

### **Reclaiming Revolutionary Feminism**

*“Generally, saying: ‘feminist’, is revolutionary enough in this day and age, it’s far more of a statement now than it was back in the eighties. And no, I wouldn’t say I was a Revolutionary Feminist now ‘cos I’m less separatist than I was at that time and I think it’s got overladen with such baggage that I’d have to spend about ten minutes defining what I meant” (Al Garthwaite).*

In this article I shall explore some understandings, and misunderstandings, of the school or type of feminism known as Revolutionary Feminism; a uniquely British school of feminism, founded in 1977. The quote above is taken from my interview with a prominent and influential British Revolutionary Feminist activist named Al Garthwaite. The interview forms the basis of this article and the research was part of my PhD on the British Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM) from the 1970s to today. Amongst many of her legacies, Al founded the Reclaim the Night marches (RTN) in the UK in November 1977; traditionally women’s night-time, street protest marches against male violence against women (VAW). Also involved in the establishment and running of the UK WLM national newsletter ‘WIRES’<sup>1</sup>, Al was at the hub of organising in the feminist hotbed that was Leeds, in Yorkshire in the North of England, in the 1970s and 1980s.

I was born too late to be part of it all at the time; in fact while Al was launching the first RTN marches in the UK, I was only a few months old, sharing a year of birth with this famous herstorical tradition. Years later, influenced by the 1980s women’s peace protest at Greenham Common in Newbury, in the South of England, I left my home in Scotland, and

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<sup>1</sup> ‘WIRES’, the Women’s Information Referral and Enquiry Service, ran from 1975 to 1985.

moved to a Women's Peace Camp in Yorkshire. It was there in 1995 that I met my first partner, Al's daughter. While, like many first-loves, that relationship didn't last, we remain like family and Al is still referred to affectionately as my mother in law. It was listening to Al's stories of feminist activism that spurred me to become more involved in feminist activism myself, and inspired me to revive the tradition of RTN marching, re-launching the march in London in 2004, following a lull in the protest across the UK over the 1990s.

In a way this interview with Al has therefore been going on since we first met, as I pestered her for tales of a feminist past and a period of radicalism that, like many younger feminists today, I felt I had missed out on. For this article however, I draw on the formal, semi-structured interview carried out with Al as part of my PhD field work in Leeds in January 2012. At the time of interview Al was aged sixty-four and working as a media consultant and community activist. Through a reading of this interview I will shed some light on the background of Revolutionary Feminism, attempt to identify some of its defining features and explore Al's contemporary political identification, as, or with, this particular school of feminism. I shall conclude with what relevance this strand of feminism has to the burgeoning WLM today.

### Feminism Past and Present

Feminism is allegedly enjoying a 'resurgence' in the UK; with documented, regular and visible feminist activism seemingly sweeping the nation and, apparently, being led by younger women (Mendes, 2011; Cochrane, 2010). The umbrella organisation 'UK Feminista' reports that grassroots feminist groups in the UK doubled between 2010 and 2012 (Topping,

2012). In 2010 a survey of 1300 UK feminist activists found most to be in their twenties, and many having been active feminists since their teens (Redfern & Aune, 2010).

Al agreed with the assertion of an upsurge in feminism, and was pleased to see feminist activism back on the streets again:

*"Oh I think it's marvellous, it's made me so happy to see the rise of feminism again in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when really it was being kept alive with a gasp in the 90s. And, I mean obviously feminism was being kept alive in Asia and all over the world so it's wrong to say that it went, but thinking, just in this country, there wasn't much appearing to be going on. I mean refuges yes, services stuff carried on. And then there was this great resurgence and the conferences and Reclaim the Night and the broadsheets covering it, and it's just really encouraging"* (Al Garthwaite).

Al was also positive about what she saw as an expansion of the diversity of participants, compared to the 1970s/80s:

*"There's a lot wider age range now, we didn't have women in their 60s back then, like we are now. There are more Black women now"* (Al Garthwaite).

The quote above highlights that inclusion was limited during the 1970s and 80s, an area which has been much documented and which is still a very live issue today; signalling previous unfamiliarity with the long history and contribution of Black Feminist theory and activism, as well as the dominance of White women in the WLM. During this time, the period known as the Second Wave of feminism, when feminism was last considered to be at its height across the Western world, Al had been part of a pioneering Revolutionary Feminist group in Leeds.

## Revolutionary Feminism

Revolutionary Feminism is a British school of feminism; it was founded by feminist activist and academic, Sheila Jeffreys, via a paper against what she saw as a liberal takeover of the WLM, presented at the 1977 National UK WLM Conference, held in April, in Islington, London (SR:58, 1977). Her paper was titled: *"The Need for Revolutionary Feminism – Against the liberal takeover of the women's liberation movement"* (ibid). The paper was very well received, and following the presentation, many began calling themselves Revolutionary Feminists, and formed groups around the country (Rees, 2010). A conference was then held in Scotland, in Edinburgh that July called: 'Towards a Radical Feminist Theory of Revolution', and it was following this that a Revolutionary Feminist group was founded in Leeds, where Al lived and still resides:

*"The group started off calling itself the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, as a result of the women who had been up to that conference in Edinburgh; they came back all fired up and talking about this thing – Revolutionary Feminism"* (Al Garthwaite).

Al became part of this group and undertook organisation of the UK's first synchronised RTN marches, which were launched in over twelve towns and cities across the UK on the night of the 12<sup>th</sup> November 1977. The roots of RTN in the UK are therefore firmly planted in Revolutionary Feminism.

Initially, Revolutionary Feminism was largely seen by UK feminists and commentators to be similar to an existing school – Radical Feminism, which had emerged much earlier in the US in the late 1960s and was influential in the UK from the 1970s (Crow,

2000; Brownmiller, 1999). The two schools do seem to have some standpoints in common: both emphasised the importance of autonomous women-only space and organising, focussed much of their theory and activism on male VAW and identified this as a keystone of women's oppression. In fact, it was arguably these two schools of feminism that pioneered feminist theory on VAW, devising new analyses of patriarchy or male supremacy, and of male violence as a form of social control. Both schools also developed original feminist theory on pornography and prostitution as forms of male VAW (Weir & Wilson, 1984; Bouchier, 1983; Hanmer, 1981).

The main difference between these two schools appears to be in the criticism from Revolutionary Feminists, that Radical Feminists had descended into what Campbell (1980) called a 'cult of woman', which Jeffreys (SR:58, 1977) referred to condescendingly as a form of cultural, or lifestyle feminism, devoid of revolutionary potential. This cultural feminism was associated with the reclamation of Goddess worship and the promotion of environmentalism and New Age beliefs for example (Caine, 1997; Ryan, 1992). Al explained that this type of cultural or lifestyle feminism did not appeal to her, although she herself pioneered the establishment of lesbian feminist communes in the UK and there raised her own daughter and several other children<sup>2</sup>. She confirmed that Revolutionary Feminism did indeed focus on separatism as one method of political organising, but not as a way of life, in the way she felt Radical Feminism did:

*"At the time it was about separatism, but not as an end in itself. I mean, we were living in an all-women house, but we didn't think that was enough, we thought you*

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<sup>2</sup> Garthwaite explained how children resident and/or raised in the commune she lived in, as well as in several others, were all given their own surname of: 'Wild'.

*had to get out there and be active. I think the stereotype of a lesbian Radical Feminist would be someone who went to live on women's land and have nothing to do with men" (Al Garthwaite).*

Al went on to recount further reasons why she was drawn to Revolutionary rather than Radical Feminism, asserting that Revolutionary Feminism did not retreat from problematising men as a group, masculinity generally and men's VAW:

*"I couldn't get a handle on what Radical Feminism was. Revolutionary Feminism identified violence against women and the threat of it as the root of female oppression, and I could never work out what Radical Feminism identified as the root of women's oppression" (Al Garthwaite).*

Not all feminists at the time were drawn to the term however:

*"there were some who didn't like the term 'revolutionary', because it reminded them of the male Left, and some who thought it sounded too violent, so they stayed Radical Feminists" (Al Garthwaite).*

This was not the case for Al though, who immediately felt that this school of feminism was more practical and concrete than she had found Radical Feminism to be, explaining that she often found Radical Feminism amorphous and undefined:

*"But I'd never liked the term Radical Feminist, I just thought there was a lot of talking and not a lot of action, it was all floating in the air and going round and round and saying things like: 'our theory is our practice and our practice is our theory', and it*

*was sort of hard to get hold of really. I didn't really get a grip on it. And so I was happy enough to call myself a Revolutionary Feminist" (Al Garthwaite).*

As indicated in the quote at the beginning of this article however, Al expressed that she no longer used the term Revolutionary Feminist to describe herself; although she chose this identification when responding to the question on political identification for the purposes of my PhD research. Her reticence to use the term and identifier of Revolutionary Feminist was reportedly due to her sense that the term is not popularly understood, and that it has become associated with myths and stereotypes, what she called 'baggage'.

Revolutionary Feminism was in fact critiqued from its inception, and has since been subject to some degree of vitriol. For example, being accused of splitting the WLM at the (as yet) last National Conference in Birmingham in 1978 (Weir & Wilson, 1984), of splitting the London Women's Liberation Workshop (Campbell, 1980), of alienating feminists through a perceived insistence on political lesbianism and separatism, of essentialising women and men (Byrne, 1996) and of being responsible for the WLM's reputation as 'man-hating' (Gelb, 1986). In a historical study of the Second Wave UK WLM, Setch describes the Revolutionary Feminists of this period as: "vehement separatists who declared war on men" (2000:187). Due to such criticisms, which Al refuted, and a sense that ignorance and misunderstanding still pervade the term, Al was reluctant to use the identifier in everyday situations or conversation. She felt that, in the company of other feminists, her particular political standpoints would become clear "*pretty fast*" anyway, without her identifying herself thus:

*"because of what I'm saying, what I see as the basis of women's oppression, what I think are the key issues; and it becomes very obvious" (Al Garthwaite).*

Al explained that, in her view, Revolutionary Feminism regarded male VAW as one of the most important bases of women's oppression and a key issue for theoretical analysis and activism. She emphasised that, contrary to some of the criticisms outlined above, her feminism did not view male VAW as biological, but as a social construction within, and a symptom of patriarchy. VAW was an issue she prioritised in her community activism, and one she felt had become more rather than less urgent:

*"yes, violence against women, and the threat of it; but I also think that violence is socially conditioned, and for young men and boys, this influences the way that they think. And I think that in society generally, things have gone backwards. I think in the 80s that was really being challenged and these days it isn't"* (Al Garthwaite).

One of the factors behind the social condition which Al identified, was the intersection of homophobia with anti-feminism. Al perceived a backlash against feminism; she felt this took a myriad of forms, one being the increasing rigidity of binary gender norms, a feature which had become prominent to her since the birth of her two grandchildren:

*"I mean, my grandson he's got a lot of strong women around him, but at the same time he has all the culture around him, and a while ago he said that all soldiers are men and we said, well, no they're not, and he said, well they are in films. And it's distressing, everything being pink, either camouflage or pink. I think a lot of that is fear of feminism and fear of sexuality; it's lesbian and gay stuff. Like the acceptance isn't actually great or they may be accepting but at the same time they don't want their children to grow up into it, so it's into the pink and into the cammo, and it's all*

*stereotyping ahoy. So it's not just about feminism, it's about parallels with homophobia" (Al Garthwaite).*

### What is feminism today?

Al felt optimistic about contemporary feminism. She felt that Revolutionary Feminist concerns around male VAW had managed to engage the mainstream, and that VAW was now a usual policy, political and media concern:

*"VAW has been mainstreamed yes, it's mainstream now, I mean, even David Cameron is talking about VAW. And there's been a lot of feminist campaigning against prostitution, but it's not as if it's gone away" (Al Garthwaite).*

As well as the persistence of the incidence of VAW, Al identified many challenges for feminism today, mainly concerned with what she saw as the mainstreaming and normalisation of the institution of pornography, along with pressures from the beauty industry:

*"The whole thing with pink, and then for older ones plastic surgery, and shaving and all this stuff; porn, there's a huge acceptance of porn on the Internet. It used to be dirty mags in Dad's bottom drawer, and now it's everywhere. You can barely find a teenage boy who hasn't seen porn. And what it says about what women should look like and what women should do, and it's really heterosexist obviously. I think the pressures are awful, and it terrifies me" (Al Garthwaite).*

Alongside this however, Al felt that feminism had made many gains and that women were no longer seen as the 'weaker sex', but as independent beings capable of achieving

their goals. However, she worried that the power of such arguably neo-liberal, individualistic narratives had perhaps added to the pressures that women face today:

*“But I mean there’s greater openness about some things. So I think it’s very hard, at the same time there’s a sort of expectation that women should just be able to cope with it all and that not being able to cope with it is a sign of weakness, and being some sort of pathetic victim. And it’s good that you’re not expected to be ‘Miss Pathetic Weed’, because that was something about the WLM that we said, but it’s really tough to be expected to cope with all this stuff”* (Al Garthwaite).

When asked to define the meaning and aim of feminism, Al returned to the Seven Demands of the Second Wave WLM<sup>3</sup>, emphasising women’s right to live without the fear and/or reality of male violence:

*“Basically, that women should have equal rights to men. Women should not be victim to male violence and attack. And, I still believe in the Seven Demands of the WLM”* (Al Garthwaite).

In line with her political identification with Revolutionary Feminism, Al still emphasised the importance of women-

#### **The 7 Demands**

1. Equal pay
2. Equal education and job opportunities
3. Free contraception and abortion on demand
4. Free 24hr nurseries
5. Financial and legal independence
6. An end to all discrimination against lesbians and a woman’s right to define her own sexuality
7. Freedom from intimidation by threat or use of violence or sexual coercion, regardless of marital status; and an end to all laws, assumptions and practices which perpetuate male dominance and men’s aggression towards women.

only space, and women-only political organising for the contemporary movement. Speaking in particular about the revived RTN marches, she stated:

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<sup>3</sup> At annual, national WLM conferences, from 1971 to 1978, the UK WLM formulated seven demands; forming a sort of (wo)manifesto for the British WLM.

*"I'd rather have it all women, it's a much more powerful statement to see a whole group of women marching down the street saying we don't need male protection, that's what it's about. If men want to play a part there are other things men can do. There are lots of things men can do to oppose VAW and joining a march doesn't have to be one of them. They can serve the refreshments at the rally, I'm not against that. Or joining the White Ribbon Campaign is something they can do"* (Al Garthwaite).

Al accepted however that feminism was still a minority pursuit. Linked to previous comments, she suggested that homophobia, to some degree, was perhaps behind the reluctance of many women to join openly feminist groups, events or protests:

*"Some women are afraid of being seen as feminist because they're afraid of men's reaction. I was at a conference recently and this woman was saying - well, why would she go along with feminism, people would think she's unfeminine. So, fear of losing male approval. I mean, nobody stands up and says - I'm not going because I'm frightened of losing male approval; they don't express it like that, maybe this sounds patronising, but that's what it might be"* (Al Garthwaite).

## Conclusion

Although Al felt that her school of feminism was perhaps never understood, and often unheard of today, to the point she no longer used the identifier, she felt many of its concerns had now entered the mainstream. She saw this as just one sign of the success of Second Wave feminism. Al defined Revolutionary Feminism as prioritising male VAW as one keystone of women's oppression, of promoting women-only space and of being focussed on practical activism. In the contemporary movement Al saw much that addressed these

priorities, and she seemed positive about what she saw as a resurgence of feminist activism in the UK. Threatening this however, she identified a backlash against feminism, elements of which she argued was rooted in homophobia. She also identified the Western beauty industry and the expansion and perceived normalisation of the pornography industry, as threats to a contemporary feminist movement.

In conclusion, the concerns of Revolutionary Feminism appear no less relevant today, even though the term is no longer widely used, much less understood. The Seven Demands are yet to be won, male VAW still claims the lives of around two women every week in the UK and sexual violence affects at least one in four women (Redfern & Aune, 2010). With the WLM growing stronger again in the UK, perhaps it is time to start asking why the more Radical and Revolutionary threads of our social movement have become subjected to the 'baggage' of myth and stereotype which AI described. Revolutionary Feminism is associated with the promotion of women-only space, political separatism, lesbianism, direct action, unapologetic problematising of patriarchy and a strong analysis of male VAW. Because of these still valid concerns, this school of feminism has perhaps become an easy receptacle for all the familiar anti-feminist narratives about radical, hairy-legged lesbians. The fact is that such archetypes are no myth; such feminists existed and still do. Until we can proudly reclaim these archetypal Amazons among the foremothers of our movement today, homophobia and misogyny will still win out, policing our political identifications and alienating us from one of the most active and inspiring branches of feminism in recent history – Revolutionary Feminism.

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