**The “housewife as expert”: re-thinking the experiential expertise and welfare activism of housewives’ associations in England, 1960 -1980.**

**Introduction**

“In housework there is no possibility of growth or advancement: feelings of achievement are transitory, enjoyment of work itself is a rare experience, and no opportunity for earned recognition is offered”.[[1]](#footnote-1)

By the mid-1970s status gained from being a housewife had diminished in many advanced industrialised nations, including Britain. Influential feminist texts, for example *The Second Sex* (1949), *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) *The Female Eunuch* (1970) and *Housewife* (1974), portrayed housewives as women denied self-actualisation due to their unpaid labour within their own homes. [[2]](#footnote-2) Consequently, they were condemned to a life of drudgery and servitude. As Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd argue “ambivalence, if not antagonism, towards the figure of the housewife can be seen to have a crucial role in the history of second wave feminism”.[[3]](#footnote-3) The view fostered by activists within the newly emergent Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM) was that women were “forced into full-time housewifery and enslaved by narrow domestic roles under patriarchy”.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This negative representation of the housewife is in marked contrast to the dynamic “citizen housewife”, promoted by the British government during the Second World War and its immediate aftermath.[[5]](#footnote-5) The “citizen housewife” was regarded as an expert in keeping her own house on a tight budget. As a result her skills and experience were requisitioned to instruct the nation during wartime and the years of economic austerity that followed. Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska has argued that during the 1940s “housewifery was no longer regarded as a private concern but rather a central component of the war effort and postwar reconstruction”.[[6]](#footnote-6) In wartime housewives were repeatedly called upon to share their expertise on food production and household management. Their insights were valued at the highest level of government with housewives invited to give evidence to official enquires based on their “first-hand experience” of housework and managing the family home.[[7]](#footnote-7)

However by the 1960s this recognition of the experiential expertise of housewives had apparently waned. Rachel Richie argues that in this decade “the sense of belonging and recognition of the housewife as expert subsided” and “failed to retain national recognition and official acceptance”.[[8]](#footnote-8) It would appear therefore that the idea of the “housewife as expert” in the national consciousness was replaced by an altogether more negative construct where housewives were trapped by domesticity, miserable and powerless in their own homes.

This chapter changes the narrative regarding the demise of the “housewife as expert” concept during the 1960s and 1970s. In doing so it challenges assumptions that the experience of being a housewife was inherently negative and that housewives made little or no contribution to the women’s movement at this time.[[9]](#footnote-9) Drawing on organisational archives of the two largest housewives’ associations in England, the National Federation of Women’s Institutes (NFWI) and the National Union of Townswomen’s Guilds (TG), it is argued that the experiential expertise of housewives continued to be effective in lobbying for welfare reforms to support women. I argue that far from fading away by the 1970s these two national organisations became even more concerned about what Robert Pinker referred to as “the subjective feelings of ordinary people about the nature of welfare and to the complete range of activities by which they seek to enhance their own well-being”.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first contextualises the “housewife as expert” construct and considers why it is assumed within the historiography that this form of experiential expertise was less influential by the 1960s and 1970s. The second utilises the history of experience, and the concept of “communities of experience”, to argue that housewives’ associations continued to be led by the experiential expertise of their members. The experiential expertise evident here was not only that of being a housewife, significant as that was, but also included the knowledge and expertise women gained from being members of a housewives’ association. Drawing on this multilayered experiential expertise helped ensure both groups maintained a foothold in policy debates on welfare well into the 1970s.

The third section outlines in more detail how the NFWI and TG used their multifaceted experiential expertise to campaign for welfare reforms. This closer examination of welfare activism by housewives’ associations identifies gaps in the British Welfare State when it came to the needs of wives and mothers. The efforts of the NFWI and TG to fill these gaps not only set out to enhance the everyday lives of women but sought to highlight the gendered experience of welfare for women. In this way housewives’ associations participated in on-going demands by the women’s movement for welfare reforms which would benefit women throughout their lifetimes.[[11]](#footnote-11)

In concluding, the chapter considers the limitations of the experiential expertise used by the NFWI and TG to underpin their welfare activism. Here the question is raised about whose experiences were foregrounded by both groups, and how representative the action taken on a national level was of the wider membership, and of women more generally. Yet despite such limitations, it is argued that welfare activism undertaken by housewives’ associations during the 1960s and 1970s was significant and impactful. Tapping into the experiential expertise of housewives, as wives and mothers, but also as members of housewives’ associations, sustained the construct of the “housewife as expert” beyond the 1950s. Consequently, the NFWI and TG contributed more to the British Welfare State than has previously been acknowledged. Moreover, their commitment to women “faring well” justifies inclusion in histories of the women’s movement during the second half of the twentieth century.

**The “housewife as expert” construct and its deceptive demise**

Laying claim to the experiences of wives and mothers to enable welfare activism has a long history. From the late nineteenth century the Women’s Co-operative Guild (WCG) demanded better housing, maternity care and social welfare provision, informed by the lived experiences of poorer working-class women.[[12]](#footnote-12) During the First World War the Women’s Labour League shared the experiences of working-class women with the Tudor Walters Committee on Housing Standards, thereby enhancing the quality of postwar local authority housing.[[13]](#footnote-13) While the WCG prioritised the needs of its working-class members, and aligned itself to the Labour Party, the steadfastly non-party political NFWI (1915) and TG (1928) set out to recruit both working-class and middle-class women working within the home. This was achieved by offering a diverse range of activities targeted to be of interest to housewives working unpaid in their own homes.[[14]](#footnote-14) Taking this approach proved very successful and by the mid-twentieth century they together represented over half a million women.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Both organisations drew on the experiences of a specific community of housewives. The NFWI catered for the needs of rural women and sought to provide educational opportunities in home economics and agricultural skills as well as opportunities for friendship and leisure.[[16]](#footnote-16) Inspired by the successful model of the NFWI, the TG (which emerged out of the post-women’s suffrage National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship) catered for the needs of housewives living in urban areas. The aim of the new organisation was to “provide a common meeting ground for women irrespective of creed and party, for their wider education including social intercourse”.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Unlike the WCG the leadership of the NFWI and TG, at both local and national level, was dominated by well-educated, middle-class women. This fact undoubtedly accounts for the middle-class sensibility associated with each organisation. It also helps explain the desire of both groups to frame the unpaid work performed by women in the home as a highly skilled, valued and professional occupation. The professionalisation of housework extended to middle-class and working-class wives with historians Joanna Bourke and Elizabeth Roberts documenting the association of housewifery with professional skills among working-class women from the late nineteenth century.[[18]](#footnote-18) By the 1920s the identification of housewifery as a skilled profession had become well established with Judy Giles observing “the idea of the housewife was offered as a highly valued and ‘modern’ role for women, albeit a conservative one, focusing as it did on women’s traditional functions within the family”.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Operating within this gendered framework, housewives’ associations were able to exploit the societal value placed on women’s domestic work to legitimate claims making around welfare throughout the interwar years. This strategy was bolstered by the partial extension of the parliamentary franchise to women over 30 in 1918 and on equal terms with men in 1928.[[20]](#footnote-20) As a consequence the NFWI and TG effectively combined the experiential expertise of members with newly won democratic rights to intervene in debates on welfare policies. The outcome was that, along with a diverse mix of other groups including the WCG, the Labour Party Women’s Sections, the National Council of Women (NCW), the Mothers’ Union and post-suffrage feminist societies, these groups were effective in demanding reforms needed to ensure women “fared well”.[[21]](#footnote-21)

It was in this historical context that the construct of the “citizen housewife” and “housewife as expert” emerged during the Second World War. At a time of national crisis the government once again found itself dependent on the support of housewives for the success of emergency policies. This included rationing, domestic food production and the evacuation of children, as well as the maintenance, as far as was possible, of “normal” domestic life. As a result government propaganda propelled housewives to a new level of importance.[[22]](#footnote-22) The image of the responsible “citizen housewife”, an expert in frugal housekeeping, was used repeatedly to inspire good habits among the wider populace.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Housewives’ associations were invited to share their expertise by giving evidence to a number of wartime enquires including the Design of Dwellings Committee (1942), the Royal Commission on Population (1944) and the Royal Commission on Equal Pay (1944). New initiatives were introduced to better capture the expertise of housewives’ associations and other women’s groups. What became known as the Women’s Group on Public Welfare (WGPW) was established in 1939 “to bring the experience of its constituent organisations to bear on questions of public welfare, more especially those affecting women and children”.[[24]](#footnote-24) Its membership was made up of all the major women’s organisations including the NFWI and TG.[[25]](#footnote-25) Furthermore the recognition given to the housewife in the Beveridge Report, published in 1942, re-affirmed the “citizen housewife” ideal. Here William Beveridge opined that, “in the next thirty years housewives, as mothers, have vital work to do in ensuring the adequate continuance of the British race and of British ideals in the world”.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Thirty years later in 1973 housewives were no longer held in such high regard. By this time the “citizen housewife” and “housewife as expert” construct, and with it public appreciation of the experiential expertise shared by housewives, was assumed to be a thing of the past. Maggie Andrews in her history of the NFWI suggests that

The expansion of the welfare state and Government in the

post-war period brought with it a mushrooming of both local

and central Government experts. Official experts took over

a variety of welfare issues which had previously been the

sphere of expertise of women in the Women’s Institute and

similar organisations.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Rachel Richie shares this view in her work on the NFWI and the WCG when she notes “the passing of the housewife’s moment” with both organisations failing to retain their “housewife as expert” status.[[28]](#footnote-28)

New professionally trained experts appeared to usurp the previously valued experiential expertise of wives and mothers. As Judy Giles notes “in the name of efficiency ‘experts’ and professionals were called upon to extend scientific and rational principles …to housework, childcare, sexual relations, and nutrition”.[[29]](#footnote-29) This shift to professional expertise wasn’t exclusive to the domestic sphere with Frank Prochaska observing that professional services provided by the welfare state displaced the role of Christian social service in postwar Britain.[[30]](#footnote-30) Moreover, the emergence of new independent non-governmental organisations (NGOs), keen to engage with professional experts, is likewise regarded as a challenge to experiential expertise.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Here the impact of what Harold Perkin terms the “rise of professional society” appears particularly relevant.[[32]](#footnote-32) Of course in reality the relationship between different types of expertise in the context of postwar welfare cultures is messy and complex. It is overly simplistic to assume that the voices and contributions of experiential experts and voluntary organisations were always “displaced” or silenced within this new, more professional landscape. As Matthew Hilton and James McKay suggest historians need to focus on the voluntary sector’s ability “to adapt and do new things”.[[33]](#footnote-33)

A second factor associated with the end of the “housewife as expert” construct is its replacement by the myth of the “happy housewife”. This idealised image of the glamorous housewife, devoted to home and family, became ubiquitous in mass circulation women’s magazines, advertisements and popular culture throughout the 1950s and 1960s.[[34]](#footnote-34) In sharp contrast to the community driven “citizen housewife”, the “happy housewife” embraced affluence and prioritised the comfort and care of her own private world, her home and family. This modern “happy housewife” retained her domestic expertise but it was now used to “keep her husband happy” and “to set jam to jell, children to rights and her hair for Saturday night out”.[[35]](#footnote-35)

The “happy housewife” myth belies the diversity of experience for housewives during the 1950s and 1960s. Increasing numbers of married women were taking up work outside their homes, the majority of which was part-time to enable wives and mothers to juggle domestic duties with paid employment.[[36]](#footnote-36) Women were able to find fulfillment in both paid work and unpaid domestic work during these years.[[37]](#footnote-37) Nevertheless poorer working class wives and mothers could only aspire to becoming a “happy housewife”. The lived experience for these women was more likely to be one of sub-standard housing conditions and a daily battle to make ends meet.[[38]](#footnote-38) Immigrant women were excluded altogether from this imagined domestic ideal. As Wendy Webster and Angela Davis have noted these women were set apart due to the assumption that their identify as migrant workers nullified their right to a comfortable home life.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Seeking to subvert the trope of the “happy housewife”, housewives’ associations themselves cautioned members in the early 1960s that a housewife was more than a “frilly little woman” whose top priority in life was to create the “house beautiful”.[[40]](#footnote-40) Instead the NFWI and TG continued to encourage members to engage fully in life beyond their homes through leisure and educational activities and by engaging in local and national campaigns relevant to women’s lives.[[41]](#footnote-41) Despite this it is the impression of the “perfect” 1950s housewife that continues to resonate so strongly with contemporary understandings of postwar domesticity.[[42]](#footnote-42) And this was the image that Betty Friedan used so effectively to evoke the disempowering narrative of housewifery, what she called “the problem that has no name”.[[43]](#footnote-43)

**“Communities of Experience” and experiential expertise in housewives’ associations, 1960-1980**

The dominance of the WLM in histories of the women’s movement has obscured activism around welfare within housewives’ associations during the1960s and 1970s. By shifting the focus away from the WLM it becomes clear this activism did not disappear and continued to be acknowledged on a national level. A 1975 government report *Women in Britain* recorded “several hundred national women’s organisations in Britain, drawn from every section of the community”. Of these a large number were

concerned with service to the community- for instance the

welfare of families, the care of children and the elderly,

improving conditions in areas of towns and the countryside…

and generally stimulating the interest of ordinary women

in her role in society.[[44]](#footnote-44)

Significantly the experiential expertise of “ordinary” housewives is acknowledged here, as evidenced in the observation that branches of the NFWI and TG met regularly

to hear lectures and to hold discussions of topics of general

interest, and resolutions are frequently passed by the branches

and at national meetings about matters where members’

particular knowledge and experience have indicated

that reform is both necessary and possible.[[45]](#footnote-45)

This “particular” experience held by housewives’ associations continued to legitimate their intervention in welfare policy debates, however this aspect of their work in the 1960s and 1970s has not yet been fully interrogated. For example Maggie Andrews in her landmark history of the NFWI ends in 1960 with the rather pessimistic conclusion that the movement had become less interested in activism by this time.[[46]](#footnote-46)

The new history of experiences encourages historians to refine their approaches and to rethink “historical experiences, historical explanations and historical knowledge, and their place in the current world”.[[47]](#footnote-47) In the case of housewives’ associations a history of experience approach demands a re-think about the experiences of women who were members throughout the 1960s and 1970s. During these two decades much of the focus of historical and sociological research has been on the experiences of wives and mothers engaging in paid work, the experiences of younger women adapting to motherhood and domestic responsibilities and the activism of women within the WLM.[[48]](#footnote-48) There are of course notable exceptions, for example Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Natalie Thomlinson’s oral history of working-class women’s lived experience in coalfield communities.[[49]](#footnote-49)

By taking a closer look at the activities of the NFWI and TG during the 1960s and 1970s it becomes clear that, individually and collectively, both groups remained vibrant “communities of experiences”. Ville Kivimäki, Antti Malinen and Ville Vuolanto argue that “communities of experiences” are made up of people who recognise similarities in their experiences and who “share and negotiate these experiences and their meanings with each other…bound together with a sense of shared experience”.[[50]](#footnote-50) Engaging with the idea of “communities of experience” shines a light on negotiations taking place within housewives’ associations when the lived experience of wives and mothers was evolving at a rapid pace. The welfare state transformed many women’s lives for the better with its access to free health care, improved housing provision and expansion of educational and employment opportunities.[[51]](#footnote-51) Paid work became an everyday experience for increasing numbers of married women, making it difficult to attend monthly meetings of housewives’ associations.[[52]](#footnote-52) Moreover new organisations, targeting younger wives and mothers, threatened the popularity of older more traditional groups.[[53]](#footnote-53) Yet despite these challenges the NFWI and TG remained two of the largest women’s organisation in Britain.[[54]](#footnote-54)

Within the “communities of experience” sustained by the NFWI and TG the “housewife as expert” construct remained robust. Here the “ways of knowing rooted in experience”, and acknowledgement that the “specialness of those ways of knowing” endowed members with experiential expertise, underpinned activism on welfare.[[55]](#footnote-55) In May 1971 the editor of the TG magazine, *The Townswoman*, wrote, “it is the collective voice which distinguishes the Townswoman in her *major* role” from her identity as a housewife, which for too long has been regarded as the “*minor* role of a subordinate sex”. [[56]](#footnote-56) As the editor went on to observe the TG member joins a national women’s organisation “for her own good, the good of her family and for the community at large” and seeks to “inform herself – an educational process – on whatever may affect their way of life, or threaten it.” Threats at this time included “bad housing, discrimination, the welfare of disadvantaged sections of the community and all things affecting individual and national wellbeing”. In expressing her informed and expert opinion as a housewife, “the TG member…acting in concert with her sister members, play a *major* part in the community’s betterment”.[[57]](#footnote-57)

As the sentiment expressed above suggests the “communities of experience” created by housewives’ associations were based not only on the experience of being a housewife but also on the experience of being a member of a housewives’ association. Membership of the NFWI or TG gave women a unique sense of belonging that enabled them to “share their experiences and to relate them to other people’s experiences”.[[58]](#footnote-58) In addition to building an influential collective identity, membership of a housewives’ association gave women the skills and confidence required to be effective organisers, public speakers, leaders and activists. Endless rounds of meetings, resolutions, elections, debates and campaigning, from the local branch to the national executive, instilled at a granular level knowledge about effective democratic processes. This knowledge, coupled with instruction in the machinery of government, helped ensure members of the NFWI and TG had the training required to hold “expertise of experience” in activism.[[59]](#footnote-59)

**The “housewife as expert”: welfare activism for “faring well”**

“Politics Replaces Jam” ran the headline in the 1 June 1971 edition of *The Telegraph* newspaper. Reporting on the NFWI Annual General Meeting (AGM) held at the Royal Albert Hall, Gerda Paul wrote that members had “voted to kill its old image of jam-making and allow its 500,000 members to voice their opinions on world affairs and domestic topics”.[[60]](#footnote-60) This change to a 50-year old rule, hotly debated since 1967, reflected the growing desire for the NFWI to become even more vocal on public questions.[[61]](#footnote-61) The previous year an article in *The Times* newspaper reported that the NFWI now accepted “its jam-making image was here to stay, but also want to be seen as forward-thinking, humanising interpreters of the welfare state, having hard thoughts under the hats”.[[62]](#footnote-62)

Acting as “humanising interpreters of the welfare state” was important to the NFWI. Throughout the 1960s the movement effectively used its high profile, mass membership and national resolutions, passed at its AGM, to highlight gaps identified in welfare provision, particularly when this impacted on the welfare of women. In 1950 the WI Devon Federation had passed a resolution calling on government to raise the earnings limit on retirement pensions, pensions for widows and allowances for widowed mothers. This issue was prompted by concerns about the hardship experienced by widows and their dependent children. Following sustained lobbying by the NFWI, working alongside the TG and a number of other women’s groups, the earnings rule for widows and widowed mothers was abolished in 1964.[[63]](#footnote-63)

The experiences of housewives and their right to “fare well” continued to underpin NFWI campaigns on welfare during the 1960s and 1970s.[[64]](#footnote-64) In May 1968 a resolution moved by Newnham WI (Gloucestershire) called on government “to provide a sufficient allowance for a housewife, disabled by chronic illness, injury or a congenital handicap, to remain in her own home; and to enable her family to continue to live as a unit”.[[65]](#footnote-65) Letters were sent to the Minister for Social Security, the Disablement Income Group and to various women’s organisations. Reporting on the follow up work linked to this resolution it was noted that in January 1975 a letter “was written to the Secretary of State for Social Services asking that a disability pension for the disabled housewife should be included in the Social Security Bill”.[[66]](#footnote-66) The 1975 Social Security Act did make provision for a non-contributory invalidity pension for housewives who were not eligible for other contributory invalidity benefits, and if they were unable to work or carry out normal household duties. In November 1977 this new benefit became payable to disabled housewives.

These examples illustrate the growing significance given to diverse experiences of housewives in relation to welfare, and how this awareness translated into activism on the part of the NFWI. In 1973 the national executive made the decision to set up a new Public Affairs Committee because of the great “increase in interest an activity among members on PQ [public questions] side of our work, and because Government Departments and official committees now ask for our views and comments more frequently”.[[67]](#footnote-67) The remit of the new Public Affairs Committee was to discuss and investigate subjects linked to “all aspects of Health, Welfare and Social Security Benefits and pensions, taxes, consumer protection, law and order etc”.[[68]](#footnote-68)

This aspect of NFWI work was acknowledged at the highest level of government. With official approval from the Home Secretary representatives from government departments, for example the Department of Health and Social Security and the Department of Employment, were appointed to the Public Affairs Committee. This decision is illustrative of the fact that during the 1970s the NFWI continued to be regarded by government as an influential body representing the interests and experiential expertise of housewives. Sir Keith Joseph, Secretary of State for Health and Social Services, further supports this argument when in April 1973 he described the movement as “a very responsible body” during a speech to the House of Commons.[[69]](#footnote-69) However, recognition by government didn't equate to the NFWI acting as an agent of the state or compromise the organisation’s willingness to campaign for women’s welfare rights.

By the 1970s the National Health Service (NHS) had transformed many women’s lives, in particular for working-class wives and mothers, through the provision of universal free access to hospitals and general practitioners (GPs).[[70]](#footnote-70) Nevertheless gaps in health services for women persisted. In June 1972 the WI Anglesey Federation executive committee tabled a resolution at the AGM urging the government to “make it mandatory rather than permissive, as at present, for all Local Authorities to provide a full free Family Planning Service”.[[71]](#footnote-71) Believing women had the right to plan their families in the way “they feel is best for its health, welfare and quality of life” the movement welcomed the clause in the National Health Service Reorganisation Act of 1973 (which came into effect in April 1974) whereby family planning became a normal NHS service provided by GPs, hospitals and clinics.[[72]](#footnote-72)

A second gap in women’s healthcare provision identified by the NFWI was the absence of a nationwide and comprehensive service for cervical cancer screening. In 1964 the Whitchurch on Thames WI (Berkshire) had 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”.[[73]](#footnote-73) This issue was regarded as extremely important by housewives’ associations as it was believed that older women, and women with three or more children were more likely to be affected. Reflecting this the TG passed its own resolution the same year calling for comprehensive facilities for routine smear tests and “especially training of technicians to interpret the tests and the service to be made more widely known”.[[74]](#footnote-74)

Eight years later the NFWI remained just as concerned about cervical cancer prevention and the need for an effective national screening service. In 1972 it was reported that the movement was represented on the Women’s National Cancer Control Campaign, set up to lobby government on this issue.[[75]](#footnote-75) As part of efforts to promote screening among members, local WI branches were sent information about cervical cancer prevention and about the British United Provident Association (BUPA) Medical Centre transportable unit for cervical smear testing. The national Public Affairs Sub-Committee, meeting in December 1973, reported that local WI members were directly supporting screening work in their local areas. For example in Westmoreland a mobile caravan, staffed by a doctor, nurse and a clerical assistant, tested 2000 women in 14 days with the support of local institute members who had done “all the publicity, and did all the arranging, before and during the visits”.[[76]](#footnote-76)

Activism around welfare, particularly with regards to women’s everyday financial security, health and wellbeing, was a key undertaking by the NFWI throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The importance of this task was explained to members in the November 1980 edition of the NFWI magazine *Home and Country*. Here the chairman, Patricia Batty Shaw, acknowledged that the movement’s activism was political, but stressed that it was not party-political. She explained “the fact we interest ourselves in Public Affairs, pass resolutions which call for government action and seek to contribute to the welfare of the community means that we are acting ‘politically’”. She went on to defend this position by adding “if we hesitate to take action for fear of being ‘political’ do we not run the risk of becoming ineffectual”.[[77]](#footnote-77)

Like the NFWI, the ability to listen to the experiences of women and advocate for the everyday welfare of wives and mothers remained a key objective for the TG throughout the 1960s and 1970s. In addition to providing a common meeting ground so members could put forward their opinion on “matters of importance to women everywhere” the Guild set out to “take a positive view on major issues of the day, making its voice heard in government, the media and the community”.[[78]](#footnote-78) In 1976 the TG, with a total number of 2,692 guilds, summed up its overall purpose as providing “opportunities to meet women from all walks of life, to share mutual interests, and to increase the influence of women through a progressive, nationwide organisation concerned with the fundamental issues of community life”.[[79]](#footnote-79)

The national Public Questions and Current Affairs Sub-Committee, set up in 1956, oversaw this aspect of the TG’s work. It was reported in *The Townswoman* that the committee was “kept very busy all year round answering questions from government departments and other interested bodies about our views on this and that”.[[80]](#footnote-80) One issue the committee reported on regularly was the TG’s support for legalised abortion. In 1965 the Guild had passed by overwhelming majority a resolution calling on the government to introduce legal abortion for women “where it is necessary to preserve her physical or mental health; where there is a serious risk of a defective child being born; where the pregnancy results from a sexual offence”.[[81]](#footnote-81) Refusing to shy away from what was a controversial issue the Guild welcomed the passing of the 1967 Abortion Act. Subsequent to this the TG protested any attempt to restrict grounds for legal abortion as set out under the terms of the Abortion Act.[[82]](#footnote-82)

Throughout the 1970s the TG continued to draw on the experiences of women to frame its welfare activism. Domestic violence (referred to at this time as battered wives) became a pressing concern, and one shared with the NFWI.[[83]](#footnote-83) In 1975 a resolution proposed by guild member Norma Proctor (Sheffield Bradway), stated that the TG was “greatly concerned about the desperate situation of wives who seek refuge and help on leaving the matrimonial home after physical assaults by their husbands”. The government was urged to “take steps to help them by the provision of local authority and grant-aided charitable ‘Refuge Hostels’ in which they and their children may obtain emergency accommodation”.[[84]](#footnote-84) An editorial in the May 1975 edition of *The Townswoman* noted that having the two largest housewives’ associations calling for hostel provision for battered wives was a “hefty straw to show the Government which way the wind is blowing in the country”.[[85]](#footnote-85)

**Conclusion**

bell hooks cautioned that hierarches of experience and “authority of experience” can be used to “silence and exclude”.[[86]](#footnote-86) The privilege given to negative experiences of housewives, the “captive” wife, propagated by the WLM has resulted in a monolithic understanding of housewifery in the late twentieth century. Of course not all women shared this experience. Satisfaction and fulfillment could be found in unpaid domestic work, and in membership of housewives’ associations. Moreover, and as hooks has shown, the experiences of women of colour and working-class women are missing in key feminist texts such as *The Feminine Mystique*.[[87]](#footnote-87)

By shifting attention onto two housewives’ associations, the NFWI and TG, and by focusing on the welfare activism of both groups, alternative narratives appear that challenge understandings of the history of the welfare state and the women’s movement. For example during the 1960s and 1970s the membership profile of the NFWI and TG was ageing, providing an interesting counterpoint to the welfare demands of the WLM, most often associated with the interests of younger women. Nonetheless an “authority of experience” was also evident within housewives’ associations. Most members of the NFWI and TG were White, middle-aged, or older, and leadership roles, locally and nationally, continued to attract the well-educated middle-class members.[[88]](#footnote-88)

In 1976 former national chairman of the TG, Marjorie E. Rice, observed “women do not, on the whole, join a guild in the hope of putting the world to rights…I suspect a majority join for friendship and companionship”. Yet she believed that the opportunities membership created for women prepared to work on controversial issues were invaluable and that this “prevents us from being an exclusively introverted, navel-regarding organisation and establishes us as a caring, concerned group of people in the community”.[[89]](#footnote-89) Limitations in the representativeness of the NFWI and TG are significant. But they should not be used to minimise agency or subject the activism of both organisations to the “enormous condescension of posterity”.[[90]](#footnote-90)

On the contrary, both groups operated within “communities of experience” and drew on the experiential expertise of housewives to translate these experiences “into action, identities, intentions and new thoughts”.[[91]](#footnote-91) As this chapter has shown many of these actions were informed by the burning desire to ensure women “fared well”. Experiences relating to reproductive rights, cancer prevention, disability and domestic violence were seen to threaten this goal and so transformed into activism. As a consequence the NFWI and TG not only identified gaps in the British Welfare State, but also advised government on how to make good such disparities. The “housewife as expert” construct facilitated this on-going activism, and the new history of experience makes known its significance.

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5. Zweiniger-Bargelowska, *Women in Twentieth Century Britain*, 154-156. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. ibid. 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Richie, Rachel. 2010. The Housewife and the Modern: the home and appearance in women’s magazines, 1954 -1969. Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Manchester, 67. See also Scott, Gillian. 2007. “Workshops Fit for Homeworkers”: The Women’s Co-operative and Housing Reform in Mid-twentieth Century Britain. In *Women and the Making of Built Space in England 1870-1950*, eds. Elizabeth Darling and Leslie Whitworth, London: Routledge, 179, Beaumont, Caitríona. 2013. *Housewives and Citizens: Domesticity and the Women’s Movement in England, 1928-1964*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 171-175, and Stott, Mary. 1978. *Organisation Woman: The Story of the National Union of Townswomen’s Guilds*. London: Heinemann, 70-75, Jenkins, Lyndsey. 2023. “The Voice of the true British housewife”: the politics of housewifery at Labour’s women’s conferences, 1945-1959. *Women’s History Review* [https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09612025.2023.2267251 Accessed 23 February 2024](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09612025.2023.2267251%20Accessed%2023%20February%202024). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Richie, The Housewife and the Modern, 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See for example Pugh, Martin. 2015. *Women and the Women’s Movement in Britain since 1914*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Pinker, Robert. 2017. The welfare state: a comparative perspective. In *Social policy and welfare pluralism: selected writings of Robert Pinker,* ed. John Offer and Robert Pinker, 70. Bristol: Policy Press. See also Introduction to this collection. Chapter 3 in this collection discusses the welfare activism of working-class women’s groups at this time. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Beaumont, Caitríona. 2009. Housewives, Workers and Citizens: Voluntary Women’s Organisations and the Campaign for Women’s Rights in England and Wales during the Post-War Period. In *NGOs in Contemporary Britain: Non-State Actors in Society and Politics since 1945*, eds. Nick Crowson, Matthew Hilton and James McKay. 59-76. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For example the WCG was successful in campaigning for the provision of local authority funded welfare clinics, enhanced maternity services and local authority housing reforms. In 1918 the Guild affiliated to the Labour Party and continued to campaign for welfare reforms to improve working-class women’s lives. It recorded a membership of 62,000 women in 1963 and closed in 2016. See Llewelyn Davies, Margaret. 1978. *Maternity: Letters from Working Class Wives*, London: Virago Reprint Library. Scott, Gillian. 1998. *Feminism, Femininity and the Politics of Working Women: The Women’s Co-operative Guild, 1880s to the Second World War*. London: University of London Press. See also Dwork, Deborah. 1986. *War is Good for Babies and Other Young Children: History of the Infant and Child Welfare Movement in England, 1898-1918*, London: Tavistock Routledge and Gorden, Peter and Doughan, David. 2001. *Dictionary of British Women’s Organisations 1825-1960*. London: Woburn Press, 159-160. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Rowan, Caroline. 1982. Women in the Labour Party, 1906-20. *Feminist Review* 12, 74-91. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Across the two organisations education, craft skills, cooking, music and drama featured among the most popular activities. Beaumont. *Housewives and Citizens*, 8-39. See also Andrews, Maggie. 2015. *The Acceptable Face of Feminism: The Women’s Institute as a Social Movement*. London: Lawrence and Wishart Ltd. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In 1954 the NFWI recorded 467,000 members and the TG c. 131,000. Beaumont. *Housewives and Citizens*, 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Beaumont. *Housewives and Citizens*, 8-39. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The National Union of Townswomen’s Guilds. 1938. *Handbook*. London, 1. The British Library. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Bourke, Joanna. 1994. Housewifery in Working-Class England, 1860-1914. *Past and Present* 143: 167-97. Roberts, Elizabeth. 1984. *A Woman’s Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women, 1890-1940.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Giles, Judy. 1993. A Home of One’s Own: Women and Domesticity in England, 1918-1950. *Women’s Studies International Forum* 16, 3: 239. Giles argues that this formation of the housewife role in industrialised nations was underpinned by economic and social transformations brought about by new scientific and technological knowledge alongside improvements in housing, healthcare and standards of living. See also Giles, Judy. 2005. Good Housekeeping: Professionalising the Housewife, 1920 to 1950. In *Women and Work Culture: Britain c. 1850 to 1950,* eds*.* Krista Cowman and Louise A Jackson, 70-88. Abingdon: Routledge and Giles, Judy. 2004. *The Parlour and the Suburb: Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity*. London: Berg. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. As a non-party political organisation the NFWI declined to publicly support the women’s suffrage campaign. Following the extension of the parliamentary vote to women the NFWI and later the TG, encouraged members to use their vote wisely and provided advice and support on how to do this in their magazines. Beaumont, Caitríona. 2018. Housewives and Citizens: Encouraging Active Citizenship in the Print Media of Housewives’ Associations During the Interwar Years. In *Women’s Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1918-1939: The Interwar Period*, eds. Catherine Clay, Maria DiCenzo, Barbara Green and Fiona Hackney. 408-420. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Campaigns included demands for better housing standards, maternity services and women’s healthcare. See Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens*, 101-134 and Thane, Pat. 1991. Visions of Gender in the Making of the British Welfare State: The Case of Women in the British Labour Party and Social Policy, 1906-1945. In *Maternity and Gender Policies: Women and the Rise of European Welfare States, 1880s to 1950s*, eds. Gisela Bock and Pat Thane. London: Routledge. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Zweiniger-Bargielowska. *Women in Twentieth Century Britain*, 154-156. See also Zweiniger-Bargielowska, Ina. 2000. *Austerity in Britain: rationing, controls and consumption, 1939-1955*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See Giles. Good Housekeeping, 72-75 for further discussion of the professionalisation of housework during wartime. It is worth noting that while all major housewives’ associations continued to support rationing and austerity measures during and immediately after the war, the much smaller British Housewives’ League, set up in 1945, campaigned to end rationing during the late 1940s. Their campaign was unsuccessful and not supported by the NFWI and TG. Hinton, James. 1994. Militant housewives: The British Housewives’ League and the Attlee Government. *History Workshop Journal* 38: 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Gorden, Peter and Doughan, David. 2001. *Dictionary of British Women’s Organisations 1825-1960*. London: Woburn Press, 168. In 1975 the WGPW was renamed The Women’s Forum. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Throughout the war the WGPW provided guidance to government on a range of welfare issues including evacuation of children and women’s welfare services. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. HM Government. 1942. *Social Insurance and Allied Services*. Cmd. 6404. London: HMSO, 53. The British Library. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Andrews. *The Acceptable Face of Feminism,* 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Richie, The Housewife and the Modern, 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Giles. Good Housekeeping, 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Crowson, Nick, Hilton, Matthew and McKay, James, eds. 2009. *NGOs in Contemporary Britain: Non-State Actors in Society and Politics since 1945*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. See Crowson, Nick, Hilton, Matthew and McKay, James, eds. 2013. *The Politics of Expertise: How NGOs Shaped Modern Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. See Introduction. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Perkin, Harold. 1990. *The Rise of Professional Society: England since 1880.* London: Routledge. See also the Introduction to this collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Hilton, Matthew and McKay, James eds. 2011. *The Ages of Voluntarism: How we got to the Big Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Beaumont, Caitríona. 2015. “What is a Wife”? Reconstructing domesticity in postwar Britain before *The Feminine Mystique*. *History of Women in the Americas* 3: 61-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Anon*.* 1963*.* The Housewife’s Treasury. *Woman,* April 27: 41. See Ferguson, Majorie. 1983. *Forever Feminine: women’s magazines and the cult of femininity*. London: Heinemann. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. By 1960 one in six of the labour force was a married woman and in 1961 over half of all women in paid employment were married, the majority of whom worked part-time in low-skilled and low-paid occupations. Jephcott, Pearl. 1962. *Married Women Working*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1-20. For an in-depth account of the experiences of working wives and mothers see McCarthy, Helen. 2020. *Double Lives: A History of Working Motherhood*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing. See also Wilson, Dolly. 2006. A New Look at the Affluent Worker: The Good Working Mother in Post-War Britain. *Twentieth Century British History* 17: 206-29. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See Golding, Lucy. 2022. Educated Expectations: Graduate mothers and their work in the long 1950s. Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Oxford for an insight into the feelings and experiences of graduate mothers based on 900 questionnaires submitted to Dr Viola Klein’s 1963 social survey into educated women’s experiences of home and work. See also Worth, Eve. 2021. *The Welfare State Generation: Women, Agency and Class in Britain since 1945*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. In 1971 one-eighth of dwellings still lacked at least one of the basic amenities such as a kitchen sink and an indoor WC. Zweiniger-Bargielowska. *Women in Twentieth Century Britain*, 159. See also Langhamer, Clare. 2005. The Meanings of Home in Postwar Britain. *Journal of Contemporary History* 40, 2: 341-362. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. See Webster, Wendy. 1998. *Imagining Home: Gender, Race and National Identity, 1945-1964*. London: Routledge and Davis, Angela. 2012. *Modern Motherhood: Women and the family in England, c. 1945-2000*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. See also Chapter 5 and Chapter 11 in this collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Beaumont. “What is a Wife”, 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. This included lobbying for child-care, equal pay, improved housing standards, rural electrification and consumer standards. See Beaumont, Caitríona. 2016. What Do Women Want? Housewives’ Associations, Activism and Changing Representations of Women in the 1950s. *Women’s History Review* 26, 1: 147-162. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic numerous newspaper headlines claimed that for women lockdown represented a return to life as “a 1950s housewife”. Ferguson, Donna. 2020. I Feel like a 1950s Housewife. *The Observer*, May 3. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/03/i-feel-like-a-1950s-housewife-how-lockdown-has-exposed-the-gender-divide>. Accessed 25 September 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. This “problem” was the boredom and frustration that white, educated, middle-class American women experienced when their lives were dominated by unpaid housework and caring responsibilities. Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. *Women in Britain*, 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism*, 220. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Centre of Excellence in the History of Experiences (HEX). 2023. <https://research.tuni.fi/hex/>. Accessed 9 September 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. See for example McCarthy, *Double Burden*, Abrams, Lynn. 2019. The Self and Self-Help: Women Pursuing Autonomy in Post-war Britain. *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 29, 201-222 and Jolly, Margaretta. 2019. *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the UK Women’s Liberation Movement, 1968-Present.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, Florence and Thomlinson, Natalie. 2022. Vernacular Discourses of Gender Equality in the Post-War British Working-Class. *Past and Present*, 254, 1: 277-313. See also Chapter 3 in this collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Kivimäki, Ville, Malinen, Antti and Vuolanto, Ville. 2023. Communities of Experience. *Digital Handbook of the History of Experience*. <https://sites.tuni.fi/hexhandbook/theory/communities-of-experience/> Accessed 9 September 2023, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Thane, Pat. 2018. *Divided Kingdom: A History of Britain, 1900 to the Present*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 262-290. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Helen McCarthy writes that in 1976 about a quarter of women with preschool aged children were working, more than double the figure in 1961. McCarthy, *Double Lives*, 324. In response to the increase in married women’s work the MU, NFWI and TG encouraged local branches to hold morning, afternoon and evening meetings to cater for all members. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. These included the National Childbirth Trust, the National Housewives’ Register and the Pre-School Playgroups Association. See Abrams. The Self and Self-Help. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. In 1971 the membership of the NFWI had declined to 442,086 while the TG experienced an overall increase to 275,700 members in 1969. Beaumont. *Housewives and Citizens*: 216. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. hooks, bell. 1994. *Teaching to Transgress*. London: Taylor and Francis, 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Leslie, Michael. 1971. Transposing from Minor to a Major Key. *The Townswomen*, May: 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Kivimäki, Malinen and Vuolanto, *Communities of Experience*: 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Jennifer Crane uses this phrase in her work for example in Crane, Jennifer. 2020. *Child Protection in England, 1960-2000: Expertise, Experience. and Emotion*. London: Palgrave and in Chapter 7. For an account of the organisational processes of housewives’ associations see Beaumont. *Housewives and Citizens.* [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. The reference to jam making dates back to the First World War, when the movement played a key role in national food preservation schemes. Paul. Gerda. 1971. Politics Replaces Jam. *The Telegraph*. June 1. NFWI 1965-1976. 2/IAW/2/B/39. International Alliance of Women Archive, The Women’s Library, LSE. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. One motivating factor for the rule change was to attract younger members and was in response to a fall in membership of nearly 20,000 in 1969. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Hunter Symon, Penny. 1970. Not all Jam and Jerusalem. *The Times*. June 1. NFWI 1965-1976. 2/IAW/2/B/39. International Alliance of Women Archive, The Women’s Library, LSE.

    Throughout the 1960s and 1970s the press frequently wrote about the NFWI in a patronising tone with much attention given to the hat wearing of members at the AGM. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Beaumont. *Housewives and Citizens*, 204-206. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. The “rediscovery of poverty” which highlighted the risk of poverty among groups such as disabled people and children, informed much of the campaigning around welfare by the NFWI during the 1960s and 1970s. On the “rediscovery of poverty” see Thane, *Divided Kingdom*, 268-269. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. National Federation of Women’s Institutes. 1981. *Keeping Ourselves Informed: our concern, our resolutions, our action.* London: WI Books Ltd, 153. The British Library. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. *NFWI Sub Committee Bulletin*. No. 5 April 1973, 6. Public Affairs Sub-Committee Bulletins (1972 –1975), 5FWI/D/1/1/3. NFWI Archive. The Women’s Library, London School of Economics (LSE). For example, in 1973 a NFWI representative was invited to sit on Royal Commission on Civil Liability and Compensation for Personal Injury. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. NFWI Pamphlet. 1972. National Federation of Women’s Institutes 1967-1979. 2/IAW/2/B/38, International Alliance of Women Archive, The Women’s Library, LSE. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Public Affairs Sub-Committee Minutes, 12 April 1973, 3. Public Affairs Sub-Committee Minutes (1973-1979), 5/FWI/D/1/1/1. NFWI Archive. The Women’s Library, LSE. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Thane, *Divided Kingdom*, 197. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. National Federation of Women’s Institutes. *Keeping Ourselves Informed,* 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. ibid. 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Merz, Caroline. 1988. *After the Vote: The Story of the National Union of Townswomen’s Guilds in the Year of its Diamond Jubilee 1929-1989*. Norwich: National Union of Townswomen’s Guilds, 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. The Women’s National Cancer Control Campaign was established in March 1965 emerging out of a local Stoke Newington Cervical Cancer Prevention Campaign (1963). [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Public Affairs Sub-Committee Minutes, 6 December 1973, 1. Public Affairs Sub-Committee Minutes (1973-1979), 5/FWI/D/1/1/1. NFWI Archive. The Women’s Library, LSE. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Batty Shaw, Patricia. 1980. A message from the National Chairman. *Home and Country*. November: 554. The British Library. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. The National Union of Townswomen’s Guilds. Publicity Flyer. c. 1975. NUTG 1974-1980. 2/IAW/2/B/44. International Alliance of Women Archive, The Women’s Library, LSE. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. The National Union of Townswomen’s Guilds. What Are Townswomen’s Guilds. 1976. NUTG 1974-1980. 2/IAW/2/B/44. International Alliance of Women Archive, The Women’s Library, LSE. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Anon. 1975. Abortion (Amendment Bill). *The Townswoman*. September: 262. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Merz, *After the Vote,* 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Anon. 1975. Abortion (Amendment Bill). *The Townswoman*. September: 262. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. In June 1975 the NFWI called on local authorities to provide alternative accommodation for battered women and their children in every county. In 1980 the movement noted with approval an annual government grant to the National Women’s Aid Federation, alongside financial assistance by local authorities to expand refuge provision. National Federation of Women’s Institutes. *Keeping Ourselves Informed,* 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Anon.1975. Public Questions Motions. *The Townswoman*. April: 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Anon.1975. Battered wives and a hungry world. *The Townswoman*. May: 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. hooks. *Teaching to Transgress*, 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. hooks, bell. 2014. *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. London: Routledge. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. For an account of working-class women’s activism see Chapter 3 in this collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Rice, Marjorie, E. 1976. Why shouldn’t we be a pressure group? *The Townswoman*. January: 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Thompson, E.P. 1968. *The Making of the English Working Class*. London, Penguin: 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Kivimäki, Malinen and Vuolanto, *Communities of Experience*, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)