**“Battling, not Bottling”: the transformative power of WI activism**

“Battling, not bottling, is more the image now” reads the eye-catching headline in the 29 May 1968 edition of *The* *Telegraph* newspaper. Alluding to the WI’s long association with food preservation, dating back to its bottling of fruit during the First and Second World Wars, the article reported that 6,000 members of the WI were gathering in the Royal Albert Hall to “battle” on many fronts, including help for disabled housewives and the financial problems of divorce. It noted that “the WI smile resignedly about their flower arranging and jam-making image” but that there was now a “more modern theme”, speaking out on local problems and taking action to support women in their everyday lives. Fast forward to 9 March 2023 and WI Chief Executive Melissa Green’s letter to *The* *Guardian* newspaper. Here she picked up on this theme of “battling” with a reminder that WI members “continue our tradition of speaking truth to power, in campaigning to tackle violence against women, to provide better support for women balancing work and caring responsibilities, and to tackle climate change and many other issues”.

**WI Legacy of Activism**

“Battling” to enhance the lives of women and girls, and of their communities, locally and globally, has long been a key aim of the WI. Members will no doubt be familiar with WI campaigns since 1915 which have contributed to this goal, for example the demand for equal pay, the payment of family allowances (now child benefit) to the mother, better housing standards (including rural electrification) and improved maternity services and healthcare for women. Yet despite this long history of activism the WI can still be regarded with condescension and pigeonholed by its association with jam and Jerusalem. Too often the campaigns of the WI are missing from histories of feminism and the women’s movement, and from public consciousness, and this is particularly the case from the 1960s onwards with the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM) dominating understandings of what feminist activism “looks like”.

This situation seems bizarre for a movement that represented some 450,000 women in 1974, making it the largest women’s organisation in England and Wales, a status it still holds today. As the “battling not bottling” headline suggests, the WI led the way on a range of issues in the 1960s, some of which pre-date radical campaigns we most often associate with the WLM. This includes activism around domestic violence (referred to at the time as battered wives). The WI also identified gaps in the new welfare state, and provided solutions, for example its demand for a nationwide cervical cancer screening service. Moreover the WI’s commitment to activism extended out into the wider community with its trailblazing action on environmental issues and awareness about sustainability. This article provides a snapshot of these campaigns, each one representing a thread in the rich tapestry of WI activism over the past 108 years.

**Domestic Violence Awareness**

In June 1975 the Barnock WI (Cambridgeshire-Huntingdon and Peterborough) moved a resolution at the WI annual general meeting (AGM) calling on the government to take immediate action to provide alternative accommodation for women and their children experiencing violence at home. Follow up action on this resolution included letters sent to the Secretary of State for Social Services and to the House of Commons Select Committee on Violence in Marriage. Reporting on the progress of this campaign in 1981 (*NFWI* *Keeping Ourselves Informed: our concern, our resolutions, our action)* it was noted that County Federations and individual WIs had given help to local refuges. It was also confirmed that the general position of battered wives was improved by the Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act of 1976, and that about 202 refuges had been set up, alongside several family crisis centres.

It is notable that the WI sought to bring out from the shadows a topic previously hidden and often viewed as shameful and taboo, as was the case with domestic violence. Having a national organisation for wives and mothers, the largest in the country, speak out publicly on this issue, and pass resolutions calling for state support to help women experiencing domestic violence was very significant. Unfortunately this problem hasn’t gone away. In response WI activism to end violence against women and girls continues to the present day. In 2019 the WI ‘No More Violence Against Women’ campaign demonstrated the movement’s on-going commitment to support women’s refuges across the UK. As reported in *WI* *Life* in November/December 2021, many local branches, for example in Nutfield Gals WI, Surrey Federation and Rothbury WI, Northumberland Federation regularly donate much needed supplies to refuges in their communities. The WI also participates in the global “16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence”. In the aftermath of the murder of Sarah Everard on 3 March 2021, the Surry Vixens WI created a bunting pennant for each woman murdered between 3 March 2021 and 2 March 2022 to draw greater public attention to this major societal problem.

**Cervical Cancer Screening**

A second difficult and not often talked about issue that the WI refused to shy away from in the 1960s and 1970s was the threat to women’s health from cervical cancer. In 1964 the Whitechurch on Thames WI (Berkshire) moved a resolution urging the government to “treat as a matter of urgency, the provision of comprehensive facilities for routine smear tests for cervical cancer”. In the 1960s it was thought that older women and mothers with three or more children were at greater risk of cervical cancer and so the issue was of particular concern to an organisation such as the WI. Lobbying for an effective nationwide screening programme continued right throughout the 1970s and in 1972 the WI secured representation on the Women’s National Cancer Control Campaign.

The WI also encouraged its own members to get involved. For example in December 1973 it was reported to the Public Affairs Sub-Committee that in Westmoreland, local WI members had volunteered to support a mobile caravan staffed by a doctor and nurse. This action resulted in 2000 women being tested in 14 days. In 1988 the NHS finally introduced a national cervical screening programme, but efforts are still required to ensure women avail of this service. To this end the WI launched its “5 Minutes That Matter” campaign in 2019, to raise awareness about the importance of attending routine cervical screenings and to support women to make an informed decision about whether to take up their invitations. Moreover a campaign action pack was produced for WI members, and a nationwide survey carried out in 2020 helped identify the reasons why low-take up remains an issue for the screening programme. The results of the WI survey were published as research briefings and shared with relevant bodies, and the public.

**Environment**

From its inception in 1915 the WI, as an organisation for rural women, has acted to safeguard our environment for future generations. As early as 1927 the WI AGM passed a resolution, moved by the Isle of Wight Federation, calling for the “clearing of our seas” of oil pollution and for the government to “take the necessary steps, without delay, for stopping the further pollution of our seas and coastal shores, and thus removing the terrible menace to the life both of our sea birds and fish”. Concern about pollution of our seas remained a live topic within the WI and in 1971 members voted to act on the risk from plastic packaging. At that year’s AGM, the Leigh WI (Surrey) moved a resolution calling on the government to enable research into the production of disintegrating plastic packaging that were seen to be a “danger to livestock and other animals and the spoiling of beaches and countryside caused by non-perishable containers”.

Follow up work on this resolution included letters to the Secretaries of State for Trade and Industry, the Environment, and Education and Science. Letters were also sent to the Keep Britain Tidy Group (which the WI founded in 1954). In 1972 the WI was represented at a Conference on Packaging and Litter convened by the Department of the Environment. Now over 50 years later acting on the risks posed by climate change and damage to our environment is critical. Once again, the WI leads the way with its campaign “End Plastic Soup” drawing attention to the scale and threat of microplastic fibre pollution. As part of this campaign the WI has held meetings with the All-Party Parliamentary Committee on Microplastics and in 2022 was invited to speak at the UN Oceans Conference in Lisbon to help identify what action can be taken on this pressing global issue.

**Women’s Grassroots Activism**

The examples of WI activism featured here, taking place locally, nationally and globally, represent the tiniest tip of the iceberg with regards to the transformative power of WI activism on the lives of women, their families and communities. Throughout the twentieth century, and well into the twenty-first, the WI remains the largest woman’s organisation in England and Wales, recruiting some 30,000 new members in 2023. With this comes a great responsibility for making a difference and for inspiring the next generation of WI activists. In response the WI has shown that activism is something the movement has wholeheartedly embraced from its earliest days, even on difficult and controversial issues, while at the same time skilfully maintaining its non-party political standpoint.

Today the movement continues to create spaces for women to come together to enjoy craft work, leisure, friendship and educational opportunities, and to campaign around a wide range of “real world” issues. These are directly linked to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, especially Goal 3: Good Health and Well-Being, Goal 5: Gender Equality, Goal 14: Life Below Water and Goal 15: Life on Land. As a historian of female activism I have had the privilege to work on the history of the WI for over 30 years. I have written about the WI’s activism in a range of contexts and my work is regularly cited in academic texts and listed as core reading for university courses. I also share my research in other ways, for example in the British Library’s *Unfinished Business: The Fight for Women’s Rights* (2020)exhibitionbook*.*

Even after all this time I never ceased to be amazed by the WI’s indefatigable commitment to women and to making the world a better place for everyone. This year, I am excited to be working with the WI, alongside academics in the UK and Ireland, the Irish Countrywomen’s Association (ICA) and Soroptimist International Great Britain and Ireland (SIGBI), on a new UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded project. Our network, “Women’s Grassroots Activism”, will showcase the legacies of women’s grassroots activism from 1918 to the present. Through our workshops, some of which WI members will be able to join online, we will identify ways to make the activism of the WI even more visible. We will make podcasts, write blogs and use social media and promote the work of the WI throughout the year. Our aim is to reveal the myriad ways the WI “battled” for women over the past century, and to help ensure this work continues for the next 100 years.

To find out more about the AHRC **#WomensGrassrootsActivism** network you can follow us on **X**: @Activism23 and **Instagram**: @womensgrassroots and **Facebook**: Womens Grassroots Activism Research Network.

**Further Reading:**

MaggieAndrews*, The Acceptable Face of Feminism: The Women’s Institute as a Social Movement* (2nded*.* 2015, Lawrence & Wishart Ltd).

Caitríona Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens: Domesticity and the Women’s Movement in England, 1928-1964* (2013, Manchester University Press).

Mavis Curtis, *The WI: A Centenary History* (2015, Amberley Publishing).