



# WOMEN ACTIVISTS OF EAST LONDON

A STUDY OF RADICAL FEMALE HISTORY IN TOWER HAMLETS, HACKNEY & WALTHAM FOREST



## INTRODUCTION

East London is one of the most culturally diverse parts of the UK. It has seen numerous waves of migration: the Huguenots in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Jews in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and Asian communities from the 1970s onwards. It has also experienced great poverty. Rising up from this mix is a range of social movements, which have shaped our society.

Women's involvement in these movements is often eclipsed by their male counterparts. Sometimes their stories are missing from the archives completely. When stories do exist, they tend to focus on well known individuals, such as Sylvia Pankhurst, often presenting them as an exception, rather than the rule.

Our research shows that women from all walks of life have campaigned for generations. They've been a crucial part of shaping labour rights, housing policy, fighting fascism, battling violence against women and girls, promoting peace and protecting the environment. This report explores some of their stories, reflects on the impact they made, and challenges they've faced.

## RESEARCH BRIEF

**The research question was:**

*How have women in the East London boroughs of Tower Hamlets, Hackney and Waltham Forest campaigned on housing, labour rights, racism, violence against women and girls, peace and environmental issues, between 1888 and the present day?*

**We also looked at the following sub questions:**

1. What were the obstacles the women faced?
2. Where did they excel?
3. What has their legacy been?

## KEY FINDINGS

1. Women's activism in East London has been almost constant, except for during WW2 and the two decades after. This lull may be due to East London being so badly affected during The Blitz. There was simply little capacity left to fight additional struggles.
2. Women have often been pioneers and innovators in campaigning techniques, yet they rarely get recognition for this.
3. Not all women activists would describe themselves as feminists, and the things that motivate them into action vary widely. However they can be loosely grouped by personal trauma and hardship inspiring action, and a sense of moral duty.
4. Women face obstacles to participation in social justice, such as hostility by men. Yet in some circumstances, such as housing, it's their unique positioning that makes them best placed to bring about change.
5. Women are more likely to be "gentle activists" yet this is often overlooked in the field of activism, including by the women themselves.

# GENERATION 1: TURN OF THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

Historical narratives about women activists are dominated by the suffragettes, focus on a handful of key characters. Yet there were many women campaigning for change in East London, among them working class migrants, most notably the Irish and Jews.

## The matchgirls strike

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, life in East London was tough. Dominated by sweat shops, pay was low and hours long. The Bryant and May match factory in Bow was particularly notable for its poor treatment of workers, who were mostly young Irish immigrant women. As well as working 14 hour days and facing excessive fines, the women faced the appalling health risks of working with white phosphorous.

When socialist activist Annie Besant wrote an article in radical newspaper *The Link*, detailing conditions in the factory, the owners responded by sacking one of the informants. This sparked a strike, which by the end of the first day saw 1400 women walk out.

The matchgirls strike is a well documented part of the labour movement history, a blue plaque commemorating their achievements on the site of the old factory in Bow. In just two weeks their employers agreed to almost all their demands, and within a generation there was an act of Parliament prohibiting the use of white phosphorous in match making.



What's less well documented is the impact it had on working class activism. These impoverished teenage girls had shown what was possible. They employed radical techniques, for example garnering of support from the wider community, which was replicated by others, including in the 1919 dockers' strike. They also inspired a burst of unionism and strike action, including within trades that had previously been unorganised. As social historian John Charlton argues<sup>1</sup>:

*"The courage, fighting spirit and resolution of the matchgirls...deserves the recognition accorded to the middle class suffragettes of the following decades."*

## Henrietta Barnett and Toynbee Hall

During this period a number of wealthy women came to the Eastend, pursuing projects that were a precursor to today's welfare system. This included Henrietta Barnett, who pioneered work to improve the social conditions of women and children in Whitechapel. This included setting up 'mothers' meetings', where women could seek advice and forge important friendships.

In 1884, Henrietta established Toynbee Hall with her husband Samuel. The aim of the centre was to support the education of working class people, and reduce social divides. Future leaders would come to volunteer at the hall, bringing them face to face with poverty. This provided practical ideas and solutions to take into their political life. Social reformers Clement Attlee and William Beveridge both volunteered at the Hall.





*East London Federation of Suffragettes procession*

### The East London Federation of Suffragettes

The women's suffrage movement became steadily more active in the years before the war. Growing impatient with the respectable and gradualist tactics of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), Emmeline Pankhurst established the more militant Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). From 1912 they engaged in a campaign involving law-breaking, hunger strikes, and increasingly violent tactics.

While Emmeline Pankhurst is often credited in securing the vote for women, she only campaigned for the right on equal terms as men. As universal male suffrage had not yet been secured, this would've excluded 40% of mostly working class women. It was her daughter Sylvia who recognised the link between suffrage and poverty, leading the call for all women to have the vote.

Sylvia's frustration with the WSPU led her to break away, establishing the East London Federation of Suffragettes (ELFS) in 1914. Based at a baker's shop in Bow, the group became a hub for women, activists, mothers and more. It also differed from the WSPU in its tactics. Working class women did not have the social or financial stability for direct action, so Sylvia focused on Eastend campaigning traditions, including calling for rent strikes. She also demanded a meeting with Liberal Prime Minister, Lord Asquith, by threatening to go on hunger strike. Once the meeting was secured, she organised a delegation of six working mothers to deliver arguments for receiving the vote.

While Sylvia was pivotal in the foundation and success of the ELFS, there are other key characters who get overlooked. This includes Emma Boyce, who at the age of 50 became a tireless campaigner for them, travelling the country to give talks on women's suffrage. In 1918 she was one of the first women elected to the council in Hackney, and was a Governor at the London Maternity Hospital until her death in 1929.

Another key figure was Sybil Smith, who managed the first ELFS creche, which opened in 1914. It was such a success that a second, larger nursery was opened the following year in a disused pub in Bow, called the Gunmakers Arms. Renamed The Mother's Arms, it housed a baby clinic and free milk depot. The nursery was one of the ELFS's most successful projects, and continued until 1921.



*Sybil Smith (middle) from ELFS at Bow nursery*

## Muriel Lester and Kingsley Hall

In 1914, Kingsley Lester died, leaving funds in his will for “educational, social and recreational” purposes. His sisters Muriel and Doris used the money to buy a disused chapel in Bow, and converted it into a community centre.

Kingsley Hall still stands, and has been used for many purposes over the years, including a nursery, hosting concerts and as an adult education centre. During the war it functioned as a soup kitchen for Air Raid wardens working through the night.

The centre was not without its controversy, however. Muriel was a contemporary of Sylvia Pankhurst’s, and Kingsley Hall had close links with the suffragettes. Like Sylvia, Muriel was an ardent peace campaigner. At the end of the war she organised a march to Parliament, demanding milk be sent to starving people in Germany. Members of Kingsley Hall also adopted a German child, paying for her to stay with a family for two years.

Muriel’s pacifist stance was fiercely criticised, but it didn’t stop her. During WW2 she continued her activism. In 1941, on her return from a speaking tour in Latin America, she was arrested and detained in Holloway prison for the remainder of the war. Churchill didn’t like this woman meddling in his affairs.

Undeterred, Muriel continued campaigning during the Spanish Civil War. She was nominated twice for the Nobel Peace Prize, and is now recognised as one of the world’s leading pacifists. She has been dubbed the “mother of peace.”



*Muriel Lester*

## Vera Britten

After losing her fiancé, brother and two of her best friends in WW1, Vera Britten became a dedicated peace campaigner. Although she originated from Buxton, she was a close friend of Muriel Lester’s, and made regular visits to Kingsley Hall. During WW2 she gave speeches at the Liberal Headquarters on Bethnal Green Road, and worked on cold winter nights to distribute soup and cocoa to the women in bomb shelters.

Despite her popularity in the Eastend, Vera was vilified by wider society after speaking out against saturation bombings in Germany. In 1945, attitudes softened after the publication of the Nazis’ Black Book. It revealed that her name was on a list of 3000 people to be immediately arrested upon a German invasion.



## Hetty Bower

Another leading light in the peace movement was Hetty Bower. Born Esther Rimmel in 1905, she was part of a large, working class Orthodox Jewish family in Dalston. At only ten years old she became a staunch opponent of the war, after seeing injured returning servicemen. She recalled:

*"I was very patriotic and waved to the men as they set off... but it didn't take long before we saw those men coming back. They were missing legs and missing arms, totally blind, and war was no longer fun. I think I was 10 years old when my hatred of war began".*



Hetty Bower (Credit: Isabel Cortes)

During WW2 Hetty ran a hostel for Czech refugees. She sheltered "trade unionists, socialists, communists, Jews and anyone else they could get out of Czechoslovakia." She went on to become one of the founding members of CND, and was at the first march to Aldermaston. She summed up her philosophy as follows:

*"We may not win by protesting, but if we don't protest we will lose. If we stand up to them, there is always a chance we will win."*

Her campaigning continued well beyond her 100<sup>th</sup> year. In 2011 she spoke at the Hiroshima Commemoration Day in London, and in 2013 she received a standing ovation at the Labour Party conference for her passionate speech, which declared: *"what I have to campaign about in the short time still left to me is peace on our planet and improvement of living conditions."* She died a few months later, and her daughter said her almost final words were *"ban the bomb, forever more."*

## Milly Witkop

At only 18 years old, Ukrainian-born Milly Witkop found herself in London's Eastend, after fleeing the Russian pogroms, state-sponsored persecution of the Jews. She found work in the sweat shops, whose harsh conditions made her question her faith and influenced her politics.

In 1895, she met and fell in love with anarchist, Rudolph Rocker. In 1914 they began their opposition to the war, including opening a soup kitchen to alleviate the poverty it caused. When Rudolph was interned as an enemy alien, Milly continued alone. In 1916 she was imprisoned for anti-war activities.

After the war, Milly and Rudolph moved to Berlin, where she developed the concept of socialist-feminism: proletariat women were exploited both by capitalism, and by their male colleagues. She also became concerned with anti-semitism in the labour movement. But in 1933, after the Reichstag fires, this became more than an organising concern, and the couple fled to America.



Milly Witkop



*Preparing to depart*

## GENERATION 2: INTERWAR YEARS

The 1920s and 30s were a time of enormous change. Women now had the vote, but their struggle had not ended. The Great Depression saw hardship across the country, but it was particularly bad in East London. Meanwhile, fascism had begun its menacing march across Europe. Women responded to all these threats with their usual passion, creativity and determination.

### Poplar Rebel Women

In the 1920s, councils funded their own local poor relief through the rate system. The high level of unemployment in Poplar meant the council had to charge over twice as much as rich boroughs like Kensington. On top of this, they were expected to collect a 'precept', which funded cross London bodies, such as police and water.

The Poplar Labour Party refused to collect the precept. They felt it was unfair their poor residents had to pay for centralised services, given they were paying disproportionately more for local services. They were told to pay the precept or face prison.

Five of the councillors had been part of the East London Federation of Suffragettes, and wouldn't be intimidated easily. Minnie Lansbury, Susan Lawrence, Julia Scurr, Nellie Cressall and Jennie Mackay stood by their principles, and in 1921 were sent to Holloway prison. A crowd of 10,000 supporters tried to prevent them from entering, but they insisted on standing with their male colleagues. Susan Lawrence told the crowd:

*"We are here representing a principle which we have to defend as well as the men. If you prevent us from going, you do us the worst turn you can."*





*Susan Lawrence, Mrs J Scurr and Mrs J Mackay*



*Nellie Cressall*



*Susan Lawrence*



*Minnie Lansbury*

Following the councillors' imprisonment, neighbouring boroughs threatened similar action, and trade unions came out in support. In 1921 the Local Authorities (Financial Provisions) Act was rushed through Parliament, equalising tax burdens.

Upon her release, Nellie Cressall publicised the awful conditions in Holloway, including the screaming of women in padded cells. She reported:

*"We women councillors were kept isolated, with as many wardresses to look after the five of us as there were to look after the other thousand women in the prison. They were so afraid lest we should talk to those women, who were there for no fault of their own, but because of the rotten system".*

Minnie Lansbury developed pneumonia while inside, and died in 1922. Thousands of mainly women mourners gathered outside her house to march to the funeral. A memorial clock was erected in the 1930s at Electric House on Bow Road.

Julia Scurr also succumbed to an early death. She died in 1927, aged only 57. Poplar Mayor, George Lansbury attributed her premature demise to the terrible conditions endured during her imprisonment.

Meanwhile, Susan Lawrence became MP for East Ham in 1923. She maintained her commitment to working class women, threatening to resign in the face of unemployment benefit cuts. Her obituary in *The Times* describes her as *"the most transparently honest and un-egotistical of politically minded women"*.



*Julia Scurr*

## Sarah Wesker

The interwar years saw a period of huge industrial growth, however the male dominated unions were reluctant to support women's work. They still saw a woman's place as in the home, their working concerns as peripheral to the mass unemployment of the time. So women who attempted to unionise faced two oppressors: their employers and their male trade union counterparts. This didn't stop Sarah Wesker.

Sarah grew up in the Rothschild Buildings, a block of flats in Spitalfields, tenanted by mainly Jewish families. Despite being less than five feet tall, she was a formidable figure.

In 1929 she co-founded the United Clothing Workers' Union. She was the only female member of its executive committee and later became the full time women's organiser<sup>3</sup>. She is quoted recalling:

*"The first strike I remember, in the 1920s, was at a firm where the employer was so bad he wouldn't even let me go out of the shop to get a doctor for a girl who was having a fit. [...] We had this strike for a farthing on the price of a pair of trousers and he never forgave me for that, even though he won, not us. I used to stand outside the factory and collect the girls' contributions. He would call me all the names under the sun and call the police to me, but the policeman would say 'She isn't doing anything wrong [...]' But it was difficult, and eventually the girls decided they didn't want to be in the union any more. After the strike he wouldn't take me back, or my sisters."<sup>4</sup>*

Sarah continued to be an active union organiser, leading strikes at several major textiles factories. She combined communist politics with the tradition of 'Yiddishkeit' or "Jewishness", which Eastern European immigrants had brought to the Eastend.

In 1928, Sarah organised 600 young women at the Rego factory on Bethnal Green Road. The workers were on strike for twelve weeks, spurred on by morale-raising singing marches orchestrated by Sarah. They won at Christmas. The following year she led two further strikes, including at the Polikoff factory and at the Simpson factory in Hackney.

Sarah made considerable progress organising women workers, which in an era of single earner families, took immense foresight. Her actions paved the way for the Dagenham workers in the late 60s, and the Equal Pay Act of 1970.

## The Women of Quinn Square

Mass unemployment caused a crisis in housing in the 30s. East London saw high levels of over-crowding in slum conditions. There could be as many as 30 people sharing meagre amenities, including several families using one tap and toilet. Coupled with illegal overcharging by unscrupulous landlords, the situation was untenable.

As women's authority was still concentrated around the home, they found themselves on the frontline of the tenant struggles. While the men were at work, women were spearheading the resistance against exploitative housing practices. This was particularly notable in Quinn Square in Hackney.

In August 1938, a woman was evicted from Quinn Square after the landlord alleged she owed arrears. After an investigation it became clear she was being illegally overcharged.

The 1915 Rent Act had introduced controls following a successful strike in Glasgow. However, the post war Tory Government had been slowly dismantling these protections. This meant in places like Quinn Square, some tenants had controlled rents, and other did not. Landlords exploited this confusion by introducing exorbitant rents across the board. A survey later revealed that 70 out of 90 of the tenants in Quinn Square were being illegally overcharged.

The other women living on the square organised a rent strike in solidarity. Pickets were deployed, posters were nailed to broomsticks and there were female-led impromptu demos. When the Hackney Gazette labelled the strike as "ill-advised", the women responded by bombarding the newspaper with 200 protest postcards, and a delegation was sent to visit the editor.

The rent strike was opposed by Oswald Mosley, who was a big property owner. As a result, the women often found themselves harassed by fascists, who would appear at tenant meetings. But the women were not intimidated, and the strike was held solid. Within two weeks the landlords were forced into a humiliating defeat, agreeing to maximum rents for uncontrolled areas, regular repairs, and recognition of the Tenants' Association.

The strike generated both local and national coverage. When tenants in similar circumstances saw their victory, it opened the flood gates. A wave of strikes spread through the East End and beyond<sup>5</sup>.

3 Kershen, A. (1995). *Uniting the tailors : Trade unionism among the tailoring workers of London and Leeds, 1870-1939*. Ilford: Cass.

4 Leeson, R. (1973). *Strike: A live history : 1887-1971*. London: Allen and Unwin.

5 Rosenberg, David. *Battle For The East End*. Nottingham: Five Leaves, 2011. Print. pp160-161

## Langdale and Brady Street Mansions

Not all rent strikes in the 30s were won so swiftly. In 1939 a strike at the Langdale and Brady Street Mansion went on for five months. The properties were owned by common landlords, clothing manufacturers called Craps and Gold. Residents were mostly Jewish, a number of whom were Communists. Hetty Donnelly chaired the joint tenants committee, which was made up of entirely women. She would later recall the all-women's committee as "a brilliant idea", since "we women did most of it".

To prevent bailiffs from entering, the women erected barricades and barbed wire around the building, and guards patrolled the entrance. Even the milkman had to secure a permit to enter. Nonetheless, police officers eventually broke through the barricades at Langdale Mansions, and a fierce struggle ensued. Women were subject to particularly high levels of brutality, yet resisted, arming themselves with sticks, shovels and saucepans.<sup>6</sup>

Sarah Schlesinger, occupation listed as 'housewife', was one of those evicted by force.

*"An inspector attempted to drag me out of the house, and when he failed, he ordered two of the twelve policemen who were in my house with truncheons drawn to remove me."*

That same evening, a mass demonstration of 15,000 people took place, including rabbis, church dignitaries and the mayor of Stepney, resulting in further confrontation with the Police. But it prompted two Stepney councillors to take up the tenants' cause, and a few days later the matter was discussed in the Commons. Under extreme pressure, Craps and Gold reached an agreement, granting a clear victory to the tenants.

## Battle of Cable Street

In October 1936, thousands of local people, from Jews to Communists and Irish Dockers, flooded the streets, blocking a march by the British Union of Fascists. Led by Oswald Mosley, the fascists specifically plotted their path through Spitalfield, to antagonise the large Jewish population. Alice Hitchen, just 17 at the time, reflects the reaction of many:

*"I was aware of what was going on in Germany and the resentment here to the Jews. I wanted to be part of the resistance to that. ... As soon as we knew the fascists were marching, we organised to stop them. We chalked the streets at night with slogans such as "No Pasaran!" "They shall not pass!"*



There was an estimated 10,000 protestors, compared to 2000-3000 fascists. Although the Police outnumbered the fascists more than two-to-one, and their attempts to clear the crowds were brutal, they were not able hold back the protestors. A young activist recalls:

*"Eventually, after some hours, the word went round that the fascists had been turned back. Everyone was cheering. Where I was people were dancing and singing and throwing their arms around one another. I think it is essential to fight. You've got to stand up to them, you have to be prepared to stop them from marching."*

The Battle of Cable Street is a legend in Eastend history, however it is often told from a male perspective. Women like Alice Hitchen are written out of many contemporary accounts. Of course, not all the women activists took to the streets, as Joyce Goodman, then just 12 years old, explains:

*"For too many girls it was an absolute terror. The police were just hitting anyone indiscriminately. We never saw a fascist all that day. We were fighting the police."*

Yet many women were active from the windows of the tenement buildings. Charlie Goodman recalled women throwing down on the Police "everything they could lay hands on". When the police ran into the sheds for cover, "the women came down from the tenements and bashed the doors in and the police came out with their hands up."<sup>8</sup>

Despite the dangers, women made their presence felt that day. And their commitment to the cause can be seen in the arrest records. Out of the 79 anti-fascist protestors arrested, 8 were women.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Henry Srebrnik, Class, ethnicity and gender intertwined: Jewish women and the East London rent strikes, 1935-1940 2006 pp 288-289

<sup>7</sup> Socialist Worker (Britain), "Eyewitnesses To The Battle Of Cable Street: 'Fascists Did Not Pass'". N.p., 2010. Web. 14 Dec. 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Rosenberg, David. Battle For The East End. Nottingham: Five Leaves, 2011. Print. Pp 206-7

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. pp 207



## GENERATION 3: SISTERHOOD AND BEYOND

WW2 caused unprecedented disruption across the country, but especially in East London. The Eastend was a hub for imports, and used to store vital war goods. This made it a prime bombing target. In Bethnal Green alone, 80 tons of bombs fell, affecting 21,700 houses, killing 555 people and seriously injuring 400 more.<sup>10</sup> For Tower Hamlets as a whole, a total of 2,221 civilians were killed and 7472 were injured, with 46,482 houses destroyed.<sup>11</sup>

It is therefore unsurprising that this period saw little in the way of activism – people were focused on a larger enemy overseas, and simple survival. Even after the war, energies seemed spent. Despite the apparent emancipation of women in the workplace, post war most returned to their place in the home. Sometimes reluctantly, but in many cases willingly. As Virginia Nicholson states in *Millions Like Us*: “*These women were as sick of bombs and battles as everyone else.*” It would take the daughters of these women to pioneer the next generation of activism. And when they did their protests would be noisy, angry and defiant.<sup>12</sup>

The swinging 60s was a big decade for women. The pill was approved for contraceptive use, instantly being adopted by many. It gave them unprecedented control over their fertility, which led to huge changes in education and career opportunities.

Meanwhile, civil rights and anti-war movements overseas inspired women to fight at a national level. The decade saw the birth of the Women’s Liberation Movement, bringing with it campaigns on abortion laws, equal pay and sexual harassment.

But post war optimism disintegrated towards the end of the decade. The country suffered a lethal combination of an energy crisis and financial crash. Although Labour’s Harold Wilson got the country back to work, it came at the price: inflation at almost 30%, and a humiliating bailout from the IMF.

The pain was felt particularly hard in East London, and the area once again became embroiled in housing battles. As with previous generations, it was women leading the fight.

While rents and repairs remained a source of conflict, these were replaced by homelessness as a central issue.<sup>13</sup> There were simply too many people in need of council housing, and not enough places to go around.

### The Sumner House protest

In the spring of 1974, a determined group of women met at the Stepney Law Centre. They described themselves as “*four young mothers, plus a few additional people in similar circumstances*”. By living with relatives they had become ineligible for emergency housing, and could not register as homeless. They named themselves the Committee for the Faceless Homeless, and orchestrated a public meeting demanding the council hand over an empty block of flats.

They secured a meeting with the Leader of the Council, who expressed sympathy. In response,

*“one member of the Committee for the Faceless Homeless (CFH) stood spontaneously to deliver an ultimatum: she thought the Council might be sympathetic but wouldn’t do anything. Either the council should agree in principle within three months or the CFH would take direct action. The Council Leader said that was no way to negotiate.”*<sup>14</sup>

The ultimatum ran out in the first week of August, and the women made their plan for direct action. They identified empty council buildings, and on the bank holiday weekend they moved their families in. Within weeks, all 52 empty flats were filled.

This collective, self-help spirit reflects the Langdale and Brady Street Mansions protests a generation before, and more recent campaigns by Sisters Uncut in Hackney.

---

10 *Bethnal Green: Building and Social Conditions from 1915 to 1945*, A History of the County of Middlesex: Volume 11: Stepney, Bethnal Green (1998), pp. 132-135 accessed: 10 October 2007

11 Rosemary Taylor and Christopher Lloyd *The East End at War* Sutton Publishing, 2007

12 Nicholson, Virginia, *Millions Like Us* Penguin 2012 p 448

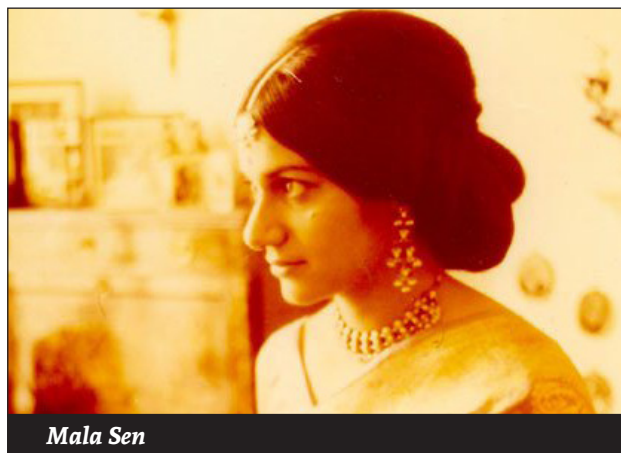
13 Phillips, Mark. *Homelessness And Tenants’ Control*. London: Dame Colet House, 1977. Print.

14 Ibid pp, 12

## Mala Sen

In a different corner of Tower Hamlets, another housing battle was emerging. Although similar in its cause, it had different roots.

In the 70s, East London saw a huge rise in the numbers of Bengalis. They replaced the Jews, who by now had mostly moved North or further East. The rise was in part due to the arrival of wives and children from Bangladesh, along with first wave refugees fleeing recession hit northern towns. The community struggled to find housing, often being dismissed as having made themselves 'intentionally homeless'<sup>15</sup>. Families lucky enough to get housing were often placed on predominantly white estates. Many left, preferring the extreme discomfort of a squat to the constant danger of racist attacks.



Mala Sen

Although most Bengali women were not allowed to take part in activities outside the home, within the family they ruled. As a result they led the way in fighting the housing crisis. As John Marriot says:

*"Far from the view that women are passive victims of a religiously based male oppression, Bangladeshi mothers are determinedly matriarchal, exercising firm control over their families. Women attended to the needs of their families and were determined to keep them, their homes and themselves safe from racism."*<sup>16</sup>

Within this movement the Bengali Housing Action Group (BHAG) was formed in 1976. It was co-founded by Mala Sen, who was born in India and came to England in the 60s. Mala said of her arrival:

*"I remember how frightened we were when we came to Britain in the 1960s. I had never seen such hatred."*<sup>17</sup>

As a result, Mala's first political activities were directed toward fighting racism. Before her role in the collective, she was a leading member of the Indian Worker's Association. In this time she wrote radical pamphlets and proposed a mass demonstration against racism in Birmingham, which resulted in the mobilisation of 20,000 people.

But it was with the BHAG that she would make her mark on East London. Their key demand was that all its members *"be given the option of housing in the safe area of E1"*, in order to provide a community for families in the face of high levels of racism.<sup>18</sup> To achieve this, they sourced empty council flats for homeless Bangladeshis, and drew up a map for the Greater London Council (GLC), defining a safe living area for the community. This established Brick Lane as the Bangladeshi heartland of Britain.

Mala's role within the BHAG was *"crucial, especially when it came to building work or dealing with the authorities or the media."*<sup>19</sup> As her ex-husband said after her death: *"She was a leading light in the East End."*<sup>20</sup> Suman Bhuchar, who made a documentary of her work, commented:

*"She was extraordinary in the sense that she was a very principled person and she ... stuck to her principles, no matter how difficult it might be."*

<sup>15</sup> 'Just a part of the wall', *Homeless Bengali Women in Tower Hamlets*, 8

<sup>16</sup> Marriot, John. *Beyond The Tower*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011. Print.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Salil Tripathi, Saliltripathi.com., "May2001tehelka". N.p., 2015. Web. 14 Dec. 2015.

<sup>18</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Glynn, Sarah. "East End Immigrants And The Battle For Housing". *Sarahglynn.net*. N.p., 2015. Web. 14 Dec. 2015, p12

<sup>20</sup> Farrukh Dhondy speaking in an interview for 'Last Words' on Radio 4, BBC., "Mala Sen, Willard Boyle, Lloyd Knibb, And The 7Th Earl Of Onslow, Last Word - BBC Radio 4". N.p., 2011. Web. 14 Dec. 2015.

## The Jagonari Centre

In 1978, the murder of garment worker Altab Ali marked a turning point in Eastend history. While the older generation had survived by keeping their heads down, a new young force broke through, determined to bring change. Although this movement was largely male dominated, some important female figures broke through.

Shila Thakor first came to Tower Hamlets in 1978, and Mithu Ghosh a year later in 1979. Together with Alma Chowdhury and Pola Uddin, they set up the Jagonari Centre in 1987, providing a place for child care and training. Jagonari took its name from a famous Bengali Poem 'Rise Up Women' by Nazrul Islam, which urges women to stand up against injustice. Jagonari aimed to challenge common representations of Bangladeshi women as submissive.

Shila Thakyr, spoke about their aims in a 2006 interview for the Swadunata Trust:

*"What we wanted to set up was something that involved child care with training. You can't have training without child care. And that was something we know back in the early 80s [...] So we set up a central place where there could be lots of different kinds of training, and place as a meeting place, somewhere you could go [...] We wanted to have this big open place where women could go and café like kitchens"*<sup>21</sup>.

Today, the centre continues to serve the local community. Yet despite its importance to local women and heritage, Jagonari was at risk of closure in early 2015. Whilst it has survived, it highlights the ongoing gap between the needs of women and the direction of government funding.

## Ama Gueye

Jagonari was not the first centre for women of colour in East London. As early as 1979, Ama Gueye founded the East London Black Women's Organisation (ELBWO). Formed following the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent conference, it offered drop-ins, advice on family matters, counselling, advocacy and a free legal advice surgery. Later it developed a focus on domestic violence. Ama recalls:

*"When ELBWO first started it was difficult to get women together because while there were a lot of women who were organised individually there was no real political organisation or tradition of black organising .... [but] our blackness is our strength because as a result of being black we have learnt the techniques of survival"*.

## Hackney Greenham Common Women

In September 1981, a group of 36 women chained themselves to the fence at RAF Greenham Common in Berkshire. They were opposing the British Government's decision to allow cruise missiles to be based there. It was the start of a peace camp that would see tens of thousands of women engage in a protest that would last years.

The decision to make the camp women-only came in 1982. They felt the role of women as mothers legitimised their protest, their acts of civil disobedience performed for the safety of their children. It also provided a unified presence in an arena normally reserved for men.

The impact of Greenham was felt in East London. In February 1984, women supporters in Hackney set up their own camp outside the town hall. They put on an exhibition showing the horrors of nuclear destruction, and organised picnics, music and camp fires in the evenings.

The camp generated a lot of support from the local community, and membership of the Hackney Greenham group increased rapidly. In September that year, several coaches took the women from Hackney to Greenham Common.

In 1985 the Dalston Lane Peace Mural was painted, and remains an uplifting reminder of the peace movement in Hackney. The mural, created by Ray Walker and painted by Mike Jones and Anna Walker, depicts a parade through a Hackney streetscape, containing anti-nuclear, CND, anti-war, green, feminist, anti-racist, and pro-tolerance images. This is a well-loved local landmark, which reflects the diverse community of Hackney and its radical political past.



## Nancy Taaffe

In 1983, the British Government set up the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) for 16-17 year olds on a voluntary basis. But many employers took advantage of the programme. They used young people as full-time workers, paying them less than £30 a week, and giving no guarantee of work at the end.

In 1985, the Government threatened to make the scheme compulsory, withdrawing benefits from anyone refusing to participate. Students across the country organised a protest against the “conscription”, staging several walks outs and a national strike.

Nancy Taaffe, from Walthamstow, was one of 15 key organisers, leading her school out on strike. Born into a family of active socialists from Liverpool, she’d been involved in other labour struggles before, including supporting the Miners’ Strike. However this was the moment she moved from supporter to organiser.

In a rare moment for the working class during the Thatcher years, the students won. The Government withdrew their plans. Unfortunately three years later the scheme was made compulsory, and in 1997 the Labour Government introduced the Workfare programme for the unemployed.

## Hackney Flashers’ Collective

Women’s struggles in the workplace were a key concern for the Hackney Flashers Collective. Formed in 1974 by photographer Jo Spence, they were a collection of photographers, cartoonists and writers, who used art as a form of protest.

In 1975 they staged a photography exhibition entitled Women and Work, which explored the hidden role that women play in the economy, arguing for equal pay. It was highly successful and toured many community venues and political events, including the 1977 Social Feminist Conference.

Their second exhibition focused on child care provision in Hackney. It was on show at galleries from Centreprise in Dalston to the Hayward Gallery in central London. During the second exhibition, Maggie Murray often had her one-year-old son with her during audience discussions, “to make a point”.

Flashers member Sally Greenhill said recently:

*“I’m really shocked that the issues that we raised forty years ago are still huge issues today. Nurseries and childcare, for example, are still expensive and remain one of the biggest concerns for working parents.”*

## GENERATION 4: THE RISE OF DIGITAL AND 4<sup>TH</sup> WAVE FEMINISM

The 90s was dominated by the Spice Girls and “girl power”. But while this was the age of perceived female emancipation, the period saw little in the way of women-led activism. Girl power emphasised individual empowerment, over mass mobilisation.

There were strong moments of activism in East London in the 90s, including the M11 Link Road protests, which merged into Reclaim the Streets. However women were involved in spite of their gender, rather than because of it. This was a stark change to the previous generation, where women defined their activism by their femininity, and their roles in the home and wider society.

By and large, it would take the rise of the internet to break out of this rut. In what has become known as 4th wave feminism, women have reclaimed the term feminist, going online to build communities of support.

### Melanie Briggs



The 2010 Coalition Government heralded an age of austerity. This caused a rise in social issues that had plagued East London in the past, particularly in housing. In spite of changes in gender roles, women again took the lead. This is perhaps because they remain the primary care giver. Parental drive certainly is key to Focus E15 in Newham, and also Melanie Briggs’ campaign to save Marlowe Estate in Walthamstow.

Almost a year to the day after Melanie bought their property on the Marlowe Estate, she received a compulsory purchase order from the council. They were tearing down the whole estate to build new, high density, high rise flats. The money the council were offering wasn’t enough to buy one of the new flats, or even stay in the local area.

Determined to fight, Melanie went door to door posting leaflets, but didn’t get much response. So she took to social media instead. This prompted a huge outcry from the wider community, particularly amongst parents. She also started writing for the Huffington Post, which went viral. The attention she generated online forced both the council and MP Stella Creasy to publish a response.

Although the demolition of Marlowe Road estate was not stopped, property owners who stayed to fight have now been offered a fair price, enabling them to stay in the area. The council have also agreed to install a temporary playground, to replace the one being lost.

Although the campaign was only a partial win, Melanie succeeded in forcing Marlowe Road onto the public agenda, and holding local politicians to account. Despite this, Melanie had never considered herself an activist until contributing to this project.





Nicole Holgate

## Butterfields Won't Budge

An over-inflated housing market has caused huge problems for renters in East London. Residents on the Butterfields Estate felt they were in safe hands, their low rents protect by Glasspool, a charity focused on alleviating poverty. But then Glasspool sold the estate to property developers, and eviction notices started arriving.

Neighbours who'd previously not spoken to each other gathered on the streets, shell shocked. They decided to organise to oppose the evictions. When resident Nicole Holgate set up a Facebook page and online petition, wider support flooded in. The neighbours have also campaigned offline, picketing the auctions where the properties were being sold off. They also organised a march through Walthamstow.

The protest has generated a lot of media coverage. It became front page national news when MP Stella Creasy invited the Chair of the Glasspool Trust to a meeting at the House of Commons. She had him "thrown out" for what she described as appalling behaviour. She later tweeted that she "marched him to central lobby and then asked police to ensure he left the building as (he was) no longer welcome."

Although the Butterfields campaign group is mix-gendered, women have taken the lead roles. Again, there's evidence that parental concerns may be one of the the driving forces. Many of the women have children at local schools, who whose education will be disrupted if they have to move. Meanwhile, Anna Plikseke fears that having to move will mean she loses her place in the queue for IVF treatment.



Anna Plikseke





*Emmeline May*

## Emmeline May

Social media has been core to Emmeline May's campaigning. Raised by a single mother, who herself was raised by a single mother, Emmeline was surrounded by strong and resourceful women. She was brought up to believe that if you have something to say, then say it. So after experiencing sexual harassment a number of times, she blogged about it. She got a huge response online from others who'd been through similar experiences.

When a local woman asked if anyone wanted to work with her to start a campaign to end street harassment, she immediately said yes. Together with another friend, the three of them co-founded *Walthamstow Women: Taking Back The Streets*. They started a Facebook group, which immediately attracted hundreds of members. It's been a key tool in sharing experiences, information and mobilising other women in the community.

They've also been working with the Police to ensure all street harassment is logged, whether legally defined as harassment or not. They're also campaigning to get more women reporting it, but this will take a big cultural shift because it's often trivialised.

This is not the first time Emmeline's used social media to great impact. Emmeline's also blogged about sexual consent, developing the cup of tea analogy: sometimes you want a cup of tea, and sometimes you don't; you never force someone to have a cup of tea if they don't want one. It went viral. It's since been used by the CPS and Thames Valley Police as their official campaign. It's also been taken up internationally, translated for different cultures and languages.

## Sisters Uncut

On 7th October 2015, at the premier of the new Suffragette movie, a group of women broke through the barriers and staged a “die-in” on the red carpet. As they were dragged away by security guards, they chanted “dead women can’t vote.”

The women were from Sisters Uncut, a feminist direct action group protesting against cuts to domestic violence support services. The heritage of women-led activism is key in the way they define themselves. Sisters Uncut activist Emma Smith said:

*“The suffragettes took direct action because they couldn’t wait any longer for the right to vote. We are taking direct action because we can’t wait any longer for women’s safety: our sisters are dying.”*

Like the ELFS, Sisters Uncut recognise how inequality cuts through all aspects of women’s lives. In July 2016, the East London collective of Sisters Uncut staged a march from Hackney town hall to Link Road, where they occupied an empty council flat in protest against the cuts in social housing. A Freedom of Information request revealed there were 1047 empty council properties in the borough, yet domestic violence victims were being sent to hostels or as far away as Essex to be housed. Like the Sumner House protestors before them, they gave a voice to the “faceless homeless”, asking: *how can she leave there if she has nowhere to go?*



**Sisters Uncut Hackney Town Hall (Credit: Sisters Uncut)**



**Sisters Uncut Link Road (Credit: Sisters Uncut)**





**Hibo Wardere**

## Hibo Wardere

No longer silenced by shame, a number of women activists are opening up about the violence they've experienced, using their anger to propel their campaigning. This is particularly true with Hibo Wardere, a victim in Female Genital Mutilation.

Hibo was born in Somalia into a large and very close family. She was woken in the morning by donkeys and goats. She describes it as an idyllic life. But at the age of six her world changed. Like 95% of young girls in the country, she was "cut". She wouldn't speak of the abuse for nearly 40 years.

The war in Somali intensified, and Hibo's family decided to leave. They were planning to go to Canada, but Hibo wanted to come to England. When a family friend said she was going to London, Hibo persuaded her mother to let her go with her. Although only 16 and separated from her family, when she arrived at Heathrow she was overjoyed, breaking down in tears. She knew that if she had daughters they would not be cut. She recalled: *"I saw stars in my head; I saw freedom."*

Hibo married, had seven children and began teacher assistant training in a school in Walthamstow. As part of her training she had to write an essay about child protection. Her husband suggested she write about her own experiences. Although reluctant at first, once she started she couldn't stop. She worked through the night, breaking down many times. The next morning she took her essay to the Head and told him she wouldn't go until he'd read it.

The Head immediately asked her to talk to the other staff. Since then she hasn't stopped, going from school to school talking to teachers, and now students, about FGM.

One of her most memorable moments was when a child stayed behind to tell Hibo she'd been cut, and was worried the same thing would happen to her sisters. For Hibo, saving just one child makes it worth it.





Rebecca Tully

## Rebecca Tully

Just a few miles down the road from where Sylvia Pankhurst used to live, Rebecca Tully continues the tradition of peace campaigning in East London. As a child she was taken to Greenham by her mother, which she describes as a “big memory”. After doing an MA in Refugee Studies, she learnt about the events that led people to leave their homes, including war. This led her to getting involved in refugee camps in France, where she cooks and helps out in the warehouse.

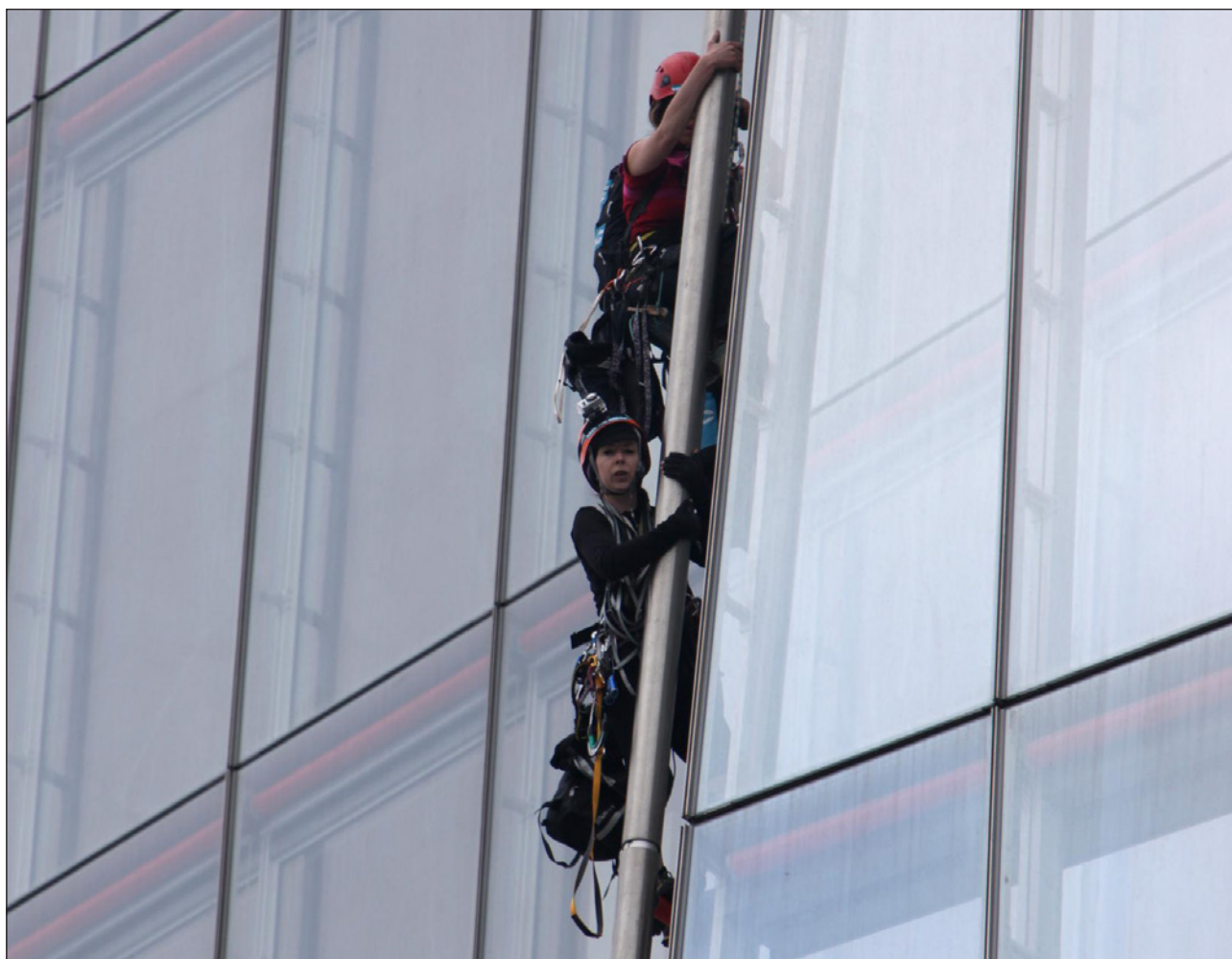
The other side of her activism is with Campaign Against the Arms Trade, where she has taken part in direct action against companies coming to London to sell their weapons. Many of the refugees in the camps are from Afghanistan, so she’s seen the direct impact of this trade.

One of Rebecca’s most memorable campaigning moments was in December 2015, on the eve of a crucial Commons vote on air strikes in Syria. With her friend Sue Wheat, she organised a peace vigil in Walthamstow. Their aim was to show MP Stella Creasy that local residents wanted her to vote against military action. They met at the mosque and led a candle lit vigil to Creasy’s constituency office. There were speeches by community leaders, and activists used post-it notes to leave messages of peace on the office window. Rebecca describes it as one of the most diverse protests she’s been on:

*“When I arrived at the mosque there were old Muslim guys, there were young white British kids, there were so many people. I’ve never been part of something so diverse. People of all sorts of different faiths talked, and I thought whatever happens, I know people agree with me. I know I’m not alone.”*



*Shard climbers - Victoria Henry 3rd left (Credit: Greenpeace)*



*Victoria Henry climbs the Shard in climate change protest (Credit: Greenpeace)*



## Climate change activism

As the immediate threat of nuclear war died down, a new concern took over. As scientific consensus on climate change became clear, organisations like Greenpeace switched funds and energy to tackling this new risk, its impacts on the natural world hitting home.

Despite its close links with the peace movement, environmental activism has often lacked a female-led moment like Greenham. This is surprising, since a UN report revealed how women are disproportionately affected by climate change, and like Greenham, there are obvious links to protecting the planet for future generations.

That's not to say women haven't been in key roles in the recent environmental movement. In 2016, Greenpeace International appointed two women as joint Executive Directors – Bunny McDiarmid and Jennifer Morgan. Meanwhile, in East London, Melanie Strickland narrowly missed becoming one of the first climate protestors in Britain to serve jail time, for a direct action at Heathrow with Plane Stupid. Melanie describes the group as thoughtful and respectful of gender, yet like the road protests of the 90s, they're involved in spite of their gender, not because of it.

The one interesting exception is the six women from Greenpeace who climbed the Shard in 2013. Among them was Victoria Henry, from Hackney. Victoria is conscious of how much “air time” is given to young white men in the movement, and is critical of what she calls “beardy boys in boats”. Part of her involvement in the 2013 action was to show other women what is possible – that direct action doesn't have to be a macho act. In the immediate aftermath of the event she received a lot of messages from women inspired by the event. Others approached her later, asking about getting involved in climbing.

Although Victoria feels there's been progress, there's still a long way to go. Women are less inclined to be physically active, and there aren't opportunities to enable them to do so.

## Lutfun Hussain and Concrete to Coriander

While activism by white women seemed to die away in the 90s, the struggle for women of colour continued. The rise of the BNP in Tower Hamlets led to the formation of groups like Women Unite Against Racism (see Appendix). While this resulted in a victory, the battle against social isolation continued for Bengali women in East London. There have been a number of projects to tackle it, including Zenith Rahman's Bromley By Bow Centre (see Appendix). However Lutfun Hussain's Concrete to Coriander deserves particular mention for ingenuity that's symptomatic of earlier generations of women activists.

Lutfun moved to East London in 1969. Separated from the culture of growing vegetables in Bangladesh, she became a volunteer at Spitalfields City Farm. Here she applied the knowledge she'd accumulated in the garden of her London home.

In 2000, Lutfun founded the Coriander Club — a gardening and cookery club for Bengali women. It provides regular opportunities to socialise with others, learn how to grow vegetables, as well as cook them. Some of the women are first generation migrants, and only speak Bengali. Many did not have opportunities to leave the house, or were scared to do so. Lutfun's initiative effectively battles homesickness and engages a group potentially at risk of social exclusion.

The initiative has made a positive difference by supporting women's sense of ownership, accomplishment and community. Lutfun's commitment to promoting ethnic diversity, cultural exchange, inclusion, organic horticulture and healthy living, led to her being chosen as a London Leader by the Sustainable Development Commission.





**Sabeha Miah**

## Sabeha Miah

Sabeha moved to the Boundary Estate in Tower Hamlets with her young son. Suffering from post-natal depression and without friends, she knew she had to get out and do something.

She got involved in the Boundary Women's Group, who were trying to create safe places for young people. The estate was run down, and crime ridden, so they did up a playground, encouraging more children to come out and play.

Sabeha got more and more involved, and when a vacancy came up to run the group, she was hired. Her work now focuses on breaking isolation and building confidence in other Bengali women. She networks with schools, local NHS services and goes out on the estate.

Like Lutfun, Sabeha's work epitomises the type of "gentle activism" that women excel at. It creates tidal waves of change. But like many other women interviewed for this project, Sabeha had never considered herself an activist.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The stories in this report highlight the constant and powerful force of women in East London. For over 150 years they have been fighting and winning, changing the social and political landscape. In doing so, they have innovated, overcome obstacles, showed tremendous bravery and used their femaleness to further their cause.

From the beginning, the matchgirls defined the tone for women-led activism, engaging in what would become a landmark strike in the history of the trade union movement. They pioneered the use of community engagement to further a cause, a technique copied since by countless other campaigning groups, women and men alike. Yet despite their innovation, they rarely get the recognition.

Women have also shown immense bravery. In 1921 the Poplar Rebel Women faced prison for their beliefs, and in the case of Minnie Lansbury, sacrificed her life. Meanwhile, in 1936 many women faced violent, male-dominated crowds at the Battle of Cable Street, while those at the Langdale and Brady Street Mansions endured police brutality. Others like Murial Lester and Vera Britten, withstood social stigma; vilified for supporting deeply unpopular causes.

Obstacles for women's participation in activism are also numerous. Early trade unionists faced hostility from their male counterparts; while in the 70s Bengali women were often not allowed to participate in activities outside the home. Despite this, they have achieved numerous victories, turning these challenges to their advantage. Collectively Eastend women paved the way to the Equal Pay Act, and Bengali women utilised their position in the home to lead housing protests.

Women have also made the personal political. The horrors of working in the sweatshops were key to Milly Witkop's political engagement, while Jewish women like Beattie Orwell (see Appendix) describe the Battle of Cable Street a deeply personal one. Generations later, Julie Begum would describe her early years experiences of racism as a driving force in her campaign against the BNP. It would even lead her to face off the Police and their dogs at an anti-racist demonstration (see Appendix). More recently, the early years abuse suffered by Hibo Wardere drives her mission to end FGM.

One of the key findings of this research is what we've defined as "gentle activism". Compassion and gentleness are traits often ascribed to women, and not always in the complimentary terms. Indeed, some schools of feminist thinking suggest women should take a more aggressive approach, for example the "lean in" philosophy of Sheryl Sandberg. Yet we have seen gentleness in activism deliver incredible results. The Mother's Arms nursery was one of the ELFS's most successful projects, continuing into the 20s. More recently projects like Lutfun Hussain's Concrete to Coriander, and the Boundary Women's Group, illustrate again this gentle, and creative approach to social change.

Yet women like Lutfun and Sabeha rarely describe themselves as activists. The term is often attributed to an approach, rather than the change it creates. And this approach is defined by stereotypical masculine qualities, such as aggression and violence. And even when women stand along side their male counterparts, such as the Battle of Cable Street, their participation is often overlooked or sidelined.

This masculinist approach to activism dominates the history books, sidelining women's participation in social change. Retelling events from the past from a female perspective disrupts the idea of women as passive. They are active, but often in their own ways. They organise from the home and with objects from the home.

Too often the stories about activism are told by men and about men. Where men have not been involved, actions are often not even classified as activism. Where men and women have been present, it is the men's stories and spaces that come to the fore. Yet there is no question that women have left an immense legacy in East London. Much of the cultural memory of resistance in this part of the capital is down to the work of women.

## CREDITS

Research by Esther Freeman and Emily Cousens

**With immense thanks to the research volunteers for their work delving into the past:**

Sarah Brooke

Annabel de la Nougered

Jean King

Susan Kochs

Cleo Pollard

**With additional thanks to the dedicated help and support of archivists:**

Stefan Dickers at the Bishopsgate Institute

Perdita Jones and Malcolm Barr-Hamilton at the Local History Library and Archives in Tower Hamlets

Hackney Archives

Charlotte Rowland

Jasmiina Kauriola

## APPENDIX

Between February and June 2016, 35 oral history interviews were collected with women activists with a link to Hackney, Tower Hamlets and Waltham Forest. The collection can be found at the Bishopsgate Institute, with the Waltham Forest interviews also archived at the Waltham Forest Oral History Workshop.

*Here is a sample selection of summaries.*

### Beatrice (Beattie) Orwell

Beattie was born in 1917 on Petticoat Lane in Aldgate. Her father died when she was 13, and her mother bought up three girls. They were very poor.

Beattie was young when the Black Shirts came on the scene, but despite this joined an anti-facist group. Every week she went to the meetings in Bethnal Green, and they marched on May Day in Hyde Park. She also joined the Labour party, who she's been with for 60 years. She went up to the Albert Hall to hear the Labour speakers. None of the rest of her family were political. She doesn't know where she got it from, but being Jewish was core to her beliefs.

When she was 19 she witnessed the Battle of Cable Street. She went up to Aldgate and she'd never seen so many people in all her life. "It was like the queen was coming, more than if the queen was coming." People were shouting "they shall not pass". There was everyone, dockers, communists etc. She stood at the corner of Lehman Street and she watched the Police come on horse back. People were throwing marbles to make the horses fall. There was lots of shouting and screaming.

She went down to Cable Street and saw a lorry turned over and scuffles going on. She didn't want to get mixed in with fights "me being a woman". She went down to "the tower" and saw Mosley and the Black Shirts all lined up ready for marching. They had their black shirts and "big buckles."

She went back to where she started and joined the other protestors in marching up to Victoria Park.

The men took the lead carrying the banner, but there were a lot of women. When they realised they'd won, that the Black Shirts weren't getting through, there was lots of singing. "If they had let them through there would have been blood shed, because there weren't enough Police to hold them back."

Every year they celebrate the anniversary of Cable Street. She feels it's important, and that they should educate the children in schools about what happened.

She got married before the war and lived in a a little flat, sharing the bathroom with two others and the kitchen with four others. During the war they got bombed out and went first to Oxford and then Leeds. They came back afterwards and her husband became Mayor in 1966 and she was Mayoress. She met the Queen twice.

She was also a school governor for 30 years, and a councillor from 1972 to 82. Housing was a big issue. She helped a lot of people, but "I couldn't even help myself." She feels it was much better back then – you got a lot of free services. Now with all the cuts it's much harder.

### Jane Shallice (nee Porter)

Jane was born in Manchester into a lower middle class family. Her father was very active in a trade unions and her mother was a teacher. It was a very political household.

In 1964 she came to London and started working as a teacher in Spitalfields. Back then people joined a union as insurance, so they had someone to fight for them if they lost their job. But Jane wanted something different. She wanted to be active politically. So she joined the NUT, and campaigned on pay and conditions, but also what was being taught in the classroom. It's was not just a bread and butter issue for her, but about what and how they were teaching.



There was a sedateness about a lot of the NUT at that time. Jane and her friend Judy would turn up with resolutions, which would be ruled out of order. The committee was run by a small group of rather old men. They didn't know how to cope with the young people turning up wanting to be more critical and radical.

One resolution they brought forward was about racism. There'd been no discussion about it, or how it could be tackled in education and by the union. The resolution said they should be tackling racism inside the classroom and amongst teachers. They were ruled out of order on the basis that they couldn't say teachers were racist.

The issue of race became an increasing problematic issue with the increasing movement of Asian communities to the Eastend. The clear threat to Asian families was important to many of them, and they eventually organised as a union around anti-fascist marches.

Finally in the 80s, schools started devising anti-racist policies. Jane spent four years in Hackney and Tower Hamlets working with teachers to devise these.

Jane organised an unofficial strike against Thatcher's education policies in the late 80s. The union was opposed to it, saying it would bring them into disrepute. But Jane and her colleagues ignored them. Despite being freezing cold and snowing, huge numbers came out, and they felt heroic.

The union suspended around 80 people involved in organising the strike. There was a hearing, and they allowed all but 10 back in. Jane was one of the 10 excluded. It was a difficult year, but eventually they contested the decision and were readmitted. Jane feels the current Conservative party is doing similar things with the education system, but it looks this time that the unions will take official, rather than unofficial action.

They never used the word activism back then, although she would call herself politically involved. This was hugely important in the relationships she had with other people. She also wouldn't call herself a feminist, although it's how she thinks and feels. However she sees class politics as underpinning everything. She calls herself as a socialist. She doesn't think gender or race is more important than this.

## Ellen Jones

Ellen was born in 1953 in Wales. Her father was in the RAF and her mother was a cleaner. She didn't have a political upbringing at all – in fact she didn't talk much to her parents about anything.

When she finished school she went to art college, which her parents didn't agree with. She was very much a child of the 60s, and there was a big generational/culture clash between them. They were appalled by the long-haired boyfriends she'd bring home.

She got involved in CND while she was still at school, and later joined the Swansea group. She was active with them throughout the 70s and into the 80s. She was motivated by the general atmosphere of fear around nuclear destruction – they really all thought the world might come to an end. Living in such a beautiful part of the world she was also concerned with environmental destruction.

One day someone from the group suggested they attend a vigil at Greenham Common. She went in a van with a group of other women. There were far more people at the vigil than she expected, and she was inspired by it. She went to another vigil later, where they all linked hands around the 9 mile radius of the base.

Her third trip to Greenham would be her longest – 2 years. Life on the camp was hard work. A lot of the time was spent trying to keep warm and the water supplies maintained. They would walk around the fence and get to know the people in the base. She thought it might help when things heated up.

She faced a lot of hostility to her involvement in the camp. When they went to the local village to collect supplies, she was spat at. The police didn't know what to do with them either, and withstood threatening situations. She has also been arrested numerous times and was marked as an "urban terrorist". She didn't think much about it at the time – it was just what needed to be done.

A lot of what they did was bearing witness – monitoring the movement of trucks, and exposing other US bases people weren't aware of. She was also involved in the action that brought down the fence at Greenham.

She decided to leave because there was only so long you could maintain a life like that. She ended up living in a caravan in Wales, so it was a slow transition in to every day life. She continued her art, making jewellery, which she had done during her time at Greenham. She still makes jewellery today, although she's not involved in protest much any more. She feels it's a different climate now – one of mistrust – and Greenham was such a high point it's difficult to know where to go after that. She's followed the Trident debate and though "oh no, not again" but has not been actively involved.

## Baroness Meral Hussein-Ece

Lady Hussein-Ece's parents were Turkish-Cypriot migrants, who came to the UK in the early 60s. Her father helped other migrants with translation work and filling in forms. So she grew up with the idea of helping other people.

In later life she got involved in working with community groups, especially with children and education. She became a school governor when there was nobody from her background doing it, even though there was a large Turkish and Kurdish community in the area.

She also set up the first Turkish and Kurdish group for women facing domestic violence. There was a lot of resistance to this, especially from men who felt very threatened. But twenty-five years later it's still running, although by other women now. Even today she faces hostility for setting this up.

In the 80s someone suggested she become a councillor. She rejected the idea initially, but they persisted. She went along to an open day, but still wasn't intending to get involved. Finally, in 1984, she stood for election and won. She was the first person from her background who ever stood. She got sucked in, getting involved in the women's agenda. In a few years she was Deputy Leader of the council.

When she first stood it was seen as extraordinary. People, including women, would ask who was going to look after the children, and what would her husband say. They would suggest that it would be better that her husband do it. She had to overcome prejudice from her own community before the wider society.

But her success got more people from her background involved, which is something she feels proud of. She became part of a project with the Government's Equalities Office, encouraging more women of colour to stand for election. She met women from all sorts of backgrounds doing amazing community work, but nobody had ever approached and asked them to get involved in politics. Women need to be asked, whereas men just put themselves forward. She's encouraged around 1000 women to get more politically active.

Today her role at the House of Lords focuses on health. She's also the Lib Dem equalities spokesperson. She highlights areas of inequality that need to be addressed when legislation is going through. It's not easy as many people in Parliament think equalities are a distraction, or like things the way they are. There are enormous barriers. You have to learn how the House works, where the allies are and where the blocks might be.

Women can and have changed the agenda in the House of Lords. She's recently been on a year long Select Committee on sexual violence in conflict, including how UK can work with partners to tackle sexual violence in war zones. The whole concept came from women peers. It wouldn't have happened if it was an all male house.

## Zenith Rahmen

In 1980 Zenith worked as an Outreach Worker in Brick Lane. She realised people were isolated. Many women who would normally rely on a mother-in-law to help them in Bangladesh, did not have that same resource. They were married young and left all alone.

In 1987 she started the Bromley-By-Bow Centre, as a multi-cultural community centre, doing events and trips. They visited the seaside, celebrated Eid, Chinese

New Year, and also went fruit picking. They've even organised trips to Bangladesh.

At first it was difficult to connect. She went door to door with a bag of toys to engage with children, and through them to their mothers. She helped people one-by-one, whatever it took – tidying a house, helping with mental health problems etc. Eventually she gained respect from the community, and the centre grew. They created a sense of family. *"Bromley-By-Bow Centre was the mother house."*

They've also run a lot of courses and training. Many of the women had never worked before. Zenith would tap into people's interests and skills to encourage them. For example, if the women were good at cooking, she would encourage them to start a cafe; or if they could sew they would teach others to.

She came from a background of community workers – her mother, father, grandparents. She was interested since she was 10 years old because she loved people, and not just Bengali people, but those from all different backgrounds. It felt a very natural role.

The work has had a big impact on the Bromley-By-Bow area. It's connected people inside the centre, but also outside. Zenith encouraged people to smile and be friendly with each other, even if they didn't speak the same language. Now people know their neighbours more, and are better connected. Now she wants to take the idea to other places, to re-create the Bromley-By-Bow Centre elsewhere.

## Carole Vincent

In the late 80s and early 90s there was a lot of road building being pushed through by the Government. This included the M11 link road, which would connect the motorway with the city. It was planned to rip through Leytonstone and Wanstead, taking ancient trees, green spaces and housing with it.

Carole Vincent lived in Leytonstone at the time on Fillebrook Rd, opposite the station. Lots of her neighbours started receiving compulsory purchase orders. Gradually the houses opposite were vacated and boarded up. Environmental protestors started coming in from across the country and offering their help. They un-boarded the houses, occupying them.

The house opposite Carol's became known as Euphoria because it had been occupied by "hippy types." They painted it in bright colours and grew vegetables in the garden. It was a transient community. Some people would stay a few nights before moving on; others would help with the campaign. They weren't frightened of being arrested. They would sit in the road to stop the police coming in.

When the demolition started there were security guards trying to remove the people in Euphoria. They took out the stairwell, and cut off the power. But the protestors just erected ladders, and they hooked the utilities up to other people's houses. Carole hooked a pulley system and would hoist food over from her

house.

One night Carole heard one of the children she was fostering crying. She went into their room and saw him standing by the window – he had wet himself. When she looked out there were riot police outside Euphoria, and they were dragging the protestors out and battering them. One young woman was dragged along the road in her underwear. The house was boarded up, but the protestors later got back in again through the roof.

By the station there as an ancient yew tree that they were going to fell. They got wind of the cherry picker coming and one of the activists called Green Dave, and other local protestors, including Carole, formed a circle. But a couple of people broke rank, which allowed the security guards in and pushed them out. They were all arrested.

One of the peak points of protest was Claremont Road. There were elderly people living there who were refusing to move. One protestor who became well known was Dolly, who was in her 90s. She'd been born in her house, and lived there ever since. Before her, it had been her parents' house. She said "they'll have to take me out in a coffin." The activists then came and occupied the house with her, and built a structure of scaffolding and netting around the home. Unfortunately Dolly fell ill and had to be moved out, and into sheltered accommodation. She died a few months later.

Despite the campaigners best efforts, the demolition continued. It was a terrible place to live at the time as there was mud and dust everywhere. There were also police everywhere still, because even during the demolition phase people were occupying the homes. Those that owned their houses got a reasonable amount of money for the years of disruption. Council tenants like Carole didn't get anything. .

## Julie Begum

Julie was born in 1968 in Stepney and grew up on a council estate. Her father was a factory worker "in the rag trade", and her mother was a housewife. Her parents emigrated from Bangladesh in 60s.

Growing up in the Eastend in 70s was not a nice experience. There was a lot of unemployment and racism, which was permanent throughout their lives – housing, education, even the police. They knew they were not wanted or accepted. Most people tried to keep a low profile, and just wanted to get on without being attacked. Going to school and back was a nightmare. There were a lot of no-go areas in the Eastend, including Brick Lane, despite the presence of so many Bengalis.

In 1978 the murder of Atlab Ali sparked a change in the community. There had been murders before, but this one sparked thousands of Bengalis and non Bengalis into action. They led a procession to Downing Street with Ali's coffin. Young men

in particular were angry and started organising, which was in sharp contrast to the older generation who had turned the other cheek. Women were less likely to be organising because they didn't have the capacity due to their other responsibilities, such as caring. There was also a culture of women not being encouraged to have a public life.

Julie was very young at the time, and her parents tried to shield her from these events, so she doesn't remember it. But she was influenced by what was going on in the US at the time around black civil rights, and also the independence movements in Asia. Her upbringing also encouraged working together in communities to tackle issues.

The fight felt very personal, and she wanted to do something. However Julie and the other women were frustrated that it was always the same men at the anti-racism meetings, making the same statements each time. Many felt excluded. They wanted to make meetings that were more inclusive, so women could be active in the movement on their own terms. They organised a collective – Women Unite Against Racism. They avoided the cult of leadership they'd seen in other movements, there was childcare provision, and they made sure women who weren't normally involved in activism had their voices heard, and could share their experiences. They came together in each other's houses and made banners and posters, discussing how they were going to do protests. They wanted to make sure the women were visible, but still safe, as the protests could get violent.

One memorable moment was at a protest in Whitechapel. The Police were there in their riot gear and on horses. They wanted to set the dogs on young men. Julie knew that as a woman, if she stood in between the police and the young men it would defuse the situation. It was an automatic reaction that grew out of her experiences of protecting her younger brothers from racist attacks as a child. Despite the risks she couldn't stand by and do nothing – it wasn't in her nature.

In the 90s the BNP put forward a candidate in the local elections and won by half a dozen votes. The reason this happened was because their supporters were coming in and beating people up, so they were too scared to go out and vote. Many didn't even register. Julie and others wanted to make sure that next time the election came round people were registered. They targeted areas with high levels of violence, and escorted women to the polling stations. When the election came, the BNP were defeated – it was a huge victory. After that, the group disbanded. They'd achieved what they set out to do.

She feels the Eastend has become a very exclusive place. There will never be another wave like the Bengalis because the area is not affordable to people like that any more. All the social housing has been bought up under Thatcher's Right to Buy scheme. It will never be the same again.



## Anna Plikseke

Anna is from Latvia. She originally moved to London to earn some money so she could return home to study. But she found she couldn't save enough, and liked London so much she decided to stay. She originally worked as a cleaner in a hotel, and later became a chef. She moved to the Butterfields Estate about 10 years ago, where she lives with her girlfriend, who also works in hospitality.

The first they heard about the change in landlord was when their boiler broke. They phoned up the person who normally does repairs, and they said they didn't work there any more, that someone else had bought the property. They were confused and worried about what this change might mean, and if rents may go up.

Then they got a letter saying they were being evicted and had two months to move out. They were really shocked and angry. Other people who had received similar letters gathered on the street to discuss it. They were all in shock. Anna had not really talked to her neighbours before, but this was the start of a movement which would bring them all much closer.

The eviction notice has been particularly worrying for Anna because she and her partner are undergoing fertility treatment at the local hospital. They have been waiting a long time, and if they have to move it might mean going back to the bottom of the queue again.

They also would struggle to afford a place elsewhere, and almost definitely have to move out of Walthamstow. As neither she nor her girlfriend are British, they wouldn't qualify for council housing either.

There is no history of activism in Anna's family, and this is the first time she has ever been involved in anything like this. She's really liked it. She went on a march through Walthamstow handing out leaflets, and she was overwhelmed by the encouragement they got. She's also been moved by all the political support they've had, especially from members of the Labour Party. People have also helped her understand her legal rights.

Anna will stay with the fight until the end, because she feels she has no other option. She's really angry that working class people can be treated like this, and is determined to see it through.

## Arifa Nasim

Arifa's mother is from Pakistan, who came over here when she was 19. Her grandfather was Iranian, and he is the main inspiration for her activism. He became a councillor, and was eventually Mayor of Waltham Forest. He was awarded an MBE for community services just before he died. While Arifa's mother was not an activist, she was still inspirational because of how much she has achieved.

Arifa's grandfather took her to council meetings, and she sat at the back with a colouring in book absorbing what was going on. He taught by example, coming home late because he was helping local families. Arifa saw him as a selfless, patient man.

When Arifa was 14 she read *Daughters of Shame* about honour abuse and killings. The stories in the book haunted her. So inspired by her grandfather, she decided to do something about it. "They made my heart hurt so much I couldn't sleep."

Arifa saw herself as a survivor by default, as she grew up in a Pakistani community. She survived because her mother didn't subscribe to that tradition. But the book made her realise it was happening all around her.

Arifa decided she wanted to run a fundraising event at her school for Karma Nirvana, a charity that supports victims of honour abuse and killings. It took her a long time to convince the staff, as they were worried about how it would impact on her exams. She replied: "Nobody is more worried about my exams than me. To you it is just a statistic, but to me it's my life. And I think I can do it." In the end the event raised £5,000. And she aced her exams too.

Following the fundraising event she teamed up with other gender violence campaigners. They realised the key to eradicating these issues was education. So she formed Educate to Eradicate and she is training teachers and running school workshops on the issue. Her initial goal was to get into every secondary school in the borough, but now she wants to go into primary schools too. She also wants to go into other London boroughs, and eventually the rest of the country, or even the world.

Still only 18, she has made great strides. She has already been to New York and spoken to the UN, including to four world leaders. But being young has its advantages and disadvantages, as people don't always want to hear what she has to say.





# WOMEN ACTIVISTS OF EAST LONDON

A STUDY OF RADICAL FEMALE HISTORY IN TOWER HAMLETS, HACKNEY & WALTHAM FOREST