian* of 10.11.94 that, "America's great swing to the right was overwhelmingly a male phenomenon. A majority of women voted Democrat by a margin of 58-42, up by 8 per cent on the 1992 elections." According to P. Norris, "The Gender Gap: A Cross-National Trend?", in C.M. Mueller (ed) *The Politics of the Gender Gap* (London, Sage, 1985) p 217-236, gender does not appear to be significant in party alignment in Britain or other West European countries. However, Norris found clear gender differences of opinion on unemployment, nationalisation of private companies, income equality, penalties for terrorism, and aid for undeveloped countries, "These gender differences are not present in all countries; there is no uniform trend across Europe. However, there is one striking pattern: in all cases where there were significant sex differences, it was the women who were more left wing on the issues", p 229. Helen Wilkinson's survey of 18-35 year old Britons, *No Turning Back, Generations and the Genderquake* (London, Demos, 1994), found that attitudes were changing with women becoming more like men in terms of their commitment to career and willingness to take risks, however, differences still existed.

<sup>209</sup> For example, recent debates about limiting the congestion and pollution in cities have produced a range of ideas including an extra tax on the use of private vehicles in city centres. This would have unjust effects on men

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pertain to the members of any group whose position differs from that of the normative white, non-poor, able male.

The nature of democracy suggests that if decisions made on behalf of a constituency are to approach legitimacy, real efforts must be made to include the perspectives of the whole membership. The present UK party-based election does this up to a point, but consent to the outcome of elections tends to be at the expense of a tacit agreement to accept three fundamental flaws in the process. First, a limited number of parties, of which only two are real contenders, stand as proxies for a multiplicity of interests and priorities. Second, simple majority victories in single-member constituencies approximate for reaching a reasoned decision. Third, the concept of the mandate, popularised during the Thatcher governments, appears to substitute for commitment on the part of representatives to on-going responsiveness and accountability towards their constituents.

### **The Nature of Representation**

The dilemmas of representation are as much conceptual as practical and revolve around the three axes referred to at the start of this chapter: what is represented, who are the representatives, and where - or how - representation takes place. These three dimensions of representation are not discrete: there may be connections between what is represented and who representatives are, and how representation takes place may in turn be connected to what is represented. The following discussion of representation is arranged around these dimensions and

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and women since women as a group are less well off in the first place, and since women, to a far greater extent than men, use private vehicles rather than public for reasons of safety and for the transportation of children.

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problems for representation hinted at above are considered in more detail. Taking up a basic assumption of representative democracy, I ask what constitutes an interest and whether a particular section of the polity can be said to "own" it. This leads into the question of whether it matters who representatives are and, if it does, why it matters and what are the implications of it mattering. Closely related to who political representatives are is the question of where political decisions are made and therefore where people and their interests are represented.

### **i. What is Represented?**

Aristotle and Machiavelli may have been certain of the nature of the political, but since the advent of adult suffrage, welfarism and the coining of the phrase "the personal is political" only one thing is certain: that all assumptions about what is political are open to challenge. The nature of the political has changed considerably since the sixteenth century when Machiavelli considered that anything which did not pertain to the acquisition or security of territory was mere "estate-management". Perversely, the main business of government is now management of the economy and welfare - issues which both Aristotle and Machiavelli would have consigned to the private sphere. Political representation is largely understood in terms of the representation of interests, therefore changes in the political have occurred as interests have shifted.

Traditionally, an interest is connected to a geographical area or, more recently, to a class. It is assumed that shared interest is known and acknowledged, or can at least be discovered, and that competition of interests forms a reasonable basis for elections and government. The existence of different interests and competition between them is at some

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remove from the conditions of classical democracy, which assumed a large measure of homogeneity and differences which could be resolved through discussion leading to consensual decisions.<sup>210</sup> The large differences of interest were between the democratic state and the outside world. More recently large differences of interest occur within states. The founders of liberal democracy in the USA envisaged the competition of interests, but not such irresolvable conflict as arose between their own northern and southern states a century later. Similarly, twentieth century democracies have confronted mutually exclusive religious and ethnic interests and found that both their conceptions of interest and their institutions for negotiation between interests were inadequate.<sup>211</sup> Problems with the representation of interests arise when an interest is too dispersed amongst the population or too hard to articulate to be part of a political programme, and when interest is determined by identification with a marginalised, relatively powerless group.

Most of the above, and much of political practice, assumes that interests, the groups to which they belong, and their political representation are clearly defined even if they are deadlocked. Yet experience tells us that this is not the case. This point is illustrated by the example of working class Conservative voters in Britain who understand their interests in terms

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<sup>210</sup> The competition includes a plethora of pressure and interest groups. These range from the orthodox players such as trades unions, professional bodies, business interests and consumer groups to the wilder fringes of roads protesters, the animal rights lobby and the more radical environmental groups. Jordan and Richardson, *Government and Pressure Groups in Britain* (1987); Berger, *Organising Interests in Western Europe* (1981); G. McLennan, "Capitalist State or Democratic Polity" in G. McLennan, D. Held and S. Hall, *The Idea of the Modern State* (OUP, 1984); A. Melucci, "Social Movements and the Democratisation of Everyday Life" in J. Keane (ed) *Civil Society and the State* (London, Verso, 1988); J. Keane, "Civil Society and the Peace Movement in Britain", *Thesis Eleven*, 8, (1984) p 5-22; S. Rowbotham, *Women in Movement, The Past is Before Us: Feminism in Action since the 1960s* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1989) p 143-162, 266-293.

<sup>211</sup> A. Lijphart, *Power Sharing in South Africa*; B. O'Leary "The Limits to Coercive Consociationalism in Northern Ireland"; B. Margac, "Yugoslavia: The Spectre of Balkanisation", *New Left Review* (1989); S. Burg and M. Berbaum, "Community, Integration and Stability in Multinational Yugoslavia", *American Political Science Review* Vol 83 No 2 (June 1989); T. Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain: Crisis and Nationalism* (London, NLB, 1981).

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of class, but dispute the Labour party's reading of how best to further their interests. Once the focus shifts away from the sorts of general interests where differences of opinion can be regarded as matters of "taste" or "preference", it moves to issues where opinion is somehow inscribed upon the bearer - where bodies are political and where identity is implicated in opinion. This is most clearly the case with issues around gender, race, disability or sexuality, although a similar level of commitment appears to take place for some people with regard to issues of the environment and animal rights. Interests can perhaps be arranged on a continuum, with very broad issues, the sorts of things upon which there is a free vote in the House of Commons, where opinion could be described as "taste", at one end. In the middle there would be the issues around which political parties are constructed such as nationalisation of industry and or membership of the EU.<sup>212</sup> At the far end would be issues where opinion is closely linked to the embodied experience of groups of people. Perhaps different sorts of issue are differently constructed as interests and require different representative forums when decisions have to be made. If so, this suggests a radical re-think of democracy along the lines described in Chapter Three. This point is developed in the final section of this chapter.

Much of the writing about women and minority groups, and much of the political practice which has been instituted on their behalf, has assumed that they possess a recognisable, agreed upon set of concerns which constitute an interest. While this raises interesting possibilities, particularly in the work of Iris Marion Young (which is discussed in detail later in this chapter) it also gives rise to questions about the nature of groups and the extent of shared interest. All groups are not the same and, although there might be a common ground of

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<sup>212</sup> The difficulty of finding presently viable issues to use here indicates the redundancy of Britain's party system at the present.

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marginalisation or subordination, the extent of internal cohesion is likely to vary. Native peoples, for example, the native Canadians who feature in Will Kymlicka's work, may possess a higher degree of common interest and internal cohesion than, for example, Black Americans, whose shared experiences are cross-cut by class, education and region.<sup>213</sup> Nevertheless, the insight that our interests are not entirely a matter of individual preference but are, at least in part and for some of us, shaped by group membership, is valuable. Moreover, it adds support to criticisms of the adequacy of orthodox liberal democratic representative practices.

Within groups whose members appear to share common defining characteristics, schisms are likely to occur over the nature of identity, determination of goals and the direction of policy most likely to achieve the goals. The closer the political interest is to individual identity, the more likely it is that different opinions will emerge and generate conflict. We can agree to differ and reach compromises over issues outside of ourselves and we can respect other peoples' points of view when we realise that our own understanding cannot be absolute. However, when we ourselves are the subject of politics, we **can** believe our understanding and our right to be absolute.<sup>214</sup> Every woman is an expert on being a woman, yet each woman's experience of gender is unique. Thus, within what might appear to be a community of common interest, schisms exist between different and even competing interests. Women, for example,

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<sup>213</sup> W. Kymlicka *Liberalism, Community and Culture* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989). Anne Phillips discusses the political representation of Black Americans in Chapter Four of *The Politics of Presence*.

<sup>214</sup> Jeffrey Weeks writes of Identity Politics: "On the one hand there was the felt need for asserting publicly and privately a strong sense of self [...] But on the other hand there was the danger of a politics rooted in subjective experience, which could give rise to 'a certain self-righteous assertion that if one inhabits a certain identity this gives one the right to guilt-trip others into particular ways of behaving'", *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (London, Quartet Books, 1990) p 237, quoting P. Parmar, "Other Kinds of Dreams", *Feminist Review*, No. 31 (Spring 1989) p 58.

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differ radically from each other in terms of who they are and what they want, and are often unequal when judged in terms of economic, educational, status, and class criteria.

This brings the discussion to the specific issue of the representation of women. It is sometimes taken for granted, that women have specific interests which require representation.<sup>215</sup>

There are two problems with this: the belief that women are a unified group which can share an interest unproblematically; and the presumption that a group is associated exclusively with an interest. Women certainly share a biological potential for having children, but even that commonality is mediated by other differences. Some women have greater control over their fertility than others, and some women can have children while continuing to lead independent lives while others cannot. Women tend to have less access to economic resources than men, but some women are much better off than other women **and** some men. Women tend to be vulnerable to male power and violence, but some women are more vulnerable than others, and some women are better placed to get some sort of compensation. Women are unquestionably linked by shared sex, gender and experience, but they are also divided by many factors. Emphasis on the way that some interests derive from group membership is an important counter to the emphasis on individuated interest prominent in neo-liberal politics. However, the

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<sup>215</sup> Historically, women have been assumed to possess concerns which were different from, but complementary to those of men. According to such as Rousseau, Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor, these exerted a "civilising" influence upon men and were to the benefit of the community. The strongest conception of women's interests comes from radical and eco-feminists, who have taken strong positions about women in relation to peace, the environment, violence, pornography. The assumption that women share a set of material goals which can be asserted politically underpins the creation of women's parties and the study of "gender gaps" in political affiliation and behaviour: Anna Jonasdottir argues that "men and women are beginning to constitute themselves as two basic societal corporations", "On the Concept of Interests, Women's Interests and the Limitations of Interest Theory", K. Jones and A. Jonasdottir (eds) *The Political Interests of Gender* (London, Sage, 1985) p 53. Jones and Jonasdottir claim that feminists identify a range of women's interests but: "[t]raditional concepts of interest do not seem adequate to define the political and moral values that women strive to achieve in having their interests represented". K. Jones and A. Jonasdottir, "Gender as an Analytic Category" in *The Political Interests of Gender*.



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fissiparous tendencies of groups built upon identity suggests that the centre of a politics constructed around groups would not hold.<sup>216</sup> This might not matter if we found ways to combine some multi-purpose, permanent and formal political institutions with others that were more fleeting and focused upon particular concerns. Here, again, the ideas about democracy outlined in Chapter Three are of interest. This point is taken up in the final section of this chapter.

The interests possessed by women are usually taken to include issues of maternity, child care, safety, and women's access to employment and pay on equal terms which do not punish them for parenthood.<sup>217</sup> They may include emphasis on a different approach to politics and the broader society, which is more consensual, less aggressive, more orientated towards problem solving.<sup>218</sup> While there is no doubt that women in general have an investment in these issues, there is a danger to both women and the broader society if women adopt for themselves, de jure as well as de facto, responsibility for reproduction, nurturing and gender equality as their political identity.

It is central to the argument of this thesis (and perhaps to the work of the women's committees themselves) that these issues are properly regarded as the concern of all citizens,

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<sup>216</sup> As Jeffrey Weeks writes of identity politics in general, "the dynamics of identity soon began to undermine even the category of 'black'. At its broadest it embraced all people from the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and the West Indies and the original inhabitants of Australia and North America [...] but this broad political umbrella concealed different cultural experience and needs. Soon a proliferation of more directed groups emerged...", *Coming Out*, p 236.

<sup>217</sup> For example, R. Lister, Dilemmas in Engendering Citizenship, *Economy and Society* Vol 24 No 1 (February 1995) p 1-39.

<sup>218</sup> The latter point is emphasised by in theories of maternal thinking such as S. Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*; J. Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman*; and care: C. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1982); N. Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (University of California Press, 1984).

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although women have a particular perspective on them because they continue, unfairly, to shoulder their weight. If this is the case, the contention that only women can represent women's interests is problematic. If women's interests are constituted as a matrix of issues which are exclusively women's concern to be represented solely by women, support is given to the misconception that children, women's economic position, and safety are not the responsibility and concern of men as well. The results of the research undertaken for this thesis do suggest that women are the most likely to perceive the need to introduce new issues which particularly concern women, and to be able to understand and express the experience of certain issues. At the same time, the research also indicates that there are pitfalls to discouraging men from engagement with a process of recognising and promoting such interests. This is a very real dilemma, which women in politics and women concerned about women constantly face: only women will raise such issues and work for them, because only women perceive themselves as directly affected by them, but by so doing they risk perpetuating the belief that these are women's issues and contributing to the political marginalisation of both women and the issues.

It is possible to draw a distinction between assuming the existence of a set of interests particular to women, and acknowledging that women possess importantly different perspectives from men on a range of issues. The distinction may be small but it is nevertheless important when considering women and political representation. In the British political system, women are elected on the same terms as men, so there is no reason to believe that they are representative of women rather than neutral representatives of their constituencies. It would be unfair to both the women concerned and their constituents to expect women elected on a broad - and party - platform to reconstitute themselves as representative exclusively or even primarily of women.

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On the other hand, creation of a Women's Party has not so far proved to be a viable alternative.<sup>219</sup> Women's parties have emerged in a few countries, but the difficulties they have experienced suggest that women might be better served by establishing a significant presence across the political spectrum. By so doing they can bring their points of view to bear on all issues and exert pressure for change on priorities and practices from a wide base, rather than risk alienating to themselves responsibility for issues around reproduction by organising as a political party.

I would argue, therefore, that women do not share so much a set of political interests, but more a set of perspectives upon widely held political interests. This is not based upon a conception of women as so radically different from each other that there can be no shared interests, but rather based on a differentiation between an interest and a perspective. The concept of political interest grows out of the needs, demands or beliefs shared by a body of voters which shape their political responses across the spectrum and can be translated into a political programme. A political perspective, on the other hand is less a political programme than a shifting set of priorities which are brought to bear upon particular issues.

A perspective - that of women or an ethnic minority - constitutes a critique of existing political and social agendas, adding, subtracting and re-focusing items. It has an agenda, but not one that is suited to form the basis of a political party as political parties are presently understood. This is a problem which Green parties have confronted: although there is a green agenda, its economic, social and foreign relations policies do not appear to be sufficiently

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<sup>219</sup> Women's parties: L. Dominelli and G. Jonsdottir, "Feminist Political Organisation in Iceland: Some Reflections on the Experience of Kwenna Fambothid", *Feminist Review* (1988); A.E. Costain, "Women's Claims as a Special Interest Group", in C.M. Mueller (ed) *The Politics of the Gender Gap* (London, Sage, 1988).

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distinct to determine a party which could enter competition for votes on terms of equality with the big parties that tap into the acknowledged political cleavages. As a political presence women and minorities stand somewhere in between single issue groups and political parties. They could be constituted as political parties, but only in a multi-party system.

Two points emerge from the foregoing discussion. First, accounts of politics as the competition of interests fail to take account of interests that cannot comfortably be translated into the political programme of a cohesive section of the polity. I would argue that women in particular do not have so much a coherent political interest as a critical perspective on the content of politics. It would be inappropriate to constitute issues of reproduction and equality, which are generally taken to be women's interests, as players in this sort of bargaining, since the issues are (or should be) the concern of all citizens. However, since the history of politics demonstrates that men, left to their own devices, do not take account of these issues, women's presence in politics may be vital to ensure that their points of view on these issues are included and that criticism of the political agenda from women's perspectives takes place.<sup>220</sup> This point is taken up in Chapters Five and Seven below.

Second, some political interests are less determined by preference than by identification with or membership of a group, particularly a group which is somehow marginalised and lacking in power. I would argue that when this is the case the identity of representatives appears to be of particular significance. This suggests a politics in which not only interests but also bodies are represented, which would be rather more diverse than what we are used to, and which would

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<sup>220</sup> It has been pointed out to me that men have a long tradition of taking account of these issues in terms of promoting measures that ensure that they are entirely women's unsupported responsibility.

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lend itself to diversification of forms and forums of representation. This point is taken up in Chapter Five below.

### **ii. Who Represents?**

The discussion up to this point suggests that the question of who representatives are is relevant to the content of politics. This question translates into questions concerning how representatives are selected and what personal criteria are relevant to selection. A common criticism of government, central and local, is that it is "unrepresentative", meaning that the members are not drawn from across the social spectrum but all derive from a fairly narrow sector. This may take the form of concern about the low numbers of women or minority MPs, or emphasis on the whiteness, maleness and Oxbridge middle-classness of them all. Similar criticisms are aimed at local government. Although there are higher proportions of women and minority councillors than MPs, councillors have also tended to come from the better educated, better-off sections of the community. Such unrepresentativeness is an effect of selection.

In the British system of government, there are two stages of selection: the first takes place within a party where a candidate is selected to represent the party at an election, the second occurs within the constituency when an election selects one of the party candidates to represent the local electorate at a representative assembly. Research into selection suggests that party selectors are more conservative than electors with regard to the characteristics of the people chosen, and that the present dearth of women in parliament is due more to the reluctance

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of the selectorate to select than that of the electorate to elect.<sup>221</sup> Therefore, quota goals and measures within parties could to achieve change in the representative profile, as has been demonstrated with regard to women in Sweden, Norway and Denmark.<sup>222</sup>

Whatever the importance of increased opportunities for women and members of minority groups to achieve political office, increasing their presence amongst politicians is not necessarily the same as bringing the **interests** of those groups into politics. There are conflicts within the position of an elected representative which are exacerbated when the representative identifies with a marginalised group. Elections are conducted largely in terms of political parties, and so is the business of both parliament and local authorities, yet voting papers carry the names of individuals.<sup>223</sup> Elected members represent the interests of their constituents, but also those of their political party, and sometimes are expected to act on behalf of some notion of the general or national good. Further, MPs and councillors often take on responsibility for particular organised interests, such as a trade union, a professional body or a pressure group. This is in addition to the personal responsibility that some representatives may feel towards a particular group; one MP prompted by his own deafness became an advocate for the deaf, Bernie Grant

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<sup>221</sup> J. Chapman, *Politics, Feminism and the Reformation of Gender* (London, Routledge, 1993).

<sup>222</sup> See A. Phillips "Democracy and Difference: some problems for feminist theory", *The Political Quarterly* (January 1992); J. Lovenduski (ed) *Women and European Politics: Contemporary Feminism and Public Policy* (Brighton, Wheatsheaf, 1988). In Britain, the Labour party has introduced a limited quota system for the selection of Parliamentary candidates, "Quotas for Women in the Labour Party: Briefing for MPs from Clare Short, Shadow Minister for Women", October 1994. Quotas have also been proposed for the selection of candidates for local elections, *Implementing Quotas for Women in Local Government: A Labour Party Consultation Paper* (London, The Labour Party, 1995), *Fair Shares: Getting more women into local government* (London, The Labour Party, 1995).

<sup>223</sup> The vast majority of local councillors are elected as members of parties; according to Gyford, Leach and Game, in the 1985 local elections only 80 out of over 3,000 councillors were returned as "Independents", *The Changing Politics of Local Government*, p 27.

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and Diane Abbott often take up black issues, and female MPs or councillors may take responsibility for issues which affect women - although they may choose not to do so. Edwina Currie famously chose not to with her declaration that she was a Conservative, not a woman.<sup>224</sup>

The tradition of representation in liberal democracies is grounded in the belief that a representative is able to act on behalf of all the people and interests of the constituency. This may take the form of delegacy, as it does in trades unions, but in Parliament and local government it takes the form of representatives acting according to their own consciences in the interest of their constituencies. As the discussion above has suggested, if the content of politics is shaped by the knowledge of participants, and if some areas of knowledge are specific to some groups of people, it is important that representatives are drawn from across the spectrum of the population. In such cases, a more directed strategy for selection might be required than the assumption that if there is equal access to the assembly then members of all the different, significant sections of the society will naturally find their way there.

A more sophisticated conception would be that of an assembly which was a microcosm of the population. As such, it could act on behalf of the entire population as if it **were** that population, because all of its shades of opinion and all its varied and competing interests would be present and articulated. As cynicism about politicians has come to characterise the political culture of western states, suggestions of mirror-type legislative and executive bodies have become seductive. The members of such bodies would not be there purely because of their ambition or because of party strength, but would have been selected on account of their possession of significant characteristics. They could be selected by lot from amongst a number

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<sup>224</sup> "I'm not a woman, I'm a Conservative " quoted by B. Campbell in *The Iron Ladies: Why do women vote Tory?* (London, Virago, 1987) p 275.

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of suitable and willing volunteers and they could regularly rotate in and out of office.<sup>225</sup> There are problems, however, with mirroring. Not least, the assumption that because a person is black, lesbian, a car-driver or a dog-owner, this feature dominates her point of view. The formal validity of proceedings would be subverted if her opinion was actually shaped by another variable, perhaps class or some hidden experience, which she was not credited with representing. Further, the position of a representative is not a comfortable one. She is taken to represent a section of society of which she is a member, yet she is an individual and can only speak from her individuated position within that group. Either she will develop an inflated view of her importance as the voice of her people, or she will develop feelings of helplessness due to her inability to know and to express the complexity of the constituency for whom she nominally speaks. The problem of distance between the representative and the represented is aggravated once Woman becomes a job title as well as a constituency.

This is not to dismiss the mirroring function. Its usefulness takes two forms, the first of which is what Anne Phillips has called a politics of presence. According to this interpretation, when an issue is linked very strongly to a particular section of the society, as pregnancy and childbirth are to women, anti-semitism to Jews, and prejudice and the legacy of colonialism and slavery to people of colour, members of that section should be present to bring their perspective to bear.<sup>226</sup> This would entail ensuring that access to all decision-making bodies was open to the population and instituting suitable procedures to promote the participation of particular groups, including outreach, training and quotas.

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<sup>225</sup> J. Burnheim, *Is Democracy Possible? The alternative to electoral politics* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1985).

<sup>226</sup> A. Phillips, *The Politics of Presence*.



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The second aspect of mirroring relates to consultation. While consultation with bodies and groups outside of government is a "Good Thing" in principle, it presents the problem that only bodies that are already constituted can be consulted. You are therefore speaking with a section from within your target group which has the motivation, time and power to organise. There is also a possibility that you will only have access to the leaders of any group, who may not be in touch fully with those for whom they are presumed to speak; and that the same people will act as representatives across a range of issues, not all of which can be within their cognisance.<sup>227</sup> One long-term strategy to counter this is reaching out into the community and fostering organisation amongst the unorganised; this is practised by women's committees, community workers and others. An alternative strategy, which would provide more of a snapshot of opinion, would be to use the deliberative assembly suggested by Fishkin.<sup>228</sup> By putting resources into assembling a cross-section of the target community, chosen on the basis of statistical analysis, and having a short, intense period of training, information exchange and discussion, opinion could be developed and incorporated into policy.

### iii. How Does Representation Take Place?

The foregoing discussion of representatives leads into consideration of the third axis, the question of how - and where - representation takes place. Along with assumptions about

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<sup>227</sup> See F. Anthias and N. Yuval-Davis, *Racialised Boundaries* (London, Routledge, 1992).

<sup>228</sup> J. Fishkin, *Democracy and Deliberation*.

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parties, elections and interests, Britain has inherited assumptions about the nature of political process. It is monumental and archaic; like the Houses of Parliament and the Albert memorial, it is ponderous and permanent. Political units, whether the parliamentary constituency or the local government ward, are of significant geographical size; each elected representative has a large and populous responsibility.<sup>229</sup> The history of political institutions weighs heavily upon present office holders, procedures are conditioned by both regulation and precedent and newcomers are socialised into appropriate behaviour by the censure of senior members. The formality of proceedings, the slow pace, and the attention to detail discourage many. Norris and Lovenduski suggest that even MPs who are members of marginal groups are nevertheless socialised into the ways of the parliamentary club.<sup>230</sup>

Having achieved power according to a certain set of rules, office holders have proved to be disinclined to change the rules of the game. While in opposition, both the Conservative and Labour parties have toyed with changing the electoral system but have done nothing upon gaining office. However, some changes have taken place at the level of local government which suggest possible directions. The relevant innovations are all in the spirit of democratic advance described in Chapter Three. For example, the institution of consultative forums both on a functional and an area basis; the increased use of a variety of means to discover opinion and disseminate information; outreach work to encourage participation, co-operation and co-ordination with organisations outside of local government;

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<sup>229</sup> John Stewart pointed out how large the units of British local government are, "The Kent County Council has a population greater than [that of] sixteen of the states of the USA, greater than all the states of Austria and much greater than all the cantons of Switzerland.", "Decentralisation and Central Government" in Fabian Pamphlet No 496, (1984).

<sup>230</sup> Particularly working class MPs who might have expected to change things.

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and the introduction of the perspectives of significant but non-traditional local groups into policy making.<sup>231</sup> This list clearly includes the establishment and the activities of women's, race, disability and other committees.

Political process and political representation need not always take place at a high level and in highly formalised circumstances. There are occasions where this is necessary to ensure highly visible responsibility and accountability, but there are many occasions when this is not so. Suggestions arising out of the possibilities of modern technology include representation without elections, which could be achieved by the selection of members of the public to sit upon legislative bodies according to statistical criteria which would provide a microcosm of the population.<sup>232</sup> Public goods could be controlled through a variety of limited agencies staffed by experts on short contracts. Government and administration could be organised through specialised agencies, where no-one has input to decision-making unless they have a legitimate material interest.<sup>233</sup>

In his critical review of Robert Dahl's *Democracy and Its Critics*, Philip Green considers the different ways that representation has taken place in the recent past rather than the technological future. He refers to the many different circumstances where people allow themselves to be represented by some of their number who have not been elected and have no formal mechanism of accountability, and yet who are considered appropriate. In his

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<sup>231</sup> It is interesting to note that local government has done rather better than national at introducing elements of integration with other European countries.

<sup>232</sup> John Burnheim reconsiders the selection by lot practised by ancient Athenians and suggests statistical representation of the citizenry upon legislative bodies, combined with the control of public goods through a variety of limited agencies. *Is Democracy Possible? The alternative to electoral politics*. See also J. Fishkin, *Deliberative Democracy*.

<sup>233</sup> J. Burnheim, *Is Democracy Possible?*

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opinion, "There may be rules for conducting an election, but there are no rules for being represented. People are represented if they think they are".<sup>234</sup> Green is particularly interested in social movements and direct action and he gives the examples of the tacit consent to representation given by Black Americans to the US Civil Rights movement and by many British women to the Suffragist organisation, the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). In the context of the present research, I would add that local populations are often content to be represented by their more active members who form Residents, Tenants' or Community groups, and that sections of people with particular needs are often happy to be represented by the people whose job it is to work with them.<sup>235</sup> Green's point is that formal channels of representation are not always necessary, particularly in the context of movements and issues which are impermanent and democratic.

According to Green, we should be:

searching for a politics that is hospitable to informal conflict resolution in place of formal rules of order; rewards dialogue and discussion rather than one-way 'communication', so that more people from early childhood on are involved in the direct action of representing and being represented' and as much as possible devolves rule-making powers, not of exclusion but of self-governance, to communities defined by, and defining themselves through, a project of joint action.<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> P. Green, "A review essay of Robert A. Dahl's *Democracy and Its Critics*", *Social Theory and Practice*, Vol 16, No 2 (Summer 1990), p 217 - 243, p 237.

<sup>235</sup> In *Power and Prejudice: Women and Politics*, p 81-82, A. Coote and P. Patullo make reference to the important part often played by an outsider in mobilising community activism. In my own research, two community representatives on different committees were professionals working with particular ethnic groups. They represented those groups on the committees in addition to their regular work and hoped that, in time, people from the community would take over from them.

<sup>236</sup> P. Green, "Dahl's Democracy and Its Critics", p 238.

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He would almost certainly consider the following to be an abject goal, but I believe that Green's point can be transposed to political initiatives working with or even within formal institutions, alongside the track of formal representation. The analysis of the membership and activities of women's committees in Chapter Five shows one attempt to do so.

### **Breaking the Participatory/Representative Dichotomy**

So far, this examination of representation has shown that the three aspects of representation, what is represented, by whom, and how, are not independent variables but are in fact closely connected. In suggesting that the representation of political interests through institutionalised competition is neither simple in itself nor an effective way of encompassing diversity, three different issues have arisen. The first of these is the suggestion that the representation of organised interests by elected members, a practice that is taken rather for granted, contains conflicts which render it less transparent than it appears. The second issue is the possibility of the representation of groups or group-determined interests. The intuitive sense that a representative assembly should resemble the constituency on whose behalf it acts underpins the third issue: the question whether representatives should reflect the wider population.

This final section takes up group representation and the creation of new types of forums where different types of representation can be tried out. These ideas promise interesting possibilities for the combination of representative and participatory democracy. Finding a way to combine the two to good effect has been a goal for critics of local

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government for some years. In a discussion of good practice in local government written in 1984 we find, "[m]ethods must be found to integrate representative and participatory approaches into a satisfactory framework. At all times, emphasis should be placed on the transitory character of democratic arrangements. There is no "right" answer which will survive for generations."<sup>237</sup> However, it is perhaps only possible to achieve this if new thinking about participation is integrated with new thinking about representation.

The social groups which are relevant here are those possessed of a "minority" social and political status. These are identified by characteristics which are considered to be different from and subordinate to the dominant norms. Iris Marion Young, in what is probably the most important discussion of group representation, presents this as a preferable alternative to the participatory politics of grass-roots or small communities. She does so in the belief that in such constituencies common ground takes precedence over difference and minority difference is likely to be crushed in the pursuit of consensus. Instead, she promotes a politics of group identity, which transcends geographical boundaries. Young maintains that in the (relatively) small political units favoured by radical democrats and communitarians there is an impetus towards the norms of the dominant group which over-rides divergent opinions and ways of life. Groups which do not constitute a majority in any location will have no coherent voice, and the characteristics which describe their difference and their group status either will be dismissed or will form the basis for marginalisation or penalisation.

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<sup>237</sup>

W. Hampton, "Participation in local democracy", Fabian Pamphlet No 496, p 50.

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Young's goal is the achievement of social justice via the redistribution of power to include the marginalised. The marginalised are almost any group of people who can constitute themselves in opposition to the dominant norms of the Western citizen as male, white, physically and mentally able and independent, non-poor and nominally christian. Young rejects both democracy construed as majoritarianism, which can undermine social justice, and "grassroots participation in decision-making [which] can lead to unjust and oppressive outcomes."<sup>238</sup> She is particularly at odds with any conception of community which might consolidate dominant norms and exert pressure to conform upon its members. Her argument is posed in socio-geographical terms: she accepts neither the very-large scale of the national government, nor the small-scale of the neighbourhood as an appropriate location for decisive power. Rather than central or local-based decision-making she focuses on the middle ground and favours "metropolitan regional government founded in representational institutions that begin in neighbourhood assemblies."<sup>239</sup> She disputes the "all too simple equation of democratisation with decentralisation and local autonomy."<sup>240</sup>

Young is making an important point about the significance of group identities. These are largely overlooked by systems founded on either the individual or the collectivity. When the individual is the political focus, people are assumed to be similar in fundamental ways despite differences. On the other hand, when the collectivity is the focus, people are assumed to be different but only in terms of class, which is overwhelmingly more important than any

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<sup>238</sup> I. M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p 93.

<sup>239</sup> I. M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p 13.

<sup>240</sup> I. M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p 52.

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other differences. However, some problems arise from her particular conceptualisation of groups. In her morphology of groups Young is countering imposed definitions of the Other, rather than describing possible flexible alliances for the achievement of concrete political goals. Thus she posits sections of society defined by different types of criteria as groups equivalent to each other: women grouped by sex, gays and lesbians by sexual choice, ethnic groups variously by colour, language or country of origin etc. In rejecting essentialism, she describes social groups as self-defining. While this is important as a counter to the external definition of groups as other and subordinate, it does not take account of "groups" which cannot give a coherent account of themselves, nor of the multi-dimensional nature of identity. By trying to address all the oppressed groups in society she risks introducing a "need for group commonalities which become essentialist categories imposed by the group on itself."<sup>241</sup>

A similar tension underlies Young's mistrust of community. Because she is countering the potentially repressive conception of community generated by conservative communitarians she does not consider the possibility of communities of interest existing in overlapping array throughout the broader society, which could safeguard diversity. I would suggest that "community" might, but does not of necessity, deny difference and repress multiplicity and heterogeneity. It depends on the wider environment and whether people are forced into self-protective communities glued together by fear, or are sharing responsibility for shared interests through strength.

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<sup>241</sup> A. R. Wilson, "Which Equality? Liberalism and gay and lesbian equality" (Leicester, Political Studies Association Conference, April 1993) unpublished paper.



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I want to suggest that something of the sort of group representation described by Young could co-exist with a degree of participation and is suited to local politics. There are significant differences between the American context in which Young developed her ideas and Great Britain, where I would like to apply them. Britain has not evolved segregated communities to the degree common in US cities, where neighbourhoods become identified with a certain income-group, ethnic-group, race or religion. Despite our characterisation of "Black" Brixton or "Jewish" Golders Green, these areas are far more mixed than their US equivalents. Cultural or ethnic domination of neighbourhoods does not occur to any comparable degree, and neighbourhoods outside of northern Ireland are rarely dominated by a religious group with political intentions. In Britain there are gross inequalities and there are areas characterised by poverty, just as others are characterised by wealth, but, for the most part, poverty and wealth inhabit neighbouring streets. Thus one of Young's grounds for mistrust of grass-roots decision-making, the local consolidation of narrow interest, cannot be fully transposed.<sup>242</sup> Further, Britain does not use zoning laws as the USA does to plan its towns, cities, and countryside, rather, decisions are made locally on an issue-by-issue basis - for better or worse, but with the result that areas are not clearly differentiated from each other in the same way as in the USA.

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<sup>242</sup> Anne Phillips points to a weakness in Young's preference for cities in order to move the debate away from "the city/country axis" and towards "a relatively open question about the level at which final decisions should be made (p 15): "The coexistence of multiple communities or ways of life inside a large city does not necessarily release people from pressures to conform: indeed, the city that is large enough to sustain numerous sub-cultures may require more homogeneity within each community than the inevitably disparate collection of individuals who are gathered together in a small village or town." "Feminism and the Attractions of the Local" p 12.

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British local authorities are large and many encompass a range of areas and social circumstances which would fulfil Young's criteria of a political unit which does not serve to separate a homogeneous population.<sup>243</sup> "Black Brixton", for example, is not a local government area of itself, but is included in Lambeth along with "white" Streatham and the rather bourgeois squares of Kennington where several MPs have their pied-a-terres. The point of devolution of power is not to achieve local autonomy for its own sake, but to establish an appropriate degree of local control of local issues combined with co-operation and co-ordination within the greater community. This is very close to Young's goals.

Conceptions of democracy based on group rather than individual interests are an important critique of liberal democracy and suggest different ways of organising decision-making, distributing power and bringing people in from the margins. Identity politics on its own runs into insurmountable difficulties around which of the many potential identities people should choose as their organising principle. However, identity politics in conjunction with other modes of organisation could make it possible for a greater range of points of view to be brought to bear on politics. This presents the question of whether, in practice, organisation around identity and group interests, perhaps in conjunction with participative mechanisms where appropriate, could enhance orthodox representative democracy.

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<sup>243</sup> John Stewart pointed out how large the units of British local government are, "The Kent County Council has a population greater than [that of] sixteen of the states of the USA, greater than all the states of Austria and much greater than all the cantons of Switzerland.", "Decentralisation and Central Government" in Fabian Pamphlet No 496, (1984). While Young is pressing for larger units of government to counter the separate administration of segregated areas which results from the conjunction of zoning laws and small units of government in the USA, Stewart is arguing that the units of local government in Britain are too large to be "local". In terms of the relevance of Young's ideas to women's committees, the point is that local authorities in Britain are large and homogenous enough answer her criticism of devolution of power.

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### **Conclusion**

This chapter has addressed what I take to be the important themes in recent discussions of representation and focused on two particular issues: the political representation of groups and the importance to decision-making bodies of a membership which reflects the important characteristics of the population. In the context of the present study of women's committees this raises three questions. First, does special representation alter the priorities and policies of government? Second, if representatives derive authority from the status of reflecting or representing a group can this work effectively in the interest of their group and in association with representatives whose authority derives from orthodox electoral channels? Third, is it possible for different forms of representation and participation to work alongside AND to achieve the benefits which are claimed for them? Aside from making the people in marginalised groups feel better about politics (possibly) would such measures achieve anything that would not have been achieved anyway?

These questions are addressed in the chapters to follow. Chapter Five describes the membership of the committees that took part in the Women's Committee Survey, placing the different groups of members and the different modes of selection in the framework of democratic representation discussed here. It assesses the relative importance to a committee's perceived effectiveness of membership issues and the committee's place in the structure of local government. Further to this, it assesses the democratic implications of the changes undertaken by some of the committees. Chapter Seven describes the procedures adopted by the committees and the projects they pursued. Particular attention is paid to the question of

## **Representation**

whether their democratic goals and special representation influenced both what they did and the way they went about it.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **The Membership of Women's Committees**

The following discussion of the membership of women's committees is based on fieldwork undertaken between 1993 and 1995. The committees and sub-committees of five local authorities took part in the project: Bristol, Islington, Leeds, North Tyneside and Oxford. The five areas were selected from a list of women's committees, sub-committees and equal opportunities committees compiled by the National Association of Local Government Women's Committees in 1992. An abstract of this appears in Appendix A. Equal opportunities committees and committees in Scotland and Wales were excluded from the research for reasons given in Appendix F. The committees and sub-committees selected all included co-optees. These provisions narrowed the field considerably and the final choice was made to include as much geographical variation as possible in order to avoid any area effects, for example, similarities between women's committees in London boroughs resulting from the influence of the GLC. One of those chosen was a full committee, Islington, and four were sub-committees, Bristol, Leeds, North Tyneside, and Oxford. Committees and sub-committees possess different powers: whereas a full committee has the power to devise and implement policy, a sub-committee can only advise its parent committee.

All five of the areas selected were urban, however, the local authorities did not all possess the same responsibilities. As described in Chapter One, Bristol, Leeds and Oxford were shire districts, Islington was a London borough and North Tyneside a metropolitan

## **Membership**

district. The significance of this for my research was that Islington and North Tyneside councils had greater responsibilities and possessed greater spending power than Bristol, Leeds and Oxford councils. Therefore, the women's committees of these areas had input to different areas of policy. Further, although all the areas concerned were urban they differed in nature, as described in Chapter One.

The research took the form of a questionnaire, distributed to all members of the selected committee and sub-committees, and in-depth interviews of a number of members from each area. The questionnaire and interview outline are given in Appendices B and C. In addition I attended committee meetings and other, related, events, had informal meetings with officers, and investigated the archives of the local press in each area. My research findings were augmented by reports on women's committees appearing in the press throughout the 1980s, and specific research on women's and equal opportunities initiatives undertaken in the 1980s and 1990s.

The goals of my fieldwork were twofold. In the first place I hoped to gain an understanding of the committees and sub-committees as democratic bodies, to analyse the forms of representation they practised, and to assess the significance of feminism to their operation. In the second place I hoped that my examination of the committees would produce useful information about the possibility of putting some theories of democracy and representation into practice. In this chapter I examine the membership of the committees in order to answer the questions about democracy and democratic representation posed by Chapters Three and Four.

The following discussion starts from the conundrum presented in Chapter Three. Women's committees were explicitly concerned with improving the democratic function of

## **Membership**

local government, but were themselves vulnerable to accusations of being un-democratic. First, on account of their membership, which was primarily, but not exclusively, female. Second, because they focused on the interests of a section of the community - women - and on particular groups within that section. Here I explore the committees' potential for innovation, arguing that they operated as agents of democratisation in the broad sense intended by the writers discussed above, and that they were attempting to change politics. To paraphrase an Islington Equalities officer, they were making their areas more democratic by opening up new issues to public view and by encouraging passive and unorganised groups of people to develop and use their voices.

This description of women's committees suggests that they were actively engaged in re-interpreting democracy in pursuit of political change; it examines the constitution of women's committees and sub-committees, their remit and their membership, in the light of the participatory, developmental, devolved and deliberative interpretations of democracy discussed above. The fear that women's committees pursued a form of sectionalism, either by privileging women in relation to men or by privileging specific groups of women, is explicitly addressed in the context of group, interest and reflective representation. I also consider the problem presented for inclusive interpretations of democracy by the difficulty of maintaining a wide and consistent level of participation.

The committees studied included male councillors, female councillors from a range of backgrounds and co-optees representing sections of the community; the significance of the nature of the membership is discussed in the light of theories of democracy and representation. Following on from this the internal working of the committees is discussed, assessing to what extent the goals of democracy described in chapter four were met, and to

## **Membership**

what extent their innovation with respect to representation affected their policies and activities. Relations between councillors and co-optees are discussed, and the committees' effectiveness as a training ground for politically skilled and active people is assessed. The different positions of elected representative and appointed administrator are a dilemma for theories of democracy. Women's committees have addressed this in relations between the councillors, the committees and the women's and equalities officers; their experiences and opinions are analysed here.

### **A Democratic Membership?**

#### **i. The Presence of Men**

Women's committees and sub-committees were part of the formal structure of local government, yet they occupied a rather odd position. Operating like internal pressure groups, they existed as evidence of the intention of local authorities to improve the performance of their employment and service policies for women.<sup>244</sup> Like other committees, their voting membership comprised elected councillors. The councillors involved were both male and female, since councils have no capacity to exclude particular councillors from committees, and since the membership of committees should reflect the strength of different parties on the council. Like some other committees, their membership was augmented by non-voting

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<sup>244</sup> Local government has no legal obligation with regard to women, although it does have with regard to race.



## Membership

co-optees from the local community.<sup>245</sup> Where the membership differed was on issues that arose over the presence of male members on committees concerned with women's interests, ambivalence around the role of female councillors, and in the imagination women's committees exercised in their efforts to use co-option to enhance democratic representation, responsiveness and accountability.

Although there was an assumption that women's committees must be all-female, this was not always the case.<sup>246</sup> Where it occurred, the absence of men from membership of women's committees was contentious, even though it could only happen through the agreement of male councillors to abstain from participation.<sup>247</sup> Of the five committees and sub-committees involved in my survey, only Islington and Oxford were all-women.<sup>248</sup> Leeds had male councillors from the opposition parties sitting on the committee, to a mixed response from female councillors; Bristol had a male Liberal Democrat member; and North Tyneside had male councillors from Labour and Conservative parties with the general approval of the female members.

I quite like having men on it [...] I think it is because they  
can actually see and can go back to their colleagues and

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<sup>245</sup> See J. Gyford, S. Leach and C. Game, *The Changing Politics of Local Government* (London, Unwin Hyman, 1989) p 267-274, for a description of co-option, the extended uses made of it in recent years, and its potential problems.

<sup>246</sup> See Appendix A for a list of committees nationally giving the numbers of male members.

<sup>247</sup> Questionnaire 9 and Interview 11 (23.8.94), give details of protests made at the appointment of male members.

<sup>248</sup> A male Conservative was appointed to the Oxford sub-committee in March 1986. The then chair was quoted as saying, "We would rather the Conservatives had nominated a woman, but there's nothing we can do about it. Mr Turner has a perfect right to be there". *Oxford Mail* 4.3.86. However, Mr Turner was not a regular attender and made no apparent mark on the sub-committee. Councillor Chris Pryce was a member of the Islington Women's Committee in 1984, when he opposed some of the grants being made. *Islington Gazette* 20.1.84.

## Membership

tell them what exactly we are doing and what we are about, I think it also keeps us .. keeps us fresh because we're getting it from another angle, rather than all women sitting there, we've all got this one aim basically and that is to have services and to make our lives better, and to be recognised [...] a lot of men have got very similar views as the women on various issues.<sup>249</sup>

The institution of all-women committees has been criticised as undemocratic: in fact it is not achievable without the support of male councillors because of the relatively low numbers of female councillors and the rules about party representation on committees.<sup>250</sup> Therefore, where men were absent it was either because they had agreed to abstain, or because they did not want to be involved. Different motivation tended to apply to male councillors from different parties. The abstention of Labour men was generally a result of the Labour group having established the committee with the intention of it being women-only; where Labour men were involved it was the result of no such decision having been made. Conservative and Liberal Democrat men either abstained, because they disapproved of the existence of a women's committee, or got involved because no woman from their own party would participate and they wanted to keep an eye on things. As one male, Conservative member described it:

I'll be perfectly frank with you, I came on [...] it was sort of a joke. I was considered probably more right-wing than I am, and I was also considered - I am very down to earth - and none of the women would serve on the women's committee [...] I was going into it to stop what I considered the nonsense [...] They objected when I first came, two or three of the lady members objected to my presence, but the chairman [...] made it quite clear that if there was going to be equality, and if the Conservatives

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<sup>249</sup> Interview 17 (22.11.94).

<sup>250</sup> Discussed in Interview 4 (23.6.94).

## Membership

wanted to send a man to the committee [...] they couldn't object.<sup>251</sup>

Another male Conservative councillor got involved because, "no-one else would do it [it was] regarded as a non-committee by colleagues (me too before I joined)."<sup>252</sup> A third male Conservative "volunteered" for the women's committee, and believed that his membership had "raised awareness of [male] views to women members and vice versa". His aim in joining was "to strengthen equal opportunities practice". Through his membership he "acquired greater understanding of female perspective and provided male perspective and some restraint on over zealous 'feminism'". He considered his greatest success to have been "moving debates from 'pro-woman' to 'equal opportunities' considerations."<sup>253</sup>

A fourth male Conservative, who had been sent to the women's committee by his party, commented, with some pride:

When I arrived on the committee a member moved a vote of no confidence in the selection of a man to the committee. I feel now that I am regarded as a useful member.<sup>254</sup>

Although male abstention, where it occurred, was voluntary, some opposition councillors felt that illicit pressures were brought to bear to keep men out. It might be argued that a committee which intentionally excluded councillors could not be democratic in itself, and was breaching the democracy of the local authority by barring

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<sup>251</sup> Interview 11 (23.8.94).

<sup>252</sup> Questionnaire 38.

<sup>253</sup> Questionnaire 39.

<sup>254</sup> Questionnaire 9.

## Membership

the representatives of some constituencies from participation. The counter-argument is that all-women committees are necessary to avoid the power differentials which come into play when men and women work together, to ensure that a woman's perspective is fully developed, and to encourage the participation of community representatives.<sup>255</sup> It is coherent with, although not essential to, the development of a form of democracy which can encompass both male and female citizenship. An all-woman committee has the potential to initiate a democracy based on groups rather than individuals, yet committees have been reluctant to speak for "women", and have instead provided a channel for the plurality of female voices.

The abstention of men from committees was by no means unique. It was similar to the experience of the Icelandic Kwenna Framboðid, a feminist party which did not exclude men constitutionally, but found that men were content to provide support from the margins.<sup>256</sup> Members of KF believed that "women needed to devote their energies to developing their own skills and talents and helping one another grow strong and confident so that they could tackle gender oppression. It was much easier to ensure that this happened if women worked within women-only organisations and formed their own independent power base", at least in the short-term.<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>255</sup> These points were developed in Interviews 4 (23.6.94); 1 (1.4.94); and 7 (21.7.94).

<sup>256</sup> "KF did not operate a policy of hostility towards men. Although men did not indicate a desire to join KF's ranks, they were not constitutionally excluded from membership. Men occupied a subsidiary role as sympathetic sympathizers and supporters and did not control any of its activities." Lena Dominelli and Gudrun Jonsdottir, "Feminist Political Organisation in Iceland: Some Reflections on the Experience of Kwenna Framboðid", *Feminist Review*, p 39, (1988).

<sup>257</sup> L. Dominelli and G. Jonsdottir, "Feminist Political Organisation in Iceland: Some Reflections on the Experience of Kwenna Framboðid" p 49.

## Membership

A different but related issue arose when committees sought to convene women-only public meetings.<sup>258</sup> While a narrow interpretation of democracy might find this undemocratic, an interpretation which takes account of the deficit of power and access which women have experienced since the inception of democracy can encompass women-only events as a correcting mechanism. There is a difference between meetings at which those in possession of power exclude those who are regularly subject to their power, and meetings from which people trying to build their own power wish to exclude those who have traditionally dominated them. It obfuscates the issue to pretend that all-male and all-female gatherings are the same in principle. After initial protests local populations and local media adjusted to the occasional women-only event. This may be because they came to understand their significance, but I suspect it is because they lost interest.

For the most part, members of all-women committees expressed appreciation and preference for the absence of men. One woman described the experience of an all-woman committee as follows:

I think that on the whole women are much more honest about their feelings about things and quite often when they talk about a principle or policies they use their own experiences, and they can be very intimate experiences, such as domestic violence. I've seen women talk about that and say, 'I've suffered it', and cry. And I think if men

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<sup>258</sup> The public meeting called by Oxford City Council Public Affairs Committee to establish a women's sub-committee generated much media comment when the press was asked to try to send a female reporter to cover the event. The *Oxford Mail* sent a male reporter and photographer, who reported adversely on the meeting, which only two other men attended. *Oxford Mail* 26/27.9.85. A letter printed in the paper the following week pointed out that the reporting implied that the exclusion of men had been the main point of the meeting, whereas in fact it had been a minor issue. The primary focus had been a discussion of how to improve the lives of women in Oxford. *Oxford Mail* 2.10.85. In a subsequent editorial the paper made its position quite clear: "although we could supply a lady reporter very easily [...] we certainly will do no such thing" *Oxford Mail* 14.2.86.

## Membership

were there they would be inhibited to reveal so much of themselves.<sup>259</sup>

Some women on mixed committees rather resented the male presence. One gentle and funny community representative commented, "I get rather fed up with having so many men turning up [...] I think, to me in any case, it does change the meeting", and then, reflecting on how the committee had changed she added, "I don't think men would necessarily feel uncomfortable about coming to our meetings [now], and they very often did at the old ones. I can remember when we had some poor man excusing himself, it made me realise how it must have been quite fun being on the Inquisition!"<sup>260</sup>

On the other hand, many women on mixed committees supported the presence of men. Some women pointed out that in order to influence men it was necessary to include them; others, that men and women have to work together to annihilate gender inequality.<sup>261</sup> Some evidence of the truth of these points was provided by the comments of male councillor members. For example, as a result of his participation on the committee, one member found that "when women get up to speak and do various things I do see their point of view easier than I did before."<sup>262</sup> A second wrote "[I] think I am held in better regard by some female councillors" and, "[I have] better understanding of the problem women have in being heard/listened too/taken seriously."<sup>263</sup> In the opinion of a

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<sup>259</sup> Interview 4 (23.6.94). Like the members of women's committees, the Icelandic feminists found that women-only organisations not only helped them to build confidence and morale, but also renewed their determination and conviction, recharged them psychologically, and generated a lot of fun!

<sup>260</sup> Interview 13 (28.4.95).

<sup>261</sup> Interview 10 (24.8.94).

<sup>262</sup> Interview 11 (23.8.94).

<sup>263</sup> Questionnaire 38.

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third, a Liberal Democrat, "I have clearer understanding of the issues facing women. I would like the committee to tackle discrimination more vigorously."<sup>264</sup>

A third point made was that in order to have access to the power and skills that individual male councillors possessed it was necessary to include them.<sup>265</sup> This was borne out by the credit a number of women felt was due to the male leaders of their councils, who had supported the committees in the face of opposition from both inside and outside their councils.<sup>266</sup>

A neutral note was struck by committee members who said that the presence of men was irrelevant since the formality of council proceedings shaped events and ensured that the ethos was one of local authority formality, not women's group informality.<sup>267</sup> As one memorably pointed out, "it's not an encounter group".<sup>268</sup>

Whether a committee was all-female or not, its goals were concerned with women and the responsibilities which were usually assumed by women. This was not an instance of giving women preferential treatment, rather, to borrow the explanation Susan Mendus uses for changing the conventions of central government, "[i]t is simply a recognition that what already exists is a case of preferential treatment for men...there is often no happy medium, or mutually convenient compromise. But that fact should not lead us to the conclusion that what currently exists is neutral between men and women,

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<sup>264</sup> Questionnaire 50.

<sup>265</sup> Interview 17 (22.11.94).

<sup>266</sup> Interviews 14 (27.4.95), 15 (27.4.95) and 16 (21.11.94).

<sup>267</sup> Interviews 8 (8.8.94), 3 (7.9.94) and 7 (21.7.94).

<sup>268</sup> Interview 7 (21.7.94).

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or that when women ask for arrangements more suitable to them they are asking for special favours."<sup>269</sup> Thus the introduction of women's perspectives, and the focus upon women's interests was justified by the need to correct a distortion within democratic practices.

### **ii. The Role of Female Councillors**

Nevertheless, there was some dissonance between this approach to democracy and the status of councillors as the elected nominees of their constituencies. Female councillors are not elected by a constituency of women, nor on a platform of women's interests, so emphasis on women's issues has to be justified as a compensatory or balancing measure. The position of female councillors sitting upon women's committees is formally no different from that of any councillor sitting on any committee: they do so as representatives of their parties and their constituents, often because they have requested membership of that committee of their party leader, sometimes because they have been asked to sit.<sup>270</sup>

Councillors often sit on committees which deal with issues to which they feel a particular commitment; however, for some women councillors on women's committees the commitment was particularly strong because they had been part of a drive to institute the committee, or had become councillors subsequent to involvement with the committee

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<sup>269</sup> Susan Mendus "Losing the Faith: feminism and democracy" in J. Dunn (ed) *Democracy the Unfinished Journey* (Oxford University Press, 1992) p 218.

<sup>270</sup> This varies between parties. Here the primary concern is with Labour councillors who are generally supportive of women's committees.



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as a community representative.<sup>271</sup> In general, female councillors have a tendency towards connection to women's interests as a result of their routes into politics. Barron et al found that many women came into local politics by an indirect path which entailed involvement in issues and organisations on the margins of orthodox local politics, which could often be loosely termed "women's issues".<sup>272</sup> This finding is broadly supported by the present research.<sup>273</sup> One councillor described her route into politics as follows:

I think it was about 1970 and Erin Pizzey had just opened up her refuge in London so it was a big issue, and a very loose grouping of left called the Socialist Women's Action Group who decided that they would open a refuge in Newcastle and they lobbied the local authority who provided a house [...] and that began, and was run by volunteers, so [...] that was my introduction to it. From that loose grouping, because there were then a whole load of women's networks going on, we took on the combined might of pornography shops, changes to child benefit, or family allowance as it was then, the anti-abortion campaign, contraception, you know, all the sorts of things that happened in the 60s and 70s. So that went on and then because of all of that background and, because I had given up work to have kids I was involved in things like mothers and toddlers groups, and schools, that sort of thing, and so when there was an opening for a ward councillor people asked if I would stand and I agreed to do that. When I think about it I was so politically naive it was untrue, I was a member of the Labour Party, but mainly because that was an easy way into politics. So all of it was kind of issue-based. It was around things like, National Travellers Trust, picketing shops that put sweets beside check-outs. You would not believe how many things I've picketed.<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Interviews 9 (24.8.94), 16 (21.11.94), 4 (23.6.94) and 17 (22.11.94). Also Questionnaire 15.

<sup>272</sup> J. Barron, G. Crawley and T. Wood *Councillors in Crisis: The Public and Private Worlds of Local Councillors* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1991) p 40.

<sup>273</sup> Five councillors who returned questionnaires (out of twenty-two, sixteen of whom were women) had been involved in some sort of women's group or activity prior to election; four councillors had been co-optees prior to running for office.

<sup>274</sup> Interview 16 (21.11.94).

## Membership

A second described a different, perhaps even more unconventional route.

I come from a really working class background. My mum's been a trade unionist all her life. 25 years she's been in the T and G. [...] I was born and brought up in [...] a very poor working class area [...] I went to this girls school and [...] it had a citywide catchment area [...] and I started to mix with girls who came from different backgrounds, different areas, all the different Tory areas, people who were expected to go to university and who had a completely different concept of life from the one that I had. I could see straight whatever the problems that were around me were very much lack of education, lack of understanding [...] and men really. [...] About six years ago I was on this documentary called Maggie's Children [...] I was so angry about GCHQ and people denied the right to be members of a union, I was living in [...] at the time and had been there for about eight years and lots of violence and ghettoisation and unemployment and poverty [...] and I just started getting really angry about it, sitting there thinking, well nobody's doing anything for us, when I read the thing with the Tories I thought well lets do something about it and at this exact moment this documentary [...] I got drawn into it and I thought it'll be pretty stupid if this goes out and I'm still not a member of the Labour Party so I joined [...] we didn't have lots of black members - couldn't get any, they weren't that articulate, they were mainly white people, white-collar workers and very embarrassed about [...] the fact there were so few black members, and so they wanted me to be chair [...] then they asked me would you go on the panel, and I didn't know what the panel was so I said yes anyway I found out what the panel was and I was interviewed for it [...] I didn't actually want to get selected because I had my finals, I had to get a job, I had lots of things to do, two young children [...] but it took three weeks and I was selected and there's no going back. [...] I want to go into Parliament.<sup>275</sup>

Although councillors often belong to committees to which they feel particularly drawn, to be a woman on a women's committee is not the same as being an enthusiastic

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<sup>275</sup>

Interview 12 (23.8.94).

## Membership

swimmer on the Leisure and Recreation committee. I would argue that being a woman shapes the perspective and persona more profoundly than using a swimming pool. A woman cannot help but be representative of her sex: however hard she pursues neutrality, she is inseparable from her sex and her gendered perspective, and men and other women will perceive her as, in some way and to some degree, representative of her sex. Ironically, this involuntary identification was emphasised by the few instances of female councillors who sat on a women's committee or sub-committee despite their opposition to its existence. They occupied the strange position of adding their voices to the debate, sometimes in a positive way, while voting against any action. One Conservative woman was described as follows: "she will sit in committee, and she will say some things, and you'll think God, she's almost a feminist, because she's obviously talking right from her heart, from her own experiences and shared experiences. Yet when it comes to voting, she votes against things. It's really odd, really strange to see."<sup>276</sup>

In conclusion, the women's committees studied pursued a very moderate course with regard to male membership and male points of view. Contrary to their depiction as bodies of women targeted on sectional interests, they demonstrated a down-to-earth appreciation of existing power relations and the need to enlist male power-holders and to transform male consciousness. The committees exhibited some justification for the existence of all-women committees, in terms of freedom of expression and the development of ideas; however, since in the context of local government this could only be achieved through consensus, their largely non-confrontational approach was salutary.

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<sup>276</sup> Interview 4 (23.6.94). Interview 16 (21.11.94) also mentioned the strange position of Conservative women.

## Membership

At the same time they were not necessarily of a uniform party political persuasion. Where Conservative and Liberal Democrat members were absent it was because they had **chosen** not to participate - even when chairs had sought their attendance.<sup>277</sup> Similarly, a range of Labour party opinion was represented on committees **unless** more conservative councillors decided against membership.

### iii. Community Representatives

The relative absence of men from the committees and their projects was the first unusual element in the composition of the committees. The second was the particular nature of the presence of co-optees, also referred to as community representatives. As described in Chapter Two, the committees and sub-committees made extensive use of the power to co-opt local people into membership in order to include women from their constituencies and their perspectives.<sup>278</sup> Co-optees had a purely advisory role, since only elected members could vote on full committees, and since sub-committees and advisory groups, where they might vote, were without decisive power. However, inclusion of co-optees was claimed to be a democratic measure since it ensured that voices in the community which would otherwise be silent, were heard. Their inclusion could be challenged on the ground that the co-optees had not been elected in any way comparable to councillors and were thus unaccountable and unrepresentative. Community

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<sup>277</sup> Interview 1 (15.4.94).

<sup>278</sup> A national list of committees showing which of them included co-optees is given in Appendix A. A list of the groups and interests represented by co-optees to the five committees is given in Appendix D.

## Membership

representatives are discussed here in terms of the potential for sectionalism they presented and the procedures created to maximise their representativeness.

Using co-optees as advisers was a well-established practice in local government; using them as participants in policy determination and to establish two-way channels of information with the wider community was innovative.<sup>279</sup> Through community representation, voices which would otherwise be unheard could reach a committee, but in so doing they might acquire a degree of authority denied to those voices which did not reach it, or were not selected for participation. Community representation confronted the recognised problems of pluralism: the interests which play a significant part, and the individuals who find a voice, are those which already possess some degree of power in relation to other interests and voices. Further, once a group or a person had a place on a committee, this served as an extension of their existing power, increasing their distance from others and the likelihood of their continued inclusion, especially since co-optees often had a long life once appointed or elected.<sup>280</sup> Processes for re-selection have rarely been rigorous, and even where they have, a sitting representative has been most likely to stay in place - just as in formal political spheres.<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> See Gyford, Leach and Game, *The Changing Politics of Local Government*, p 267-274, for a discussion of co-option.

<sup>280</sup> Re-selection processes do not always prohibit the same people from running again, although the Leeds committee, in its first incarnation, had a two year limit.

<sup>281</sup> Two community representatives had been on their committees for six years (Questionnaires 5 and 23), one for five years (Questionnaire 35) and two for four years (Questionnaires 33 and 49). This was not always the case: the former Leeds committee had a rule that women could only sit as community representatives for two consecutive years, although they could be returned after a break. Interviews 14 (27.4.95) and 15 (27.4.95).

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Although co-option had these shortcomings, it proved to be an important initiative, bringing different perspectives onto the committees while encouraging women to learn how local government worked and to develop the skills to join in. It is the first of these which is the most important in the present context; the second is discussed below. The processes by which committees decided which groups to include and select representatives varied. However, they all sought to validate the presence of community representatives by establishing processes of nomination and election amongst the women of their areas. Processes instituted by Bristol and Leeds in 1993 and 1994 were notable for their extensiveness and openness, described below. Those of Oxford, Islington and North Tyneside were less open in comparison, but nevertheless achieved the active participation of a number of women from different sections of the community.

An early criticism, expressed by councillors and press opposed to committees and even by some supporting councillors, was that the co-opted positions had been grasped by women who were not truly representative of the local community but were instead pushing the interests of minority groups.<sup>282</sup> Since the purpose of co-option was to engage the perspectives of minority/marginal groups, this criticism needs some unpicking. Although the circumstances of committees differed, as did the women involved in each area, there were common threads linking the criticism. First, that co-optees were, for the most part, middle class; second, that they possessed a consciously feminist perspective; third, that a disproportionate number were lesbian. One member regretted the fact that, as she saw it, "in terms of having a representative group of women, it isn't. Everybody is

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<sup>282</sup> One member wrote about the "radicalist feminist mission" which was "not in the best interest of the majority of women", Questionnaire 10. Another spoke of co-optees as "absolutely, totally committed, [they] could see nothing else beyond one particular point of view.", Interview 11 (23.8.94).

## Membership

middle class which is just ridiculous".<sup>283</sup> The critique suggests that rather than functioning as a forum at which the broad interests of women in the area were addressed, the seizure of membership by particular groups resulted in the privileging of the interests of a small section of women, who were not particularly disadvantaged in the first place.

The survey suggests that there is a factual base to the criticism, but that it requires careful interpretation. Co-optees were, and continued to be, primarily middle class, in terms of education and career, if not in terms of background.<sup>284</sup> This is a tricky issue. A number of the women interviewed had come from working class backgrounds but had used the education system to change their opportunities. In one case, a woman from a Welsh mining village had gone to Cambridge and trained as a teacher; another, from a large urban council estate, had put herself through undergraduate and graduate degrees as a mature student with children and gone on to work as a social services professional. Women with the sort of drive to achieve in these ways will also have the impetus to get involved in initiatives like the women's committees; this is a paradox apparent throughout politics and the voluntary sector. There were differences between the areas and the committees with regard to class, and the membership of the North Tyneside committee was significantly more working class in background.<sup>285</sup> Nevertheless, all the committees had made efforts through outreach to engage women who were locked into private worlds, but a lot of time might pass before such efforts produced results.

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<sup>283</sup> Interview 7 (21.7.94).

<sup>284</sup> See Appendix E for details.

<sup>285</sup> Differences between committees are developed in Chapter Seven below.

## Membership

It was inevitable that women who belonged to women's organisations and who wanted to become involved with a women's committee would possess at least some sort of feminist perspective.<sup>286</sup> Critics should note that even the Women's Institute is not untainted these days! However, this did not mean that they were all fire-breathing radical separatists, nor that they brought ideology to bear on every issue. The feminism displayed by the committees was of a very general nature and individual members tended to focus on issues rather than principles. One member described this as "there's this definite feeling of sisterhood and solidarity which is really lovely [...] we are a collection of women [...] all coming from different backgrounds and different motivations and wanting to achieve different things [...] We are a bit of a motley crew."<sup>287</sup> A woman from another committee supported this picture of diversity. "I think it's pretty diverse. There's a mixture of women there. I would say the majority would say they were feminists".<sup>288</sup> The feminism of the committees is fully discussed in Chapter Six below; for the present, the important point is that the feminism of co-optees was not divisive, and was appropriate in terms of the interpretation of democracy discussed here.

The presence of lesbians on committees drew considerable fire. It was, perhaps, the case that there had been a higher proportion of lesbians on committees studied than in the general population, but this was an effect of their particular commitment to **women**, rather than to homosexuality. Lesbians had been present both as representatives of gay

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<sup>286</sup> Of the 53 female respondents to the questionnaire (6 male councillor committee members replied) 33 had been involved with a women's group of some description before joining the committee. Of these 5 were councillors (16 female councillors replied) and 28 community representatives (37 community representatives replied).

<sup>287</sup> Interview 1 (15.4.94).

<sup>288</sup> Interview 7 (21.7.94).



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women, and as representatives of other groups, in which case their sexuality was incidental. According to women interviewed, they had, if anything, down-played their sexuality and scrupulously concentrated on broad women's issues, for fear of being accused of pushing sectional interests.<sup>289</sup> As one woman said, "I'm a lesbian but I wouldn't put sexual orientation or whatever as more important than another [interest]"<sup>290</sup> Another noted that, "they were lesbians, yes, and they never fought on lesbian issues. Age-old story. Very good on race issues and women, all other things but not lesbianism [...] It's interesting that there are a lot of lesbians working very hard on women's issues. Traditionally we always have done for donkey's years."<sup>291</sup>

It is no surprise that some councillors might feel threatened by gay women, nor that the press might play to public homophobia. In some of the criticism there was an underlying fear that there were lesbian networks linking up different organisations, impenetrable to the outside community and granting privileges to the membership.<sup>292</sup> One community representative reflected upon this,

[...] some of the officers were lesbians and had come out and this gave some people the feeling that it was controlled by a clique and I wouldn't agree with that [...] I don't think any of us felt that there had been a hidden

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<sup>289</sup> This was particularly pertinent after the passage of the 1988 Local Government Act with the famous Clause 28, which, according to Jeffrey Weeks, targeted "Labour controlled local authorities in London, Manchester and elsewhere which were adopting equal opportunities policies for lesbians and gays, establishing lesbian and gay units in the local bureaucracies, setting up and subsidising gay centres, providing grant aid for voluntary bodies and encouraging the development of positive images of homosexuality, especially in schools: all, in the language of the time, 'on the rates'", *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (London, Quartet Books, 1990), p. 239.

<sup>290</sup> Interview 7 (21.7.94).

<sup>291</sup> Interview 14 (27.4.95).

<sup>292</sup> Such fears were noted by Jeffrey Weeks who quotes a headline from the *Sunday Telegraph* of 5th June 1988, "Is There a Homosexual Conspiracy?", *Coming Out*, p. 242.

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agenda. I never got the feeling there as I do when I'm a community rep on a council committee that the councillors have their own agendas. They know each other, they've worked together for years they've had their meeting beforehand and business goes almost on the nod.<sup>293</sup>

As this woman implied, there is some irony when such fears are expressed by people who are members of that entrenched network of men which includes local business, golf clubs, masonic lodges, and the council. The crux of the matter is where the energies of the committee and their funding went. The accounts given by members, the minutes of meetings, and the allocation of grants suggest that very little of either went to explicitly lesbian causes.<sup>294</sup>

### iv. The Reform of Recruitment and Organisation

None of the above constitutes a damning critique of the processes of co-option or of the involvement of co-optees. Nevertheless, a number of committees and sub-committees concluded some six or seven years after their foundation that they needed to overhaul the way they were doing things. Bristol and Leeds were amongst these. Although particular circumstances applied in each case, there were some common factors. Bristol's Women's Committee, after a turbulent few years, was re-constituted as a

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<sup>293</sup> Interview 13 (28.4.95).

<sup>294</sup> See Chapter Six for sample lists of grants made.  
"There was a lot of resistance to anything to do with lesbians [...] Labour group had to be very careful, once or twice the women's committee gave money to a black lesbian group and it was immediately in the local rag and it was like so horrendous, so upsetting. There's a lot of homophobia so they, what they try to stick to is race, disability and gender and that's kind of safer in terms of equal opportunities", Interview 14 (27.4.95).

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sub-committee in 1993. This coincided with the re-organisation of equalities staff and the recruitment of a new senior officer in charge of all equalities issues.<sup>295</sup> Its reorganisation entailed altering the position of co-optees. Instead of co-opting women directly onto the sub-committee an advisory forum was established to which women were nominated by local women's groups, organisations and workplaces. The advisory forum then elected members to sit on the sub-committee.<sup>296</sup>

Leeds followed a similar, but higher profile, process: instituting an advisory group while maintaining a women's committee to which six members from the advisory group were elected. In both Bristol and Leeds the institution of the advisory forum was preceded by a publicity drive to maximise participation. In Bristol this took the form of contacting all known women's organisations and others which had a particular concern for women, and inviting participation through the press. Leeds undertook a series of public meetings across the local authority area, resulting in the nomination of groups, the representatives of which stood for election at a public meeting held at the Civic Hall.<sup>297</sup>

It was perhaps significant that both Bristol and Leeds committees had experienced conflict with the wider council. In both cases the community representatives were implicated in the problems, and in both cases the re-organisation was seen by some people as re-entry into the mainstream<sup>298</sup>. This can be read in two ways, and both points of view have been adopted by different participants. On the one hand, it can be read as

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<sup>295</sup> Interview 21 (13.4.94).

<sup>296</sup> Interview 21 (13.4.94).

<sup>297</sup> I was present at this meeting which was also recorded in Questionnaire 10.

<sup>298</sup> Questionnaire 10; Interview 11 (23.8.94); Interview 12 (23.8.94); Interview 21 (13.4.94).

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the collapse of a radical initiative and the making of wholesale concessions to the orthodox channels; on the other, it can be read as the reclamation of the initiative from powerful minority groups by the mainstream in the interest of "ordinary local women". There is some truth in each point of view.

The circumstances of the two committees were different, but in both places numbers of councillors felt that the co-optees were not representative of the general run of women in the area.<sup>299</sup> According to them, some of the women who sat as community representatives on these committees until recently, represented, either in themselves or in the groups from which they derived authority, particular perspectives and demands deriving from a thought-out feminism, sometimes in tandem with a lesbian perspective or revolutionary politics.<sup>300</sup> In Leeds, change was set in motion by committee members at the instigation of the leader of the council, who appointed a new chair with a reforming brief. In Bristol, change was instigated by the Labour group, which altered the committee structure, creating an equalities committee with subordinate women's, race, and disabilities sub-committees in place of the full committees; in both places change was mobilised by the equalities officers who organised meetings and ballots. For the Leeds officers this was part of a long-term project which included training and support of the advisory forum members.<sup>301</sup>

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<sup>299</sup> Questionnaire 10; Interviews 12 (23.8.94), 11 (23.8.94), 4 (23.6.94) and 5 (23.6.94).

<sup>300</sup> Interviews 4 (23.6.94) and 5 (23.6.94); Questionnaire 10. There were differences between Leeds and Bristol. In Leeds feminism was the stronger influence while Bristol was more affected by divergent tendencies within the Labour party.

<sup>301</sup> Interviews 14 (27.4.95) and 13 (27.4.95).

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Bristol and Leeds made the processes whereby community representatives arrive at the table as open as they could. Particularly in the case of Leeds, real effort was made to reach women normally outside of local politics through publicity and holding meetings on estates throughout the area. The categories of women represented on committees were usually built around criteria of identity, such as lesbians and older women, or occupation, including carers, women in work and trades unions members. This was in keeping with the principle of group representation. However, the Leeds committee found that this failed to engage women who were not already part of well-organised groups and therefore, in order to reach women at the margins, it added geographical representation to its array of community representatives. This contrasted with Young's strategy of subverting geographical concentrations of opinion by group representation, and emphasised the need for approaches which are not rule-bound but which take account of local circumstances.

The Bristol and Leeds committees succeeded in drawing in women who might not otherwise have been part of political process. As one representative said of her committee, "it has been successful in drawing women from different parts of Leeds, and more older women and more "normal", not women who would normally think of university, polytechnic, demonstrating, women who belong to unions perhaps, but [who] are quite happy to be wives and mothers."<sup>302</sup> However, as a result of the reforming process each lost all but one of the women who had been community representatives on the committees previously. Although a wholesale turnover in membership was the

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<sup>302</sup> Interview 13 (28.4.95).

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intention of at least one Leeds councillor member, other members, including the representatives who stayed with the committees, expressed mixed feelings. "To my mind, this drawing in women from the margins has marginalised the marginal women. The ethnic minorities, the lesbian, the disability, you are on your own much more and the issues don't come up so much."<sup>303</sup>

In neither place did the new structure work out as well as expected by the optimists, although they may be performing in the way intended by those who wished to subdue the co-optees. In Bristol, advisory group members expressed disappointment and attendance at meetings of the group dwindled, with the result that responsibilities rested upon a very small number of women who were left with all the on-going tasks and attendance as delegates at women's sub-committee meetings. One member regretted that "we haven't had enough enthusiasm from our elected advisers. Only three or four of the sixteen ever show up at the forums". Another noted that, "not many of us turn up. I'm always surprised at how few Advisers make it to the meetings."<sup>304</sup> An advisory forum attached to a sub-committee is an intrinsically marginal place to be, and the Bristol sub-committee, at this point, had no compensating support from powerful interests or councillors. The Bristol sub-committee suffered for the conflict which characterised its history as a committee, when strong councillors, supported by authoritative officers and co-optees divided the committee and the Labour group.<sup>305</sup> The Leeds advisory group was

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<sup>303</sup> Interview 13 (28.4.95).

<sup>304</sup> Questionnaires 53 and 54.

<sup>305</sup> Interviews 4 and 5 (23.6.94). The *Western Daily News* of 20.10.89 carried an article about a dispute between a women's officer and the chair of the women's committee and an article in the *Evening Post* of the same day headed "Threat to Labour Rebels Peace Bid" referred to the division between women councillors on the council and the women's committee. At the same time Labour and Conservative councillors were in dispute over the committee and arguing it out on the letters pages of

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in a stronger position since it was attached to a full committee which had the support of the leader of the council. However, the new structure (which was instituted, at least in part, to remove the existing, forceful, co-optees) failed to provide the conditions for co-optees to acquire the skills necessary to play a full part in committee meetings. As one woman shrewdly commented:

If you want to stop women making a fuss [having an advisory group] is quite a shrewd move [...] because everyone talks out there. Sooner or later they'll get round to thinking, but we're not getting anything done! [...] one of the things that was said was that the advisory group saved the council money because they get the women's points of view that they'd have to pay money to someone to find out for them, but that isn't exactly what women when they joined it expected, we expected to do something.<sup>306</sup>

In both cases most of the experience which the previous co-optees had acquired has been lost. At Leeds there had been a situation in which new co-optees learned skills from those already in place.<sup>307</sup> Possession of a place on the committee was limited to three years, so there was a guaranteed rotation of personnel, but with enough continuity to ensure that new members were supported.<sup>308</sup> This will start to happen again, but not until co-optees have gone through the first two or three year cycle, thus time and momentum have been lost. It is not yet clear whether the double drive behind the changes - that to remove the existing community representatives, and that to make the

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the local press, for example, the *Bristol Evening Post* on 14.11.86, 9.1.87, 9.9.87, 3.10.87, 6.10.87 and 16.10.87.

<sup>306</sup> Interview 13 (28.4.95).

<sup>307</sup> Interviews 13 (28.4.95) and 14 (27.4.95).

<sup>308</sup> Interviews 13 (28.4.95) and 14 (27.4.95).

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committee more representative, responsive and democratic - will in the long run generate a body which is more or less effective and influential.

Not all committees felt under pressure to alter their proceedings. The Oxford women's sub-committee continued to follow the regime for co-option instituted when it was formed, although it did, in 1994, embark on an exercise to decide how to make the sub-committee more effective. When the sub-committee was established the intention was that it should have representatives from significant sections of women in the city and a formula of group and interest membership was agreed upon (see Appendix C). Nominations for the various categories were invited and an election held. Subsequently, when a situation fell vacant due to the retirement of a member, nominations were invited again. Over time, this resulted in a body of representatives mixed in enthusiasm and understanding of what they were doing on the subcommittee. Newer recruits in particular appeared to be unsure of their role, and attendance at meetings, although regular, was not high, which might be expected since there were twenty-six co-optees.

Co-option at Islington worked smoothly. It was a small, cohesive committee, and its co-optees were highly motivated and committed: Islington had four co-optees where Oxford had twenty-six, although both had six councillors. Periodically local women's groups and organisations were invited to make nominations from which members were selected. Members were often re-nominated and re-selected. This had some disadvantages in terms of the inclusion of a range of perspectives, but had the advantage of the accumulation of experience. North Tyneside's committee pursued a similar process but replaced co-optees annually and was, at the time of writing, investigating possible improvements to their system.



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Taken overall, the inclusion of co-optees, although not a perfect initiative, was a democratically defensible means by which to discover the perspectives and interests of different sections of women and to press for their addition to the local authority agenda. Minorities are a concern for democracy, attention to their needs is demanded by social justice, and attention to their contribution to political and social diversity is one way to keep alive the spirit of innovation and change in the polity - as recommended by John Stuart Mill. Committees experienced difficulties in establishing and maintaining a wide and consistent level of participation on the part of non-elected members, however, this problem is not confined to women's committees. It is inherent in the contradiction between participatory measures and a polity constructed around minimal participation. Significantly, women's committees exercised a high degree of self-criticism and repeatedly acted to ensure that co-optees were selected and participated in a spirit of democracy.<sup>309</sup> Their practice of determining categories of women from whom to seek representation, and of inviting women's organisations to nominate representatives, demonstrated that organisation around identity or group interests could coexist with and enhance orthodox representative democracy. Women's committees were a very small experiment within a resistant structure; they achieved a lot in terms of evolving ways of combining representatives with different sources of legitimation and different forms of accountability.

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<sup>309</sup> Since I started this research an officer from one area has asked about my findings in the hope that I have made discoveries that would help her to improve community representation. Officers and councillors from other areas have asked to see my results so that they can compare themselves with other areas and, hopefully learn from other committees. A frequent question during interviews has been, "how are we doing in comparison with other places?"

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### Internal Democracy

As debates around the operation of trades unions and political parties have demonstrated, democracy is as relevant to the internal working of an organisation as it is to its relations with the wider community.<sup>310</sup> When they were first established, women's committees were influenced by the aspirations of the women's movement, which included a preference for non-hierarchical and non-confrontational forms of organisation and problem-solving.<sup>311</sup> As a result, community representatives were co-opted onto committees to be the equals of councillor members, officers in the complementary women's units worked as equals without the usual local authority hierarchy, and members and officers worked together with a minimum of formality.<sup>312</sup> Committee members regarded this as a more egalitarian and thus more democratic way of doing business. As one councillor said, "officers and members working together with the political pressure and the officers' expertise and knowledge, [...] can achieve an awful lot."<sup>313</sup>

Women's committees' determination to change working practices was in conflict with local government norms, in much the same way as their intention to change the

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<sup>310</sup> S. M. Lipset, M. A. Trow and J. S. Coleman, *Union Democracy: the internal politics of the International Typographical Union* (New York, Free Press, 1956); P. Fairbrother, *All Those in Favour: the politics of union democracy* (London, Pluto Press, 1984).

<sup>311</sup> S. Rowbotham, *The Past is Before Us: Feminism in Action since the 1960s* (London, Pandora, 1989); S. Rowbotham *Women in Movement: Feminism and Social Action* (London, Routledge, 1992); B. Anderson and J. Zinsser, *A history of Their Own* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1988) Vol 2 p 406-433.

<sup>312</sup> Interview 5 (23.6.94).

<sup>313</sup> Interview 1 (15.4.94).

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political agenda was in conflict with local government assumptions. The following examination of the internal democracy of women's committees addresses three points. First, to what extent were committee proceedings democratic in the sense of equal weight being placed on the contribution of each member? Second, were the committees democratic in the sense of fostering the development of political skills, as has been suggested by the theories of developmental democracy discussed in chapter four? Third, in relations between committees and officers were efforts made to undermine the distance between elected representatives and appointed officers which is often felt, and to subvert the danger of unaccountable expertise which has been a concern for critics of liberal democracy?<sup>314</sup>

### i. An Equal Membership?

Community representatives and councillors were formally unequal members of women's committees because co-optees were not permitted to vote on full committees, although they could vote on sub-committees, whose function was advisory rather than decisive. Councillors could increase the power of community representatives informally by being guided by, or taking account of, the opinions of co-optees when voting on issues. Although there was little evidence of this taking place directly, the presence of co-optees had helped to shape the agenda, and the opinions and votes of councillors might be influenced indirectly by long-term exposure to the opinions of the representatives. A

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<sup>314</sup> See J. Burnheim, *Is Democracy Possible?*.

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female councillor noted, "I am more aware of the needs of more groups of women, not one group. I have experienced different opinions/views which have put mine into context and influence my thinking". A male councillor noted, "I feel that my attitude towards women's problems in work etc has been affected."<sup>315</sup>

Relations between co-optees and councillors varied between the committees surveyed and were to some extent shaped by the status of the committee within the council. Although the opinions of co-optees were not homogeneous and within most committees they displayed a range of responses when asked whether they had achieved their goals within their committees, it is still possible to identify some common patterns.

Councillors and community representatives perceived committee proceedings differently. Councillor members, for the most part, stated that their comprehension of local issues and their understanding of women's issues had been significantly affected by the influence of the community representatives and that they were satisfied with their presence on the committee, while wanting to continue to extend their recruitment process to include a greater diversity of women. Councillors said of the co-optees on their various committees: "they provide a unique understanding"; "they target in on a subject and often, because they have little knowledge of the wider problems will solve a situation by clearer thinking"; "they offer life experiences not reflected by councillors eg ethnicity, disability, youth, age"; "they bring a wider experience to the committee...ideally the co-optees should be less self-selecting with a clearer accountability to women in the community".<sup>316</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> Questionnaires 14 and 9.

<sup>316</sup> Questionnaires 36, 37, 40, 21.

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Co-optees exhibited a wider range of opinion about their own efficacy as members of the committee. While some were entirely satisfied, many expressed some degree of disappointment with how the committee worked and their ability to make meaningful contributions. At one extreme co-optees felt that they had influenced the activities of the committee, benefitted the group which they represented, increased their knowledge from discussions, and improved their political skills. One felt that she had a "strengthened ability to be involved in political process and to feel able to challenge constructively", another that she had "raised awareness of disability", a third that she had "gained confidence, knowledge and skills".<sup>317</sup> At the other end, they believed that their time had been wasted, they resented the domination of councillors, they had become demoralised, and the only thing that they had learned was that local government wasted time and money. Typical comments were as follows: "The co-opted members feel irrelevant."; "The committee wastes a lot of time discussing things and rarely takes any action."; "It's hierarchical and intimidating and not open to non middle class women."<sup>318</sup>

In between these two positions was a range of responses. Common sources of satisfaction, however, were increased understanding of local government, increased confidence and political skills, heightened awareness of women's issues, and increased familiarity with the perspectives of different groups of women. One co-optee "didn't realise there was so much abuse towards women by men before I joined". Another

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<sup>317</sup> Questionnaires 44, 49, 51.

<sup>318</sup> Questionnaires 29, 30 and 24.

## Membership

described herself as "much more aware of politics within the council and more realistic about what I can personally achieve and expect".<sup>319</sup>

Common regrets expressed by co-optees were that they considered themselves to be lacking in understanding of procedures, rules and powers, excluded from debate either because of a lack of background knowledge or a lack of specialist knowledge, and that they felt isolated, irrelevant or subordinate to the councillor members and the officers who attended meetings to give expert opinions. As one put this, "senior staff play quite a controlling role on committee members - a little alarming on occasions. The specialist knowledge is often used - and abused/misused - in this respect".<sup>320</sup> Very few of the responding representatives were totally disillusioned with their committee; even those who expressed disappointment were nevertheless defensive of the general value of their committee. As one woman said: "by existing it raises women's issues on equality and abuse". A second noted, "I was a bit ambivalent about the group at the beginning but now I really want it to work".<sup>321</sup>

Where co-optees did not feel fully integrated into a committee, their frustration was compounded by the way that different facets of local government came together at a committee meeting. On any committee councillors have to balance the demands of being constituency representatives, party members and fair adjudicators of the issue under discussion, while remaining true, in some way, to their own beliefs. On a women's committee female councillors had the additional tensions of representing their sex and

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<sup>319</sup> Questionnaires 27 and 29.

<sup>320</sup> Questionnaire 6.

<sup>321</sup> Questionnaires 29 and 57.

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taking account of the presence of community representatives. Normal committee procedures entailed party group pre-meetings of councillors; if there was a strong party majority, and if the party was efficiently organised, all the items on the agenda would be sorted out at the pre-meeting and the committee meeting involved little more than the voting through of items - a process which community representatives could only watch. Unless procedures had been put in place to involve co-optees prior to this, they were marginalised at the meeting.

Pre-meetings for co-optees went some way to ameliorating the threat of marginalisation, if enough of them attended. At a pre-meeting they could discuss what was going to take place, usually with council equalities officers present to brief them, and decide whether and when to intervene during the meeting.<sup>322</sup> Co-optees were permitted to present reports to committees and sub-committees, but they had to plan to do so ahead of time so that they could be included on the agenda. Pre-meetings provided an opportunity for co-optees to encourage each other to produce reports, and for more established members to pass information and skills on to the newly selected.<sup>323</sup> Sub-committees were less bound by rules than full committees and co-optees had more opportunity to participate, but that was the result of their possessing less official power.

My research suggests that community representatives took little advantage of the opportunity to present reports and that their attendance at pre-meetings was low.<sup>324</sup> There

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<sup>322</sup> Interview 14 (27.4.95).

<sup>323</sup> North Tyneside and Leeds committees have pre-meetings.

<sup>324</sup> This has not always been the case. In areas where there are advisory groups pre-meetings may have little relevance; in areas where a lot has been achieved co-optees may feel that there is not a great deal to talk about!

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was no conclusive evidence as to why this was. Many co-optees displayed commitment to a range of activities in addition to their work and family obligations; their resulting need to prioritise may have been a reason.<sup>325</sup> Certainly, in the areas where there were advisory groups, attendance at advisory group meetings, pre-meetings, committee meetings and the meetings of the group which the co-optee was representing was a heavy workload. The level of knowledge of councillors and officers intimidated some co-optees and this may have resulted in their behaving more like an audience than performers. However, there was a high rate of questionnaire response from co-optees, the majority of which showed enthusiasm for their committees. Although some expressed disappointment and feelings of inadequacy very few indicated feelings of alienation or intention to withdraw. In some cases co-optees may have felt that councillors and officers were covering their concerns well enough for them to take a back seat until something called for their greater involvement.<sup>326</sup> Nevertheless, councillors and officers were alert to creeping passivity on the part of co-optees and in those areas where reform was not already in progress steps were being taken to find ways to improve participation.<sup>327</sup>

On the whole, councillors were happier with their own position and that of co-optees than the co-optees were. This was in large part due to different perceptions of the role of the co-optees. Councillors believed that co-optees were there to contribute ideas,

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<sup>325</sup> Results of the questionnaire showed that 49% of female committee members had been involved with a political party prior to joining the committee, 64.15% were involved in community groups, 52.83% in interest groups, 62.26% with women's groups, 45.28 in a trade union, 56.6% in a voluntary group, and only 1.88% had no previous involvement in a voluntary or political activity. Further details are given in Appendix E.

<sup>326</sup> Questionnaire 28 appears to support this point of view, which was proposed in Interview 14 (27.4.95).

<sup>327</sup> Oxford and North Tyneside.



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channel information out into the community, advise and, in some cases, rally support from the community.<sup>328</sup> Co-optees believed that their advice should be acted upon and that their ideas should be a decisive part of democratic process. Councillors and officers were not unaware of the disjunction between the perceptions of councillor and community members. The measures taken at Leeds and Bristol were intended to counter disillusion through information and training, and Oxford attempted to improve communication by introducing the discussion of issues in small groups. One councillor maintained that the very structure of the committee or subcommittee denied the possibility of democracy, which could only be approached by working through small focus groups.<sup>329</sup> However, the more practical politicians dismissed such initiatives as whimsy which was irrelevant to the achievement of concrete goals.<sup>330</sup>

### **ii. The Development of Political Skills**

The consideration given to encouraging the understanding and participation of co-optees takes us on to the second question asked above: whether the committees were democratic in the sense of fostering the development of political skills amongst their members. Building women's political effectiveness had long been an explicit goal of women's committees. Many came into existence to provide support for female

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<sup>328</sup> Interview 16 (21.11.94) stressed the importance of groups outside the council which could rapidly be mobilised in support of the committee.

<sup>329</sup> Interview 10 (24.8.94).

<sup>330</sup> Interview 8 (24.8.94).

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councillors and to encourage more women to run for office, as well as to lobby for more female employees and for woman-targeted services.<sup>331</sup> Committees served to encourage and enhance both the skills and the careers of councillors and co-optees alike, but bringing in new women and assisting them to become fully participating members was an on-going process, which demanded constant attention.

The assimilation of current management practices, including the use of focus groups, might improve the effectiveness of large committees and subs. However, there were structural issues which have a bearing on the sense of efficacy felt by co-optees. There appeared to be a relationship between the sense of efficacy felt by co-optees, the type of local authority, the status of a committee and its complementary resources, the numbers of people involved, and the level of activity in which the committee and officers are engaged.

Of the committees surveyed, the most positive feedback from co-optees came from Islington. This was a small, full committee where there were four community representatives and six female, Labour councillors. There was a high degree of continuity amongst members, and a high level of support from both a well-resourced equalities unit and the full council. The committee and unit had a high profile locally and were active in the community. The most negative responses from co-optees came from Bristol, where the new advisory group and re-constituted sub-committee had not yet achieved a sense of cohesion or shared purpose. The advisory group members did not believe that they were effective, and were suspicious of the councillors. According to one member, "there's a

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<sup>331</sup> Interview 9 (24.8.94).

## Membership

commitment from officers but I'm not convinced the group actually has any real effect....I worry about the reasons why people become councillors - the people who shout loudest seem to get ahead".<sup>332</sup> Another declared herself "shocked by the entrenched party political attitudes in committees".<sup>333</sup>

Co-optees responded most positively when they believed that their participation was effective, thus a small, full committee which had access to resources generated satisfaction. Where there was a large number of co-optees, their sense of efficacy was qualified by a degree of anonymity, although this in turn could be mitigated if the committee was busy and successful. Oxford City Council's sub-committee provoked mixed responses. On the one hand representatives were pleased to be involved in something which was effective, on the other hand, some members felt that their individual voices were not heard. The arrangement which provided least satisfaction was where there were large numbers of co-optees combined with the absence of decisive power, few resources, and little support within the council.

This is an important finding because it appears to contradict the assertion that involving more people enhances democracy. However, it is important to note that Islington is a London borough and possesses more powers than Bristol, Leeds and Oxford, which are shire districts. Islington is a full committee and its efficacy is enhanced by the officers in the Women's Equality Unit. Committee members, both councillors and co-optees, drew strength from being part of a committee that enjoyed relatively high status in a local authority that was relatively powerful. In contrast to this,

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<sup>332</sup> Questionnaire 52.

<sup>333</sup> Questionnaire 56.

## Membership

Bristol is a shire district, where significant powers are exercised by Avon County Council, and the committee had been reconstituted as a sub-committee. These structural factors were important but not necessarily determining; the Oxford sub-committee worked effectively with a high number of co-optees in a shire district. Some members expressed dissatisfaction, but perhaps that was as much to do with having the opinions of twenty-six co-optees as with any difficulty about there being twenty-six co-optees. Individual satisfaction is not necessarily the same as democratic legitimacy: perhaps a cost of enhanced democracy is constant, low-level dissatisfaction which acts as a counter to complacency and drives the pursuit of further improvement. This point is taken up again at the end of this chapter.

Representatives felt more relevant when their position on a committee was part of a clear framework. If they had been elected as the representative of a particular constituency with which they had clear links and to which they had responsibilities, they were on the whole happier than when they were not, or only loosely, attached to an external body, or when their position on the committee was not clearly defined.<sup>334</sup> This is a strong argument in favour of a form of group representation which is embedded in the wider community rather than reflective representation where members would be selected solely according to a template of characteristics. Moreover, representatives felt more effective when the committee or sub-committee had a stable and recognised place in the local authority and was actively engaged in doing things, suggesting that the value of participation is dependent on external factors.

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<sup>334</sup> Similarly, Kwenna Frambothid members elected to Icelandic local government became unhappy with their position as their links with the grass-roots membership diminished. L. Dominelli and G. Jonsdottir, "Feminist Political Organisation in Iceland: Some Reflections on the Experience of Kwenna Frambothid", p 44.

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The involvement of women who were closely linked to a particular constituency provided a network for the transmission of ideas. However, it recalled concerns expressed by previous commentators on women's committees, and by committee members. A common complaint was that the women most likely to become involved in a women's committee were those who were already involved in public service in some way, and that there were barriers to the introduction of new women into public life. For example, "It has proved very difficult to involve the full range of local women in decision-making. The women's sub-committee is still dominated by co-opted members who are predominantly middle-class or overtly feminist. Having said that the main success of the women's sub-committee has been in setting up a women's training scheme which does involve working class women in their own training."<sup>335</sup> And, "involving local women in decision-making is a very slow process."<sup>336</sup>

Reaching women who have no connection to public life is difficult, getting them to participate is more difficult, and keeping them involved is a step further still. Early on, Sue Goss warned that the committees were tending to attract women already involved in women's rights or the voluntary sector, who might overlook local and working class concerns.<sup>337</sup> Similarly, Peter Dickens warned that the perspective of women's committees was one which tended to separate women from their class positions. "It is again the middle classes...who are tending to be those most actively engaged in this period of

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<sup>335</sup> Questionnaire 21.

<sup>336</sup> Questionnaire 35.

<sup>337</sup> S. Goss, "Women's Initiatives in Local Government" in M. Boddy and C. Fudge (eds), *Local Socialism: Labour Councillors and New Left Alternatives* (London, Macmillan, 1984).

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activity".<sup>338</sup> However, he acknowledged that "[d]espite the tendency of the middle classes to dominate these local social movements, they still cut across class divisions and are diffusely organised."<sup>339</sup>

The changes introduced at Bristol and Leeds were intended to go some way towards bringing different women onto the committees, as discussed above, and council officers with special responsibility towards the committees made efforts to encourage the community representatives through pre-meetings and through prompting them to prepare and present reports.<sup>340</sup> However, the commitment of many co-optees to a variety of organisations, which had certain advantages, also had drawbacks. Attempts to encourage co-optees to take a greater part in meetings ran up against their limited time and multiple commitments. Most co-optees had obligations to several voluntary organisations as well as work and domestic commitments.<sup>341</sup> As one co-opted member pointed out, "the women involved tend to already be over-committed and do not have enough time or energy to be active in promoting the committee and its aims."<sup>342</sup>

A further limitation was the absence of a shared sense of purpose amongst the community representatives on any one committee, which might have encouraged them to organise and take on the agenda. One co-optee described her relations with other committee members in this way: "a couple of them I actually come into contact with

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<sup>338</sup> P. Dickens, *One Nation? Social Change and the Politics of Locality* (London, Pluto Press, 1988) p 169-70.

<sup>339</sup> P. Dickens, *One Nation? Social Change and the Politics of Locality*, p 172.

<sup>340</sup> This was an issue at a committee meeting which I attended on 7.3.94.

<sup>341</sup> See Appendix E for numbers involved in voluntary activities.

<sup>342</sup> Questionnaire 24.

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because of work...but apart from this...there is no-one I would say, well I'll go to, to discuss a women's issue that is bothering me or for mutual support or even to socialise."<sup>343</sup> For the most part community representatives went to meetings as individuals, each concerned with her own particular constituency, sometimes seeing other community representatives as competitors for resources.<sup>344</sup> Representatives did not see each other outside of meetings and had little sense of continuity. For many of them attendance was incidental to the rest of their lives: it may have been an important gesture but their primary commitments were elsewhere: "I don't feel that attending these meetings or getting to know whatever relates directly to my work...to the people I'm representing."<sup>345</sup>

The changes made at Leeds and Bristol may mitigate some of the problems which faced community representatives. The systems of election introduced meant that a high proportion of the women on the new advisory forums were directly involved with groups in the community to which they would be responsible. The advisory forums provided links between women who were nominally representative of different community groups and/or interests. In both places education programmes were put in place so that the new advisors were aware of how the local authority worked and what was their place within it. Leeds instituted a further training course in assertiveness and public speaking for all advisors in conjunction with a local college. The community representatives elected from the advisory forum to sit on the women's committee or

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<sup>343</sup> Interview 8 (8.8.94).

<sup>344</sup> Interview 3 (7.9.94).

<sup>345</sup> Interview 8 (8.8.94).

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subcommittee would have been encouraged to take part in committee fully, and would be supported by having the advisory forum and their own constituencies behind them, giving force to their voices and affirmation of their importance each time they reported back.

The new arrangements at Leeds and Bristol provided clear frameworks, however, even here, the distance between the co-optees and real power proved a disincentive to participation. An advisory group attached to a powerful committee might engender enough enthusiasm and sense of achievement amongst its members to guarantee their commitment; members are unlikely to feel that an advisory group attached to a relatively powerless and marginalised sub-committee is a productive use of their scarce time. The latter appeared to be the state of the Bristol advisory group, where a number of members complained about time-wasting.<sup>346</sup> The Leeds advisory group, also attached to a sub-committee but in an authority where it had the support of the leadership, was doing rather better at holding onto its members. Nevertheless, those who had been elected from the advisory group to sit on the sub-committee were not wholly enthusiastic about their involvement. This had the result that one of them ceased to attend after only two meetings.<sup>347</sup> A significant finding in terms of group representation was a tendency for some co-optees to lose interest if the committee was not addressing something of direct interest to their constituency. This appears to be a result of the election of co-optees to represent very specific constituencies. It may not always happen, but it certainly indicates the need for selection and induction processes that stress deliberation, shared decision-

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<sup>346</sup> Questionnaires 52, 54, 56, 55.

<sup>347</sup> Telephone conversation with Leeds Community Representative.



## Membership

making and the good of the community rather than explicit interest representation and competition.

When the committees started, the conjunction of councillors, burdened with the formalities of orthodox politics, and co-optees, representing different interests, possessed a certain cohesion. This derived from their links with and commitment to a wider women's movement and a generally feminist approach. It would appear that the induction of women from wider constituencies, whose acquaintance with any politicised women's movement was more distant, resulted in the loss of some of that cohesion. Despite awareness of the very different concerns and needs of different sections of women, committees in their early days had some sense of a common good, provided by the general goals of feminism and the women's movement. As early as 1989, Sara Roelofs mourned the diminution of links between committees and the women's movement and feminist activists in the local community, assessing that disillusion with local government as an instrument of feminist change was an inevitable outcome of trying to work within the entrenched power structure of the local state.<sup>348</sup> Perhaps it was not just an effect of local government; with the added perspective of a few more years I suggest that it was inevitable that as feminism fragmented into feminisms, the women's movement dispersed into many women's movements, and shifts occurred within feminism from the collective/political to the individuated/therapeutic, the early sense of shared purpose would diminish.

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<sup>348</sup> S. Roelofs "In and Against the State", *Spare Rib* (March 1989) p 47.

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In summary, the internal democracy of women's committees was variable, but it was a conscious goal. The difficulty of achieving it derived from the unequal positions of councillors and co-optees, including the fact that the councillors determined who was co-opted and how. In the opinion of one councillor, "the reps do influence if the policies relate to the women's unit's operations only, but the scenario is different if the policies affect the whole council."<sup>349</sup> Although members were inherently unequal, co-optees believed that they were more effective on committees which were well-resourced, active and supported by the wider council.

The committees proved successful at encouraging co-opted members to develop political skills and political ambition. As one councillor commented, somewhat ruefully,

[...] once the co-optees have been appointed they gain confidence so [three women] started as co-optees and have since decided that they want to stand as councillors. It means we have a good tranche of councillors coming in! The other thing is that often women take it on when they are at home with children or unemployed, and then they go for an interview and maybe have something to talk about, so they get the job because they come over as quite confident. So I have to say that we have probably written more references for women to get jobs than anything else!<sup>350</sup>

The committees also played a part in encouraging more women to run for office and to seek responsibility. In 1988 the local Oxford paper ran a headline "Petticoat Power" referring to the fact that "Every senior civic post in Oxford is now held by a woman".<sup>351</sup> This was an achievement that the women's sub-committee claimed some of

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<sup>349</sup> Questionnaire 3.

<sup>350</sup> Interview 16 (21.11.94).

<sup>351</sup> *Oxford Times* 23.2.88.

## Membership

the credit for.<sup>352</sup> Four of the councillors surveyed had started off as co-optees and gone on to run for office. Councillors were also encouraged in their political ambitions by their participation on women's committees. Five female councillors from the areas in the survey were known to be seeking selection for parliamentary candidature. The majority of these credited their experiences with helping to make them believe they were capable of becoming an MP.

Despite their success, the experience of the committees illustrates a problem which can arise when participatory practices are introduced to a system premised on minimal participation. As the new advisory forums demonstrate, giving time and energy to a political initiative is considered to be rewarding when the initiative appears to be successful and results are visible fairly quickly. However, when the initiative appears to lack power and results are slow in coming - if at all - participants lose interest and may feel themselves to be less politically effective than they thought they were at the outset. Thus encouraging participation carries risks. It may be beneficial in appropriate situations where channels of power have been opened, but otherwise it might further alienate people from politics. Similarly, although group representation has proved to be an effective way of bringing in new perspectives and of ensuring that representatives and the committees are enmeshed in the wider community, it may result in fragmentation if representatives see their role purely in terms of the interest of their individual groups rather than each interest in the context of all the other interests represented.<sup>353</sup> This suggests that the development of a deliberative rather than competitive ethos is vital.

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<sup>352</sup> Interview 9 (24.8.94).

<sup>353</sup> Interview 14 (27.4.95).

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### **Democratic Relations between Committees and Officers**

Political theorists who develop radical versions of democracy are often uncomfortable with the position of appointed administrators and experts within government. The powers of elected representatives and appointed experts are differently justified, guaranteeing that there is no necessary coherence in their roles or goals. Theoretically, elected members possess sovereignty by virtue of representing the will of the electorate, but their tenure of office may be transitory in comparison with the secure employment of officers, and their knowledge of issues will be far more general than the specific expertise of the various professionals - including that of professional administrators.

These circumstances combine to ensure that officers have at least the potential to exert considerable power over elected members. The uncomfortable fit between democracy and expertise results from the different natures of the two as modes of justifying and legitimating a course of action. If we choose a democratic course rather than a rational/bureaucratic course along Saint-Simonian lines, perhaps because we value the developmental and deliberative aspects of democracy, we must also accept that some decisions may not be the most efficient, and that mistakes will occur. We need to find ways in which expertise is valued and consulted, but is ultimately only a part of democratic process. Deliberation has a role to play in this as does the acquisition of expertise within a democratic framework which encourages openness rather than fixity of

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purpose.<sup>354</sup> Relations between women's committees and officers with particular responsibility for equalities issues are illuminating with regard to both possibilities and problems.

In the literature of local government, women's committees were strongly identified with women's units, although there were committees without units and units without committees. When the new committees or sub-committees were established there was a need for them to have council officers to provide support and/or complementary activities; this was not always met, and was sometimes met indirectly by having services provided by the staff of another department.<sup>355</sup> A local authority's commitment to the goals of a women's committee is perhaps better judged by the commitment of staff and resources than by the rhetoric surrounding the establishment of a committee. Some committees, notably that of the GLC, but also Islington and Bristol in their early days, had relatively generous allocations. Some local authorities established women's units, sections of council officers dedicated to work on women's issues, some had equalities units with either a dedicated officer or a general responsibility for women's issues, others gave officers in an existing department the additional responsibility for women.

At the outset, the founders of women's committees had high aspirations for their relations with council officers with complementary responsibilities - women's or equalities officers. Where new jobs were created the committees wanted to employ

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<sup>354</sup> On the other hand I acknowledge the truth in the saying that a camel is a horse designed by a committee. Not all aspects of expertise need to be open or subordinate to democracy, but those which profoundly affect the course of public life should be.

<sup>355</sup> As described in Chapters One and Two.

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women who had a commitment to women's issues. Where existing staff were made available they wanted to take on women with commitment.<sup>356</sup> There was an expectation that the committee members and staff would work together towards the achievement of their common goals. Up to a point this has been fulfilled. However, outside pressures, inherent differences, new issues and changing circumstances altered the game-plan.

First, wherever a unit with dedicated officers was set up, but especially where women were employed from outside the council, there was pressure from the local press and opposition parties. In Bristol councillors generated conflict by setting relatively high salaries for the women's officers they were allocated.<sup>357</sup> Second, where officers were employed from outside the council specifically to work as women's officers, there was potential for conflict with other council officers.<sup>358</sup> Third, where non-hierarchical working was established this caused problems for officers from other departments who needed to communicate or work with the unit, and set the stage for exploitation of officers who were junior, in terms of pay and local authority status, but were expected to share the responsibility and work of, officially, higher officers.<sup>359</sup> Fourth, the literature tended to regard such officers or units as having a support function, however, council officers had job descriptions and career goals of their own and might plot their own courses independent of the committee.<sup>360</sup> For example, Isabel Stone found that while

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<sup>356</sup> Interview 5 (23.6.94).

<sup>357</sup> This is taken up again in Chapter Eight.

<sup>358</sup> Interview 11 (23.8.94).

<sup>359</sup> I. Stone, *Equal Opportunities in Local Government* (London, HMSO, 1988) p 30. Also, see the Chapter Seven.

<sup>360</sup> This was mentioned by officers at the councils taking part in the Women's Committee Survey.

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some officers working with women's committees considered the support of the elected members invaluable, they preferred them to be supportive rather than directive, and one officer quoted found the committee members' knowledge of the issues of women's equality wanting.<sup>361</sup>

The fifth point is connected to the dawning awareness that there was no one unified women's interest for which to work but a range of interests, perhaps with some common threads, but also with some conflicts. This perception, which dominated feminism in the 1980s, was brought home to women's committees via their community representatives. It both enriched and complicated the work of officers as they tried to take account of the different and sometimes conflicting needs of local women. Finally, the steady diminution of local authority powers and resources, coupled with the increase in responsibilities, in the context of reorganisation and Compulsory Competitive Tendering, provided a changing set of circumstances for the committees and officers to negotiate. All this in a world which had become hostile to initiatives intended to help women, in direct relation to women's ever-higher public profile! Summing up the situation in 1992, Di Parkin found that "[m]any women's units at present perceive themselves as beleaguered, their structures constantly under review."<sup>362</sup>

Officially, non-hierarchical working practices had largely disappeared before the commencement of the present research. Officers appeared to have distinct rather than collective responsibilities, nevertheless, they worked together co-operatively and with a

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<sup>361</sup> I. Stone, *Equal Opportunities in Local Government* (London, HMSO, 1988) p 37.

<sup>362</sup> D. Parkin *Women's Units at a Time of Change*, Occasional Paper 5, (Work and Gender Research Unit, Department of Social and Economic Studies, University of Bradford, April 1992), p 4.

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minimum of bureaucracy. Furthermore, the survey found that relations between committee members and complementary officers were considered, in most cases, to be more close than those between other committees and officers.<sup>363</sup> It was still the case that women had been attracted to work on women's or equalities issues because of an existing interest and commitment, and that they maintained a high level of commitment to their work. Most questionnaire respondents and interviewees spoke highly of officers, for example, "The equalities staff are often the originators of discussions and very much sources of information." and, "I would say that the women's unit is strongly a feminist unit...they've made such great improvements".<sup>364</sup>

In response to questions about the relations between officers and the committees, most respondents believed that officers tended to lead the way, but a significant minority of councillors believed that the committee led and officers followed. In response to a question about who initiated issues fifteen respondents agreed that "the committee and staff consult", while thirteen agreed that "since staff have specialist knowledge they are able to advise". However, six respondents believed that "the committee makes decisions which staff execute", of which five were councillors, and three that "staff and the committee can sometimes have conflicting points of view", of which two were co-optees. Nineteen respondents did not answer this question. Of the forty-one respondents who replied to a question about the relationship between the committee and officers, twenty-four believed that it was "mutually supportive" and six that it was "lively and

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<sup>363</sup> The disappearance is documented by D. Parkin, *Women's Units at a Time of Change*, and was largely attributable to the factors given above. It is further discussed in Chapter Eight.

<sup>364</sup> Questionnaire 35 and Interview 3 (7.9.94).



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challenging". Only seven respondents believed it to be "complicated by power struggles", of which four were councillors. Other respondents replied that they were "not closely enough involved to be able to answer".<sup>365</sup> Sixteen respondents did not answer this question.

The interaction between co-optees and officers was very different from that between councillors and officers. Officers did most of the work in recruiting and training co-optees, and were their link with the council. The relationship tended to be quite relaxed and officers could be very protective of the women they had introduced to local politics. Councillors and officers shared goals and may have subscribed to an egalitarian ethos, but they nevertheless occupied different positions within a bureaucratic structure. They shared a working relationship within which there could be tensions over jurisdiction and precedence. As one councillor indicated, "the staff advise, but we don't have to take their advice."<sup>366</sup> Another suggested that, "councillors are very often regarded as interfering busybodies that officers have to put up with."<sup>367</sup> The power of councillors as elected people may conflict with the professional authority of officers. Thus it was questionnaire responses from councillors, for the most part, which noted conflict between officers and the committee - although co-optees were not wholly unaware of this, since three characterised the relationship as "complicated by power struggles" and two noticed that "staff and the committee can sometimes have conflicting points of view".

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<sup>365</sup> Questionnaire 41.

<sup>366</sup> Questionnaire 14.

<sup>367</sup> Interview 1 (1.4.94). This supports I. Stone's finding mentioned above.

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The very commitment to their jobs which characterised women's and equalities officers could present problems in the face of changing circumstances. Bristol committee members gave accounts of officers in the past having taken sides with some members of the committee against others during a period of conflict, and having maintained that loyalty even when members had left the committee - to the extent of ignoring the instructions of the committee chair: "[t]he officers actually used to not do what we told them to do and do what they wanted to do. We had a tremendous conflict. I was here once a week up in the chief executives office complaining about them."<sup>368</sup> The reforming chair of the Leeds committee found officers uncooperative when her style and vision of change conflicted with theirs, a situation described by another councillor as one in which "confrontation, not consultation, is very often the norm."<sup>369</sup> Both an ex-chair and officers at Islington described their relations as characterised by conflict, although here the conflict was more over jurisdiction than ideology, since it concerned a hands-on chair and officers with a clear sense of their distinct role. As the councillor described it, "When I first came, when I was first chair, there were no meetings, regular meetings, to review the progress of the work of the unit and the progress on recommendations that had come from the committee, and I instigated a chair's review which met every fortnight and that is now a permanent fixture...and that was not really welcomed"<sup>370</sup> Nevertheless, even when they were in conflict, the commitment of the officers to the goals of their

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<sup>368</sup> Interview 4 (23.6.94).

<sup>369</sup> Questionnaires 10 and 14.

<sup>370</sup> Interview 1 (15.4.94).

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committee, if not to its present members, suggested something rather different from the usual bureaucratic neutrality.

Bureaucracy and expertise present problems for democrats. Bureaucracy is, on the whole, a more egalitarian and effective way of administering a large and complex polity than the alternatives, but it generates its own motivation and power bases which may conflict with the goals of elected representatives.<sup>371</sup> Expert knowledge and judgement are vital in a complex, technological era in which individuals can possess only limited information, but expert judgement should not inevitably take precedence over popular concerns. Women's committees and officers have not arrived at any solution to these conflicts, but their experiences suggest that a close connection between elected members and officers around particular issues can generate a degree of shared purpose. In this sense women's committees operate as deliberative forums where the different people taking part learn from each other and have the potential to reach conclusions which are more to do with a collective good than the sum of individual demands.

## **Conclusion**

The membership of the committees and the procedures that developed around membership are central to my claim that women's committees were democratic bodies

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<sup>371</sup> There is a particular problem here for the Labour party: a local authority that wants to change its structure is likely to come into conflict with the public sector trades unions. When the local authority has a Conservative majority the national party might be troubled, but when it is Labour the conflict strikes to the heart of the party, because the public sector unions are significant Labour supporters and contributors to funds. Separating Labour from the unions and building up the independent membership will have some effect on this contradiction, but is unlikely to remove it since public sector employees are numerous and are significant amongst Labour supporters.

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that sought to extend the boundaries of democracy. They are also illuminating about what happens when theories about democracy and representation are put into practice. The membership of the committees shows that innovative forms of representation can be introduced alongside orthodox electoral process, and that new forums linked more closely to the community and facilitating a higher degree of participation can work in tandem with regular institutions. The achievements of the committees suggest that encouraging political engagement can result in increased political efficacy, and that it is possible to facilitate deliberation through collaborative working practices (including the induction of new arrivals by experienced members), advisory groups, community links and pre-meetings.

However, all these testaments to greater democracy are qualified by institutional and human factors which suggest limitations to the potential of democratic change within existing political institutions. Importantly, these attempts to implement democratic initiatives took place within formal political institutions and demonstrated the interconnection between different structural elements. The type of local authority and its powers were relevant, so were the status afforded the committee within the authority and the resources allowed to it. Satisfaction amongst committee members was influenced by relations within the committee and connections between individual members and the wider community. The range of commitments evidenced by both councillors and co-opted members appears to have been a constraint on their commitment to the committees. It seems that it is not necessary to possess all the positive criteria to be successful (a relatively powerful local authority, full committee status, designated staff, a significant budget, support of the council leadership and committed co-optees), but that a

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certain number need to be present - perhaps a minimum of any three. The satisfaction of co-optees may be a dependent variable: if enough of the significant criteria were present co-optees would be satisfied however many of them there were; or it might be independent of the other criteria and relate purely to numbers - the fewer there are the more effective they feel. It is impossible to draw a definitive conclusion from the research data, the number of committees is too small and the variation between them too large. Nevertheless, the relation between feelings of political efficacy, the numbers participating and structural criteria is clearly an issue for democratic theory.

As Michael Walzer so vividly pointed out, people have plenty of other things to do besides sitting in committee rooms. One of the important contributions of women's committees to politics is that they have shown how women's quasi-political involvement in tenants groups, nurseries, a multitude of support and advisory organisations, and even sports and arts groups, can be drawn into political decision-making through representation on a committee. The downside of this is that the women are interested in the nursery or the poetry group, not in the council, and not necessarily in each others' interests or the broader concerns of women in the community. Deliberation has a role to play here in helping the women to see the connections between all their interests and the relation between individual or group interests and the good of the wider community. However, because of the multiple commitments of the women and the formal constraints of local government, deliberation is limited. Nevertheless, the research data quoted above suggests that at least some women have experienced change as a result of their involvement in a committee. Deliberation also appears to be significant to negotiating the tension between democratic legitimacy and expertise. Although there were tensions

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between officers, who were the experts on women's issues, and elected members, these were negotiated (admittedly with varying degrees of success) through the shared goals and close co-operation of all the people concerned. The various forums, and the processes of agreeing those forums, opportunities for the discussion of opinion and the evolution of strategy.

Up to this point, the discussion of women's committees has focused upon their democratic significance, although the feminism of the committees has been an underlying theme. Their connection to the women's movement was discussed in Chapter Two, where the ambivalence existing between feminists and the committees was introduced. In Chapter Four the theme of ambivalence continued in terms of a feminist interpretation of democracy. It is not within the scope of this project to examine the implications of women's committees for a wider women's movement; however, in the next chapter the relationship between feminism and the nature and achievements of the committees is discussed.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Feminism and Women's Committees

The early 1980s, when women's committees were gathering momentum, were characterised by a consolidation of the women's movement in a range of political initiatives, including the final stages of the effort to get the Equal Rights Amendment ratified in the USA, the formation of a women's - feminist - party in Iceland, the establishment of the women's camp at Greenham Common, and the organisation of women against pit closures in the north of England.<sup>372</sup> Committee founders and members were aware of such movements to varying degrees, but were certainly conscious of being part of a wider

<sup>372</sup> The ERA was the fulfilment of the liberal approach to gender equality in the USA: to have women explicitly acknowledged as full and equal citizens by the Constitution. See Deborah Rhode's account of the significance of the ERA for American feminism in *Justice and Gender: sex discrimination and the law* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1989); also J. Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA* (Chicago and London, Chicago University Press, 1986). The Icelandic Kwenna Framboðid (Feminist Party) was evidence of women taking on the political mainstream and using it to achieve their ends without compromising their beliefs. L. Dominelli and G. Jonsdottir, "Feminist Political Organisation in Iceland: some reflections on the experience of Kwenna Framboðid", *Feminist Review* (1988). Greenham Common bore witness to the development of a women's politics which broke from issues of inclusion and equality within orthodox structures built around men, and posited a politics rooted in women's sympathetic connection to nature, the environment, peace and creativity. See A. Cook and G. Kirk, *Greenham Women Everywhere* (London, Pluto Press, 1983); B. Harford and S. Hopkin, *Greenham Common: Women at the Wire*, (London, Women's Press, 1984). The women who agitated against pit closures in the middle of the decade had goals and methods which were complementary to those of the men of their communities, but were nevertheless independent. They did not just organise to feed and clothe the men and children, they also travelled and addressed meetings to raise consciousness. The movement has had a lasting impact in the northern mining areas. See A. Coote and P. Patullo *Power and Prejudice: Women and Politics* (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990) p 61-85; this was also referred to during Interview 17 (22.11.94) of the Women's Committee Survey.

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movement for change.<sup>373</sup> The purpose of this chapter is to discover how the committees interpreted feminism, and what effect it had on their conduct. Furthermore, it investigates what effect their identification with feminism had upon how they were perceived by the public.

The four initiatives mentioned above illustrate the different directions in which women's energy was going at the time: relatively orthodox demands for equal recognition and equal opportunities; the assertion that women had a place in political institutions, but that those institutions should adapt to accommodate them; the postulation of a women's politics, on women's terms, which took the criteria of femininity according to which women had been excluded, and re-presented them as positive grounds for inclusion and change; and women's traditional success in organising on behalf of the greater community, which took on a new dimension through contact with explicitly feminist groups resulting in the politicisation of a section of women who would not otherwise have called themselves feminist. These different types of initiative all entailed engagement with the mainstream of politics and society.

Each of these political directions influenced the goals and activities of women's committees. The committees were feminist initiatives, but, as the second part of this chapter will show, they were not in the front line of either feminist theory or the wider women's movement. Perhaps because of their position within orthodox politics, they took a broad

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<sup>373</sup> Results of the Women's Committee Survey Questionnaire showed that of the responding female committee members thirty-three (62.26%) were or had previously been, involved with one or more women's groups. By way of comparison, Parry, Moyser and Day found that only 1.3% of their female sample were members of a feminist group. Parry et al also found that women who were active in feminist groups were more active in other areas of politics than the average citizen, particularly campaigning, collective action and direct action. G. Parry, G. Moyser and N. Day, *Political Participation and Democracy in Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 1991) Table 7.4 page 12.



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approach to feminism and did not (for the most part) ally themselves with any very specific tendency. Feminism as a theory, or a set of theories, developed alongside the women's movement. Feminist theory and women's initiatives influenced each other, but they were not the same thing. Many women involved in women's committees had only the most superficial acquaintance with theory; not all considered themselves to be feminists.<sup>374</sup> My research suggests that the committees' connection to a theory of feminism had diminished with time. This is not to say that they were no longer "feminist", but that they were, perhaps, less self-consciously so.

Feminism has acquired many strands since the 1960s, to which women are attached with varying degrees of commitment. Nevertheless, it remains possible to describe a common feminist core of belief with which even the most faint-hearted would agree. Amongst committee members even women who hesitated to call themselves "feminist" were clear about their belief that women were disadvantaged in comparison with men and that bold action was called for to improve their lives. Lovenduski and Randall use the following rule, which covers the main issues, "[w]e describe as feminist all ideologies, activities and policies whose goal it is to remove discrimination against women and to break down the male domination of society."<sup>375</sup> Responses to the Women's Committee Survey

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<sup>374</sup> See Chapter Two above.

<sup>375</sup> J. Lovenduski and V. Randall give a definition of feminism in the introduction to *Contemporary Feminist Politics: Women and Power in Britain* (Oxford University Press, 1993) which is appropriate to the approach of the women's committees: "We describe as feminist all ideologies, activities and policies whose goal it is to remove discrimination against women and to break down the male domination of society." p 2, drawn from D. Dahlrup, *The New Women's Movement: Feminism and Political Power in Europe and the USA*, (London, Sage, 1986) p 6.

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suggest that committee members would by and large agree with this broad description of feminism.

Feminism does not have the degree of shared ground experienced by left-wing groups; it has never been one coherent philosophy or movement. The British suffragists were divided; in the 1970s feminist perspectives were rigorously separated into radical, socialist and liberal; and after the initial surge of enthusiasm in the 1960s and 1970s women rapidly became aware that there was no one, simple, category of Woman.<sup>376</sup> The illumination of differences between women, differences which, it has been contested, are so great that women are more divided than joined by their interests, threatened the very existence of feminism: if there was no shared platform, however qualified and specific, there could be no feminism, only competing feminisms. As Michele Barrett wrote: "...the perception of significant differences *between* women is in itself a challenge to the grand feminist claims of an unshakeable identity *as* women. At least, it forces on us a reconsideration of what the constituting elements of "being a woman" might be".<sup>377</sup>

In order to establish the background to the feminism of the committees, this chapter starts with an outline of feminist political theory in the 1980s. This focuses on the importance of "difference" to feminists, both as a counter to an earlier emphasis on "equality" with men and as an assertion of the value of womanhood. Differences between

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<sup>376</sup> Race was one issue, epitomised by bell hooks's book *Ain't I a Woman? Black women and feminism* (London, Pluto Press, 1982), and accompanied by class, sexuality, age and ability. Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis point out that ethnicity is bound up with issues of gender and class; they are critical of feminism for not considering ethnicity adequately, but indicate the complexity of the inter-relationship, "Contextualising Feminism - Gender, Ethnic and Class Division", in T. Lovell, *British Feminist Thought: A Reader* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990) p 103-118. Anne Phillips indicated the competition between class and gender for women's loyalty in *Divided Loyalties: Dilemmas of Sex and Class* (London, Virago, 1987).

<sup>377</sup> M. Barrett, new introduction to *Women's Oppression Today: the Marxist/Feminist Encounter* (London, Verso, 1988) p vii.

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women were also of major importance to recent feminism and to the women's committees under discussion. The feminism of the committees is the subject of the second part of the chapter. Here, the comments of committee members are used to give an understanding of their feminism, and the way that feminism was used against them by the local press is shown. Following on from this, the last two sections ask whether tensions within feminism generated conflict within the committees and to what extent it provided resolution to problems.

### **Feminism in the 80s**

The Sunday Times magazine of 12.9.71 was given over almost entirely to feminist themes. Amongst articles on women's reproductive health, the politics of women paying for their own drinks, the controversy around Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* and profiles of prominent British feminists, was an article which gave the aims and addresses of forty-six local Women's Liberation groups and suggested that "if a W.L. group has yet to start in your town, why not start one yourself?"<sup>378</sup> It is difficult to imagine a similar article appearing in the 1990s. Although the different groups are quoted as making disparaging comments about the media's treatment of feminism, the article displays an enthusiasm and sense of unified purpose within the Women's Liberation Movement which would be difficult to reconstruct today on even a local basis - let alone nationally.

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<sup>378</sup> Sheila McNeil, "Pockets of Resistance: An operational guide to Women's Lib. groups", *Sunday Times* magazine (12.9.1971) p 47.

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By the end of the 1980s it was more common to find writers making statements like this passage from Frazer and Lacey, "There's not one feminist movement, but many. In many contexts women find that they have interests which are opposed to men's. But we cannot say in advance exactly what those interests are, how they are related to each other (conflicting or coincident) interests, how they will be understood and enacted by the participants in the situation, or what categories are appropriate for characterising the process".<sup>379</sup>

From the perspective of 1995 the *Times* article is extraordinary because of the changes which occurred in both the women's movement and feminism in the intervening years. These changes were the backdrop against which women's committees developed and declined, therefore it is the feminism of the 1980s which is of interest here. Despite their continuing significance, I do not intend to examine either the historical roots of modern feminism or its resurgence in the 1960s and 1970s, both of which are well documented elsewhere.<sup>380</sup> Feminism in the 1980s was characterised by fragmentation and uncertainty, as Frazer and Lacey describe, nevertheless, two key themes emerged. These two themes were the supposed tension between equality and difference, and the intense sensitivity to differences between women.

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<sup>379</sup> E. Frazer and N. Lacey, *The Politics of Community* (London, Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1993) p 12.

<sup>380</sup> For example: V. Bryson, *Feminist Political Theory: An Introduction* (New York, Paragon House, 1992); H. Eisenstein, *Contemporary Feminist Thought* (Counterpoint, 1989); D. Bouchier *The Feminist Challenge* (London, Macmillan, 1983); S. Rowbotham, *The Past is Before Us: Feminism in Action Since the 1960s* (London, Pandora, 1989) and *Women in Movement: Feminism and Social Action* (London, Routledge, 1992).

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On the first point, tension between equality and difference as ways of understanding the relation between women and men was not new; however, for a brief period it received unprecedented attention.

### **i. Feminism, Equality and Difference**

Within all approaches to feminism there have been two broad perspectives on strategy: one which took women's equality with men as a goal another which maintained that women would be best served by demanding consideration of their difference from men.<sup>381</sup> These differences are sometimes, but not always, grounded in perceptions of human beings as essentially more or less similar. A preference for legislation which grants women special protection may be purely practical, or may derive from a belief that women possess special characteristics which set them apart from men.

Tensions between the criteria of equality and difference can be seen as early as in the work of Mary Wollstonecraft. On the one hand she emphasised women's rights to economic and social equality, based on equal humanity, on the other she demanded consideration of women's importance as mothers. Lively debates about whether to prioritise women's equality with, or their difference from, men have characterised late twentieth century feminism.<sup>382</sup> Different emphases have divided feminists and thrown up some strange

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<sup>381</sup> E. Frazer and N. Lacey, *The Politics of Community*, p 8.

<sup>382</sup> Socialist feminists, in particular, found themselves at odds with the men who shared their broader political beliefs. B. S. Anderson and J. P. Zinsser suggest that, "[t]he new women's liberation movement, in contrast to earlier feminist movements, was founded on women's opposition to like-minded men.", *A History of Their Own* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1988), Vol 2, p 406.

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alliances, particularly those between radical feminists who emphasise the value of women's characteristics, and conservatives emphasising traditional values. Consider, for example, the common ground between feminist and conservative opposition to pornography in the USA.<sup>383</sup> Since the mid-1970s difference from men has taken on a significance in the debate around women's "different voice", and the issue of differences between women has become a powerful internal critique of feminism.<sup>384</sup>

Although the issue of equality versus difference was divisive in Britain, much of the literature was American. In the USA conflict between the competing values of equality and difference was largely determined by the constitutional and legislative framework. The constitutional pledge of equality between "men" was taken all too literally; custom and legal practice ensured that women were excluded from economic and political participation and included within the political existence of their fathers or husbands.<sup>385</sup> Special employment protection offered women ambivalent results: as described by Deborah Rhode, women in low paid, sex segregated occupations benefitted while other women suffered job loss; yet it was feared that legislating for equality would dismantle the fragile protection women had and permit employers to coerce them into long hours and dirty conditions, and open women to conscription.<sup>386</sup> As Rhode has pointed out, women have only ever been protected from

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<sup>383</sup> A. Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (London, Women's Press, 1981).

<sup>384</sup> b. hooks, *Feminist Theory: from Margin to Centre* (Boston, South End Press, 1984): "white women who dominate feminist discourse today rarely question whether or not their perspective on women's reality is true to the lived experiences of women as a collective group. Nor are they aware of the extent to which their perspectives reflect race and class biases", p 3 and, "[w]hile it is evident that many women suffer from sexist tyranny, there is little evidence that this forges 'a common bond'" p 4.

<sup>385</sup> D. Rhode, *Justice and Gender: Sex discrimination and the law* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1989).

<sup>386</sup> D. Rhode "Definitions of Difference" in D. Rhode (ed), *Theoretical Perspectives on Sexual Difference* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1990): "For example, sex based employment protection has

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conditions and hours that pay well and that men want; no woman has ever been protected from back-breaking work in the home or the fields.<sup>387</sup> Nevertheless, a quick scan of recent feminist literature demonstrates that the contest between approaches favouring equality and those favouring difference occupied considerable time and space for both political actors and writers.<sup>388</sup>

Equality has been espoused more by liberals and socialists, with radicals having a marked preference for difference, but the lines here are not distinct. Lovenduski and Randall maintain that "[t]hroughout the 1980s there was evidence that the opposition between equality and difference was a false one, and that, in practice, both perspectives had much to offer."<sup>389</sup> We are, in fact, accustomed to making adjustments between equality and difference, for example the law may be applied equally to all when deciding innocence or guilt, but sentencing takes account of individual circumstances. Emphasis has shifted away from dichotomy; Deborah Rhode suggests that it is disadvantage resulting from difference which is significant, not difference itself. Her proposal that this can best be dealt with through gender-neutral legislation - for example, no worker should have to work in dirty or

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produced mixed results, improving conditions for some groups of women, causing unemployment for others, and generally contributing to segregation of women in low-pay, low-skill, low-security sectors." p 209.

<sup>387</sup> D. Rhode, "Definitions of Difference", p 209.

<sup>388</sup> The articles in G. Bock and S. James (eds) *Beyond Equality and Difference* (London, Routledge, 1992), seek to resolve the debate.

<sup>389</sup> J. Lovenduski and V. Randall, *Contemporary Feminist Politics*, p 64.

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dangerous conditions - offers a practical resolution to this part of the equality and difference impasse.<sup>390</sup>

Rhode addresses issues of equality and difference within the framework of the American legal system, however, difference between women and men has also underpinned the development of feminist theory with a rather different flavour. Starting, perhaps, with Carol Gilligan's *In A Different Voice*, women have been characterised as having an approach to morality and decision-making which is different from that of men.<sup>391</sup> This is said to derive from their up-bringing and socialisation as girls and women, and to have implications for their interaction with the natural world, and for their social and political participation.<sup>392</sup> Women are said to possess, or at least have access to, an ethic of care, which is rooted in connection to, and responsibility for, other people, which is different from, and perhaps preferable to, the male ethic of objective reason.<sup>393</sup>

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<sup>390</sup> D. Rhode, "Definitions of Difference", p 204, p 210-211; D. Rhode, "The Politics of Paradigms: gender differences and gender disadvantage" in G. Bock and S. James (eds) *Beyond Equality and Difference* (London, Routledge, 1992) p 154.

<sup>391</sup> The particular approaches taken by C. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1982) and N. Chodorow, "Family Structure and Feminine Personality", in M. Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (eds), *Women, Culture and Society* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1974) illustrate the over-simplification of the frequent assumption that socialists and liberals pursue equality while radicals favour difference.

<sup>392</sup> Using Freudian theory Nancy Chodorow has developed a description of how all-female mothering fosters differentiated male and female personalities amongst children, N. Chodorow, "Family Structure and Feminine Personality". Her main suggestion to overcome this appears to be the greater involvement of men in fathering, a conclusion supported by L. Eichenbaum and S. Orbach, *What do Women Want?*, (Glasgow, Fontana, 1984).

<sup>393</sup> N. Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (University of California Press, 1984); D. Dinnerstein, *The Rocking of the Cradle and the Ruling of the World* (London, Women's Press, 1987); S. Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: towards a politics of peace* (London, Women's Press, 1990). Will Kymlicka provides a good summary of the issues arising from an ethic of care. He concludes that most of its principles parallel those of a progressive interpretation of liberalism, however, its unique contribution is to draw attention to the contradiction between autonomy and responsibilities for dependent others. *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991) p 262-286.



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Although this approach has been widely criticised, both in terms of the methodology used by, for example, Gilligan and Chodorow, and philosophically, either for essentialism, or for promoting passivity, it has been highly influential.<sup>394</sup> At one end of a scale of influence, it engendered confidence in values associated with the female and supported the importance of women as mothers and carers while legitimating women's demands that men should play a greater part in parenting; at the other, it underpinned ecofeminism.

In Gilligan's work women's different voice took the form of a morality which was grounded in connection rather than the abstract set of rules which comprised justice; amongst radical feminists women's voice was interpreted as the voice of peace and caring while the male voice was identified with violence. As a result there was a renewed interest in the distinctly female qualities of women and a renewed concern with male violence. The renewed interest in womanhood underpinned a critique of liberal, equal rights feminism and proposed a feminism which valorised women's affective capacity. Proponents of maternal feminism and the ethic of care claimed that women had access to a different way of doing things which was grounded in specific circumstances and particular relationships rather than general rules. The renewed concern with male violence built upon the earlier concern with domestic violence which had led to the establishment of women's refuges.

However, the discovery of a distinct female ethic was, like everything that went before, open to the criticism that there was not a women's voice but multiple female voices. Moreover, some of those voices were privileged at the expense of others. This observation

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<sup>394</sup> For example, by L. Segal in *Is the Future Female? Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism* (London, Virago, 1987); D. Rhode "Definitions of Difference", *Gender and Difference*; R. M. Jackson, "The Reproduction of Parenting" *American Sociological Review* Vol 54 (April 1989) p 215-232.

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introduces the second key theme in 1980s feminism mentioned above: the intense sensitivity to differences between women.

### **ii. Feminism and Differences Between Women**

As women gained access to social, economic and political power, and as feminism became a complex set of ideas, the importance of shared sexual identity was qualified by the understanding that women occupied widely different positions in relation to each other as well as in relation to men.<sup>395</sup> This perception demolished the certainty with which feminists organised and theorised in the sixties and seventies: when the category "woman" is in dispute formulating a programme for women is compromised. As Frazer and Lacey suggest, "...we must develop a theory of identity which acknowledges that within any single society the definitions and expectations of what it means to be a woman will vary greatly, by race, by class, by status, by generation. Similarly what it means to be working class will vary by gender, by race, and so on."<sup>396</sup>

The increased sensitivity to differences between women derived from criticisms of feminism and the women's movement from lesbian and ethnic minority perspectives.<sup>397</sup> These were not issues that could just be added to the feminist agenda: they called into

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<sup>395</sup> "As for the term "Women", it contains the kernel of a dispute that has problematized the politics of contemporary feminism and come to dominate theoretical polemic" Michele Barrett, *Women's Oppression Today*, p v.

<sup>396</sup> E. Frazer and N. Lacey *The Politics of Community*, p 10.

<sup>397</sup> "...the voices now most effectively addressing questions of class, inequality, poverty and exploitation to a wider public are those of black women, not white socialist-feminists.", Michele Barrett, new introduction to *Women's Oppression Today*, p xxiv.

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question the nature of the agenda itself. Demands for equal access to employment and pay were seen as white middle class demands which failed to take account of the differences between the opportunities available to white and black people and the extent to which white women were privileged in relation to non-white people. The rights to contraception, abortion and sexual freedom which were central to second wave feminism were seen as heterosexist demands which failed to take account of lesbians and assumed a heterosexual norm. Cross-cutting these critiques was the nagging awareness that feminism was a rather middle-class affair. Feminists might try to take account of working class women but those women did not themselves play a large part in the women's movement.

The centrality of identity to feminism, and the emphasis on personal experience as the basis for political belief, generated acute sensitivity to issues of who could best speak for whom. As a result, feminism has been more conscious of, and more troubled by, accusations of privileging some groups of women over others on criteria of race, class, sexuality, age or ability, than other socio-political theories and movements.<sup>398</sup> Feminists now find themselves in a position typical of the post-modern withdrawal from grand theory: although convinced of the accuracy of their critique of what has gone before, their analyses of the present and their prescriptions for the future are layered and qualified to take account of an infinite range of positions.

In the world of real politics some feminist goals have become part of the mainstream, but under headings of equal opportunities, human rights, or expediency. Many people, including some of those on women's committees, are not comfortable with the word

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<sup>398</sup> As Jeffrey Weeks has written of Identity Politics: "there was a real danger that what people had in common would be lost through asserting differences", *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (London, Quartet Books, 1990) p 237.

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feminism. Even women who were proud to call themselves feminists said that on their committee they represented the interests of their constituency, not feminist interests. For academics feminism is a real approach to life and to understanding. It is complex and nuanced; it has many threads and contains many conflicts. For many non-academics "feminism" is part of the language of the 1960s and 1970s and feminists are, or were, rather strange and alien beings who opposed the family, disliked men, and frightened other women at least as much as they frightened the opposite sex.

### **Women's Committees as Feminist Bodies**

Feminism and feminists played a significant part in the founding of committees. However, the problems of feminism during the 1980s ensured that feminism as an explicit code was a largely silent presence on committees by the 1990s.<sup>399</sup> There are, therefore, a number of questions about the relationship between feminism and women's committees. The development of feminist theories and movements described here prompts the question: did women's committees perceive themselves to be feminist, and, if so, what sort of "feminist"? Writers and journalists both in favour and against women's committees have called them feminist, but what of the women themselves? Did the categories liberal, socialist and radical retain a significance for them which had been superseded in academic

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<sup>399</sup> In their 1983 article Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis criticised the narrowness of feminism, "Black, minority and immigrant women have been on the whole invisible within the feminist movement and within the literature on women or feminist studies.", "Contextualising Feminism - Gender, Ethnic and Class Divisions", p 103.

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circles, or did the committees follow feminism down the disputationary pathway of equality and difference?

The committees investigated displayed all the different feminist motivations described at the start of this chapter: relatively orthodox demands for equal recognition and equal opportunities; demands for political institutions to adapt to accommodate women; the postulation of a women's politics, on women's terms; and the creation of links between women in traditional organising roles in their communities and explicitly feminist groups. Obvious examples include their encouragement of women running for office; their pressure for training, parental leave, and improved conditions of employment for women; their introduction of egalitarian working within the council and attempts to make service delivery more democratically accountable; the inclusion of community representatives, the creation of advisory groups, and their involvement in public forums.

The women who mobilised to found women's committees came from across the spectrum of feminist belief: radicals from local women's groups, socialists from the Labour Party, and women from the community whose approach was a liberal one of inclusion and equal opportunities. Not all of them, however, called themselves feminists. Councillors engaged in a committee sometimes saw what they were doing as part of their socialist project, and themselves as socialists who were taking up the interests of a section of the community in a responsible way, rather than feminists. As one councillor said,

The pressure for setting up the women's committee came from this other councillor...there was a tension between the two of us right from the outset in that she was a feminist with a capital 'F' and was very firm, for example, that everything should be women-only, and was also very much into the consensual way of doing things, and I was certainly not a feminist with a capital 'F' and I'm not an absolutist as she was

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on the women-only front, and also I had not been brought up in the feminist movement in the way she had.<sup>400</sup>

Despite the equivocal feminism of some members, the results of the Women's Committee Survey constitute a strong argument that the committees were feminist. As I shall show, their goals, activities and their very way of being were shaped by feminism. Not, perhaps, by a close reading of feminist texts, but certainly by the more popular feminism of women's magazines, the Guardian women's page and the initiatives of women in the Labour party. The committees and their members were in no doubt that the problems of local women and the shortcomings of local services which they set out to resolve were connected to sex and to gender-based assumptions.<sup>401</sup>

This was apparent in the way that members described themselves and their goals.

One feminist councillor described the start of her political career:

When I first started I was the youngest councillor and I think I was probably the only woman councillor who understood what feminism was about - the other women councillors had survived by adopting a male set of values, which I think is quite common. That doesn't mean that they had forgotten about women's issues but it just means that they didn't understand a feminist agenda [...] since then more women have come onto the council, who've come up through the community who understand women's issues, who whatever committee they're in they see it very much from a woman's perspective.<sup>402</sup>

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<sup>400</sup> Interview 9 (24.8.94).

<sup>401</sup> In *The Politics of Community*, Frazer and Lacey suggest that only acts informed by some sort of feminist consciousness are actually feminist: "A woman may be locked in mortal combat with her son or husband over an issue like domestic work. This fact alone is not sufficient to make the combat feminist combat however. That depends on her actions and practices being bound up with an understanding (implicit or explicit) that the situation they are all in has to do with sex or gender [...] (However, feminists do identify 'proto-feminism', the foundation on which feminist movements and struggles have been built, in such circumstances.)", p 11.

<sup>402</sup> Interview 16 (21.11.94).

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Another described how she saw the women's movement as follows,

there's a lot of women who individually feel very strongly about other women and sort of - like a generic term you know women as a group - and want to do what's best for women as a group, and want women to have certain rights.<sup>403</sup>

A third said:

I suppose I would say that I have in fact learned an awful lot from the women's movement and its broad aims I clearly agree with. I think that women should not be discriminated against, that they are a part of society which ought to be taken account of in the way in which services are set up and structured, and that there are clearly differences between the needs of women and the needs of men.<sup>404</sup>

And a fourth:

I see myself quite clearly as a feminist and I know that I am sometimes alienated by the men even within the council because of it. But I am not, I'm proud of it, I don't think there's anything wrong in it. I'm not sure, I mean people ask what is a feminist and I'm not sure, but I will not let men get away with what they get away with.<sup>405</sup>

The following discussion examines how the committees were perceived by their members and the outside world in order to discover how relevant feminism was to their continuing existence. I argue that feminism was central to the committees through addressing the following questions. Did the committees' popular identification with feminism generate criticism and challenges which would not have been forthcoming if the same issues and policies had been couched in different language and presented through a different forum? Did the self-questioning and internal conflict inherent in feminism generate

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<sup>403</sup> Interview 12 (23.8.94).

<sup>404</sup> Interview 9 (24.8.94).

<sup>405</sup> Interview 4 (23.6.94).

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divisions within committees? Did feminism solve any of the committees' problems, either by providing the unifying ingredient of a common cause, or by providing ideas and methods which enabled them to circumvent difficulties?

### **i. Self-Consciously Feminist?**

The goals of women's committees, as stated in their terms of reference given in Chapter Two, were explicitly feminist: to promote women's interests, to eliminate discrimination against women, to actively promote equal opportunities, to support women's groups and organisations, and to make council decision-making structures more open and accountable to women.<sup>406</sup> However, they did not necessarily include a specific feminist political critique or analysis of power: their goals could be comfortably contained within a liberal-egalitarian approach. The specific direction came from the women who were there at the beginning: women from the community mobilising for a committee, councillors, and equalities officers.

The committees involved in the Women's Committee Survey underwent considerable change between their foundation in the early eighties and 1995. From all accounts, they were less radical in 1995 than in 1985. This was partly a function of time: they had become more familiar, their general goals passed into public consciousness, and they learned to play the game of politics. It was also a function of changes in personnel.<sup>407</sup> Women who were there at the beginning moved on and their places were taken by women

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<sup>406</sup> B. Webster "Women's Committees" *Local Government Policy Making* (November 1983) p 27-34.

<sup>407</sup> This is referred to by J. Lovenduski and V. Randall, *Contemporary Feminist Politics*.



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who were not of necessity innovators, and who had the opportunity to learn political manoeuvres from their predecessors. An ex-chair described how she inherited a political programme from her predecessor:

A borough plan for women had already been instigated by the previous chair, X, which was quite interesting, a very interesting document. So that basis was there and when I actually became chair the committee itself was already operating in certain fields, leisure and a bit of work on education, it became very involved in domestic violence and I became very interested in housing issues.<sup>408</sup>

Present members were aware of the changes that had occurred and viewed them with mixed feelings. Some were pleased to have got beyond the controversial early years with the associated lost opportunities and unnecessary conflict while other regretted the perceived loss of dynamism. Where committees had been restructured there were particular misgivings and some members wondered for how long women would bother to put their energy into something which appeared to have little effect. On the one hand members described how committees were started by highly motivated women, whose interests may not, however, have been those of the mass of the female electorate:

I think it started off as a very high-profile radical feminism, almost rampant feminist, which antagonised other women in the council, council employees, councillors. It antagonised most of the men. And got friends amongst the voluntary groups that they funded, but otherwise raised a lot of hackles, and it was almost counter-productive it was so high-profile.<sup>409</sup>

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<sup>408</sup> Interview 1 (15.4.94).

<sup>409</sup> Interview 5 (23.6.94); another Councillor said: "the pressure for setting up a women's committee came from this other councillor, who then, unfortunately, got deselected by the party[...] there was a very big group of women on it who were of a similar sort of persuasion to her and indeed a very large group of radical lesbians", Interview 9 (24.8.94).

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On the other hand, members described how coherence and sense of purpose had been replaced by separation, marginalisation and a diminished sense of efficacy.

By 1995 it was taken for granted that a variety of perspectives, including some which were not primarily feminist, would be present on a committee, resulting in a diverse representation of women, shaped by feminism, but perhaps not driven by it.

[...] the council members, they are politicians, they are in the Labour Party, so some perhaps feel their loyalty to the Labour Party is more important than loyalty to the women's movement, and don't even, may not even consider the women's movement as something there and something that they can relate to, but there are others who do. So there's a mixture really, it's difficult to paint a unified picture. Quite a mixture of women.<sup>410</sup>

There's a mixture of women there. I would say the majority would say they are feminists. So I would say there is a certain common [feeling] amongst the women there.<sup>411</sup>

Thus the present committees were perceived by their members as being generally feminist in motivation, but without particular ideological underpinnings.

You see, people think of different things when you say feminist. I think some of the women on the women's committee are definitely feminists and it shows in everything they say and do, but I think others are purely political women and I think there is a difference there in the way that they operate and think. But if you think in terms of feminism as stemming from the women's liberation movement of the late 60s early 70s when it was a question of particular demands then around child care, 24 hour nurseries, all those things we were demanding, that then became a sexual politics as well with radical feminism, lesbianism etc, that doesn't come into the ordinary day to day work of a women's committee or what we discuss, but if you look at the work we do, for instance on violence against women, domestic violence and all those issues, they arise because we have a particular

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<sup>410</sup> Interview 3 (7.9.94).

<sup>411</sup> Interview 7 (21.7.94).

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attitude which I consider to be feminist in looking at what a male-dominated society does to women.<sup>412</sup>

A word often used by councillors was "pragmatic",

I think it's a very pragmatic committee, I think it's interested in getting things done and that's why we stood out from a lot of the other committees when it was set up [...] I think it has always been very issue based in that sense rather than saying, we're radical feminists we're going to do this that and the other [...] We'd never get into those philosophical debates because I think they're for another place. This is about actually getting services to women and for me that means that you're helping women, giving them the space that they need to help themselves.<sup>413</sup>

However, community representatives did not always see things in such a benevolent light and some perceived the "pragmatism" as a lack of commitment or failure of will. For example,

I think it very much reflects the view or stance of the councillors who are on it [...] because it's representing women's issues you can say it is more on the feminist side, but I don't see it actually being strongly feminist.<sup>414</sup>

There were individual exceptions, but on the whole a member's attachment to feminism differed according to which of the three groups present - councillors, co-optees or officers - she belonged to. Councillors were women who had chosen to become involved in party politics. Many were deeply concerned about women's well-being and even committed to feminism, but had to square it with their other political beliefs. Co-optees came from different sections of the community with various prior commitments, but many of them,

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<sup>412</sup> Interview 2 (7.4.94).

<sup>413</sup> Interview 16 (21.11.94).

<sup>414</sup> Interview 8 (8.8.94).

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particularly those representing women's centres, women's groups, rape crisis centres and the like, had chosen feminism, or at least women's interests, as their primary political focus. Some co-optees were mistrustful of some councillors, believing that their party loyalty and political ambitions took precedence over their feminism, for example, "Most women are people oriented and more concerned and less power-seeking - but not the party political ones who often act like men", and "women's needs should be central, but many women and male councillors see the council as a means of furthering their own political ambitions."<sup>415</sup>

Council officers involved with the committees, particularly those who worked in women's or equalities units, appeared to be informed and committed feminists. According to a councillor, "the officers were more feminist than the committee members per se."<sup>416</sup> Nevertheless, they were professional administrators, and as such held their beliefs in the context of - and perhaps in tension with - their jobs and the framework of the local authority.

A number of committee members (ten councillors including two men and seventeen co-optees) believed that women had a different views on local government from men. In general this was related to women's perceived better understanding of people's problems and closer connection to issues of care, although some respondents to the questionnaire suggested that men were out of touch, "more paternalistic and anachronistic" in the words of one respondent.<sup>417</sup> Many also believed that women did things differently from men. It was suggested in interviews that women were more efficient than men, because they got on with the job rather than jockeying for position, and they were more effective because of their

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<sup>415</sup> Questionnaires 5 and 8, in response to question 31.

<sup>416</sup> Interview 1 (15.4.94).

<sup>417</sup> Questionnaire 14.

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emphasis on discussion rather than competition. Questionnaire responses claimed that women "tackle problems in a different more direct way than men", that "men do not co-operate together as well as women do. Women want to solve problems and get services in place rather than discussing semantics" and that "men approach it more as a battleground than women".<sup>418</sup>

More committee members (fourteen councillors including three men, and twenty-six co-optees) believed that women had social/political interests distinct from those of men; eleven councillors and twenty-one co-optees believed that this was of major significance for local politics. Women's connection to caring responsibilities and their greater reliance on welfare services than men was cited; however, one respondent put this in a wider context when she wrote, "in my experience women want to make improvements which will benefit those most discriminated against: more good child care, care for the elderly, health care reform etc, whereas men seem more removed from it all and think on a grander scale. More interested in individual advancement."<sup>419</sup> These responses appear to support the criticism that women take a more parochial view of politics, as one respondent wrote, "I feel women feel things more personally and perhaps have not always seen the wider view of affairs."<sup>420</sup> However, they can be interpreted differently, as criticism of a politics which is focused on the grand scheme to the extent that it overlooks the constituent parts, and of political conduct which prefers combat to co-operation and individual heroism to collective

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<sup>418</sup> Questionnaires 37, 40 and 18. Responses question 30, "Do you think men and women have different view on local government?".

<sup>419</sup> Questionnaire 52. Response to question 31.

<sup>420</sup> Questionnaire 23. Response to question 30.

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discussion. This was the view of one respondent who wrote, "Local government is riddled with sexism - it's a male environment, its pedantry suits men who are generally more cautious and uninspired than women."<sup>421</sup>

A closer link between women and local politics than national has often been assumed, and up to a point supported by research.<sup>422</sup> For example, one respondent to the Women's Committee Survey wrote, "Women are more likely to be concerned about local government issues, education etc, therefore more likely to be interested in their management etc and to get involved in local politics."<sup>423</sup> Anne Phillips has questioned whether women's greater connection to the local arena is either necessary or real.<sup>424</sup> Local government appears to be an easier entry-point for women, and local issues are certainly closer to women's traditional roles and pre-occupations. However, Phillips suggests that perceptions about women's greater affinity for the local may be the result of a distortion: "it is not that women are more likely than men to participate in local politics, but that when women are involved in politics it is more likely to be at the local than the national level. This is true, on the whole of everyone, so its implications cannot be taken to far".<sup>425</sup> Phillips points to the importance for women of engaging in politics at the level at which change can be achieved - which is

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<sup>421</sup> Questionnaire 51. Response to question 31.

<sup>422</sup> B. Hayes and C. Bean, "Gender and Local Political Interest: Some International Comparisons" *Political Studies* Vol XLI No 4 (December 1993) p 672-68. From their data Hayes and Bean conclude that although women remain less interested than men in politics generally, this is not the case with local politics: "Thus, contrary to previous international research [...] sex *per se* is not by and large a distinguishing factor in explaining local political interest" p 681.

<sup>423</sup> Questionnaire 7. Response to question 31.

<sup>424</sup> A. Phillips, "Feminism and the Attractions of the Local" forthcoming in D. King and G. Stoker (eds) *Rethinking Local Democracy* (London, Macmillan, 1996).

<sup>425</sup> A. Phillips, "Feminism and the Attractions of the Local", p 5.

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most often the national.<sup>426</sup> The results of the Women's Committee Survey suggest that the participants saw that local issues and local politics had a particular significance to women, but not at the expense of ignoring other issues. The women concerned saw local issues and politics as an under-privileged part of the whole and their activities as a corrective to the unbalanced focus of regular politics - local and national. As one respondent wrote, "In order to build both a socialist and environmentally sustainable society we need to move towards a women's way of doing things; local employment with shorter hours, local accessible services, local pressure groups."<sup>427</sup>

It was quite clear that feminist approaches shaped the procedures of the committees, as one member said,

I would think that the way that it works is quite indicative of the women's movement as well in that it's part of the structure but it's not being encompassed by the structure: it's not taken on the structure's way of working. It's much more based in, let's have a discussion and a debate about this. I think it is part of the women's movement.<sup>428</sup>

The significance of feminism to one committee became particularly apparent when it acquired a new chair who, although concerned about women, was not a feminist. Both her beliefs and her approach generated protest, disruption and her timely replacement. Her instincts were those of a Labour party member, public servant and trades unionist, but not those of a feminist. Other committee members thought that she privileged class over gender

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<sup>426</sup> A. Phillips, "Feminism and the Attractions of the Local" forthcoming in D. King and G. Stoker (eds) *Rethinking Local Democracy*, p 14.

<sup>427</sup> Questionnaire 13. Response to question 31.

<sup>428</sup> Interview 16 (21.11.94).

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and was uncomfortable with attempts to take account of differences in sexuality or ethnicity

- thus illuminating by contrast the strength of the committee's feminism.

[S]he used to talk a lot about the needs of women in sort of socialist terms. Because she worked with women she talked about women [...] she certainly knew about the needs of women in that sort of health way, but in a very patronising way [...] I couldn't [describe her as a feminist] I felt at first I could because I like to give everyone the benefit of the doubt [...] and then she started doing things that were very unpopular [...] and she also did things very secretly [...] and I think she might have liked to see it as what happens in politics, but I think it was different because we weren't part of the political party and that sort of institutionalised slanging match which goes on, which you can sort of cope with because it's part of the game, but we were outside that.<sup>429</sup>

From this summary it is clearly apparent that a range of feminist insights was influential in shaping the nature and goals of the committees. A feminism which emphasised equal opportunities underpinned the committees' encouragement of women to stand for office; their monitoring of council employment practices; their training and assertiveness schemes; and their attention to child care. Feminism mediated by socialism determined the committees' sensitivity to issues of class and their efforts to encompass working class perspectives. This led to their emphasis on including working class co-optees and extending grants to working class women, as well as their efforts to improve services, and their commitment to taking meetings out of the council offices onto the estates. It also determined their engagement with the Labour party and the local authority trades unions.

All of the above tended to emphasise women's right to equal access and equal opportunity. However, other issues and approaches adopted emphasised the value of women's difference from men and took account of differences amongst women. Some of

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<sup>429</sup>

Interview 15 (28.4.95).



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these derived from a more radical feminism. Initiatives which drew on women's difference from men included: funding women's centres; combatting violence and rape; and introducing more egalitarian working practices. Initiatives which drew on differences amongst women and a commitment to inclusiveness started from seeking out ethnic minority and lesbian representatives and pursuing issues relevant to them. Projects might include: combatting discrimination in housing; securing women-only access to leisure facilities; starting training schemes with particular relevance to ethnic minority women; and pursuing the equal consideration of lesbian partnerships and lesbian parenting. On the whole, the committees practised a balanced approach to the problem of equality versus difference and it rarely appeared as an issue itself. They appear to have adopted the practical rule that equal opportunity, access and treatment were fundamental to political, social and economic life, however, in particular circumstances people should have access to special provision or treatment either to compensate for a shortfall in the past, or to take account of a present situation, or to pave the way for improved equality in the future.

### **ii. Damned if You Do and Damned if You Don't?**

Depending upon where their critics were coming from, women's committees were criticised for being feminist or for not being feminist enough. The second criticism came from feminists who were not engaged in institutionalised politics, who mistrusted politics and politicians, and who saw the initiative as a sell-out and a drain upon the energy of the women's movement.<sup>430</sup> Although such criticisms may have angered feminists involved in

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<sup>430</sup> J. Parker, "Labour Women: the battle for a political voice", *Spare Rib* 109 (August 1981).

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committees, and may even have discouraged some women from participation, their circulation was too narrow to affect the credibility or effectiveness of the initiatives. This was not the case when committees were criticised for being too feminist - or for being feminist at all.

Criticism often took the form of suggesting that the committees were pursuing the "wrong kind" of feminism - but when this accusation is taken apart and the "wrong" bits stripped away, the "right kind" of feminism which is left is scarcely distinguishable as feminism. Feminism is a critique of pre-existing theories and practices, and as such it has something new to say and it upsets existing assumptions. Feminism cannot help but challenge every situation in which men get a better deal than women, cannot help but insist that women get resources in later life or in new situations to compensate for those which they did not get when at school or when channelled into low-skill occupations, cannot help but point out that there are at least two ways of looking at most issues, and that those perspectives are shaped by gender.

However, particular popular conceptions of feminism gave force to criticism in the press and amongst Conservative politicians. Two broad conceptions dominated the public image of feminism, one that it was trivial and obsessed with silly issues and campaigns, the other that it was invidious and targeted upon destroying the family, undermining men and promoting lesbianism.

Like all really effective character assassinations, the accusations were not strictly untrue. Feminism is concerned with what appear to be small things, such as whether important texts and laws refer to "men" or to "people", and whether important meetings are held at times and in places that "people" with both domestic and employment

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responsibilities can get to them. It is concerned because the norms have excluded women, and not trivially.<sup>431</sup> Similarly, feminism is concerned with criticising an idealistic vision of the family and the unequal value accorded to, and power possessed by, men and women. This can be, but rarely is, an absolute indictment of men and relations between men and women; it is a criticism of the social norms and a demand for something better.

Through the filter of these two conceptions many of the rather sensible and useful things that committees discussed, suggested or did assumed a foolish or ominous shape. Anything they did which stretched the boundaries of the political or extended the nature of citizenship incited a riot of alliterative headlines self-righteously condemning the waste of rate-payers money and hinting at the end of civilisation.

Local press often took upon itself responsibility for pointing out the absurdity, if not the wastefulness, of women's initiatives, especially in the early years, up to the late 1980s. As one paper announced: "[c]ould anything be more incongruous than women who claim to be non-sexist in their attitudes trying to hold a public meeting at which men are barred?"<sup>432</sup> Of the four men at the meeting, which had been called so that local women could join in discussions about the establishment of a women's committee, two were reporters from the Oxford Mail and Times. Since the papers had been asked to send women, and since they made front-page news of the issue, the suspicion is aroused that this was intentionally

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<sup>431</sup> As Will Kymlicka writes: "Women are disadvantaged, not because chauvinists arbitrarily favour men in the awarding of jobs, but because the entire society systematically favours men in the defining of jobs, merit, etc." *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1990) p. 243.

<sup>432</sup> *Oxford Mail*, 26.9.85.

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provocative. The suspicion is reinforced by a subsequent article suggesting a "Size Committee", comprised of short people and reported upon by short journalists.<sup>433</sup>

Attempts by women councillors in the same area to get the title "Chairman" of council committees changed to "Convener" were ridiculed at length in the local press, as was the foundation of the women's committee and its contention that there were too few women and members of ethnic minorities in top local authority jobs.<sup>434</sup> However, it would be inaccurate to assume that the Oxford press was wholly antagonistic towards the women's committee, or that it was taking a coherently anti-feminist approach. Articles reported the free shoppers' creches without adverse comment, and reported the council's cut in spending on a women's refuge critically.<sup>435</sup> Underlying some of the criticism was general opposition to the Labour administration of Oxford City and support for the political opposition. In so far as there was any consistency in the newspaper coverage, it appeared to support initiatives that helped women to do the things they were expected to do and that protected them from the rare men who were "beasts"; it opposed initiatives that were shaped by a feminist critique of the balance of power in society. Thus creches and refuges were good things; women-only committees, positive action on employment, and changes to language were bad.<sup>436</sup>

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<sup>433</sup> *Oxford Times*, 19.7.85.

<sup>434</sup> *Oxford Mail*, 28.2.84, 1.2.84 and 2.3.84; *Oxford Times*, 30.3.84; *Oxford Mail*, 27.10.91 and 26.3.92.

<sup>435</sup> *Oxford Mail*, 13.11.90 and 14.12.90; *Oxford Mail*, 30.10.91.

<sup>436</sup> The way that non-feminist men approach male violence was illuminated by a councillor, who was appalled by the way these "beasts" treated women, and felt strongly that women should be protected, but saw violence as an individual issue rather than an effect of a system wherein women are disadvantaged in relation to men, Interview 11 (23.8.94). Also, Interview 4 (23.6.94) gives an account of a male councillor at

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The Islington press was resolutely opposed to the women's committee in its early days, publishing articles like "Just What does the Women's Committee Do?", "£30,000 cash bonanza for women's groups", "Town Hall women seek pin-up ban", and comments including, "[w]hich committee of Islington Council bears the greatest responsibility for the borough's dotty image? My nomination must be the Women's Committee"; "I've waxed with feeling before on the subject of Islington Council's women's committee...so please forgive me as I have yet another go. I have to say that I find this committee an insult to women"; and "[t]he problem with falling asleep at Islington Council meetings is that when you wake up you find you are still in fantasy land. Take the last meeting of the women's committee."<sup>437</sup> Even faint praise was couched in dismissive terms. Commenting on a recent intake of councillors, the Chronicle observed: "The present bunch are a big improvement on some of their predecessors. At least these don't give grants to buy gym mats for lesbian self-defence courses or subsidise conferences to discuss women-only graveyards. The present members are well-meaning and certainly not malevolent. It's just that they seem to live in a ... well, fantasy land."<sup>438</sup>

Opposition and ridicule from the press made the regular conduct of business difficult for committees; this was compounded when the press were encouraged by the political opposition, as, for example, when a local paper "reported the prejudiced remarks of Councillor X who was obsessed with lesbians and used to say she saw lesbians kissing in

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a Women's Committee meeting who followed up his speech in support of anti-violence policies with the aside that, of course, some women did ask for it.

<sup>437</sup> *Islington Gazette*, 8.7.83; *Islington Gazette*, 31.3.83; *Islington Gazette*, 11.2.83; *Islington Gazette*, 14.6.85; *Islington Gazette*, 30.3.84; *Islington Gazette*, 3.10.86.

<sup>438</sup> *Islington Gazette*, 3.10.86.

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the corridors".<sup>439</sup> When the press was aided and abetted by the Labour party normal business was brought to a standstill.

In Bristol, opposition to the committee (which led to its reconstitution as a sub-committee) came from local Conservatives, augmented by conflict within the Labour party, and the opposition of some Labour members. This was duly recorded by the local press. Conservatives were reported making concerted attacks on the committee, for example, "Tories Secret Blitz on Women's Votes"; and an article describing how Conservatives had taken out advertising to describe, incorrectly, the activities of the women's committee and had been instructed to pay for the publication of correct information.<sup>440</sup> Public meetings were apparently disrupted by Conservative councillors and the press printed accounts and responses from readers on letters pages.

As the committee staggered towards collapse, Quita Morgan wrote in the *Evening Post*:

Bristol Women's Committee has been peered at, jeered at and sneered at. But it could have been worse, It might have been ignored. Its greatest misfortune, in my view, is that it has been hijacked by party politics.<sup>441</sup>

This was followed by another article more directly critical of Labour in-fighting,

[...] but lets get a few things straight. The Women's Committee has always been used as a stooge. As an initiative of the left of the Labour Party it is hardly surprising it has pushed party politics....Its critics no longer need to call publicly for its demise; the in-fighting, back-biting and dogma from some of the city's Labour Councillors during the

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<sup>439</sup> Interview 15 (28.4.9).

<sup>440</sup> *Bristol Evening Post*, 12.7.87.

<sup>441</sup> Quita Morgan, *Evening Post* of 4.2.88.

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past few days are surely a firm indication that they are happy to allow it to self-destruct.<sup>442</sup>

Oxford experienced opposition to women's initiatives from within the Labour Party,

the first kind of steps we took were not to do with setting up the sub-committee, our first fracas were the ritual ones of getting rid of the term of chairman of the committee, and that was our first sort of campaign where we failed initially because half the Labour group back-tracked and voted with the Tories.<sup>443</sup>

This conflict was reported in detail in the local press, with entertaining headlines and solemn editorial.

We then tried again and got it through the second time. But the setting up of the women's sub-committee we did in the end get our colleagues to agree. There was a substantial number of people within the Labour group who didn't really agree with it and who were pretty agnostic.<sup>444</sup>

Women's committees were caught up in competition between political parties because of their links with Labour, and vulnerable to disputes between different factions within Labour. Nevertheless, my research strongly supports the argument that it was their identification with feminism that made them most susceptible to attack. By depicting the committees as "feminist", critics seized upon and manipulated a popular stereotype. Rather than engage with the actual policies of the committees and the actual needs of women, they could repeat a few evocative phrases, call up an unreflective response, forestall debate and impede change. In some instances they were successful in achieving immobility: the Bristol committee became so enmired in its internal conflict that, as the arriving senior equalities

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<sup>442</sup> Lynn Barlow, *Evening Post*, 1.11.89.

<sup>443</sup> Interview 9 (24.8.94).

<sup>444</sup> Interview 9 (24.8.94).

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officer found in 1994, it failed to produce a statement of equal opportunities for women.<sup>445</sup>

In others, the persistence of the committee members, the fairness of their policies and their activities, and the support of sections of the community, eventually wore down the opposition. Their enemies did not, for the most part, turn into supporters, but they gradually lost interest and started to leave them alone.

In Islington, for example, press comment tailed off from the late 1980s. A councillor commented on the diminution of press opposition and corresponding changes amongst the electorate:

[...] a few years ago, well, up until quite recently, maybe two years ago, our local gazette was quite vicious trying to negate all the work that we did, and, just canvassing around now for these elections, we've come across a couple of women who are very angry that they got leaflets, I won't say who from, saying 'waste of money', and they are not going to vote for so and so because they don't support us. So there we are. And we did used to find on the doorstep, women's issues: waste of money, lesbians and gym-mats, that kind of thing, and that's completely disappeared.<sup>446</sup>

### **iii. Feminism: the Root of Conflict?**

It could be argued that constant disruption is inherent in the nature of feminism. Premised upon a critique of existing power relations and political institutions; grounded in the politics of personal experience; feminism and feminist initiatives developed with on-

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<sup>445</sup> Interview 21 (13.4.94).

<sup>446</sup> Interview 1 (15.4.94).



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going commitment to self-criticism and re-appraisal of their truthfulness.<sup>447</sup> This approach is un-political in the Machiavellian sense of keeping your eye fixed on the goal, keeping your beliefs to yourself, and doing whatever is necessary to ensure that the goal is achieved and secured.<sup>448</sup> Feminist initiatives are vulnerable because they are accessible to all women and invite their criticism and comments. They are open to attack, because they constantly appraise their own authenticity and take account of accusations of inauthenticity. Furthermore, many of the back-alleys of political manipulation are closed to them because they cannot - if they want to remain feminist - subordinate the means to the end if the means entails any risk of failing to give due respect to any woman or group of women or other section of the community which is deemed marginal or discriminated against.

On the whole this is desirable. Political programmes have too often ridden over the present well-being of the population in pursuit of a halcyon future.<sup>449</sup> However, careful matching of means to ends and self-scrutiny may slow a feminist initiative down in comparison with a more goal-oriented project. At the same time, the unusual nature of both feminist procedures and goals might make them vulnerable to criticisms of wasting time and paying too much attention to peripheral issues from more orthodox politicians.

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<sup>447</sup> I am using the term in the way that Vaclav Havel did when he describing the potential power possessed by ordinary people in oppressive regimes. In "The Power of the Powerlessness" he pointed to the changes that might result if everyone were to start "living in the Truth". By this he meant that action should match belief: that one should not act in one way in order to meet convention or avoid conflict while believing in another, and that one should avoid deluding either oneself or others. V. Havel et al, *The Power of the Powerless: citizens against the state in central-eastern Europe* (London, Hutchinson, 1985).

<sup>448</sup> This is the Machiavelli of *The Prince* who wrote, that it was better to be feared than loved and claimed that private beliefs had no place in political programmes.

<sup>449</sup> Isaiah Berlin discusses this in his introduction to Alexander Herzen's autobiography, *Childhood, Youth and Exile: Parts I and II of My Past and Thoughts*, translated by J. D. Duff (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1980). He describes Herzen's belief that life and value in the present should not be sacrificed in order to achieve an ideal state in the future. This belief was not grounded in hedonism, but in the value he placed upon individual people and life rather than distant goals.

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A feminist approach can seem very indirect. One councillor complained about what she considered to be the excessive discussion and reflection: "the way that most women's committees start up, it is articulate middle class women, normally those who've been marginalised in the past and so want to fight something and that's great and they move things forward but at the end of the day there's very little movement forward because all they want to do is vocalise their anger, their distress, their views and opinions and that stuff, and very little else."<sup>450</sup> This councillor may be accurate in some of her criticism of middle class women, but what she is pointing to is fundamental to feminism: women's anger and distress, and their views and opinions, **are** their politics. However, the councillor made an apt point: politics entails action, therefore feminists have to ensure that their scruples over principle do not result in paralysis.

Committee members with party political, rather than women's movement, backgrounds were not only frustrated by the personalisation of issues which sometimes took place. They were also, on occasion, shocked by the intensity of feeling which committees provoked amongst feminists in the community. One councillor gave the following account of a meeting with the community which was intended to iron out some misunderstandings:

[Two other councillors] and I went to meet the lesbians at their request and we had the most abrasive meeting I've ever had; I had two hours - we had two hours - of exhaustion: accusations flung at us that we weren't running it, we weren't pro-active, we weren't feminist enough, we weren't this, we weren't that, we weren't the other.<sup>451</sup>

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<sup>450</sup> Interview 12 (23.8.94).

<sup>451</sup> Interview 5 (23.6.94).

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In part such responses were provoked by simple disappointment with a committee's ability to deliver, but there was more to it than that. The councillors were not just criticised for what they were doing, but also for the way they were doing it, and for **the way they were**. The part of feminism which is bound up in female identity interprets compromise as betrayal, and this can result in conflict and division between women who share fundamental goals. Problems certainly arose from the high expectations placed upon the committees by feminists in the community when they confronted the bureaucracy and tendency towards compromise of local government procedures. One community representative said of another, "the Asian ethnic minority community rep [...] was very disappointed because she's a fighter and she's not used to compromise in doing things. She has had to fight hard to get her own life, she's naturally aggressive, and she finds that she's just wasting her time."<sup>452</sup>

The committees' intention to put feminist principles into practice in the employment of staff did not sit very comfortably with local authority norms:

[...] they appointed three officers, and the chair at the time [...] pushed for very high salaries for those three officers saying they weren't clerical level, which they weren't, but fought for quite a high grade for them which was perhaps a little over the top. [...] they were to work as a collective and this made difficulties because [...] it meant that if you wanted an answer from women's unit you had to wait until all three were on duty at the same time, one could not give you an answer.<sup>453</sup>

As a second councillor commented,

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<sup>452</sup> Interview 13 (28.4.95).

<sup>453</sup> Interview 5 (23.6.94).

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[...] that was fine from a feminist point of view, but not from a constructive working with and organisational point of view.<sup>454</sup>

There are two issues here: collective working, which proved difficult for the councillors on the committee and other council staff to cope with, and the relatively high pay. The second gave the local press a subject for a new article, "Fight for Rights at £14,000 a Year", and did not endear the unit to other council employees. On the subject of the women's officers, as with the adoption of a feminist approach to discussion and participation, the committees appear to get caught in the space between traditional and innovative politics: a creative position, yet one fraught with difficulty.

Women's and equalities officers were not always met with resentment. Even when securely installed, however, officers saw that their commitment could be storing up difficulties in the long term. As one officer said, her commitment to the unit and her identification with women's issues and feminism had not enhanced her career prospects within the local authority.<sup>455</sup> Describing oneself as a feminist and pursuing feminist goals in a feminist way also proved an impediment to the success of individual councillors. One councillor pointed out that "it is used [...] to categorise, minimalise and isolate one in local politics very much and that framework is a very useful tool for other politicians who seek to marginalise the work that you are trying to do."<sup>456</sup> A second councillor described how councillors measured their status according to which committees they sat on and chaired, and how the leader manipulated his party by the distribution of desirable positions. She

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<sup>454</sup> Interview 4 (23.6.94).

<sup>455</sup> Informal discussions at Islington.

<sup>456</sup> Interview 1 (1.4.94).

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explained why he had denied the most obviously suited councillor the Chair of the Women's Committee: "it was only X who actually spoke out and it didn't do her any good [...] she was a much better candidate than I was for chair of this committee, and was dying to chair this committee, [but] because she'd created problems [...], because she hadn't toed the line, and because [he] knew he couldn't control her [she did not get the post]"<sup>457</sup>

A rather different issue was the committees' concern about the quality of their membership, their responsiveness to women in the community, and their representativeness. Their feminism gave an edge to their democratic impetus and ensured that they were never quite satisfied: the experiential component of identity politics means that there will always be some doubt about whether one person is qualified to speak for any other. Thus there was always some doubt within the committees about their authenticity as representative of the interests of local women. This was beneficial in so far as it led to searches for new ways to achieve representation and efforts to include women from different sections of the community, yet it also prompts the question of whether the quest for representativeness distracted attention from effectiveness. One ex-community representative suggested that,

due to different political pushes within feminism at the time there was more of a push towards being representative of all the women in X, which is good, more black women particularly, but not looking at what strengths someone could realistically bring, so some women came who wanted, well, to further their careers, or didn't take it seriously enough.<sup>458</sup>

A second, largely unanswerable, question posed is whether introspection distracted the committees from action. An officer in one area suggested that this was the case, while in

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<sup>457</sup> Interview 12 (23.8.94).

<sup>458</sup> Interview 15 (28.4.95).

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another area an ex-member suggested that extensive self-examination had been introduced to **halt** the energetic activities of the women.<sup>459</sup>

The more successful of the committees in terms of achieving facilities and improvements for women, appear to have been somewhat accepting of their limitations. For example, the Islington committee only had four community representatives and did not try to mirror the diversity of the population, but directed itself at reaching out into the community through its surveys, information and training initiatives.

Feminism certainly provided opportunities for conflict, which were taken up by some members in the early days of the committees. When the committees were starting up there were disagreements about excluding men, about procedures for selecting co-optees and about where to direct energy and resources - all of which were underpinned by feminism. However, where there were serious rifts feminism was only a part of the picture. When the committee in Bristol split, divisive loyalties within the Labour party appear to have been of more significance than feminism, although it is difficult to separate the two. Certainly remaining members attributed the problems to leftism rather than feminism; a councillor described the path taken by one of the women involved in the conflict as follows: "I'm not quite sure of the sequence of events, I think it went something like this. She voted against the Labour whip, she was suspended from the Labour group, she resigned from the Labour group, she resigned from the Labour Party, she left the council and she joined the Socialist Worker's Party."<sup>460</sup> A pattern suggestive of a particular form of socialism rather than feminism.

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<sup>459</sup> Interviews 21 (13.4.94) and 14 (27.4.95).

<sup>460</sup> Interview 5 (23.6.94).

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In discussion of the conflict around changes made in the structure of the Leeds committee feminism often came up. It was suggested that changes were, in part, driven by a desire to exclude the more vocal feminists from the committee and to focus it upon equal opportunities rather than pro-woman policies. The picture is complicated and feminism appears in different guises: encouraging change in the shape of including a range of women's voices; resisting change when it appeared to be directed at excluding feminist voices; and as grounds for fear of the committee amongst uninvolved councillors. In fact much of what went on is best explained in old-fashioned political terms: the creation and destruction of power bases, and political careerism.

The results of the Women's Committee Survey suggest that the potential for division provided by different perspectives within feminism and the tension between equality and difference was rarely taken up. When feminism did figure in a crisis it was one of a matrix of issues and the situation tended to be one in which a committee was positioned against the rest of the council rather than against itself. As to relations within committees, the response of one community representative was telling: "they're issues that don't seem to create differences. I mean, there are nuances, of how you word something perhaps, but not real differences. And though in the number of years I have been on there, there have occasionally been co-opted people who might have a stronger line or a stronger bent towards a particular strand of feminism than others, it's never developed into tremendous rows."<sup>461</sup>

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<sup>461</sup> Interview 2 (7.4.94).

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### **iv. Feminism: The Solution to Problems and Conflict?**

My research suggests that feminism's greatest value to the committees was that it gave them a central organising principle. Although the theory may have been rather unspecific and may never have been discussed in much detail, it gave them a sense of direction and common cause. The women, and up to a point the men, involved agreed that women were unfairly disadvantaged by practices premised upon an ordering of gender which systematically privileged men, and that the committee should do something about it. The sense of common cause generated tremendous energy and commitment at different times.

In the early days of the Leeds committee for example,

[...] we were so busy being active, I mean, in one of the years there were two Crimes Against Women Conferences within six months as well as an election conference and the International Women's Day event, and that's because all the reps were really on the go and on the ball organising these things [...] we were really rushing about, and an incredible amount of energy.<sup>462</sup>

Changes in the culture of the committees referred to earlier were apparent in the rather more measured approach of present members. Nevertheless, effort was sustained and commitment still in evidence. According to one community representative:

we only have overstretched, unfunded volunteers who want to help individuals whom they can empathise with but haven't got the energy to tackle the wider issues of oppression and inequality. I have, luckily.<sup>463</sup>

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<sup>462</sup> Interview 15 (28.4.95).

<sup>463</sup> Questionnaire 51.



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The feminist belief that women could do things differently, and better, than men was strong although not universal. Tacitly supporting the assertion of a distinct female identity grounded in care and connection, many members not only believed that women and men had different political interests, but also that they possessed a different approach to politics. Questionnaire responses referred to women's emphasis on practical problems and problem solving compared with men's concern with more abstract issues and male politicians interest in status, power-seeking, and career advancement.<sup>464</sup> Women were perceived to be "more consensual and less obsessed with procedure".<sup>465</sup> This links the committees to the strand in feminism which proposes that women have a "different voice" and to the concept of maternal thinking. While committee members emphasised the particularity of women's approaches, they related this to women's engagement with the nitty-gritty of life in comparison with men's distance - one respondent wrote that "men like to manage and like to watch women carrying out the work".<sup>466</sup> On the whole respondents did not appear to think of these differences as essential to men and women and used phrases including "By virtue of their upbringing..", "not essentially different but..", and "men and women are not homogeneous categories.." to qualify their statements.<sup>467</sup> The belief that women could do things better gave force to the committees' attempts to change procedures and monitor the activities of the council at large referred to in Chapter Seven below.

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<sup>464</sup> Questionnaires 3, 4, 5, 18, 35, 37, 40, 52. Responses to questions 30 and 31.

<sup>465</sup> Questionnaire 21. Response to question 30.

<sup>466</sup> Questionnaire 29. Response to question 30.

<sup>467</sup> Questionnaires 23 and 15. Responses to questions 30 and 31.

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Feminist concern with differences between women drove the committees continually to improve upon their procedures for consulting and including as wide a range of women as possible. This could be both a disadvantage and an advantage. Where committees embarked upon major changes to their structures they ran the risk of focusing upon themselves rather than concentrating on improving conditions of employment and service delivery for local women. Nevertheless, various means used to include, consult, assist and inform local women were important in discovering women's different needs, supporting women's citizenship, and aiding effective policy-making.

While providing internal strength, feminism also linked the committees into the wider community of women's initiatives. In the words of a committee member, "when you look at the Women's Aid movement, that's the women's movement; Rape Crisis Centres, that's the women's movement; sexual abuse survivors, incest survivors movement, they all come from the women's movement as we knew it in the early 70s. But they exist in a different form and I think local government women's committees is also a form of the women's movement because it has women who come from that background."<sup>468</sup> This was significant in the movement of ideas between the committees and other organisations and groups, as discussed in Chapter Two above and Chapter Seven to follow. It also provided a source of support for initiatives from outside the council, as described by one member, "if there was a threat to women's services within the council it's quite easy to mobilise a lot of women outside who would put pressure on the council, who'd come and picket the front and chain doors and things, it's easy to do that."<sup>469</sup>

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<sup>468</sup> Interview 3 (7.9.94).

<sup>469</sup> Interview 16 (21.11.94).

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Through feminism it was possible to put local issues into national and international context, for example,

I realised there were a lot of parallels between Iranian women who were coming here as refugees and other women who were coming here as refugees, and also black women, who were living, had been living, were born in this country.<sup>470</sup>

This connection was realised by the Leeds committee, which set up an exchange with a women's committee in Germany. One member described her experience of meeting with her German colleagues:

By the time we went to Dortmund the officers and the councillor and me, we were the only white people among our group. All the rest, the other five or six, were Afro-Caribbean, there was somebody from the Yemen. I think the Dortmund people were a bit startled because their ethnic minorities are guest workers and they hadn't actually done very much, we drew that to their attention and they were very pleased about that, one of the things that we contributed to their perspective.<sup>471</sup>

My research suggests that identification with the universal issues of feminism gave the committees a sense of their difference from other local government committees and encouraged the development of links amongst themselves. Initiatives spread between women's committees through the auspices of the National Association of Local Government Women's Committees, and women from different areas were acquainted with each other through this as well as other local government and Labour party groups. Feminism was integral to the committees and its value far outweighed the inherent problems referred to in the previous sections of this chapter.

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<sup>470</sup> Interview 3 (7.9.94).

<sup>471</sup> Interview 13 (28.4.95).

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### **Conclusion**

On the whole feminism was a source of strength for the committees, gave force to their policies, linked them into wider issues and initiatives, and provided them with the support of women and feminist groups outside of formal politics. The equality versus difference issue which was divisive in academic and american feminism had little impact in terms of policy direction: committee members were too busy trying to achieve small gains for local women and defend themselves against their opposition to pay much attention to philosophy. In practice, they balanced gender equality against special consideration on an issue by issue basis. Members did, however, tend to believe that women were different from men in important and positive ways, particularly their political interests and behaviour.

The other aspect of difference, women's difference from each other, had more impact, but rarely resulted in division. The most significant effect was the committees' commitment to making themselves representative, accountable and responsive, even when it took up time and caused inconvenience and re-organisation. The presence of women from different backgrounds and with different lifestyles on the committees did not cause conflict internally, although it was food for their opponents.

Strangely enough we all got on well enough and it wasn't an issue. Everyone could band together against Councillor X because she was so extreme. I think the things we were doing didn't bring us into conflict with each other, we all worked together really well and there was always a mixture of lesbians and heterosexual women.<sup>472</sup>

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Interview 15 (28.4.95).

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Levels of commitment to feminism varied amongst members, sometimes causing misunderstanding but rarely conflict. Having followed different routes to a women's committee, and possessing different combinations of loyalties, co-optees and councillors tended to view themselves and each other differently. Some co-optees considered some councillors to be compromised by their party loyalty, while some councillors considered that the vision of some co-optees was narrowed by their commitment to feminism or their loyalty to a particular group. Since councillors possessed far greater power than co-optees this disparity did not turn into schism, although it was an element in the conflict experienced at Bristol prior to the Women's Committee Survey, described in Chapter Five above.

The feminism of the committees fuelled opposition, but it was central to their existence. Mistrust of women's initiatives was such that the committees could not fail to arouse antagonism, however emollient their approach. Even if they had eschewed any overt connection to feminism, the label "feminist", especially when attached to "lesbian", was simply too evocative, inflammatory and effective for it not to be used whenever a number of women gathered together to do something on behalf of women which did not include knitting socks or making tea for men.<sup>473</sup> As feminist bodies, the committees were remarkably conciliatory: politely trying to influence men by argument and example, carefully avoiding activities which would provide obvious provocation for the press or

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<sup>473</sup> In her article "Resisting the Erasure of Lesbian Sexuality" Anne Marie Smith suggests that "the figure of the lesbian or, more precisely, the black lesbian is used to invalidate the Labour Party's support for a whole range of feminist, black, disabled, and lesbian and gay projects. This tactic was used, for example, in leaflets distributed by the Conservative Party local constituency association in Surbiton before the May 1991 elections. [...] References to the illegitimacy of funding for black lesbian projects were also made by both left- and right-wing politicians throughout the debates on the abolition of the GLC.", K. Plummer (ed), *Modern Homosexualities* (London, Routledge, 1992) p 208.

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opposition, and seeking the approval of all sections of women in the community. They were nonetheless resolute, and their successes have been the result of their determination.

Contrary to the impression which has perhaps been given so far, the women's committees I studied were far more concerned with doing things to improve women's lives than with examining their own procedures. It is their concrete achievements in the community and within the council organisation that will finally determine whether the effort to establish special committees with special representation was worthwhile. This is the subject of the following chapter which looks at how the committees operated and how successful they were in pursuing projects which were to the benefit of women.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **Putting it All Together: What Women's Committees Did to Realise Their Goals**

Democracy, as Hanna Pitkin reminds us, is not just about being. It is, more importantly, about doing. Chapter Five described how the women's committees demonstrated a democratic will by establishing accountable and responsive mechanisms around themselves and by pursuing equality in their internal practices. Chapter Six described the feminist will exhibited by the committees in their concern both for issues relevant to women and the way that issues were addressed. Having asserted their democratic and feminist credentials, they then had to act. This chapter examines what the one committee and four sub-committees investigated did, in order to discover to what extent they managed to pursue democratic and feminist goals. Did the committees make the community more involved in democracy? Did they make the local authority any more democratically responsive or accountable? Did they achieve the feminist goals of making women's voices heard and improving women's access to the benefits of citizenship?

In order to answer these questions this chapter explores whether the committees got more women involved in making decisions, introduced new items to the political agenda, and encouraged women to initiate projects and to get more involved in politics. Furthermore, it considers whether the committees made services more responsive to

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women's needs, improved women's conditions of employment within the council, and initiated different ways of doing things derived from women's perspectives. Importantly, it asks whether the committees succeeded in taking account of differences amongst women. The projects described here are only a small selection of those taken up by the five committees. Their activities were many, varied, and not always documented. Much was undertaken in response to grass-roots initiatives and the committees moved rapidly from one project to another, often starting something up and then never returning to see what happened. As a result, their programmes often appeared to be haphazard and fragmented.

Since the committees possessed very limited resources, their power lay primarily in their ability to influence the council and the outside world. They did this in four ways; first, through their own efforts, and the efforts of women's and equalities' officers, to start initiatives, projects and campaigns; secondly, by monitoring council business and drawing attention to anything that had relevance for women through the mainstream committees; thirdly, by working with organisations outside the council to promote women's interests; and finally, by giving financial support to women's groups and initiatives.<sup>474</sup> The full committee had some funding from which it could give support to local women's events and groups, and sub-committees could influence the grant-giving of their parent committees.

Technically, a full committee had greater power than a sub-committee. A committee possessed its own funds, had control over how these were spent and had a degree

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<sup>474</sup> From research into the London Borough of Ealing, Fisher concluded that the Women's Committee and Unit had developed policies for both the council's internal conduct and its practice of service provision. The Committee had been able to influence the policies of other departments, such as, the provision of child-care facilities by Planning and the prioritising of domestic violence victims by Housing, P.A Fisher, *Women Empowered? An Examination of Local Government Gender Structures* (South Bank Polytechnic, 1989/90) p 36-49.



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of authority by virtue of its status. A sub-committee, by comparison, could only give advice to and make requests of the committee to which it reported.<sup>475</sup> However, committee status was only one variable amongst several to play a part in determining the effectiveness of a committee. The others included the type of local authority, the level of support, and the amount of resources made available. My research suggests that there was interplay between formal and informal factors which meant that a committee's formal status might be less relevant to its efficacy than informal considerations. Of particular relevance were the support (or resistance) of the council leadership, the presence (or absence) of established and powerful councillors on the committee and the support (or indifference) from groups in the community.<sup>476</sup>

This was illustrated by the experiences of two areas, a London borough with a full committee and a shire district with a sub-committee. Amongst the range of its activities, the Islington Women's Committee conducted surveys into the needs of local women, organised programmes of training sessions, ran regular women's lunches, produced an extensive range of literature to assist and inform the women of Islington, and organised activity days for school leavers to demonstrate the opportunities available to them.<sup>477</sup> They did this using

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<sup>475</sup> From her research into the sixty-one local authorities affiliated to the National Association of Local Government Women's Committees (NALGWC) in 1989/90 Fisher concluded that "[h]igher status structures ...are given higher staffing allocation and budget levels. Therefore they are in a better position in terms of resourcing to address...a wide range of policies". However, she found that the efficacy of women's committees was compromised by the limitation of only being able to make recommendations without responsibility for implementation of policy decisions. P.A Fisher *Women Empowered? An Examination of Local Government Gender Structures*, p 36-49 and p 61.

<sup>476</sup> A point also made by J. Edwards in her article, "Local Government Women's Committees", *Critical Social Policy* No 24 (Winter 1988/1989): "the nature of the policy process is such that many aspects of the bureaucratic machine need to be in harmony in order to bring about any desired end", p 53.

<sup>477</sup> Islington: Women's Equality Unit Annual Report 1992/3; Women's Equality Unit Work Programme 1993/94 Monitoring Report.

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their funding and the complementary work of the equalities' officers.<sup>478</sup> Despite its sub-committee status Oxford City Council Women's Sub-committee was similarly effective. It established initiatives including a shoppers' creche and a Women's Training Centre, for which they won European Community funding, secured women-only time at leisure centres and was involved in the Zero Tolerance campaign and the Women's Environmental Network.<sup>479</sup> These achievements were the result of strong support from organised women outside the council, the presence of influential councillors on the committee, the ability and dedication to mobilise external resources, and a long-term strategy of increasing the numbers of women councillors.<sup>480</sup> The two bodies achieved a similar level of effectiveness despite their difference in formal powers. However, Islington managed to do more because it had greater resources and was in an authority with more extensive responsibilities. On the other hand, just as a sub-committee could be enabled by the support of the committee to which it reported, a full committee could be constrained by the absence of support and resources.

This chapter looks first at the pursuits of the committees studied in terms of those activities they generated themselves, those they generated through their influence upon other committees and departments, those generated in partnership with external bodies, and finally, the implications of their capacity to make grants to local groups and organisations. In the second half of the chapter these activities are considered in terms of their significance for

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<sup>478</sup> Ibid.

<sup>479</sup> Interview 9 (24.8.94); Agenda Public Affairs (Women's) Sub-Committee Monday 10th January 1994.

<sup>480</sup> Interview 9 (24.8.94).

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enhancing democracy and implementing feminist goals. Here I attempt to answer the question asked at the end of Chapter Three, whether the creation of new democratic forums has any effect upon policies and policy outcomes. The discussion is organised around four themes: freeing women from constraints which inhibit political involvement; encouraging women's potential; raising the profile of women, their interests and their perspectives; and setting an example to the council and the wider community.

### **How the Committees Pursued Their Goals**

#### **i. Self-generated Activities**

Even the best resourced women's committees had very small allocations of money and staff in comparison to other, mainstream, committees. They therefore sought to use what they had to best advantage. A large part of their energy was taken up by monitoring and influencing other committees and departments and outside bodies; however, they also generated projects themselves, often in order to stimulate action on the part of other people. Good use was made of questionnaires and small research projects to determine local need. For example, a questionnaire distributed by the fledgling Oxford sub-committee reached a broad spectrum of the female population and demonstrated that the women of Oxford wanted a women's training centre; this was subsequently established with European Community funding, and passed over to the Employment and Economic Development Committee for on-going support.<sup>481</sup> Islington Women's Committee used surveys for a range

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<sup>481</sup> Interview 9 (24.8.94).

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of purposes, in some cases drawing in external funding for the research. A survey on job occupancy, commissioned during the early days of the committee, found significant inequalities which gave leverage to their pressure for improved employment practices.<sup>482</sup> Another employment issue led Islington to undertake a survey of female care-taking staff with a view to pressing for increased female recruitment.<sup>483</sup>

While questionnaires and surveys were widely adopted as guides to need and satisfaction with services, women's committees pursued their goal of informing and engaging with the wider community through regular newsletters, publications concerning specific issues, conferences and open days around different topics.<sup>484</sup> International Women's Day proved to be a focus in all areas and various events were arranged or sponsored every year.<sup>485</sup>

In order for most women, particularly the hidden women whom committees wanted to reach, to be able to get more involved in public affairs they need to release some free time

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<sup>482</sup> Important findings were that the occupants of the council's 50 best-paid jobs were male, employees in the top five grades were male, and that of the 30 staff in the sixth grade only one was a woman. It also found that at the other end of the scale - care assistants, home helps and nursery assistants - women were in a large majority. Not one of the councils 34 chief officers and deputy chief officers was a woman. *Evening Standard* 5.11.82; *Islington Gazette* 5.11.82. Islington has also undertaken surveys on domestic violence and the take-up of leisure facilities by women.

<sup>483</sup> "Women Into Caretaking in Islington " Report of the Chief Executive, 23.6.93.

<sup>484</sup> For example, *Leeds Women: Newsletter of the Leeds City Council Women's Committee*, published by the Equal Opportunities Unit; *Opportunities for Women: Islington's Guide to Classes and Training for Women with No or Few Qualifications 1993-4* 4th Edition, published by the Women's Equality Unit and the Urban Regeneration Unit; *Islington Women's Guide: Information and Resources* 2nd Edition, 1990, produced by Islington Council Press, Campaign and Publicity Unit on behalf of the Women's Committee Support Unit. Conferences topics included: Safety and Self-Defence in North Tyneside (*Newcastle Journal* 21.11.88); Violence Against Women, Women's Training and Women and Enterprise in North Tyneside (*Newcastle Journal* 15.8.89); pornography in Bristol in 1990, Interview 5 (23.6.94).

<sup>485</sup> *International Women's Day Events Report*, Bristol Equalities and Community Development Committee (Women's Advisory) Sub-Committee 29 June 1994; articles in the local press invited North Tyneside women's groups to apply to the women's issues committee for funds to organise projects for International Women's Day, *Evening Chronicle*, 13.7.94.

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from their existing domestic and work responsibilities. For women with small children the availability of child care was and is vital. Committees and officers provided child care at all the events they organised, including public meetings, and they constantly lobbied for account to be taken of child care, and the care of adult dependents, in all aspects of council business.<sup>486</sup> One councillor told of how it was a standing joke that she would have "What About the Creche?" tattooed on her forehead, so that instead of repeating it at council meetings she could just lift up her hair.<sup>487</sup>

The provision of child care was not just a goal in itself; more importantly, it was a means to enable women to make choices about work, leisure, and commitment. Therefore, committees and units worked to provide information and training about opportunities in employment and community affairs, and about what services were available to assist people who were disadvantaged by poverty or care responsibilities.<sup>488</sup> However, the research shows that running their own projects was not the primary concern of women's committees and officers. They were aware of the dangers of marginalisation and of the need to place women's perspectives at the centre. Therefore, integrating their agenda with that of other committees and departments was given high priority.

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<sup>486</sup> Accounts of child care initiatives are given in the following. Islington: *Women's Equality Unit Annual Report 1992/3* and *Women's Equality Unit Work Programme 1993/94 Monitoring Report*. North Tyneside: *Childcare: the magazine of Childcare North Tyneside*, the Communications Unit, North Tyneside Council, 1995. Oxford: *Oxford Times* 14.9.1991. Leeds: *Under Eights Unit - Progress Report*, Report of the Executive Director Community Services Committee: Nursery and Under Eights, 9.2.94; *Leeds Women: Newsletter of Leeds City Council Women's Committee*, Spring 1995.

<sup>487</sup> Interview 16 (21.11.94).

<sup>488</sup> Examples included the Women's Training Centre in Oxford, the 'Women's Voices, Public Voices' initiative in Islington and 'Women Take a Chance' in Leeds as well as a range of conferences and training schemes. Details are given in the following sections.

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### ii. Influence on other Committees and Departments

The influence that women's committees exerted upon the policies and activities of other, more mainstream, committees was not their most high-profile activity: that dubious privilege fell to grant-giving. Nevertheless, it was their most important. Committees, and especially sub-committees, had little power of their own and they were constantly at risk of becoming dumping grounds where everything to do with women could be pushed and forgotten.<sup>489</sup> If change for women was to be achieved, all departments of local government had to take it on as a serious concern. If this was to happen it could not be left up to the departments themselves, for there were too many other legitimate interests vying for attention. There had to be a pressure group constantly monitoring the departmental agendas and reminding officers, councillors and political parties that many of the things they did had particular implications for women.<sup>490</sup> As one co-opted member pointed out,

[...] the sort of work that the women's committee does is to make certain that women's issues are on the agendas of other committees, for one[...] then to take up specific issues as they arise.<sup>491</sup>

Loretta Loach credited women's committees with focusing pressure on the Labour Party to reconsider its policies on women, and challenging the inflexibility of council practices.<sup>492</sup> Similarly, Jan Parker described the potential for the committees to change local

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<sup>489</sup> S. Goss pointed this out: "Women's Initiatives in Local Government" in M. Boddy and C. Fudge (eds), *Local Socialism: Labour Councillors and New Left Alternatives* (London, Macmillan, 1984).

<sup>490</sup> For example, North Tyneside Women's Issues Committee exerted pressure for equalities monitoring on the Personnel Department, Agenda of the Women's Issues Committee Monday 21 November 1994.

<sup>491</sup> Interview 2 (7.4.94).

<sup>492</sup> L. Loach, "Can Feminism Win?", *Spare Rib* 134 (September 1983) p 30 and "Local Government: what have women got to lose?" *Spare Rib* 151 (February 1985).

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conditions for women, and the broad significance of their particular approach to council work, particularly working across departments. She expressed a warning which all women's committees would come to echo: "[t]he difficulties often lie not so much 'out there' in the community as within the council itself."<sup>493</sup> The results of my research supported both the value of working across departments and the need for constant vigilance. For example, the North Tyneside committee found that despite the council having called itself an Equal Opportunities employer for some years, the Personnel Department of North Tyneside Council was not monitoring the gender and ethnic mix of people offered employment.<sup>494</sup> I found that all the committees worked by both monitoring the activities of various departments, and coaxing them to take on particular initiatives.

Many of the councillor members interviewed were proud that their committees had succeeded in pressuring other parts of the council into considering gender issues and taking responsibility for projects that women's committees had initiated. One councillor described how other parts of the council took over their ideas as they were their own:

Child care never started from the social services committee or the education committee, child care came about because the women's committee was saying, 'what about child care, what about the creche, why can't we have a creche, we want creches set up', so there was this constant pressure. What I find quite amusing is that quite a lot of the things that other people have taken credit for starting in the council actually started in the women's committee. Now, if they want to take the ball and pretend it's theirs well that's fine by me, because I know where the energy came from in the first place - it didn't come from any of the hierarchical departments that they have!<sup>495</sup>

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<sup>493</sup> J. Parker "Labour Women: the battle for a political voice", *Spare Rib* 109 (August 1981) p 7.

<sup>494</sup> Agenda of the Women's Issues Committee Monday 21 November 1994. Interview 16 (21.11.94).

<sup>495</sup> Interview 16 (21.11.94).

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Persuading different departments to take responsibility was both an economic necessity and a shrewd political strategy:

[...] the other way in which the sub-committee has operated [...] is [...] that it should not have a large budget of its own, because however large the budget it would be very small compared to the total budget of the council, that the approach the sub-committee ought always to take was that it was effectively a kind of monitoring and gingering committee on other service committees. And so, the women's training scheme, for example, is part of the Employment and Economic Development Committee - in fact it's the biggest item in their budget - which means then that they are the committee who take the lead and they have an investment in keeping it going. The Shoppers' Creche was part of the Chief Exec's and the Equal Opportunities, so that is actually dependent on the Women's Sub-Committee, but the other creches in all the recreation facilities are a function of the Recreation Committee and it comes out of their budget.<sup>496</sup>

Departments targeted by women's committees included Planning, Housing, Recreation or Leisure, Personnel, Education and Social Services. In the spirit described above, committees initiated projects and then ensured that other committees and departments took them on. Alternatively, equalities officers working in different departments introduced the women's committee's agenda to their host department.<sup>497</sup> Women's committees came into being at a time when the role and resources of local government were called into question, and their continued existence was in the context of changing organisation and practice, and increasingly controlled resources. Thus their ability to work with outside organisations was not only politically desirable, but also economically advisable.

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<sup>496</sup> Interview 9 (24.8.94).

<sup>497</sup> This approach was adopted in Islington.



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### iii. Working with External Bodies

Working with outside bodies is a more conventional activity for a local government committee than the internal monitoring function performed by women's committees. I found that women's committees and sub-committees took it up enthusiastically as a way to advance their goals in the wider community and raise the profile of women's perspectives. From their research into feminism and politics, Lovenduski and Randall gave details of the co-operative initiatives of a number of women's committees including those in "Leeds and Norwich [which] instituted committees in which rape crisis workers, women's aid workers, police, and welfare professionals concerned about violence to women regularly take part."<sup>498</sup>

My research showed all the committees taking part to be engaged in some form of co-operation with external bodies in order to address domestic violence. For example, Oxford City Council Women's Sub-Committee participated in a multi-agency approach to domestic violence which included the Chief Executives Department of the council, Oxford City Division of Social Services, Oxford and District Victim Support, Thames Valley Police, the Housing and Revenues Department of the council, Central Services Department of the council, Thames Valley Partnership, Crown Prosecution Service, Oxfordshire Probation Service, Women's Aid, Department of Psychology, Warneford Hospital, and Jericho Health Centre.<sup>499</sup>

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<sup>498</sup> J. Lovenduski and V. Randall *Contemporary Feminist Politics: Women and Power in Britain* (Oxford University Press, 1993) p 332.

<sup>499</sup> Agenda for the Public affairs (Women's) Sub-Committee Monday 7th March 1994.

### **Putting It All Together**

The co-operation and co-ordination of such a range of relevant bodies made it possible to address the issues in a comprehensive and coherent way. The many different immediate concerns, which included tenure and transfer of council tenants, the enforcement of court orders, and the safeguarding of children's interests could be addressed together. As a result, strategies to protect and inform women and children, and to prevent violence could be developed which involved all the relevant agencies. Amongst the committees studied, co-operative initiatives included participation in moves to provide anonymity on the electoral register for women under threat of violence, the production of information leaflets, and participation in the Zero Tolerance Campaign.<sup>500</sup> The inter-agency approach provided a forum for the development and sharing of ideas. These included the initiative by a Housing Department to develop its policies to include violence towards older women by children or carers and to ease women's change of accommodation.<sup>501</sup> It also provided the opportunity to share information with Multi-Agency groups from other areas. Other policy areas where co-operation with external bodies occurred include health and child care.

#### **iv. Grant Giving**

The one direct power that the committees had was that of using their resources to fund local women's groups and initiatives. Full committees had their own funding and could allocate grants directly; sub-committees were only able to make suggestions and offer approval or disapproval of allocations made by their parent committees. They used this

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<sup>500</sup> Ibid.

<sup>501</sup> Islington Women's Equality Unit Annual Report 1993/4.

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facility to attempt to reach sections of the community which would otherwise not have been touched by local government. Since funds were limited, and each authority had rules governing allocation, criteria for eligibility, the number of grants and the amount of each grant were limited. From research into two local authorities P.M Bottomley concluded that women's committees and units tended to avoid issues which would raise conflict with the controlling group on the council, and to adopt courses of action most likely to gain support.<sup>502</sup> Nevertheless, particularly in the early years of the committees, some grant allocations gave rise to conflict and adverse publicity. One much-quoted incident was the £600 grant for a women's group in Islington to buy sports equipment - the "gym mats for lesbians" affair - which took years to disappear.<sup>503</sup> Grants were for the most part small and given to non-controversial organisations: much of the finance of any committee was taken up by child care-related funding.<sup>504</sup> However, committees have used their grant-giving

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<sup>502</sup> P. M. Bottomley *The Political Interactions of Women's Initiatives in Local Government* (Department of Urban Planning, Leeds Polytechnic, May 1990).

<sup>503</sup> *Islington Gazette* 14.6.85. This issue re-appeared in 1995 when problems in children's homes in Islington caused the press to re-examine the career of Margaret Hodge, ex-leader of Islington council and now an MP. *Guardian* 27.5.95.

<sup>504</sup> Between 1988 and 1991 funding given by Bristol City Women's committee included: the Mobile Creche, Safe Women's Transport, HALOW, Bristol One Parent Project, Well Women Information, Withywood Association for Neighbourhood Day care, Bangladesh Association Women's Group, Bristol Chinese Women's Group, Dignity for Isolated Disabled Women, Elmlea Summer Playscheme, Bristol Summer Play. As a sub-committee in 1994 it gave grants to a number of organisations to fund International Women's Day events. (Agenda Equalities and Community Development (Women's Advisory) Sub-Committee 29th June 1994). In 1993 Leeds Women's Committee made grant allocations to Swillington Women's Group, Two Willows Women's Group, Girls Drama Group, Age Concern, Roundabout Women's Group, Laurel Bank Women's Group, Centrepoint Women's Group and Saathi Advice Group. The sums ranged from £300 to £450 and were given to pay for educational equipment, training or tutoring, and child care (Agenda, Leeds Women's Committee 30th November 1993). In 1994 Oxford City Council Women's Sub-Committee was asked to make recommendations on grants applications from: East Oxford Women's Counselling Service; Family News; International Women's Week Collective; National Council or One-Parent Families; Oxford Black Women's Support Group; Oxford Campaign Against Domestic violence; Oxford Lesbian Line; Oxford Rape Crisis; Oxford Women's Nightbus; Oxfordshire Family Conciliation Service; Parentline; Oxfordshire Refugee Council; Relate; Redbridge Travellers Women's Support Group; WEA Margaret Sanders Branch; Joint Breastfeeding Initiative and the National Childbirth Trust. The amounts requested ranged from £300 for the Oxford Women's Nightbus to £1,800 for Oxford Lesbian Line,

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powers for major projects; for example Bristol, when it had a full committee, funded a women's transport scheme to facilitate the movement of elderly or disabled women who would otherwise have been unable to leave their homes.<sup>505</sup>

By giving grants to local groups and organisations committees intended to benefit women in the community in two ways. First, they could go some way towards satisfying a need in the community which was considered to be within the brief of the committee; second, they could enhance women's power over their own lives. In setting an agenda for grant allocation each committee had to take account of the funds available, any limitations established by the council, the availability of grants from other sources, and what it hoped to achieve by the pattern of its allocations. A committee could only give grants to groups that applied for funding, therefore publicity and outreach work were important.

Committees, and subcommittees where they had the opportunity, used their grant-giving powers to draw in groups from the community which would normally be outside the reach of a local authority.

[...] and from the point of view of giving grants to women's organisations, the amount of grants that the women's sub-committee gives out are a kind of residual budget. What we insist is that sporting organisations, or arts organisations, that happen to be for women get their fair share of the Sports and Arts budget. Health groups, the Health budget, and so on. And that the only organisations that we pick up are those which quite clearly don't fit into any of the other committees. So we have a very small budget in grants to women's organisations and indeed we are having quite a bit of difficulty in even spending what we've got because we've

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and £10,000 for the Oxfordshire Refugee Council (Agenda, Public Affairs (Women's) Sub-Committee Monday 7th March 1994).

<sup>505</sup> The Women's Transport Scheme was so controversial that the local paper has a whole file it.

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been so successful in pushing everything off onto the other committees.<sup>506</sup>

Thus grants were given to lesbian, black and Asian women's groups and to women's centres. A problem, which runs like a refrain throughout this research, was that of reaching women at the margins. From its early days the Islington committee appealed for working class women to come forward with ideas to be funded, and the Oxford and Bristol committees found that middle class white women dominated the requests for grant-aid.<sup>507</sup> My research suggests that reaching women at the margins requires more than simply advertising services. It requires a long-term policy and practice of outreach which places heavy demands on resources and provides slow rewards. As a committee member whose job involved working with chinese women pointed out:

Awareness of women's issues or women's rights is so low you are really talking about starting right at the very basic. At some of the traditional families it is not accepted that women should go out and work, it is not accepted that women should have education...So it's not talking about, well, we've got a very good retraining programme encouraging women to go back, and it's not talking about let's go and produce a leaflet in chinese to encourage these women to come out, because even if you do that they won't come out because they have to attract a lot of alienation from their own community, from families, before they can do that...you are talking about such long-term work, starting at very basic levels, it is a totally different story.<sup>508</sup>

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<sup>506</sup> Interview 9 (24.8.94).

<sup>507</sup> *Islington Gazette* 1.4.83. This was not an isolated problem. In Iceland, for example, Lena Dominelli and Gudrun Jonsdottir found that the bulk of resources established under the auspices of the Kwenna Frambothid (Feminist Party) and made available to all women, including creches, advice services and a women's centre, were used primarily by middle-class women. "Feminist Political Organisation in Iceland: Some Reflections on the Experience of Kwenna Frambothid", *Feminist Review*, p 40, 1988,

<sup>508</sup> Interview 8 (8.8.94).

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Through working in these different ways - across committees, in conjunction with outside organisations and giving grants - the committees attempted to ensure that consideration of women and women's perspectives was not marginalised. Councillors interviewed believed that they had secured the place of women's issues on the agenda and women's officers on the staff by enmeshing them in the business of different departments and generating connections to them in the community.<sup>509</sup> The second part of this chapter considers how the committees enhanced participation in democracy amongst women and pursued feminist goals.

### **Democratic Implications of the Committees' Projects**

The following discussion of the activities undertaken by women's committees is organised around the question posed in Chapter Three about their democratic nature and potential. Chapter Five concluded that the committees were pursuing an inclusive and deliberative form of democracy in terms of their membership and their ways of working, and that they were committed to ensuring that their representation of women was accountable and responsive; Chapter Six maintained that feminism was central to their motivation and staying power. The following analysis considers the ways in which the committees attempted to enhance access to the benefits of citizenship amongst women, and addresses the question of whether the special representation on the committees made a difference to what they did.

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<sup>509</sup> Interviews 1 (15.4.94) and 16 (21.11.94).

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The policies promoted by women's committees and the activities they undertook can be understood in terms of four types of goal: freeing women from constraints; encouraging women's potential; raising the profile of women's interests and perspectives; and setting an example of good practice. All of these draw on democratic and feminist ideas discussed in previous chapters. They grow out of the feminist critique of democracy which claims that women experience a different sort of citizenship from men, which denies them full access to its benefits. They draw upon approaches to democracy which claim that participation in political activities enhances the individual's political efficacy, and which suggest that true democracy entails putting mechanisms in place to enhance equal participation. Finally, they draw on feminist and democratic critiques which suggest that women might find ways of doing things differently from the men who have always determined the rules, and that there are many different sections and interests in a community, all of which are relevant to democratic politics.

#### **i. Releasing Women from Constraints**

A point that stands out in feminist theories and feminist critiques of democracy is the assertion that women experience citizenship differently from men. It has been suggested that the rights and duties which comprise citizenship have been shaped around the male body and life experience so as to exclude the female body and experiences deriving from female-ness. According to critics, this model of the citizen resulted in a conception of equality which dismissed differences in the ability to make use of opportunities when such differences derived from embodiment and the different responsibilities which appeared to be

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inseparable from embodiment. Hence, perceptions of equal access and treatment did not take account of pregnancy, nor of women's traditional caring responsibilities, nor of the vulnerability which derived from a history of being less well educated, paid and trained, nor of the intangible constraints which derived from women's history as the property of men, subject to their will and their might. In the light of this criticism, women's committees' efforts to improve conditions for women are revealed as possessing significance for a wider constituency than the relatively few women who benefitted from the child care, employment policies and leisure facilities that they promoted or the training and grants that they provided. Their efforts to release women from the constraints imposed by caring responsibilities and the threat of violence were important because they sought to give women the opportunity to participate more in the public sphere if they chose.

The issue most strongly connected to women's committees was one which was strongly implicated in women's differential citizenship: child care.<sup>510</sup> All committees and officers took this on, organising shoppers' creches, especially at Christmas, and creches at council leisure facilities.<sup>511</sup> Women's committees and units established creches themselves, pressured their councils and the different departments, and advised anyone interested in setting up a creche or nursery.<sup>512</sup> Often, the creches they established were handed over to other bodies once they had become successful. For example, Leisure Centres took over creches on their facilities and local businesses took over Shoppers' Creches.<sup>513</sup> The

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<sup>510</sup> Child Care was the topic of the NALGWC quarterly meeting in October 1993.

<sup>511</sup> Interview 9 (24.8.94).

<sup>512</sup> Islington Women's Equality Unit Annual Report 1992/93 and Work Plan 1993/94.

<sup>513</sup> *Oxford Mail* 14.9.91



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committees and officers extended their activities out into the community, for example, an officer from the Islington Women's Equality Unit (WEU) oversaw the production of a feasibility study into developing employment related nursery provision, funded by the Urban Programme, which was used to obtain funding for the development of a community nursery. She also convened working group meetings between the community and employers in order to establish child care provision and advised employers and community groups on the establishment of nurseries. In 1992 and 1993 the Islington Unit's Women and Child care Co-ordinator was seconded to the Education Service, where she worked on joint projects between the WEU and Education. These included work on services, and related information services, for Under-Eights and under-fives and nursery and child care provision.<sup>514</sup>

The pressure exerted by the women's committee upon North Tyneside Council bore fruit in the form of "Childcare", a comprehensive strategy established in 1990. Childcare encompassed nurseries for pre-school children, school holiday schemes, and facilities to fill in the gaps before and after school hours. It also provided creches at a range of facilities including: a mobile creche; a training, registration and inspection system for childminders; and a nanny-matching service. The council approached the development of Childcare as a partnership with parents and employers and recently established an independent company to carry on its principles, with all profits to be re-invested back into the community.<sup>515</sup> The

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<sup>514</sup> The concern to develop the conception of citizenship to include characteristics specific to women extended to the introduction of other child-related issues to the political agenda. For example, the Oxford committee's involvement with breast-feeding. The sub-committee asked the Environmental Health Department to see that restaurants were judged on breast-feeding facilities, the Planning Department to negotiate with developers to include suitable facilities, and Oxford City Council itself to improve facilities on its own premises. *Oxford Mail* 14.12.90.

<sup>515</sup> *Childcare: The Magazine of Childcare, North Tyneside*, published by North Tyneside Council September, 1995. "Initially the decision was taken to expand existing services so that parents who could afford to pay could take a place at the nurseries - the money generated could then be used to help those who could not afford to pay. We were then able to expand our nurseries and employers could contract with us for

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women's committee of North Tyneside made use of the changing environment of local government in its pursuit of good child care and chose to regard change as opportunity. In the opinion of councillors and officers the council was no longer simply a provider of services to a passive public. One councillor spoke of the approach to service provision as follows:

What's interesting in the Consultation Task Group that I've been chairing [is that] we've been working out a way of getting from a paternalistic consulting group that's saying 'we are the council what services do you want us to deliver?', to it being a much more participative process where we say to people, 'how would you like your area to look in five years time? What would you like to have in it?' And to go through all the steps of that, whether it's infrastructure, like having no cars on the estate, an area of children's play, or whatever, through to want[ing] elderly people to be cared for properly. But to be taken through that process and then to say to them 'OK the council comes in with X, Y and Z, what are you going to add to the process?' So it's much more of a - I suppose the Conservatives would say it's citizen participation, but [...] I think in terms of empowering them to start making changes, [which] is a lot more interesting than coming along as a benevolent institution constantly cleaning up the place.<sup>516</sup>

Child care facilities can help women to make greater use of the different opportunities available, but women are often inhibited by the threat or the actuality of male violence.<sup>517</sup> They may feel trapped in their homes, particularly after dark, by the dangers lurking around dark corners, or they may be literally trapped by violence within their

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a number of places [...] All profits made by the new company will be invested into ensuring the Council continues to provide a good service to its clients and back into North Tyneside to be used for child care [...] Employees working in facilities in the North Tyneside area will still be employees of North Tyneside Council." p 20.

<sup>516</sup> Interview 16 (21.11.94).

<sup>517</sup> Violence Against Women was the topic of two of the quarterly meetings held by NALGWC in April and June 1993.

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homes.<sup>518</sup> Committees sought to address this on two levels, first, in terms of prevention, by lobbying for the implementation of safety measures, including women's transport schemes, and, second, by raising awareness of violence and promoting ways of providing help after the event. On the first point, committees raised issues with Planning and Maintenance departments to ensure that roads and pathways were adequately lit and not shaded by overgrown shrubbery.<sup>519</sup> They also encouraged or sponsored women's transport schemes to assist the most vulnerable.<sup>520</sup>

On the second point, all the committees co-ordinated with other bodies to raise awareness and improve strategies for dealing with the effects of violence and all were taking part in the Zero Tolerance campaign to raise awareness of domestic violence, which was started in Edinburgh in 1992; they also took part in conferences around violence organised by NALGWC.<sup>521</sup> Islington Women's Equality Unit undertook a survey on domestic violence, the results of which were presented at the NALGWC conference. The same survey results also underpinned policy proposals made by the Islington committee to Islington Council.<sup>522</sup>

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<sup>518</sup> The NALGWC quarterly meeting of June 1993 focused on violence in the home.

<sup>519</sup> Interview 16 (21.11.94); This is evident in the records of the Bristol and Islington committees.

<sup>520</sup> *Safe Transport in Bristol* produced by S. Mann of Bristol and Avon Community Enterprise Network and T. Fowler of Bristol Community Transport (August 1993); *Islington Borough Plan for Women and Safe Women's Transport*, mentioned by *Caribbean Times*, 1.8.86 and *Islington Gazette* 19.12.86; Oxford Women's Sub-committee approved funding for Oxford Women's Nightbus in 1994.

<sup>521</sup> Violence Against Women: Challenges for the 90s, National Association of Local Government Women's Committees, April and June 1993.

<sup>522</sup> Report to NALGWC Quarterly Meeting, Leeds April 93.

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Islington Women's Equality Unit also obtained a grant from Islington Safer Cities to employ a Domestic Violence co-ordinator.<sup>523</sup> Amongst the projects she worked on in 1992-3, she contributed to the elder abuse policy being developed through social services. The unit also produced a Good Practice Guide, "Working With Those Who Have Experienced Domestic Violence", which was distributed for use by council staff, particularly those in Neighbourhood offices. In pursuit of the committee's goals the Domestic Violence Co-ordinator liaised with council officers and other agencies, including refuges, health visitors, women's groups, black and minority ethnic women's groups, police domestic violence units and the probation service. The unit also co-operated in a Home Office funded project, "Domestic Violence Matters", at Islington and Holloway Police stations, and produced leaflets giving information on violence, local facilities and lines to call about services.<sup>524</sup>

In North Tyneside the commitment to combat domestic violence arose from an open forum on Women and Crime held by the women's committee. The eighty women who turned up, ranging in age from fourteen to eighty, turned out to be far more concerned with domestic violence than with car theft or crime on the streets. As a result a Domestic Violence Task group was set up which led to involvement in the Zero Tolerance campaign and the creation of a multi-agency forum.<sup>525</sup> In this case the participation of local women was very clearly significant in the development of policy.

Connections are often assumed to exist between violence and pornography, and it follows that on several occasions women's committees took up issues around pornography,

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<sup>523</sup> Islington produced a survey of Domestic Violence.

<sup>524</sup> *Evening Standard* 24.2.93

<sup>525</sup> Interview 16 (21.11.94).

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although they found that the issues were not always straight-forward and differences of opinion occurred within committees.<sup>526</sup> The first campaign to take place among the committees studied here was Islington's opposition to the display of nude pictures in council buildings. This resulted in some success, but also articles in the *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Star* and the local press trivialising their intentions. The same issue was taken up in other areas, where employees and male councillors appear to have taken the point. A male councillor in Leeds noted, "When I first came on this council the walls were plastered with nudes and I suppose the sexist talk, if you like to call it that way, that's gone."<sup>527</sup> The Bristol committee organised a conference on pornography in 1990, which stimulated debate around the different perspectives.<sup>528</sup> Looking outside of the council, both Islington and Oxford committees were involved in debate around the regulation of sex shops, an issue over which different points of view emerged.<sup>529</sup>

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<sup>526</sup> The committees' concern with pornography reflected that of feminists elsewhere. Some feminists, primarily radicals, linked pornography to male violence while others, primarily liberals and socialists, took up the issue of censorship. By the end of 1991 groups had formed around the pro- and anti- positions: the Campaign against Pornography, the Campaign against Pornography and Censorship, and Feminists against Censorship. Lovenduski and Randall give an account of the conflicting positions, *Contemporary Feminist Politics*, p. 126-132; the link between pornography and violence was most powerfully expressed by Andrea Dworkin. The issues around pornography are further complicated by some lesbians who lay claim to a sexuality which could include sado-masochism and pornography.

<sup>527</sup> Interview 11 (23.8.94).

<sup>528</sup> Held at Bristol Council House, 17.2.90; *Islington Gazette* 15.2.85; *Islington Gazette* 19.4.86. Dawn Primarola, the MP for Bristol took part in the conference and was involved in efforts to restrict the sale of pornography to licensed premises. J. Lovenduski and V. Randall, *Contemporary Feminist Politics*, p. 127.

<sup>529</sup> *Islington Gazette* 4.2.83, 29.4.83; *Daily Star* and *Daily Telegraph* 30.4.83. The first response of the committees was to oppose sex shops as instances of male exploitation of women, however, a dissenting voice was raised by lesbians who themselves used pornography. This issue brings into sharp relief contradictory tendencies present within feminism; on the one hand female exploitation was deplored, on the other women were claiming the right to define their own sexuality.

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The implications of domestic violence were among the concerns which led women's committees to take an interest in access to council housing, in terms of the protection and re-housing of women and children affected. Other concerns were the interests of ethnic minority women, and the fair treatment of homeless women.<sup>530</sup> The Islington Domestic Violence co-ordinator worked on housing policy areas including repairs, evictions, injunctions, and allocations, and started research into the local needs of black and ethnic minority women, and women in temporary accommodation. Oxford women's sub-committee took a keen interest in housing and ensured that a worker was appointed to carry out a project to improve the access to housing services of ethnic minority women.

The research findings support the argument that the committees helped to free women from constraints and enabled them to become more active. The commitment to child care and the routine provision of creches at public meetings did not take place until the women's committees forced the issue onto the agenda. The effect upon women of domestic violence was given unprecedented attention and the committees raised the issues of public awareness and the need for service providers to develop strategies to assist women. The committees worked in conjunction with other bodies, and sometimes these took the credit for their ideas, however, until the committees were created child care and domestic violence were not items on the political agenda.

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<sup>530</sup> Housing was the topic of the NALGWC quarterly meeting in January 1993. North Tyneside appointed an officer with specific responsibilities for women and housing; her first priority was homeless women. *Newcastle Journal* 3.4.87: "Councillors in North Tyneside have appointed what they believe to be the country's first housing officer especially for women."

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### ii. Encouraging Women's Potential

The committees were committed to encouraging women to develop their potential. One way of doing this was to make funding available to women's groups, thus encouraging women to initiate activities as well as supporting existing projects. Other strategies included organising conferences and open days around particular topics, setting up training schemes, and encouraging women to get involved in politics either as community representatives, as councillors or as candidates for parliament.

The Islington committee and unit, which held regular women's lunches with speakers on a range of topics, also held a range of open days and conferences including a Women's Training Day, where skills including computing, taxi-driving and plumbing were demonstrated, a Women's Health Fair, and an open day for school leavers.<sup>531</sup> They also established a scheme of training for participation in public affairs, "Women's Voices, Public Voices".<sup>532</sup> This was a course of workshops for women interested in developing their involvement in community affairs which took one day a week and lasted for six weeks. It was run twice in 1992 and was well attended.<sup>533</sup> Material from the course was later turned

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<sup>531</sup> In 1992/3 the women's lunches organised by Islington Women's Equality Unit had speakers on: Women and Transport; The Cost of Care; Is the Law Male?; Women and the Child Support Act; Domestic Violence and the Law; and Women and Human rights (Women's Equality Unit Annual Report 1992/3). The Health Fair for women was organised at Finsbury Library in March 1993.

<sup>532</sup> Women's Equality Unit Work Programme 1993/4, p 11.

<sup>533</sup> Interview 3 (7.9.94).

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into a book, with funding from the Equal Opportunities Commission, and made available to organisations and individuals.<sup>534</sup>

The Leeds and Oxford committees concerned themselves with occupational training. In Leeds this included a project called "Women Take a Chance" which enabled council employees, particularly manual workers, and certain categories of other women to undertake training in something they had not done before.<sup>535</sup> In Oxford the sub-committee obtained funding from the EU to back up the local authority funding for a women's training centre, which was particularly concerned with enabling women with few skills and little experience to start to earn a living.<sup>536</sup>

Committees and units took steps to encourage women's self-development through improving access to public facilities. Leisure facilities were of particular concern. A survey of the take up of leisure facilities by women, undertaken in Islington in October and November 1992, was used to influence the availability and programming of sports facilities. In other areas pressure was exerted on the relevant departments to promote sports facilities to women and to secure women-only times.<sup>537</sup> Similarly, Islington officers engaged with the libraries to ensure that they were meeting women's needs in terms of resources and facilities.<sup>538</sup>

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<sup>534</sup> This is referred to in the Islington *Women's Equality Unit Work Plan for 1993/4* p 11.

<sup>535</sup> Interview 13 (28.4.95).

<sup>536</sup> Interview 9 (24.8.94).

<sup>537</sup> Interviews refer to this taking place in Oxford, Leeds and Islington.

<sup>538</sup> *Women's Leisure Survey*: 501 women were interviewed during October and November 1992 and the results were reported back to the committee in a report dated 23.6.93.



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A broader strategy was the commitment to consultation. This often helped to shape committee projects: for example, Islington's leisure survey led to projects in sports centres and libraries; and North Tyneside's conference on safety led to involvement in projects to combat domestic violence. It is, however, more difficult to judge how effective this was in empowering women in the community. Committees took their meetings out to community centres and halls on council estates remote from the town hall, they canvassed opinion through questionnaires and advertised their activities through newsletters and the local press and they held public elections for co-optees. Inevitably, the committees only managed to reach a proportion of women, nevertheless, they got to some women who would otherwise have been outside of political processes and gave them a voice and access to information, resources and training that they would not otherwise have had - the three hundred women who turned up at Leeds Civic Hall to elect community representatives in 1994 bore witness to that.

More tangible results were achieved by the committees' determination to get more women elected into political office. Women's committees encouraged women to stand for office and supported female office-holders who took senior office and sought selection to stand for parliamentary constituencies.<sup>539</sup> With regard to the recruitment of female councillors, one said,

Well, we had a broad issue which was that we wanted to make good the fact that at the time there was not very many councillors. I mean I can't remember what the numbers were but [...] it was certainly less than a third women. And Oxford has subsequently of course got up to nearly half women and then it's dropped back slightly I think it's 46/47% [...] and

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<sup>539</sup> Of the sixteen women councillors who responded to the Women's Committee Survey, four had been community representatives prior to their election (25%) and at least five of the councillors have or will be attempting to get selected to run for parliament(31%).

### Putting It All Together

women have had very important positions in fact a lot of the men think that women have far too many important positions.[...] There was a time when we actually made it into the Daily Mail because at that time the Lord Mayor, the Deputy, and the Leader and Deputy Leader of all three major groups were all women.<sup>540</sup>

A number of the councillors who took part in the research had first sat on a women's committee as a co-optee and had subsequently decided to run for office. At least one of these has gone on to seek selection for a parliamentary seat. In terms of encouraging women to run for Parliament one councillor said of two others: "She has [political ambitions] and good luck to her and we'll all help her get wherever she wants [...] I know she has got an ambition, she wants to be an MP[...] and there's someone else [too], so the word's getting floated around,[...] we need to be talking about the X seat and who's going to stand for it."<sup>541</sup> Another councillor said of herself: "Yes I've tried to get selected a few times and I'll have another go"<sup>542</sup>

In fact, some committees were more enthusiastic to help their members than those women were themselves:

I know that some people would like me to go on and be an MP. People pushing me to do that and saying I would be really good because I'm a good person and because I'm a woman but I'm just not interested in that, I don't want to be that.<sup>543</sup>

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<sup>540</sup> Interview 9 (24.8.94).

<sup>541</sup> Interview 17 (22.11.94).

<sup>542</sup> Interview 9 (24.8.94).

<sup>543</sup> Interview 4 (23.6.94).

### **Putting It All Together**

The research findings suggest that the committees were successful at encouraging women's potential within the limitations set by their resources and the sheer number of women, all with different interests and needs, in the community. The lunches, conferences and open days were well-attended; the various training schemes were well used.<sup>544</sup> The women-only facilities at sports centres were so well-patronised that, in Oxford, the times were extended.<sup>545</sup> The fact that these strategies and services have been taken up by other departments and extended indefinitely suggests that they are appreciated by the public and accepted by the politicians. It is not possible to say from the research whether the committees managed to reach any of the most marginalised women. The women involved appear to hope that although it might not be possible to draw women from the margins into active participation, at least they can be assisted by services which are better targeted at their needs.

### **iii. Raising the Profile of Women**

All the policies adopted and activities undertaken by women's committees served to raise the profile of women, women's interests and women's perspectives. The one event supported by all the committees which was directed specifically to that purpose was the celebration of International Women's Day. It was important to ensure that women's issues

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<sup>544</sup> Interviews 3 (7.9.94), 9 (24.8.94), 13 (28.4.95), and 16 (21.11.94) ; Islington Annual Report of the Women's Equality Unit 1992/93.

<sup>545</sup> Interview 9 (24.8.94).

### **Putting It All Together**

could not be erased from the political agenda, therefore committees strove to embed their goals into the programmes of other committees and departments.

The committees took the opportunity of International Women's Day to fund particular initiatives to mark the event. The new Bristol sub-committee found that, while it was finding its feet, the one thing it could do was to encourage and sponsor events to raise awareness on International Women's Day. North Tyneside had specific funding available for women's groups to undertake projects for International Women's Day, which was advertised in the local press. The committee also used the day to hold a forum for the discussion of a particular issue - law and order in 1994 - at which the election of community representatives for the next year took place. The various events taking place in Leeds were publicised in the newsletter published by the committee. Coverage given to the events in the local press suggests that celebration of the day has become an established occasion in these areas.

My research findings suggest that as a result of the constant pressure exerted by the committees, and especially their work upon the agendas of other committees and departments, women's interests and perspectives infiltrated the mainstream. In the opinion of female councillors it would now be impossible for their councils to shelve responsibility for child care, women's safety, and women's employment issues. According to one councillor,

I think after ten years they are not going to marginalise this any longer. It's part of the mainstream and it's on every report. There are enough of us now that if there's an equal opportunities implication on a report, because every report has to comment on whether there are any equal opportunities implications, they aren't allowed to get away with it.<sup>546</sup>

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Interview 16 (21.11.94).

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Another commented,

"[...] what I was trying to do was to get the work of the unit far more centrally placed to infiltrate policy and practice in a far more direct way and very much be seen as part of the council structure not as a unit on its own operating within its own framework and having its own rules [...] I think I was reasonably successful in doing that and [...] I think the women's unit now is quite firmly embedded in the council. It would take an awful lot to get rid of it."<sup>547</sup>

The committees appear to have been quite successful at putting women on the local political agenda and keeping them there, a task which became easier with time as more female councillors were elected, particularly those with experience as community representatives, and more female councillors achieved senior positions on the council.<sup>548</sup> In looking through files at the offices of local papers I found that the local press in Oxford and Islington no longer expressed outrage every time the committees made a decision. In Newcastle the *Sunday Sun* went so far as to poke fun at councillors who protested about the celebration of International Women's Day, "The north's Old Labour won't be falling over themselves to celebrate International Women's Day. The blinkered bunch think women already have one special time of the year - Mothers Day!"<sup>549</sup>

As far as it is possible to tell from the research, which was concentrated on the committees themselves rather than on the other parts of the local authorities, women's committees appear to have been quite successful at raising the profile of women. The work of the committees took place against the backdrop of a range of organisations and groups

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<sup>547</sup> Interview 1 (15.4.94).

<sup>548</sup> *Oxford Times* 29.7.88: "Every senior civic post in Oxford is now held by a woman!"; Interviews 9 (24.8.94) and 16 (21.11.94).

<sup>549</sup> *Sunday Sun* March 1994.

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which were raising awareness about different issues and campaigning for change. Women's committees drew from the ideas of organisations outside of local government, and their successes were achieved in the context of a society in which their goals were gaining a wider legitimacy.

#### iv. Setting an Example of Democratic Practice

The members of women's committees hoped that their influence would spread out into the wider community through the example of their policies and activities. Julia Edwards has argued that the committees are not only a way of focusing attention on women; she maintains that they constitute an example of good practice in local government with implications for Britain's integration in Europe.<sup>550</sup> The results of the research undertaken for this project show that although the committees were concerned with women, their policies indicated ways in which democracy could be made more effective for the whole polity. Important issues upon which they attempted to set standards were employment, political recruitment, consultation and political participation.

In terms of employment, women's committees promoted equal opportunities policies and monitoring within local authorities, to take account of sex, race and ability.<sup>551</sup> For

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<sup>550</sup> J. Edwards, "Women's Committees: a model for good local government?" *International Review of Administrative Sciences* (1989); J. Edwards, *Local Government Women's Committees: a feminist political practice* (1995).

<sup>551</sup> All the councils except Bristol (see below) possessed equal opportunities policies for women. All had race committees, sub-committees or advisory bodies and forums. Bristol and Leeds also had sub-committees and advisory forums on disability. At the time that this research took place the North Tyneside committee was putting pressure on the Personnel Department for its failure to monitor job applicants (although other departments did so); committee members at Leeds were pleased that they had been able to change promotion practices which had a discriminatory effect.

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example, the Leeds committee questioned the even-handedness with which some employees who were acting up a grade have been given substantive tenure of that grade while others had not.<sup>552</sup> However, it should be noted that the Bristol committee prior to 1992 had failed to establish an equal opportunities policy with respect to women and appears to have been too caught up with its internal contradictions to have attempted to influence council employment policies outside of the women's officers.<sup>553</sup>

Committees prompted the establishment of training schemes to fit female employees for promotion to the higher grades within local authorities: for example, "The Aspirations Survey came about because women on the committee said if someone goes to the Housing Office they should have the right to be interviewed by a woman [...] and then we found out that there actually weren't enough women officers in the Housing Department on a high enough grade to interview people, so then we had to start the training process."<sup>554</sup> Local authorities are large employers, and remain so despite Compulsory Competitive Tendering; they exert influence upon other employers in their areas, therefore their practices are important in the community.

The committees' initiatives with surveys and public meetings have been adopted by other parts of local government and underpin the more recent project of area committees in Oxford. As one councillor explained,

We have even more consultation about all sorts of things than we used to have and we have made them much less threatening and more accessible so that more women actually

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<sup>552</sup> Interview 12 (23.8.94).

<sup>553</sup> *Review of Bristol Council's Equal Opportunities Policy*, a report prepared by Pamela Brown Associates (London, November 1992).

<sup>554</sup> Interview 16 (21.11.94).

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participate in them. We have got area committees, which meet in a couple of parts of the city which then allow people to say [what they want from] services. We have got into surveys and complaints services and things that we never did before so that we are in fact a much more open council than we were before, and there are a lot more women councillors than there were before, and we have done an awful lot, obviously not enough, to make services more accountable and more accessible.<sup>555</sup>

Similarly, the committees' approach to management and problem solving has contributed to the re-structuring of North Tyneside Council. Following the success of the women's committee other consumer group committees were established. When massive cuts were called for the strength of the new initiatives was such that it was felt that resources should be channelled into changing the structure of the council to accommodate the consumer group committees and their initiatives rather than maintaining the traditional hierarchies. According to one councillor,

I think it will bring a better service. There are things like the one-stop shops which now the Health Authority are thinking of buying into. They want to be able to give health information through those one-stop shops in the same way that we deliver housing, social services, school information, the whole lot, through those one-stop shops. [...] instead of having to trail around these departments, they go in and they say I need to be rehoused and they get someone who can go over all the different problems.<sup>556</sup>

North Tyneside also established Task Groups comprised of councillors and officers with the power to bring in people from outside with particular knowledge, to address specific issues. The Task Groups covered a range of issues from grass-cutting to domestic

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<sup>555</sup> Interview 9 (24.8.94).

<sup>556</sup> Interview 16 (21.11.94).



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violence; they were single issue, multi-party groups which were allowed three meetings within the committee cycle in which to reach a decision before reporting back to the Policy and Resources Committee. These are tight and efficient bodies which ensure that committees are able to operate efficiently in turn. As one councillor described them,

There are usually only about half a dozen councillors and a very small number of officers but basically they sit down and hammer it out until they've got the problem sorted. They have to make recommendations back to Policy and Resources who then have to take them on board and decide what to do with them, but these are the nitty-gritty problem solving things. What they should do is ensure that the committees do not get bogged down with discussing public toilets, dog dirt, grass-cutting and housing repairs ad nauseam.<sup>557</sup>

As this account shows, the findings of the research support the argument that women's committees influenced other parts of the councils in the direction of implementing equal opportunities policies, instituting mechanisms for greater consultation and participation, and taking a look at different ways of solving problems.

### **Conclusion**

The strategies and projects outlined above constitute a strong argument for the committees as agents of both democracy and feminism. The adoption of consultative mechanisms, public meetings, conferences, advisory forums and surveys, involved the community more closely in democracy. Increased provision of child care and training facilities, and attention to women's safety demonstrated responsiveness to women's demands. The pursuit of improved opportunities for women in employment and better

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<sup>557</sup> Interview 16 (21.11.94).

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treatment for women as parents and carers, their concern with male violence and commitment to instituting practices influenced by women's experiences, demonstrated their adherence to feminist goals.

The research suggests that issues which had been outside of the remit of politics have become firmly embedded in local government policies during the period of the committees' existence: not only child care and fair employment measures, but also women's safety, both on the street and in their homes. Women's committees and units took up a range of issues which had not previously been addressed by local government, or not addressed adequately. It is perhaps difficult to recall that before this period most local authorities were only committed to providing child care for those families and children in the most need, whereas now councils like North Tyneside and Islington regard it as an important service and an integral part of an economically and socially healthy community. The research also suggests that the committees were active in establishing new roles for local government: as a central resource for organising events and collecting and disseminating information; as a facilitator providing services in consultation with the public; and as an initiator experimenting with new ideas in conjunction with the public in the expectation that someone else would take them over if successful. As described in Chapter Two, these ways of being and modes of operation were at some remove from those of the archetypal monolithic provider of municipal services.

However, it is not always possible to draw direct causal links between the democratic and representative procedures of the committees and the activities and achievements described in this chapter. In some cases it is possible, for example, the connection between Islington's domestic violence survey and its involvement with the Inter-

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Agency project, the Zero Tolerance Campaign and pressuring other departments to adopt appropriate policies. A similar connection is apparent between North Tyneside's conferences on violence and safety and its involvement in the Inter-Agency Project and the Zero Tolerance Campaign.

Islington's Leisure Survey led to projects at sports centres and libraries; North Tyneside's Aspirations Survey led to the training up of officers and the introduction of multi-functional local offices; Oxford's survey of women's needs directed them towards creating the Women's Training Centre. However, all these initiatives are connected to conferences and surveys rather than to the membership of the committees. Public meetings, conferences and surveys are democratic and important ways of operating, which women's committees have taken up enthusiastically and encouraged other parts of their councils to do the same. However, they are not as particular to the committees, nor as innovative, as the community representatives on the committees and in the advisory groups.

Councillors stressed the value of the community representatives and the committees as a whole demonstrated an on-going concern to ensure that they were drawn from the community in ways that were representative. Nevertheless, connections between community representatives and actual projects are, except on rare occasions, unclear. There is a link between Islington having a representative of female care-takers and undertaking a project to increase the number of female care-takers in the borough, but otherwise links are far more diffuse. It is likely that many of the projects would have gone ahead without the presence of community representatives because of the commitment of councillors and officers - child care and equal opportunities in council employment in particular. In fact, much of the work

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undertaken, especially in recent years, was generated by officers, so what did having community representatives achieve?

Responses to the questionnaires and interviews suggest that the influence of community representatives was not so much concerned with giving explicit direction as with setting the scene. Thus we rarely find a causal relation between a representative of X and a project concerning X, but see instead that the representatives were instrumental in establishing the committees as distinct bodies different from other local authority committees. The representatives provided opportunities for deliberation and a channel through which the committees could be held to public account; they provided feedback from the community and reminded the councillors that there was a constituency which had a claim upon them. As was suggested in Chapter Five, these mechanisms may have been imperfect, but in other parts of the local authorities they did not exist. I would argue that the presence of community representatives has shaped the committees and their projects in the long run, helping to make them responsive and accountable to the community of women outside each council and helping to embed the committees' goals in other local authority committees and departments.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### **Conclusion**

The forgoing chapters have described the background and development of local government women's committees, set a framework of democratic and feminist theory, and analysed the committees which took part in the Women's Committee Survey in terms of their membership, goals, methods and projects. The joint purposes of this thesis were to add to the existing body of work which describes women's committees and analyses their strengths and weaknesses, but also to assess the committees in the survey as experiments in democracy and representation. A number of issues framed the project: the different perceptions and expectations held by various groups of people who were involved with - or who monitored - the committees; tension between the formality of the committees' institutional setting and the informality of the origins of their goals in the new social movements; and the problem of pursuing an inclusive, participatory politics in political communities where the populations are diverse and political activity is neither highly valued nor facilitated.

## **Conclusion**

### **Women's Committees in 1995**

What has this thesis added to the body of knowledge about the committees, their strengths and weaknesses? As was shown in Chapter Two, the number of committees has diminished considerably over the past few years. There are now only fourteen women's committees and sub-committees of which nine are in England. Some committees have been amalgamated into equal opportunities committees while others have been closed. Further committees are likely to close as a result of the re-structuring of local government: Marilyn Taylor of the Women's Local Authority Network believes that at least two more will disappear. This is happening at a time when the goals of the committees and the committees themselves are attracting far less adverse comment than before, and when the Labour Party, with which the committees have been associated, has become stronger in local government and has adopted commitments to increase the numbers of women MPs and Councillors. Yet the only new committee to start up in the 1990s was in Glasgow, Scotland, where women's committees do not appear to be under so much pressure and there is a lively political culture among women in local government.

The preceding chapters have shown that the committees taking part in the Women's Committee Survey were unexpectedly careful in their dealings with both men and opposition parties. Male and female councillors of all parties were, of course, entitled to sit on the committees, however, the research suggests that men were often welcomed because they brought with them power and the opportunity for influence. Conservatives and Liberal

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Democrats provided the opportunity for cross-party campaigning, although this only appeared to happen at North Tyneside. Thus the committees (at least during the period of this research) were conciliatory rather than confrontational and took a highly *political* approach to the achievement of their goals.

The Islington and North Tyneside committees put considerable effort into entrenching themselves into their parent authorities. In Islington, the Women's Equality Unit was firmly locked into the framework; while in North Tyneside councillors ensured that the committee itself was secure within the council. The Oxford committee was secure within the council, in part because of its success in encouraging women to become councillors and senior officers. However, at the time of the research members were unsure of what its role should be in the future and the possibility that it might be dissolved from a position of strength, having achieved its goals, was mooted. In Leeds, the committee and officers appeared to be secure, but the changes they were undergoing gave rise to some uncertainty about the future. The future of the Bristol committee must hang in the balance. Having been re-organised into a sub-committee of an equal opportunities committee and with a past characterised by conflict and bad publicity, it may not be in a strong position to meet the effects of the demise of Avon County Council. All the committees pursued their goals through other departments or in conjunction with outside organisations. By following this course they tried to ensure that they were not the sole custodians of their aims, and that women's interests became the concern of the whole council and community.

These committees, however, are successes: they continue to exist and to act. The research undertaken does not provide a basis from which to compare these with either the

## **Conclusion**

committees which have closed or with the (apparently) more vibrant women's political culture in Scottish local government. Nevertheless, I can suggest what the research has shown about these committees as a possible explanation for their continued existence.

It appears that a number of factors predispose a committee to success. These are a mixture of the structural and the fortuitous and include the type of local authority in which the committee is situated, the attitude towards the committee of powerful councillors, the resources made available, and the support from outside the council. These were addressed in Chapters Two and Five. From the experiences of North Tyneside and Bristol it would appear that two other factors can be significant: relations between and within political parties. In North Tyneside the committee was (for the most part) treated as a non-partisan arena and opposition councillors often supported measures simply because they were in the interest of their constituents. The Bristol committee, on the other hand, became the arena in which divisions within the Labour party were fought out, resulting in the paralysis of the committee and appalling publicity. Further explanations are connected to the commitment to democracy and feminism.

### **The Democratic Innovation of the Committees.**

As Chapters Three and Five and Six have shown, my claim that the committees were experiments in democratic organisation rests upon a feminist and enabling interpretation of democracy. Such an interpretation maintains that it is legitimate to put special mechanisms in place in order to compensate for a democratic deficit; in this case, the



## **Conclusion**

relative absence of women's perspectives and women's persons from local politics. Moreover, since the domination of a majority perspective might tend to discourage the formation of alternative points of view, it is legitimate to create special forums in which people can explore political possibilities: in this case, the creation of spaces and the provision of facilities so that women can work out what they need and think.

Women's committees appeared to be engaged with participatory democracy: they called public meetings to establish the committees and work out what their goals should be; they took their meetings out into the community while inviting the public in to meetings; they encouraged the formation of new women's forums. In fact, they were committed to increasing women's participation, but not to creating participatory democracy as it is described by political theorists. They did not have the power to do so, nor the will, since they were part of elected local government with (for the most part) respect for the role of elected representatives. They did, however, act upon the claim that participating in democracy fosters political efficacy, therefore they supported women's groups and initiated schemes for training in both vocational and political skills.

Their vision was the achievement of a degree of autonomy whereby women could choose when, how and whether to engage in political, economic and social activities. This demanded the provision of facilities which would enable women, first, to have some freedom from claims upon them in order to explore possibilities, and second, to have access to facilities which would make such exploration possible. Hence their concern for child care, women's safety, improved access to local authority services and facilities, and equal opportunities monitoring. The committees might not have been working for a fully-realised

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participatory democracy, but they were intent on increasing women's participation. Committee members and officers appeared to believe that by improving women's opportunities in such ways they would have an effect upon political efficacy and equality.

It must be said that the committees and officers had considerable difficulty reaching women who were truly at the margins - either socially or geographically. The women involved in the committees were far more skilled and educated than the average ward resident. Nevertheless, their schemes illuminated local government's failure to serve and represent the whole community. They managed to reach some women who would otherwise not have come into contact with local authority facilities and to draw into the committees and advisory groups others who would not have thought of going into politics. In terms of their organisation, they remained within the framework of representative democracy, albeit in an innovative form. For one thing, the councillors involved recognised that they were in an odd position as the elected representatives of their male and female constituents, but taking a special responsibility for the women in the local authority area.

Councillors did not appear to have too much trouble with their anomalous position, tending to equate it with the concern warranted by any special needs group. The more controversial innovation was the introduction of community representatives as working members of the committees. As has been discussed above, co-opted members were an established part of local government practice. The novelty of the women's committees' community representatives was that they were (for the most part) elected by the communities rather than selected by the committees, and that they were there to introduce ideas and take part in general debate rather than to offer specific expertise. Their ability to

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introduce ideas was limited by the conventions of local government and their own multiple commitments. Nonetheless, they introduced extra dimensions to all the committees and at particular times were able to achieve a great deal. Where committees were poorly resourced but strongly connected to the community, representatives appear to have been very active, initiating projects and taking on administrative tasks which would otherwise have been performed by officers. This was the case in Leeds prior to my research and in Bristol at the time of the Women's Committee Survey.

Community representatives varied in their attachment to the sections of the community or groups which they nominally represented. Some were closely attached and reported back regularly, some had no organised connection at all, others had loose arrangements. No community representative was so closely linked to both her group and the committee that she experienced conflict. Some, however, failed to see much value in their committee membership for the group which they represented. This may have been a reflection of the limited powers of the committees, or may have indicated a deeper problem. This is the difficulty of putting together a committee of people representing diverse interests and expecting the individual members to act collectively for the general good of their constituencies rather than competitively. If community representatives are to act both collectively and in their own particular interest, then the committee and the representative framework must be conducive to the discussion and working through of issues. The care which went into creating ways of selecting community representatives was connected to this.

## **Conclusion**

### **Election procedures**

As Chapter Two has shown, there was concern from the start of the committees that community representatives should be drawn either from across the community or from significant sections of the community. Committees have drawn up templates for representation without too much difficulty, including what they consider to be the important groups or interests, and altering the template when it became necessary. On the one hand this has been quite successful. Women from a range of backgrounds and with a range of interests have been brought onto committees. On the other, it plays directly into one of the dilemmas of group representation: the only groups to be represented are those which are already legitimate, recognised and (often) organised. It is very hard to imagine how this dilemma can be avoided. Opening the process for women (or groups) to put themselves forward continues to give advantage to organised groups and women with political skills. The problem is connected to the problem identified with trying to increase participation: the unorganised women at the margins are most difficult to reach and are least likely to put themselves forward.

Two of the committees studied here have attempted to bring in more women through the creation of advisory forums and have gone to considerable lengths to support the women elected to the forums. They have created wide ranging mechanisms around the elections to reach as many women as possible, and introduced new formulae for representation in order to bring in different women. In Leeds these mechanisms have brought in a range of different women, while Bristol has been less successful. However, in Leeds as in the other areas

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where representation has not been re-organised, the committee with its innovative structure runs up against the limited powers allowed to, it and the framework of local government.

The degree to which the committees have facilitated discussion of problems and policies varied both between the committee and over time. Ironically, the forums which were best suited for deliberation were those which possessed the least power - the advisory groups. It would seem, however, that even though the committees were not much like Fishkin's deliberative assemblies they provided more opportunity for discussion and the evolution of goals and policies than was normally the case in local politics. This was particularly evident in the relations between committee members and officers. Shared objectives and shared commitment to doing things differently often led to productive co-operation. Even when it did not, and more than one of the committees investigated had experienced considerable conflict between officers and committee members, the disputes over ends and means were part of an evolving democracy.

Thus, the committees studied here sought to entrench themselves and their goals in both the local authorities and the wider community. They attempted to make themselves legitimately representative of local women through their creative use of processes for consultation and co-option. They both encouraged other departments and outside bodies to adopt their aims and presented themselves as a forum for local women and groups. They continue to learn and to change: they have, by and large, become neither disenchanted nor complacent.

## **Conclusion**

### **The Implications for Theories of Democracy and Representation**

This thesis has attempted not only to assess the committees as experiments in democracy and representation, but also to discover from their experiences the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches to democracy and representation described in Chapters Three and Four. The experiences of the committees tend to support the criticism that in a polity structured by differences in power and resources, the better equipped will tend to occupy any new political spaces. However, the committees appear to have been aware of this and have tried to take the next step and link measures to increase participation with measures to guarantee access. The developmental approach to democracy described in Chapter Three claims that participation leads to the development of political efficacy. The discussion in Chapter Seven suggested that this was difficult to prove in the community, but that events within the committees pointed towards the development of political and other skills amongst both elected and co-opted members. At the same time, the experience of the Bristol advisory group suggests that encouraging participation where there is little opportunity for achieving real results can have a contrary effect on peoples' feelings of political efficacy.

Women's committees, despite their identification with the Labour party, were dislocated from class politics in so far as they recognised that a woman's life chances were shaped by gender, whatever her relationship to wage labour. The committees were not revolutionary bodies in Green's sense; they worked with - if not within - the framework of local government. Furthermore, in the context of post-industrial England they had little opportunity to change working practices and little power to devolve. They are, today, more

## Conclusion

concerned to consult local women than to introduce participatory democracy to their proceedings. Despite their limitations, women's committees made the most of the opportunities they had to encourage the re-distribution of power by changing working practices, establishing consultative procedures and creating advisory forums. They also addressed the problem of the relation between democratic legitimacy and expertise in their dealings with women's and equalities officers. Further, the committees set examples which have been taken up by other parts of local government, as shown in Chapter Seven.

The committees' engagement with groups in the wider community, their emphasis on public meetings, their creation of advisory forums and the relations between officers and members suggest a commitment to deliberation. At the same time, the problems they ran into illustrate the potential difficulties of the sorts of assemblies envisaged by Fishkin. Again, the most significant problem is engaging the people who are least integrated into the community and have least invested in it. Problems of language, understanding the culture of deliberation, and providing all the facilities necessary for (for example) a Chinese-speaking kitchen worker on hourly pay to participate, are daunting. Yet if this sort of outreach is not attempted, deliberative assemblies will only reproduce mainstream concerns and attitudes. They may produce policies which are benevolent towards minority groups, but not from the minority's point of view. This brings us to the issue of presence.

Women's committees have introduced the practice of group representation without too much difficulty. The issue of which groups constitute a fair picture of the community has been addressed by introducing different ways of encouraging groups to put forward nominees. There are nevertheless potential problems about the entrenchment of certain

## Conclusion

groups and the exclusion of groups which are not organised or which exist around interests which are not easily articulated. The election process at Leeds was designed to draw in new groups of women but no-one was in a position to foster the development of un-organised interests into groups. Committees have not addressed the issue of the relationship between the representative and the group in any depth, apparently because it has not arisen. This may be due to the relatively weak powers of the committees: one can imagine that in a more powerful body where real influence and access was at stake members of groups would be far more concerned about the behaviour of their representatives.

At the time of writing, women do not constitute a significant presence in the local government of most areas. About 20% of councillors are female and it would be misleading to assume that all (or even most of) these give priority to women's issues. Historically, issues of importance to women have appeared on the political agenda, but not necessarily from women's points of view. Child care (outside of times of war) was a minor responsibility for families in trouble, while safety and violence were law and order issues. Women's economic activities have been regulated in the general interest, and providing the *same* access for everyone to facilities and services was assumed to mean *equal* access. Women's committees and their success in encouraging more women to run for office ensured that, at least in the areas where they were active, women's presence in local government became more significant.

Their presence has affected the priorities and the approaches taken to items on the agenda. Local authorities now take responsibility for child care for the whole community in the context of the range of family structures and women's economic activity. Safety and



## **Conclusion**

violence have been re-interpreted as issues for the whole of the council, with implications for social services, housing, education and town planning. Women's economic activity is now seen in terms of equal opportunities policies and training schemes both within local authorities and in the wider community. Some of this may have taken place without the committees, but I doubt whether it would have happened without the increased influence of women one way or another. The research did not undertake comparisons between local authorities with and without women's committees. Nevertheless, it is possible to say that the considerable steps taken by most of the councils addressed here took place after the creation of the committees. An officer in one area had asked for an early draft of this thesis to use in the construction of a defence for her committee. Having written her report she told me that she had forgotten just how many different things they had been involved in over the years; once a project was running it was passed over to another department while the committee and officers got on with the next project; they never stopped to list or reflect upon the initiatives they set in motion.

## **Conclusion**

Women's committees today are more likely to consult the opinions of women in the constituency than draw them in to democratic decision-making. Consultation is, of course, an important element in a democracy, but perhaps not what the women who started the committees hoped for. Their democratic will is perhaps better expressed through their

## **Conclusion**

various projects aimed at providing better facilities, choice and access for women, who will then be able to take part in decision making in any arena they choose.

It seems unlikely that the committees which have closed were very different from those which I studied. Perhaps they had less auspicious conditions in terms of their types of authority and support, perhaps their members were not blessed with boundless energy, commitment and optimism - perhaps they achieved their goals and the members decided to transfer their energies elsewhere. It is an unfortunate fact that the national Labour Party has taken little interest in either their achievements or their demise. What is certain is that as a political initiative the committees present a challenge for politicians. They have demonstrated that it is possible to involve members of the public more closely in decision-making and even to devolve responsibility in specific instances. Furthermore, they have shown that the conventional modes of representation and organisation are not the only legitimate ones - and that in certain circumstances alternatives might be more legitimate.

## Appendix A

### APPENDIX A

#### Committees catalogued by the National Association of Local Government Women's Committees 1992

##### Women's Committees - Standing

Name	Staff	Co-optees	Men
<i>Aberdeen</i>	6	6	2
<i>Central Regional</i>	7	3	11
<i>Edinburgh</i> (minority Labour)	5	-	5
<i>Islington</i>	4.5	5	-
<i>Lewisham</i>	1	variable	1
<i>Lothian</i>	5	-	4
<i>North Tyneside</i>	3	9	5
<i>Waltham Forest</i>	12	-	1
<i>Greenwich</i>	10	-	1
<i>Southwark</i>	7	-	-

##### Women's Committees - Sub

Name	Staff	Co-optees	Men
<i>Birmingham</i>	11	-	5
<i>Brighton</i>	2	-	5
<i>Bristol</i>	2	-	-
<i>Kirklees</i>	5	13	-
<i>Leeds</i>	7	23	-
<i>Manchester</i>	8	55	-
<i>Newcastle</i>	1	-	-
<i>Newham</i>	6	10	3
<i>Oxford</i>	5	20	-
<i>Southampton</i>	5	9	1

## Appendix A

### Equal Opportunities Committees - Standing

Name	Staff	Co-optees	Men
<i>Camden</i>	3	-	7
<i>Dundee</i>	3	4	14
<i>Dunfermline</i>	3	4	8
<i>Haringey</i>	1	-	15
<i>Lambeth</i>	3	-	9
<i>Tayside</i>	3	5	21
<i>Fife</i>	3	4	12
<i>Hounslow</i>	3	-	4
<i>Nottinghamshire</i>	11	1	6
( + women's Issues Consultative Group)			

### Equal Opportunities Committees - Sub

Name	Staff	Co-optees	Men
<i>East Kilbride</i>	1	-	3
<i>Hammersmith and Fulham</i>	11	-	3
<i>Leicester</i>	5	-	12
<i>Stirling</i> (Conservative)	5	-	-
<i>Tameside</i>	2	12	13
<i>Humberside</i>	3	11	11
<i>Middlesburgh</i>	9	-	11
<i>Pendle</i>	2	-	11
<i>Wakefield</i>	1	8	20
(no women councillors)			

### Women's and/or Equal Opportunities Committees - Advisory

*Clackmannon*  
*South Glamorgan*  
*Strathclyde*  
*York*  
*Calderdale* (hung)  
*Derbyshire*  
*Gloucester* (hung)  
*Norwich*  
*Rochdale* (Lib/Dem)  
*Stockport* (hung)  
*Thamesdown*

## Appendix A

### Other Committees taking some responsibility for EO

*Hamilton*

*Harlow*

*South Tyneside*

*Kilmarnock* (hung)

*Nottingham*

*Peterborough* (hung)

### Oddities

*Sheffield* : has a women's Unit but not a committee

*Wolverhampton* : has an Equal Opportunities "team" but no committee

*Sutton* : (Lib/Dem) has an Equal Opportunities officer but no committee

### Political Affiliation

All the above were Labour controlled in 1992 except:

*Edinburgh* : no overall majority, Labour minority administration with SNP support

*Stirling* : Conservative

*Calderdale* : hung

*Gloucester* : hung

*Kilmarnock* : hung

*Peterborough* : hung

*Rochdale* : Lib Dem/Conservative alliance

*Stockport* : hung

*Sutton* : Lib Dem

Source: *Directory of Women's Committees, September 1992* (National Association of Local Government Women's Committees, Manchester).

## Appendix A

### Committees known to the Women's Local Authority Network 1995

#### Women's Committees - Standing

##### Name

*Edinburgh*

*Glasgow*

*Islington*

*Lothian*

#### Women's Committees - Other

##### Name

*Birmingham*

*Bristol*

*Kirklees*

*Leeds*

*North Tyneside*

*Oxford*

*South Glamorgan*

*Southampton*

*Strathclyde*

*York*

Source: Women's Local Authority Network, 21.11.95, Manchester.

Appendix B

Appendix B

**Questionnaire for Councillors**

The following questionnaire is divided into four sections which ask for biographical information, information about your work with the Women's Committee, your opinions on local government and local democracy, and, last, details of your work as a councillor.

The questions sometimes require very simple answers, but some ask you to give opinions or explanations, or to make judgements. Your responses are very important to my research and will be treated in confidence.

The data collected from people involved with women's committees around the country will only be presented in aggregate form. Individuals will not be identified, quotes will not be attributed, and a copy of the report will be available if you should wish to read it.

Thank-you for taking the time to answer these questions and to take part in this project.

**Biographical Information**

1. Name : \_\_\_\_\_
2. Phone (this is, of course, confidential and only for use if I need to clarify any points with you)  
: day \_\_\_\_\_ Evening \_\_\_\_\_
3. Age : under 22 \_\_ 22-30 \_\_ 31-40 \_\_  
41-50 \_\_ 51-60 \_\_ over 60 \_\_
4. Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

**Please tick as many boxes as are relevant to answer the following questions:**

5. Education : O-Level/CSE \_\_ A-Level \_\_  
Further Education (non-degree) \_\_  
Degree \_\_ Higher Degree \_\_
6. Status: Married/Co-habiting \_\_ Divorced/Separated \_\_ Widowed \_\_  
Single \_\_
7. Dependents: Children \_\_ Other \_\_

Appendix B

8. Political Party Member: Labour \_\_ Conservative \_\_  
Lib-Dem \_\_ None \_\_  
Other (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

Has your party membership changed during your membership  
of the committee? If so, please specify \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**You and Your Work with the Women's Committee**

9. Were you involved with any of the following types of activity before joining the Council?

(Please tick either YES or NO to each):

- a. Party politics YES \_\_ NO \_\_  
If YES please specify \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- b. Community groups (eg residents) YES \_\_ NO \_\_  
If YES, please specify \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- c. Interest groups (eg Amnesty, CND) YES \_\_ NO \_\_  
If YES, please specify \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- d. Women's groups (eg WI, women's refuges, creches, Women in Business) YES \_\_ NO \_\_  
If YES, please specify \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- e. Trade union YES \_\_ NO \_\_  
If YES, please specify \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- f. Voluntary work (eg CAB, prison visiting) YES \_\_ NO \_\_  
If YES, please specify \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- g. None YES \_\_ NO \_\_



Appendix B

h. Other (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

10. How long have you been on the Committee?  
(Please give years and months) \_\_\_\_ years \_\_\_\_ months

11. What is your position on the Women's Committee?  
(eg Chair, Vice-Chair, member) \_\_\_\_\_

Do you sit on any other Council committees? YES \_\_ NO \_\_  
If YES, which? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

12. What did you as an individual hope to achieve when you got involved with the Women's Committee?  
(Please tick as many as are relevant):

- a. To improve service delivery to women \_\_\_\_\_
- b. To modify council policies in women's interest \_\_\_\_\_
- c. To improve the conditions of female employees \_\_\_\_\_
- d. To strengthen the influence of women on the council \_\_\_\_\_
- e. To involve local women in decision-making \_\_\_\_\_
- f. To challenge the traditions of local government \_\_\_\_\_
- g. To promote the interest of a particular group \_\_\_\_\_
- h. Don't know \_\_\_\_\_
- i. Other(please specify) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Which of your goals have been realised?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

If any of your goals have **NOT** been realised, why do you think this is?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Appendix B

13. Has your work with the Women's Committee affected any of the following?  
(Please tick either YES or NO for each):

- |    |                                  |     |    |
|----|----------------------------------|-----|----|
| a. | Your private life                | YES | NO |
| b. | Your attitudes                   | YES | NO |
| c. | Your politics                    | YES | NO |
| d. | Your goals as a committee member | YES | NO |

If you have answered 'YES' to any of the above, please elaborate.

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Has your work with the Women's Committee affected any other areas of your life?  
(Please illustrate)

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14. What is your usual role at Committee meetings?  
(Please tick as many of the following as apply to you):

- |    |   |   |
|----|---|---|
| a. | Representing a particular point of view | — |
| b. | Asking for information                  | — |
| c. | Presenting information                  | — |
| d. | Suggesting policy                       | — |
| e. | Questioning policy                      | — |
| f. | No particular role                      | — |
| g. | Other (please specify) _____            |   |

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15. What are the Committee's goals?  
(Please tick as many of the following as are relevant):

- |    |  |   |
|----|--|---|
| a. | To further equal opportunities                         | — |
| b. | To extend council services to excluded groups of women | — |
| c. | To ensure that local women's interests are represented | — |
| d. | To safeguard the interests of female council employees | — |
| e. | To monitor council policies and services               | — |
| f. | No particular role                                     | — |
| g. | Other (please specify) _____                           |   |

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Appendix B

16. How can co-ordination of policies and activities between the Committee and equalities staff best be characterised? (Please tick ONE of the following):

- a. The Committee makes decisions which the staff execute —
  - b. The Committee and staff consult over decisions —
  - c. Since the staff have specialised knowledge they are able to advise the Committee —
  - d. Staff and the Committee sometimes have conflicting points of view —
  - e. No particular relationship —
- If none of the above apply, please provide your own characterisation:

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17. How would you evaluate communication between elected members and equalities staff? (Please tick ONE of the following):

- a. Mutually supportive —
- b. Lively and challenging —
- c. Complicated by power struggles —
- d. Distant and bureaucratic —
- e. No particular relationship —
- f. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

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18. Is the Council supportive of the Committee's goals? (Please tick ONE of the following):

- a. Fully supportive —
  - b. Quite supportive —
  - c. Indifferent —
  - d. Quite antagonistic —
  - e. Antagonistic —
- Please elaborate on your answer:

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Appendix B

19. Is the Council supportive of the Committee's policies? (Please tick ONE of the following):

- a. Fully supportive \_\_\_\_\_
- b. Quite supportive \_\_\_\_\_
- c. Indifferent \_\_\_\_\_
- d. Quite antagonistic \_\_\_\_\_
- e. Antagonistic \_\_\_\_\_

Please elaborate on your answer:

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20. Is the Council supportive of the Committee's procedures?  
(Please tick ONE of the following):

- a. Fully supportive \_\_\_\_\_
- b. Quite supportive \_\_\_\_\_
- c. Indifferent \_\_\_\_\_
- d. Quite antagonistic \_\_\_\_\_
- e. Antagonistic \_\_\_\_\_

Please elaborate on your answer:

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21. What in your view has been the greatest success of the Women's Committee?

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22. What in your view has been its most significant failure?

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Appendix B

23. Reviewing your experience of the Women's Committee, what do you see as your greatest success? Is there anything which you regard as a personal failure? It would be helpful if you could describe these within your general experience of the Committee.

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**Local Government and Local Democracy**

24. Do you think local government is for...  
(Tick **one or more** of the following):

- a. Implementing the policies of central government —
- b. Developing policies and services to serve the community —
- c. Ensuring that minority groups are not overlooked —
- d. Ensuring that all local interests are considered in policy and services —
- e. Decision-making at a local level on local issues —
- f. Don't know —
- g. Other (please specify) —

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25. Is local government as important as central? YES \_\_\_ NO \_\_\_  
If YES, please indicate in which ways; if NO, why not?

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26. Is local government as effective as central? YES \_\_\_ NO \_\_\_  
If YES, please indicate in which ways; if NO, why not?

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27. Should local government have greater autonomy? YES \_\_\_ NO \_\_\_  
If YES, please indicate in which ways; if NO, why not?

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Appendix B

28. Should the role of local government be modified to take account of social and political change? YES \_\_ NO \_\_

If YES, please indicate in which ways; if NO, why not?

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29. Would you like to see the council/committee structure changed?

YES \_\_ NO \_\_

If YES, what changes do you envisage. If NO, why not?

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30. Do you think that men and women have different views on local government?

YES \_\_ NO \_\_

If YES, how do they differ, and why do you think this is so?

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31. Do you think that women have social/political interests which are distinct from those of men? YES \_\_ NO \_\_

If NO, please move on to the question 32, if YES:

- a. Is this of major significance for local politics?

YES \_\_ NO \_\_

Whether you have answered YES or NO, please elaborate further:

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Appendix B

- b. Is local government the right place to address such interests?

YES \_\_ NO \_\_

Whether you have answered YES or NO, please elaborate further:

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- c. Is local government competent to address such interests?

YES \_\_ NO \_\_

Whether you have answered YES or NO, please elaborate further

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32. What does "local democracy" mean for you?

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33. Has this changed during your involvement with the Women's Committee?

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**Your Role as Councillor**

34. What are your priorities as a Councillor?

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35. Do you have particular goals in relation to the people in your ward?

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Appendix B

36. How do you see yourself in relation to:

- a. the local party,
- b. the national party?

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37. As a representative, how do you see yourself in relation to:

- a. your male electorate
- b. your female electorate?

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38. How did you get involved with the Women's Committee?

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39. Has your membership of the Committee altered your perception of yourself as a Councillor? **YES \_\_ NO \_\_**

If YES, please illustrate.

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40. Do you think that your membership of the Committee has altered other Councillors perceptions of you? **YES \_\_ NO \_\_**

If YES, please illustrate.

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Appendix B

41. Has your Committee got an appropriate number of community representatives?

YES \_\_ NO \_\_

If NO, please explain.

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42. Do you think that the presence of community representatives on the Committee has any effect on its policies?

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43. Do you think that the presence of community representatives on the Committee has any effect on its ability to implement policies?

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44. What have you found most helpful about the presence of community representatives on the committee?

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45. What has been least helpful about the presence of community representatives on the Committee?

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46. Would you alter the ways in which co-optees have been brought onto the Committee?

YES \_\_ NO \_\_

If YES, how?

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Appendix B

**Your role of Community Representative**

34. Do you represent a particular group? YES \_\_ NO \_\_  
If YES, who:

\_\_\_\_\_

35. How were you co-opted into membership?  
(Please tick **ONE** of the following) :

- a. Elected at a public meeting \_\_\_\_\_  
b. Invited on a personal basis \_\_\_\_\_  
c. Invited as the representative of an existing women's organisation \_\_\_\_\_  
d. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

36. Do you report Committee proceedings back to a group outside the council?  
YES \_\_ NO \_\_

If YES, to whom do you report back?

\_\_\_\_\_

How often do you report back?

\_\_\_\_\_

37. Do you experience any conflict of interest between your membership of that group and of the Committee?  
YES \_\_ NO \_\_  
If YES, please illustrate.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

38. Has your opinion of local government changed during your involvement with the Committee?  
YES \_\_ NO \_\_

Appendix B

If YES, please illustrate.

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39. Are there any tensions in your Committee membership? YES \_\_\_ NO \_\_\_  
If YES, what causes them?

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40. Have your perceptions of yourself altered as a result of your Committee membership?  
YES \_\_\_ NO \_\_\_

If YES, in what ways?

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41. Has your Committee got an appropriate number of community representatives?  
YES \_\_\_ NO \_\_\_

If NO, please explain.

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42. Do you think that the presence of community representatives on the Committee has any effect on its policies?

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## Appendix B

43. Do you think that the presence of community representatives on the Committee has any effect on its ability to implement policies?

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## **Appendix C**

### **APPENDIX C**

#### **Interview Plan**

##### **a. General**

1. What gave rise to your interest in women's issues?
2. Did you have any specific goals to achieve on the part of women when you joined the Committee?

##### **b. Feminism**

1. How do you see yourself in relation to the women's movement?
2. Do you think that the committee as a whole has a particular feminist point of view?
3. Have different ideas about the best way to further women's interests ever caused tensions between Committee members.
4. Has there ever been conflict between practical concerns and larger ideas how to improve women's position?

##### **c. Sexuality**

1. Were men present on the Committee? If not, do you think there should have been some men present?
2. Do you think that this presence/non-presence in any way shaped what happened in committee meetings?
3. Did differing attitudes to men ever generate division within the Committee?

## **Appendix C**

### **d.Minorities**

1. Do you have an explicit concern for the effect of membership of a minority on some women? If so, is/are there a particular groups(s) whose interest you promote?
2. Does the Committee take particular care to encompass the perspective of any particular minority group(s)? If so, which, what form does this take.
3. Does consideration of the perspectives of minorities ever generate conflict within the Committee?
4. Does consideration of minorities issues ever conflict with practical concerns?

### **e. Party Politics**

1. Is your concern with women's issues coherent with your party's general goals?
2. Is more than one party represented on the Committee? Does it make a difference whether there is one or more parties?
3. Has intra-party difference been significant?
4. How significant has inter-party conflict been for the definition of goals?
5. How significant has inter-party conflict been for the achievement of goals?

### **For Councillors:**

How has involvement in the Committee fitted in with - or altered - your political goals?

### **For Community Representatives:**

Has involvement in the Committee prompted or changed any political ambition?

### **For all:**

Do you think that improvement in women's life will be achieved by working for equal opportunities and improved facilities within present structures?

Finally, is there anything you would like to raise?

## Appendix D

### APPENDIX D

#### Interests and Groups Represented on the Committees Taking Part in the Women's Committee Survey

##### *Groups and Interests Represented on the Advisory Group Attached to Bristol Women's Sub-Committee*

1. Women's Groups : ten
  - \* Bangladesh Association Community Development Project
  - \* Maternity & Health Links
  - \* Bristol Miscarriage Association
  - \* Off The Record
  - \* All Bristol Womens Self-Defence Training for Trainers Group
  - \* Bangladesh Women's Group
  - \* Barton Hill Women's Group
  - \* Barton Hill Asian Women's Group
  - \* Southmead Community Centre Women's Group
  - \* Rive Gauch Poets
2. Women's work group : six
  - \* Avon Parents Network
  - \* Pre-school Playgroup Association
  - \* Bristol Mencap
  - \* Avon Social Services, Bristol
  - \* North Women's Equality Group
  - \* TUC
  - \* Bristol Women's Centre
3. Individuals : one

##### *Interests currently represented on Islington Women's Committee; Islington does not have a blue-print for interest representation*

1. Older women : one
2. Ethnic minorities : one
3. Local authority tenants : one
4. Individual : one

Candidates are nominated or invited and their membership is ratified at a public meeting.

## Appendix D

### ***Groups and Interests Represented on the Advisory Group Attached to Leeds Women's Sub-Committee***

1.	Women living in inner city areas	: four
2.	Women living in outer city areas	: four
3.	Tenants Associations*	: five
4.	Community Associations*	: four
5.	Asian women	: three
6.	African-Caribbean women	: one
7.	Older women	: two
8.	Disabled women*	: one
9.	Lesbians	: one
10.	Carers	: one
11.	Single parents	: one
12.	Young women	: two
13.	Departmental women's groups*	: one
14.	APT&C unions*	: one
15.	Manual unions*	: one

Candidates volunteer or are nominated and elections take place.

***Interests currently represented on North Tyneside Women's Issues Sub-Committee;  
North Tyneside does not have a blue-print for interest representation, except for trades  
union representatives. For the six other places women are elected at a public meeting and  
may or may not represent particular constituencies***

1.	Women as Carers	: one
2.	Women's safety	: one
3.	North Tyneside Peoples' Centres	: one
4.	Individuals	: three
5.	Trades unions	: two

Candidates are nominated and elected at an annual meeting close to International Women's Day.

### ***Interests and Groups Represented on Oxford City Women's Sub-Committee***

1.	Oxfordshire Women's Aid	: one
2.	Women and Recreation	: one
3.	Women and Work	: one
4.	Unemployed Women	: one
5.	Women and Education (Training)	: two
6.	Women and Housing	: one
7.	Women as Carers	: two
8.	Women as Parents	: one



## Appendix D

9.	Older Women	: one
10.	Young Women	: two
11.	Ethnic Minorities	: three
12.	Lesbians	: one
13.	Individuals	: three
14.	Women and Disabilities	: one
15.	Women and Health	: one
16.	Women and Planning	: vacant

Members are asked each year whether they wish to remain on the committee. When positions become vacant nominations are called for and an election takes place.

( In all the above, those marked \* are nominated from within their organisations rather than invited or elected publically)

## Appendix E

### APPENDIX E

#### Output From the Women's Committee Survey

The following is a summary of the main findings of the more quantitative parts of the questionnaire. Fifty-nine committee members from five areas responded to the questionnaire: twenty-two councillors, of whom six were men, and thirty-seven co-optees (including the advisory group members from Bristol referred to in Appendix F). In the following analysis the male councillors are included unless stated otherwise.

##### Age:

	<u>All</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>% Women</u>
Under 22	: 2	2	3.77%
22-30	: 9	9	16.98%
31-40	: 15	14	26.41%
41-50	: 17	16	30.18
51-60	: 7	7	13.2%
Over 60	: 10	6	11.32

Source: *Women's Committee Survey*, Question 3.

##### Level of Education of All Members:

	<u>All</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>Councillors</u>	<u>Reps(inc advisors)</u>
No qual	: 4	6.78%	9%	5.4%
O-level	: 5	8.47%	9.1%	2.7%
A-level	: 4	6.78%	9.1%	5.4%
FE	: 13	22.03%	18.2%	24.3%
Degree	: 16	27.12%	31.8%	24.3%
Higher	: 17	28.81%	22.7%	29.7%

Source: *Women's Committees Survey*, Question 5.

##### Level of Education of Women Members:

	<u>All</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>Councillors</u>	<u>Reps</u>	<u>National %</u>
No qual.	: 3	5.66%	12.5%	5.4%	37%
O-level	: 4	7.4%	6.25%	2.7%	34%
A-level	: 2	3.77%	12.5%	5.4%	9%
FE	: 13	24.52%	00.0%	24.3%	10%
Degree	: 15	28.3%	43.75%	24.3%	7%
Higher	: 16	30.18%	25.0%	29.7%	not given

Source: *Womens' Committees Survey*, Question 5 and *General Household Survey 1993*, table 10.3 page 165, (National %).

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As can be seen, the female committee members possessed significantly higher levels of educational qualification than the female population at large, with well over half having a degree compared to 7%, and only 5.66% possessing no educational qualification in comparison with 37%. This supports Jim Barry's findings in his London Councillor Survey, *The Women's Movement and Local Politics* (London, Avebury, 1992).

### **Marital status:**

	<b><u>Number</u></b>	<b><u>%</u></b>
Not given :	1	1.88%
Co-habiting :	29	54.7%
or married		
Divorced :	11	20.75%
Widowed :	3	5.66%
Single :	10	16.86%

Source: *Women's Committee Survey*, Question 6.

### **Dependents:**

Yes	: 34	57.63%
No	: 25	

Source: *Women's Committee Survey*, Question 7.

### **Involvement with voluntary groups and organisations:**

<b><u>Type</u></b>	<b><u>All</u></b>	<b><u>Women</u></b>	<b><u>% Women</u></b>	<b><u>Nationally</u></b>
Political Party	: 32	26	49%	3.6% active members
Community Group	: 36	34	64.15%	
Interest Group	: 30	28	52.83%	
Women's Group	: 33	33	62.26%	
Trade Union	: 24	24	45.28%	28%
Voluntary Group	: 32	30	56.6%	
None	: 1	1	1.88%	39.5%
Other	: 13	13		

Source: *Women's Committee Survey*, Question 9; G. Parry, G. Moyser and N. Day, *Political Participation and Democracy in Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 1991) p 151 and Table 7.4 p 12, (national percentages).

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### **Party Affiliation:**

	<b><u>All</u></b>	<b><u>Men</u></b>	<b><u>Women</u></b>	<b><u>Community Reps</u></b>
No response :	4	0	4	4
Labour :	25	0	25	11
Con :	7	5	2	1
Lib Dem :	2	1	1	0
None :	20	0	20	20
Other :	1		1	1

Source: *Women's Committee Survey*, Question 8.

### **Membership of Political Parties**

There is some discrepancy between the category of political party activity in the first table and political party affiliation in the second. Six respondents were members of political parties but did not consider that they had been active in their parties prior to committee membership; four respondents were not members of any party but had been active in party politics prior to joining the committee. In the first case this suggests that respondents had joined a political party subsequent to joining the women's committee - thus the committee had been instrumental in their politicisation. In the second it suggests that people who were on the fringes of organised politics but not prepared to commit themselves to party membership saw membership of a women's committee as an extension of their activities but were not prepared to commit themselves fully to the partisan nature of local politics.

Parry, Moyser and Day found that only 3.6% of women were active political party members; since women's committees are a political initiative it is not surprising that half of the women surveyed were party members. While party membership was to be expected of councillors it is perhaps notable that 35% of co-optees were members of political parties.

### **Membership of Women's Groups**

Parry, Moyser and Day found only 1.3% of their female sample to be members of a feminist group, while 62.26% of the women responding to the Women's Committee Survey had been active in women's groups. Parry et al found that women who were active in feminist groups were also more active in other areas of politics than the average citizen. They found them to be more active overall and on their criteria of party campaigning, collective action and direct action. Table 7.4 page 12. The authors note that, "There may not be a general association between women and such a style [direct and collective action] of politics, but there is so far as members of feminist groups are concerned." Parry, Moyser and Day, p151. Therefore it is no great surprise that women who were active in women's groups should find their way into women's committees, resulting in the high proportion found by the Women's Committee Survey.

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### Membership of Trades Unions

According to *Social Trends* for 1993, 28% of women were trades union members. The higher percentage found by the WC Survey (45.28%) probably reflects the occupational profile of the group (see below). The most highly unionised sector according to *Social Trends*, was that of female professionals, at 56.4% compared with 38.4% of professional men. Amongst the women of the Women's Committee Survey x% were either in professional occupations or were students. The high rate of union membership also reflects the concentration of members in the public service sector, where union membership is common.

### Community Representatives Representing a group:

Yes	:	29	78.37%
No	:	8	

Source: *Women's Committee Survey*, Question 34.

### Means of Selection of Community Representatives:

Elected	:	17
Invited personally	:	4
Invited as a representative of a group	:	4
Other	:	9
No response	:	3

Source: *Women's Committee Survey*, Question 35.

### Community Representatives Reporting back to a group:

Yes	:	21	56.76%
No	:	16	

Source: *Women's Committee Survey*, Question 36.

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### **Occupation:**

<b><u>Occupation</u></b>	<b><u>Total</u></b>	<b><u>Distribution Between Councillors &amp; Representatives</u></b>
<u>Not given</u>	: 5	
<u>Not working</u>	: 15	
Retired	: 7	6 councillors
Unemployed	: 6	2 councillors
Parent	: 1	1 councillor
Voluntary work:	1	1 rep
<u>Student</u>	: 4	4 reps
<u>Working</u>	: 35	
Lawyers	: 2	2 councillors
Social Work	: 11	all reps
Pub/voluntary sector	: 22	
Ed/Training :	6	3 councillors

### **Occupations Given by Councillors:**

Lawyer  
 Teacher  
 Solicitor  
 Company Director  
 Placement Officer - Housing for the homeless  
 University lecturer  
 Lecturer  
 Manager, Administration  
 Policy Administrator  
 Personnel Manager, NHS  
 Area Arts Manager

### **Occupations Given by Community Representatives:**

Journalist  
 Research, training and management consultant  
 Criminologist  
 Local government officer  
 Midwife  
 Project worker, hostel for single homeless women  
 Industrial chaplain  
 Community social worker

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2 Students  
Project manager, women's refuge  
Health Visitor  
P/t teacher, P/t student  
Community worker  
Community and youth worker  
Partner in family business  
Community worker, women's development  
Educational trainer  
P/t secretary  
Trainer  
Cook, UNISON convenor  
Supervisor City Council  
Community education worker  
Advice and information officer  
Manager voluntary sector, training  
Social/community worker  
Service manager, social services department

Source: *Women's Committee Survey*, Question 4.

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### APPENDIX F

#### **The Research Process**

Fieldwork among women's committees was conducted between the summer of 1993 and spring 1995. The shape of the fieldwork was dictated by two considerations: the nature of the project and the nature of the committees. Although this thesis sets out to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the committees, the major objective of the project was to explore the committees as experiments in new forms of democracy and representation. The background to the investigation of the committees was the considerable amount of theorising about alternatives to representative democracy and new forms of representation that had taken place in the previous thirty years. At the outset it was clear that the challenge of synthesising theory and fieldwork necessitated a flexible and open-ended approach to information. It was felt that an emphasis on qualitative data was most suited to this project, and that committee members, rather than their records and publications, should be at the centre. The project started from a range of democratic possibilities rather than from a concrete model of democracy. The aim of the project was to test the claims of democratic theories against the experiences of the committees, and explore the committees in terms of the theories. Therefore it was appropriate to collect information and use it to build a sense of the committees' democracy.

The direction suggested by the nature of the project was reinforced by issues arising from the nature of the committees. Despite their official status within local authorities the committees had, for the most part, few resources for extensive record-keeping. Membership



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was often in flux due to the inclusion of co-opted members, while their involvement with the wider community meant that they were engaged in a wide range of initiatives to a greater or lesser extent. The committees were concerned with debate and action, therefore it was appropriate that a researcher should address the membership directly.

An early decision was made to concentrate on a small group of committees and explore them extensively. Detailed analysis of one committee would have been too narrow for the goals of the project, while analysis of all the committees could only have been undertaken superficially. The research itself was planned around the need to collect information pertinent to the goals of analysing the weaknesses and strengths of the committees, as well as understanding them as experiments in democracy and representation. It was necessary to obtain a general picture of the committees, their prevalence, and how much they had in common, before acquiring more detailed knowledge of a small number of them. Data collection was planned as a pyramid: a broad base of general information about all known women's committees tapering towards detailed information about a small number of committees and their members. Research methods included searching for archival material, using documentation from women's committees and associated organisations, attendance at meetings, informal discussions, questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews.

### **Selecting the Sample**

Selecting committees for the project was a process of gradually narrowing the field. "The field" was provided by the 1992 report of the National Association of Local

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Government Women's Committees (NALGWC), which detailed all the known women's committees and other initiatives in England, Scotland and Wales. This was a reliable source and the jumping-off point for the research programme.<sup>1</sup> First it was decided to omit areas in which there were only equal opportunities committees since these took responsibility for ethnic, disability and other issues, as well as gender.<sup>2</sup> Second, it was decided to include both women's committees and sub-committees, since differences of status might prove to be important, but to exclude advisory bodies which had no formal role or powers. Third, only committees and sub-committees with co-optees were to be included, since the presence of these unelected members was important to the democratic innovation of the committees. Finally, a decision was made to concentrate on committees and sub-committees in England. Northern Ireland and Wales were non-starters: the former because there were no women's committees and a unique form of local government; the latter because there was only an advisory committee (in Glamorgan). Scotland was ruled out because of the differences in the local government systems which would have added unwanted variables to the project and shifted the focus away from the democratic innovation of the committees.

Having narrowed the field to England there were ten committees and nine sub-committees from which to choose. Despite the narrowed field of research, it was nevertheless desirable to select committees with as much variation as possible, including geographical distribution. Geographical variation was desirable in order to avoid any effects

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<sup>1</sup> *Directory of Women's Committees* (Manchester, NALGWC, 1992); this is summarised in Appendix A.

<sup>2</sup> It was not uncommon to find a Women's Sub-Committee which reported to an Equal Opportunities Committee; in such a case the Women's Sub-Committee was considered appropriate for research although the Equal Opportunities Committee was not.

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which might derive from a particular region. It was possible, for example, that the London committees, shaped by the specific character of the capital and the politics of the Greater London Council (GLC), might share characteristics amongst themselves which were not shared with those in other areas. However, the range of areas from which to select committees for the research turned out to be quite narrow, since not all areas, and only certain political formations, had proved receptive to the idea of a women's committee. Committees existed almost entirely in Labour dominated areas where the agenda of the new urban left had been influential in the 1980s.<sup>3</sup> These were predominantly metropolitan and city authorities characterised by mixed populations, in terms of race and class.<sup>4</sup> In view of the similarity in the committees' locations, and bearing in mind the research aims, an initial selection of eight committees possessing the important characteristic of co-optees were selected from around the country. The selection included a committee at which the research would be piloted. The committees selected were: two London committees, one from inner London and one from outer; one from the south-east of England; one from the south-west; two from the midlands; and two from the north. Of these, three were full committees and five were sub-committees. All included co-opted members and were

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<sup>3</sup> J. Gyford, *The Politics of Local Socialism*, (London, Allen and Unwin, 1985); W. Hampton *Local Government and Urban Politics* (Harlow, Longman, 1991) p 126. According to *The Directory of Women's Committees* (Manchester, NALGWC, 1992) in 1992 there were women's or equal opportunities committees or subcommittees in nine non-Labour areas. Five of these were hung authorities, one Liberal Democrat, one Liberal Democrat/Conservative alliance, one Conservative, and one where there was no overall majority and a Labour minority administration. Only the last of these, Edinburgh, had a full women's committee. See Appendix A for details.

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix A for the location of committees. The exception amongst those selected was North Tyneside where ethnic minorities formed a very small part of the population and the political ethos was overwhelmingly working class.

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primarily made up of women although three included male councillor members.<sup>5</sup> Eight committees represented 42% of the total of nineteen. This fairly high proportion was considered necessary in order to retain an adequate sample if, as was to be expected, one or more of the committees should either refuse to take part in the research or drop out at some point.

The initial selection of committees and sub-committees was: Brighton, Bristol, Islington, Leeds, Lewisham, Manchester, North Tyneside and Oxford. Chairs of these committees were approached for their agreement to take part in the project in April 1993. Access to the committees was not difficult, but it proved to be tortuous. Women's committees had been the target of adverse media attention during the 1980s and the members were understandably wary of people approaching them. They had also been the subject of several earlier research projects and some members were rather weary of this. Further, the committees were experiencing a period of change during which many were closed down or amalgamated into general purpose equal opportunities committees; members, were therefore, concerned with maintaining their committees and wary of doing anything that might provide ammunition for their opponents. The Manchester committee was dropped at this point because it was undergoing considerable upheaval.<sup>6</sup> Some confusion ensued because almost all the chairs had changed between the NALGWC report and my initial contact. Nevertheless, initial agreement was reached that the seven

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<sup>5</sup> *The Directory of Women's Committees* (Manchester, NALGWC, 1992). By the time of the Women's Committee Survey male councillors were present on two of the committees which had not been recorded as having male members.

<sup>6</sup> According to 1995 records there is no longer a women's committee in Manchester, (letter from Marilyn Taylor, Co-ordinator Women's Local Authority Network).

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committees and sub-committees would take part in a research project which would entail access to documents, visits, a questionnaire and interviews.

Moving from this initial acceptance to actual participation posed unexpected problems some months later (which are detailed below) and led to one committee, Lewisham, being dropped from the project. A third committee, Brighton, was dropped because it had become an equal opportunities committee. Despite the decreased size of the sample, it was still considered adequate to the goals of the project. Five out of what was now eighteen women's committees and sub-committees in England represented 27.8%, still a reasonable sample. The remaining group continued to provide a fair geographical spread and included committees as well as sub-committees.

### **Creating the Research Tools: Questionnaires and an Interview Plan**

The base of the pyramid of information, details about the location, size and resources of all known women's committees was acquired from NALGWC. In order to create the mass of more detailed information, a decision was reached to use a questionnaire and to conduct interviews. The intention was to collect a quantity of information organised around specific themes from all the members of the selected committees and to supplement this with more detailed, less specific information from a small number of in-depth interviews.

The questionnaire was formatted slightly differently for councillors and co-opted members. The main body of the form was the same for both, but a section at the end of each asked questions specific to the different roles. The goals of the questionnaire were, first, to

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collect background descriptive data on the individuals involved; second, to discover what they considered to be their achievements and failures with regard to the committee; third, find out what were their feelings about local government and the status of their committee within the local authority; fourth, to illuminate forms of democracy in the internal operations of a committee and in its relations with local women and women's groups; fifth, to identify how representation was taking place and to evaluate how satisfied members were with their efficacy as representatives of women in the community; and finally, to ascertain the different roles of councillors and co-optees on a committee and the responses of committee members to those roles.

The questionnaire was designed comprising a mixture of closed, open, and multiple choice questions. On all questions which were not directly eliciting information, options of "none" and "other" were included. Wherever appropriate, subjects were offered the opportunity and given space to put forward their own answers and to discuss their responses. A phone number and address were made available so that participants could query any part of the questionnaire.<sup>7</sup> There are well-rehearsed reservations with regard to the use of questionnaires, particularly when they are delivered by post, as this one was going to be. They often generate only a low response rate because there is little incentive for recipients respond; the quality of the sample is undermined by this low response rate. Furthermore, the fear that recipients are easily deterred from filling in the questionnaire decrees that postal questionnaires will be short. There is no opportunity for the researcher to clarify any issues for participants or to probe their answers, and the quality of answers depends on a

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<sup>7</sup> The only person to make use of these was a male councillor, who wanted to know whether the form had been sent to him in error.

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reasonable level of literacy. The researcher cannot control the order in which questions are addressed, nor the context in which a questionnaire is answered - is it just the person to whom the questionnaire was sent that answers it or does the whole household join in? Is it completed with seriousness, with irony, or treated as a joke? To compound all of the foregoing, the process of sending out questionnaires, chasing them, and eventually receiving them back is slow.<sup>8</sup>

Given these problems, why use a questionnaire, particularly a postal one? First, I needed to collect a quantity of fairly routine information about the people involved and their backgrounds. Only the people themselves could provide this information. On the one hand it would have been inefficient for me to have travelled around meeting them to collect this, while on the other a telephone survey was made impossible by the reluctance of council officers to divulge the addresses and phone numbers of co-opted members. In terms of the problems inherent in postal surveys, I believed that the approval of the project by committee chairs and the high level of commitment to the committees amongst members (which had been reported by previous researchers) would counter most of the potential difficulties by providing reasons for the committee members to want to complete the questionnaire and to take it seriously.

There nevertheless remained a rather different concern arising from the more general problem encountered by any proposed question-and-answer process: the extent to which a researcher "fixes" the outcome of a project by virtue of the questions asked - and not asked - and the phrasing and ordering of questions adopted. Any process which involves asking

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<sup>8</sup> Kidder and Judd, *Research Methods in Social Relations* (New York, CBS Publishing, 1986) p 231.

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people questions is vulnerable to fibs and forgetfulness. Inaccuracies in descriptive information - about age, education, political affiliation, length of service, for example - are due to the subjects' choice or memory.<sup>9</sup> Extracting opinion, however, offers greater opportunity for leading the subject. Particularly relevant to this research was the risk of distorting a participant's opinion by the form, order or context of questions. In order to minimise the risk of directing the subjects, questions were formulated and arranged in order to provide as much choice as possible. The questionnaire went through three versions in consultation with specialists in methodology. It evolved from an outline of themes and broad questions into a document of four sections directed at specific areas of information. The questionnaire was designed to treat its recipients with respect, allowing them to express their own opinions with a minimum of direction, yet permitting them to be brief in recognition of the pressures on their time and energy. The resulting questionnaire was long but relatively straight-forward.<sup>10</sup>

The second research tool was the Interview Outline. Interviews were included in order to add depth and complexity to the information collected by questionnaire; their aim was to probe individuals about their participation and ascertain their opinions about how the committees operated.<sup>11</sup> My intention was to conduct fairly open interviews, but to guide the subjects through a number of different areas relevant to the research. An interview plan was

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<sup>9</sup> Asking questions about political affiliation might sometimes be problematic, but was not expected to be so when people were being addressed because of their political engagement.

<sup>10</sup> See Appendix B, Questionnaire. The length of the questionnaire is at the upper limit of what is considered reasonable for a postal survey. The length was justified by the particular nature of the people participating. This questionnaire comprised 43 questions. For comparison, Norris and Lovenduski's *The British Candidate Survey, Political Recruitment* (Cambridge University Press, 1995) p 251, comprised 75 questions (although not all of these would have been relevant to all respondents).

<sup>11</sup> See Appendix C for the interview outline followed.



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constructed which would take the interviewee through the themes of feminism, gender, minority interests, party politics and the impact of the committee on the individual's politics and ambitions. However, the structure permitted considerable circumlocution and interviewees were to be encouraged to discuss the individual circumstances of their committee and its history. The interviews were to be taped and transcribed, with the knowledge and permission of the interviewees.

### **The Pilot**

In order to pilot the research plan, a London authority was selected where the committee was small and the area easy to reach. At this point my miscalculation about the accessibility of the committees became apparent. Although the chair of the committee had agreed to participate, when the relevant officers were contacted to obtain names and addresses of members, obstacles arose. The officers wanted to examine the questionnaire and meet me before agreeing to the research going forward. Although they were reticent initially, the officers were ultimately helpful and supportive. Their main concern was that I should understand the work of both the committee and the officers, and the difference between them. The only alteration which they wanted made to the questionnaire was to change the designation of themselves, the council-employed women's officers, to make explicit their independent role and their professionalism; this I was happy to do. This hiccough caused anxiety and delay rather than concrete difficulty. Once the final form had been agreed, the committee secretary proved most helpful in distributing questionnaires and encouraging members to participate.

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Questionnaires were sent out through the committee secretary with a covering letter and return-paid envelope. A follow-up copy was sent to non-respondents after about two weeks. At this stage there were some doubts about the length of the questionnaire; however, it elicited an 80% response rate, all of which were full responses and none of which contained adverse comments about length or content, although such criticism had been invited. The two non-respondents were women who had appeared to the officers to be withdrawing from the committee prior to this. No problems with the clarity of questions were apparent, so it was decided that the research would go ahead using the existing form. With the assistance, again, of the committee secretary interviews were set up with three of the responding committee members: one councillor and two co-optees. Interviews went well and the interview plan appeared to be satisfactory. The duration of an interview ranged from half to one hour.

The information provided by the questionnaires and interviews appeared to be appropriate to the goals of the project. It included descriptive data about the people involved, their backgrounds and their goals; information about the committees from their points of view; and their opinions about the goals and achievements of the committees in terms of democracy, representation and feminism. I therefore decided to go ahead as planned. The question arose of whether to include the pilot study as part of the project. Three issues were important here: first, whether there would be any difference between the pilot and further studies of committees; second, the relatively small number of committees in existence; and third, the investment of time and effort made by the people at the pilot local authority. Since no changes were made to the questionnaire and interview outline from those applied during the pilot there was no real obstacle to including the results in the main

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body of the research. The decision to do this was reinforced by awareness of the small number of committees (the pilot took place at what was one of the very small number of full committees) and belief that it was most fair to include the input of the people from this local authority, who had been generous with their time.

The second part of the research was then undertaken for this committee, which comprised attendance at meetings, collection of material from the committee's own records and investigation of the archives of the local press.

### **The Fieldwork**

Having established that the research plan would work, the main body of the fieldwork commenced. Similar problems of access arose as each of the remaining six committees was addressed in turn.<sup>12</sup> In each case, when the first stage of research, distribution of the questionnaire, was broached, council officers acted as gatekeepers, protecting both councillors and co-optees from potentially dangerous intrusion. This stumbling block was compounded by another factor: change. In all but one of the committees some sort of change took place between the initial contact and the start of fieldwork. In one case this was only a change of Chair, but in others it entailed major changes in organisation including alteration of status and structure of the committee and the introduction of new procedures for the selection of co-optees. At this stage a further two committees were dropped from the research: Brighton because it had become an equal

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<sup>12</sup> Of the eight committees initially selected one had already been dropped and one had been the pilot.

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opportunities committee and Lewisham, where the officers proved to be unwilling to co-operate.<sup>13</sup>

Research was allowed to proceed without delay in the second area once contact had been established with the new chair.<sup>14</sup> In the third, no obstacles arose but delays occurred because the committee was going through changes in status and structure, including the creation of a new advisory forum and the appointment of a new equalities's officer with a brief to oversee change. It was agreed that councillors should be interviewed immediately, with the questionnaire and interviews of co-opted members to take place a year later when the new arrangements had settled.<sup>15</sup> The fourth committee proved quite resistant to the notion of a questionnaire, subjecting it to scrutiny by the chair and officers. This committee was also undergoing structural change and changes to the process for selection of co-optees. Here, permission was eventually given to send the questionnaire to councillors, who could then be interviewed, but access to co-optees was to be delayed for a year.<sup>16</sup> At the fifth, the officers wanted copies of the questionnaire so that it could go to a committee for approval

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<sup>13</sup> Brighton and Lewisham. Brighton, where a women's officer had been very helpful, became an equal opportunities committee. At Lewisham the women's officer was initially reticent, discouraging further contact with councillors on the ground that they were far too busy. It gradually emerged that the committee had been involved in research before, on which occasions the researchers had not fed back any of their results to the committee or officers, resulting in a bad feeling of exploitation. Further, the officer maintained that the committee was no longer very active, most of the initiative having been transferred to another committee. However, sample questionnaires and an description of the research were sent to the officer for her comments. Unfortunately, the officer decided to copy and distribute the questionnaire herself. As a result, a version of the questionnaire slightly different from the finished version was distributed, badly copied, without a covering letter or prepaid return envelope, to the committee members, resulting in one response. It was felt that this action, coupled with the general resistance of the officer, had spoiled the committee as a research subject.

<sup>14</sup> Oxford.

<sup>15</sup> Bristol.

<sup>16</sup> Leeds.

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prior to distribution to the women's committee. Despite misgivings, this did not present any problems, only delay.<sup>17</sup>

Initially there had been eight areas selected for research: three with committees and five with sub-committees. The final group comprised five areas (including the pilot) which possessed two committees and three sub-committees. These included 105 members: 47 councillors and 58 co-optees; two committees had no male members, one had nine, one had three, and the last had one.<sup>18</sup>

### **Response Rate for the Women's Committee Survey Questionnaire**

Once research was under way few major problems were encountered. In each area the initial despatch of questionnaires was followed up by a second a few weeks later, resulting in a response rate which varied between committees but was overall satisfactory. The generally good rate of response was lowered by that from Bristol, the committee which had undergone the greatest restructuring and where questionnaires were sent out one year after councillors had been interviewed. During the period of the research the Bristol women's committee was merged into an Equalities and Community Development

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<sup>17</sup> North Tyneside.

<sup>18</sup> This total is comprised of the numbers of members documented by the officers responsible for the different committees, and represents the number of questionnaires sent. Membership numbers fluctuated during the period of the research as co-optees resigned and were recruited. Further, some councillors (notably non-Labour men) who were on record as committee members were, apparently, unaware that this was the case, while some others took no part in committee proceedings. In the case of Bristol agreeing upon a number of members has been complicated by changes in the committee structure. There is now an equalities committee with an advisory women's forum. The women's forum has 16 elected members, two of whom sit on the equal opportunities committee. However, different members from the advisory forum sit each time, therefore all of the forum members have been included here, although this is a rather inaccurate representation. The committees referred to are: Islington, Oxford, North Tyneside, Leeds and Bristol.

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committee, with advisory sub-committees for Women, Race and Disability. The women's sub-committee was augmented by an advisory group made up of local women. Rather than abandon the area, particularly since the committee had an interesting history, it was retained, but it did not fit perfectly with the other four. The sub-committee did not have a permanent complement of community representatives, rather, two members of the advisory group attended a committee meeting having volunteered to do so at the previous advisory group meeting. Owing to the nature of the new structure it was impossible to distinguish between voluntary members of the new advisory group and co-opted members of the restructured women's sub-committee. There was, however, a reasonable rate of response from advisory group members.<sup>19</sup> The lowest response rate was from the Bristol councillors, who perhaps felt that they had told me all they had to tell during the interviews.

### **Total response rate:**

The total number of responses was 62 out of a possible 106, or 58% (the response rate excluding Bristol was 51 out of a possible 82, or 62.2%,).

Response rates varied between areas, nevertheless, certain trends were discernable.

Community representatives responded at a higher rate than councillors and the response rate

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<sup>19</sup> Advisory groups, having no formal powers, proved less effective at retaining the support of their elected community representatives than full or sub-committees, where members might not have felt particularly powerful themselves, but knew that they were part of a body which had power. Therefore, weighting the responses of advisory group members equally with those of the co-opted members of other committees is not entirely satisfactory. However, this is what has been done in the absence of any alternative. Leeds women's committee, which also had an advisory group, had a permanent complement of advisors elected to the committee for two years. In this instance committee members were included and advisory group members who were not also committee members were excluded.

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from male councillor members was lower than that from both female councillors and co-optees.

### Response rate for councillors:

The total number of responses from councillors was 23 out of a possible 48, or 47.9% (the response rate excluding Bristol was 22 out of a possible 40, or 55%).

### Response rate for community representatives:

The total number of responses from community representatives was 39 out of a possible 58, or 67.24% (the response rate excluding Bristol was 29 out of 42, or 69%).

### Broken down by area the response rates were as follows:

	<b>Total</b>	<b>Councillors</b>	<b>Representatives</b>
Bristol	45.8%	12.5%	62.5%
Islington	80%	66.6%	100%
Leeds	64.7%	63.6	66.6%
North Tyneside	44.4%	29.4%	70%
Oxford	71.4%	100%	63.6%

The numbers of people involved were as follows:

	<b>Councillors</b>		<b>Representatives</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<b>Poss.</b>	<b>Actual</b>	<b>Poss.</b>	<b>Actual</b>	<b>Poss.</b>	<b>Actual</b>
Bristol	8	1	16	10	24	11
Islington	6	4	4	4	10	8
Leeds	11	7	6	4	17	11
North Tyneside	17	5	10	7	27	12
Oxford	6	6	22	14	28	20

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With the exception of Bristol, where I can only assume that the time between my initial contact and the distribution of the questionnaire coupled with the general disruption of the committee had an adverse effect, it was interesting to note that where the responses from councillors were lowest there were the highest numbers of male and non-Labour councillors. This was a contributing, but not decisive, factor in the lower response rate for councillors than for community representatives. Pressure of work might be a reason for the difference between councillors and co-optees, however, the responses to the questionnaire showed that the women co-opted into membership were notable for their commitment to a range of activities (see Appendix E for details). The type of commitment might be a more promising explanation: councillors were committed to politics, of which the women's committees were a part, whereas co-optees were more committed to a single issue which they acted on through the committees. This would be in keeping with the possibility, elaborated in Chapter Five, that women's issues were a predominant drive for community representatives, while councillors balanced their concerns for different social and party political issues. Male councillors, whether supportive or in opposition, may have felt themselves to be peripheral and believed that their responses were of no great importance.<sup>20</sup> The lower response rate amongst male councillor members had a particular impact on the response rate of North Tyneside, the committee with several male members.

Nevertheless, the response rate was good, confirming the initial premiss that people involved in the committees would be highly motivated to take part in research into them.

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<sup>20</sup> A letter written to male members asking whether they would like to explain why they had not responded prompted one to reply that he had never actually been involved with the committee, and a second to reply "laziness" - and to send his completed questionnaire.



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The results compare favourably with those achieved by Norris and Lovenduski for their *British Candidates Survey*.<sup>21</sup> Their response rates varied between 43% from a postal survey of party members, 55% from a postal survey of applicants, 69% from a postal survey of MPs and candidates, and 74% from a survey conducted at party meetings.<sup>22</sup> Kidder and Judd suggest that the response rate from postal questionnaires is "often less than 50%"; therefore, the results achieved by the Women's Committee Survey were satisfactory and constitute a sound basis for this thesis.<sup>23</sup> The results of the questionnaires have formed the basis of this thesis; they were of particular significance in Chapters Five, Six and Seven.

### **The Conduct of Interviews**

A relatively small number of interviews was undertaken in order to provide depth of information and more personal reflections upon the committees. Further, the interview situation provided an opportunity for committee members to introduce new themes and perspectives. From the committee members who had responded to the questionnaire a number were selected for interview on a random, pin-in-the-list basis. The number selected in each case varied according to the size of the committee and included both councillors and co-optees. To the initial selection were added two non-Labour councillors who were prepared to be interviewed, and two ex co-optees. Most of the committee members approached were willing to be interviewed and were open and helpful during interviews.

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<sup>21</sup> P. Norris and J. Lovenduski, *Political Recruitment*.

<sup>22</sup> Norris and Lovenduski, first page of Appendix A.

<sup>23</sup> Kidder and Judd, *Research Methods in Social Relations* p 223.

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One cop-optee whose questionnaire responses suggested hostility to the committee did not respond to invitations to be interviewed, thus adding support to the concern that members who differed widely from the norm would not get involved in the research. Very few councillors who were not in the Labour party had responded to the questionnaire, but a Conservative and a Liberal Democrat member were open to being interviewed. Male councillor members were approached for interview, with only one, Conservative, taker. Amongst the co-optees the group selected covered a variety of interests and groups and included women from different backgrounds.<sup>24</sup>

Eighteen face-to-face interviews were undertaken, ten of councillors and eight of community representatives. Of these, three were in Bristol, all councillors; three in Islington, one councillor and two community representatives; five in Leeds, two councillors and three community representatives; three in North Tyneside, two councillors and one representative; and four in Oxford, two councillors and two community representatives. Eight councillors were Labour, one Conservative and one Liberal Democrat. One councillor was male, all other interviewees were female. The co-optees interviewed represented: older women, women from ethnic minorities, women with disabilities, women and work, women and training and women as carers. One woman interviewed sat on a committee as an independent, representative of herself.<sup>25</sup> In addition to these I interviewed two community representatives from Bristol over the telephone, because of the difficulty of arranging a face-to-face interview.

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<sup>24</sup> For a list of groups and interests represented on different committees see Appendix D.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

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In order to encourage the confidence of the subjects, interviews were conducted at times and places of their choice. As a result, co-optees were interviewed in their homes or places of work, while most councillors chose to be interviewed in council buildings. I adopted an approach towards the interviewees which was intended to encourage them to express their thoughts and develop their ideas, without pushing them towards treating me as a confidante. I wanted to avoid creating a complicity in unstated values with the interviewees and exploiting their impression that they were talking to someone who shared their goals and commitment, which might have encouraged them to give more intimate information than they might have done otherwise.<sup>26</sup> Most of the people interviewed supported the committees. The main exception to this was the male Conservative councillor, who saw his role as keeping the committee in check. Nonetheless, he was happy to talk about the committee and his feelings about it. Although interviewees were generally supportive, a range of opinion emerged from the interviews. In part this was due to the precarious situation of some committees and changes taking place in others. Some interviewees appeared to be supportive of a committee in theory while highly critical of the reality of their own committee; others compared the past and present of their committee to the disadvantage of one or the other. Thus, despite the degree of self-selection of the people available for interview differences in opinion and in the motivation behind their willingness to be interviewed appeared. The interviews, like the questionnaire results, underpinned all of the preceding work but were of particular importance to Chapters Five, Six and Seven.

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<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of ethical issues that arise when a woman is interviewing women see J. Finch, "It's Great to Have Someone to talk to: Ethics and Politics of Interviewing Women", in M. Hammersley (ed), *Philosophy, Politics and Practice* (London, Sage, 1993).

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### Some Conclusions Emerging from the Interviews

As with the questionnaires, the interview process revealed a number of issues. Differences were apparent between councillors and co-optees. Councillors brought with them to the interview confidence derived from public position, experience of being interviewed in the past, and the parallel existence of their private and party-political personas. Rather than being exploited by the interview process councillors appeared to enjoy the opportunity to talk things through, re-live their successes and explain what had frustrated them.<sup>27</sup>

Co-optees presented more variation in terms of experience, confidence and political commitment. Some were confident professional women, others had less public experience and less facility in expression. It was with these women that the risks of presuming upon shared womanhood and superficial friendship were most real since not all of them were experienced in separating their public from private personas - a trick familiar to all councillors. Here, experience of the questionnaire, which had preceded the interview, and the formality of a tape recorder and an agenda of issues to be covered, provided reminders that something other than a friendly chat was taking place. Nevertheless, interviewees were unfailingly forthcoming, and even expressed gratitude for the chance to assess what they had done.<sup>28</sup>

The interviews confirmed an impression given by the questionnaire responses that councillors and co-optees were similar to each other in many ways, including education,

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<sup>27</sup> Interviews 9 (24.8.94) and 10 (24.8.94).

<sup>28</sup> Particularly Interviews 8 (8.8.94) and 14 (27.4.95).

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articulacy and commitment to public life, but different in others. They underlined the different expectations of the committees held by the two groups of people and the distinction between the two groups as committee members. The interviews were invaluable for their revelations about the relations between committee members and the complexity of members' commitment to the committees. Members whose questionnaire responses had given a one-dimensional description of what they thought were successes and failures of their committees could now explain the finer points of their responses and put them in the context of the committee's history.

A far more nuanced picture of relations between councillors, co-optees and officers emerged from interviews than from the questionnaire responses. This was of importance for understanding the internal democracy and the feminism of the committees. Important issues which had not been part of the questionnaire were introduced by interviewees. These included the importance of the personality, politics and commitment of the committee chair; the absence (in most case) of any connection between co-optees outside of committee meetings; the nature of links with women's groups outside the council; and the sometimes fragile balance between co-optees and officers. With regard to this last issue, one interviewee suggested that co-optees were very important when a committee was poorly staffed, because then they initiated projects and took on a lot of the administrative work. If a committee later acquired better staffing, the officers took over these tasks and co-optees were displaced.

One councillor and two community representatives interviewed identified themselves as members of ethnic minorities, and four interviewees identified themselves as lesbian. One male councillor was interviewed; one of the councillors belonged to the

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Conservative party and one to the Liberal Democrats, the remainder of the councillors were Labour. The majority of those interviewed had been educated to degree level.<sup>29</sup> The present status of the majority placed them in the middle classes, although class backgrounds were mixed.<sup>30</sup> For example, two highly educated women with middle class occupations still identified strongly with their poor, working class childhoods and lived in what they described as working class areas. This highlights the inadequacy of normative class analysis to address the complexity and changeability of women's circumstances.

### **Formal Meetings and Informal Discussion**

In addition to the process of collecting questionnaire responses and conducting interviews, the research included attendance at a committee (and other) meetings, and informal discussions. The goal of these activities was to see the committees in action, to get to understand them in the context of the whole council, and to gain a sense of how they worked. Attendance at meetings was important from the outset in order to get a sense of what each committee felt like, how it worked and who the people involved were. My presence was also important as an encouragement to members to complete their questionnaires, and more than one questionnaire was returned with a note saying something like, "I remember you from our meetings and hope that this helps in your research". At two

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<sup>29</sup> Eleven had degrees and higher degrees, three had further education or professional qualifications, one was studying for a degree.

<sup>30</sup> Occupations included: college lecturer, policy administrator, social worker, teacher, journalist, researcher, arts manager, community worker, company director, housing officer, trainer, clerical officer, and voluntary sector management.

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of the committees I was invited to introduce myself and talk about my work; at a third I was able to do so informally after the meeting. Agendas, minutes and notes from the meetings augmented the questionnaires and interviews, providing a description of the formal shape within which the individual members operated and formed their opinions.

At least one meeting of each committee, and advisory group where one existed, was attended, and a variety of other meetings, depending on the activities of individual committees.<sup>31</sup> Where committees were undergoing change I went to a variety of events, including more than one committee meeting. It was not possible to attend more meetings because of the time and distances involved. Attending more meetings in the relatively short time-span of the research would not have revealed much more; occasional attendance over a period of years might have proved interesting, but was outside the scope of this project. On all occasions I was primarily an observer, not taking part except to engage in general conversation. Nevertheless, I suspect that my presence altered the dynamics of at least one of the events I attended.

In addition to the formal meetings, informal, un-taped, meetings and telephone conversations took place with the women's and equalities officers of the different councils. These facilitated access to members, meetings, documentation and general information. As council employees and professionals in their field, officers had a different perspective on the committees from that of the members. They took account of the position of the committee and themselves within the whole council, and broad trends in women's and equal opportunities policies. As career local government officers they could take a long term view

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<sup>31</sup> One committee was undergoing a process of considerable change which involved public meetings and election of co-optees, so these meetings were attended.

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of gender and equalities issues and they were often in possession of the history of their committee, which its members lacked because they were subject to replacement.<sup>32</sup> Notes from meetings with officers provided the context for questionnaire and interview data, discussed in Chapters Five, Six and Seven.

### Archival Research

All the sources of information referred to so far came from within the councils or the committees. In order to find an external perspective the local press in each area was investigated. This was done with two aims. The first was quite straight forward: to collect information about what the committees had done over the years in order to supplement the records of the committees. The second was perhaps more interesting: to discover the attitude adopted by the local press towards the committees; to find out what was reported about the responses of councillors and the public to the committees; and to see how the public reacted to the committees through the Letters pages.

The local press in all areas covered the activities of the local council and councillors, and had kept files which were easily accessible.<sup>33</sup> Coverage was given to significant committee meetings, especially when there is an angle which could draw public attention and increase readership. This provided valuable information about the activities of the committees, the wider political issues against which they were projected, and the context of public opinion in which they were operating.

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<sup>32</sup> See I. Stone, *Equal Opportunities in Local Authorities* (London, HMSO, 1988), and Chapter Five above for details of such conflicts.

<sup>33</sup> Except in Leeds where everything was on micro-fiche at the Public Library.



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The existing literature of women's committees made reference to campaigns waged against them in the local press of different areas, which was in tune with the broader press campaign against Labour left initiatives in the 1980s.<sup>34</sup> The archives of the local papers in the areas responses the Women's Committee Survey confirmed that the committees received considerable adverse publicity, especially during the first few years of their existence.<sup>35</sup> However, the coverage was not uniform. It varied according to the issue in hand, and suggested a degree of political innocence on the part of the committees. In one instance the press faithfully reported the very bad behaviour of Conservative councillors, who disrupted public meetings held by the committee and directed a scurrilous campaign against it.

The archives provided valuable information about the activities of the committees along with insights about the responses of local people and the attitudes of the journalists themselves (or at least their editors). Opposition and ridicule of the "loony lesbian feminist" variety were largely apparent in the earlier years of the committees and almost nothing of this sort appeared after 1990. Much of the criticism, past and present, focused on spending and was directed against the council as a whole. In certain cases the council, or a group of councillors, were criticised for failing to support the women's committee adequately and counter-productive divisions within the council were noted. Press responses to the committees in different areas varied. Most notably, the press in the North Tyneside area had very little to say about the committee and almost nothing derogatory. For the most part, the newspapers simply and without comment reported what the committee was doing. This may

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<sup>34</sup> See Goldsmiths Media Research Group, *Media Coverage of Local Government in London* (Department of Communications, June 1987); the response of local newspapers to the committees in this study is examined in Chapters Six and Seven above.

<sup>35</sup> See Chapter Seven for details.

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well have been connected to the nature of the committee, particularly that it involved councillors from both parties and male councillors.

On the whole, adverse press coverage suggested not so much coherent opposition to the committees, as willingness to seize upon anything which could make a controversial or ridiculous headline, with little reflection upon underlying value. The archives indicated a poverty of ideas and direction in local newspapers rather than ideologically-led muckraking. Which is not to deny how damaging such unreflective presentations of the goals and activities of the women's committees and other initiatives were, especially when the committees were made to look ridiculous and their members foolish. The committees did not appear to have been of great interest to the press recently, which was more likely to be a comment upon the diminished prominence and heightened public relations skills of the committees than the improved attitudes of journalists. Press treatment of the committees is discussed in Chapter Six.

### **An Evaluation of the Research Approach**

It is a dilemma of this sort of research that the self-selection inherent in a group of politically active people will be compounded by the self-selection of the group of people who choose to respond. Councillors are self-selected to stand for public office, therefore they are bound to be a rather specialised sub-section of the community: most people do not put themselves forward for public office. The terms upon which committees sought co-optees and the selection procedures they had in place would ensure those selected would be women who were already involved in some sort of woman-focused activity, either

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professionally or as a voluntary activity. It was also to be expected that there would be similarities between the committees themselves as a result of their co-operation and co-ordination with each other through the National Association of Local Government Women's Committees (NALGWC). Further, councillor members in each committee would be familiar with councillor members in other areas through participation in the Labour party and various Labour, local government and women's political organisations.

Although relatively high response rates were predicted and achieved, it is possible that participation appealed to a particular group and repelled those who did not share certain characteristics, and it may be that those who did not respond were those who least conformed to a membership norm in terms of commitment and satisfaction. Despite attempts made to include as wide a variety of people as possible in the fieldwork it was to be expected that certain common ground between committee members would become apparent. Very simple limitations of time and resources made it impossible to chase up every member more than was done, or to interview every member who responded.

Nonetheless, despite self-selection the data findings suggested that the councillors sitting on women's committees were by no means a homogeneous group. The majority were Labour councillors, who by and large supported the committee, but these differed from each other in terms of age, class background, and approach to the committee: some were clearly feminist, while others were directed by more liberal or socialist beliefs. Conservative and Liberal Democrat councillors sat on committees with a variety of motivations. Some did so unwillingly in order to fulfil party obligations, others did so out of curiosity, and some out of a perceived sense of duty, in order to restrain a committee's more extravagant flights of

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fancy.<sup>36</sup> With regard to the co-optees, responses to the questionnaire indicated the range of women involved. Despite similarities in terms of a higher level of education and greater political engagement than average, co-optees were drawn from a relatively broad social base.<sup>37</sup> Fewer women were drawn in from ethnic minorities and the working class than committee members would have liked, but some were present on each committee.<sup>38</sup>

Moreover, respondents displayed a range of attitudes towards the committees in both questionnaires and interviews. At least two hostile questionnaire responses were received. These detailed frustration, disappointment and anger towards both council proceedings and councillors, and their existence suggests that a fair assortment of opinion was canvassed. Other questionnaire responses and interviews revealed ambivalent and complex feelings towards the committees.

This programme of research did not set out to make comparisons between committees, although it encompassed those of five disparate areas. It was felt that a "compare and contrast" approach would impose a limiting structure on the research and would not afford particular insight into the democratic and representative beliefs and goals of committees or their members. Setting out to compare and contrast would assume that the meanings of democracy and representation were already agreed upon and that in consequence the democratic and representative practices of the committees were somehow measurable. Whereas I assumed quite the reverse: the meanings of both democracy and

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<sup>36</sup> Only Islington women's committee had no non-Labour councillors involved. Leeds, Oxford and Bristol each had two. A male Conservative councillor saw his role on the committee as, "To bring a sensible approach to Women's Committee work." Q. 11.

<sup>37</sup> See Appendix E for a summary of education and occupation.

<sup>38</sup> See Appendix E.

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representation were up for grabs, and this study set out to analyse the complexity and contradictions of beliefs and practices. Counting conceptions and those who held them, therefore presented itself as a possible mode; however, it was felt that this again posed a structure which would limit research and suggest an over-orderly picture of the world.

Since comparison was not an issue the study could have focused on one committee, however, it was felt that in order to capture a wide variety of members and to transcend the possibility that members of one committee might be similarly influenced by their shared context, it was necessary to study several committees. At some points of the discussion differences between committees are relevant and are indicated, but the focus of this study is upon people who were members, and upon the goals and strategies which they more-or-less shared.

Taking the committees as a whole, they displayed considerable overlap of ideas and initiatives, for example: the shoppers creche which originated in Strathclyde was later established in Oxford; many areas became involved in an inter-agency approach to combatting domestic violence; and the "Zero Tolerance" campaign on domestic violence was widely adopted. Although the research did not extend beyond the chosen committees and any transposition of conclusions would have to be heavily qualified, the similarities between the committees studied suggested that some tentative conclusions could be extended to other initiatives.

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