Recognising and Constructing an Identity: the Beginnings of the Women’s Liberation Movement in Melbourne

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The emergence of a collective feminist identity in Melbourne in the early 1970s represents the collision of a number of factors which inspired a disparate group of individuals to name themselves as an aggrieved social body with specific and distinct experiences of a supposedly common oppression. It has been argued that where a particular category of identity has been repressed, delegitimated or devalued in dominant discourses, a vital response may be to claim value for all those labelled by that category in an essentialist manner. For many women, who joined together to form the Women’s Liberation Movement, it was seen not merely as politically expedient to present a united front in order to achieve certain advantageous outcomes for the category of ‘women’ in the battle against what was assumed to be a common and united enemy. The naming of a conglomerate of ‘like-minded’ women as an ‘authentic’ and ostensibly clearly definable group, with common interests and shared attributes, was also seen as an essential ingredient in the cultivation and adoption of a ‘true liberationist’ identity, and to claim membership to the class of ‘sisterhood’. Women who chose to resist the traditional definitions of ‘woman’ that had dictated what it was possible, appropriate or valuable to be, self-consciously applied the mantle of ‘Women’s Liberationist’. This construction was itself controlled and informed by rules and regulations of thought and behaviour that involved omissions and oversights that would increasingly and inevitably prove problematic.

The discourse of individual recognition through homogenous group identification, as expressed by the women who formed the first Liberationist groups in Melbourne, reveals the intense desire to create a connectedness based on mutuality and commonality rather than difference. As Arlene Stein has argued, the rejection of some categories necessarily entails the creation of others; identity politics necessarily requires defining an identity around which to mobilise. It is the aim


3 Arlene Stein, ‘Sisters and Queers’, pp. 43-44.

of this study to investigate why and how, in the particular historical, political and social context of the late 1960s, large numbers of women desired the merging of their varied identities into a singular purportedly all-inclusive totalising identity, and how they undertook the discursive project of the construction of the unified 'liberationist' subject and of the appropriate content of a singular 'liberationist' agenda. Consequently, the women who spoke on behalf of the many expressed a discourse of 'sisterhood', an exercise in describing a constituency for which feminism speaks to engender a sense of solidarity which, as Judith Butler has argued, invariably triggers internal debates over the limits and boundaries contained in that term.4

During the 1960s the context which inspired a large number of women to adopt and cultivate a 'liberationist' identity was similar in most Western industrialised nations, where movements for the liberation of women were instigated. Liberal discourses of 'liberation', 'oppression', 'human rights', 'equality' and the language of 'revolution', 'subversion' and 'protest' were enthusiastically embraced by the women and men in Black Civil Rights, anti-Vietnam, anti-Apartheid, counter-culture and student groups and given theoretical credibility through the work of intellectuals from the self-proclaimed radical New Left.

The environment that allowed the possibility of a 'liberationist' voice to galvanise and express its grievances was one in which a number of voices expressed dissatisfaction with the traditional figures and ideologies of control and the social 'status quo' Europe, America and Australia by the mid 1960s. Angry and frustrated groups of newly politicised 'radicals' began to react against what were defined as the staid and materialistic doctrines of the 1950s. These collections of 'New Left' activists, who heralded among their heroes the theorists Gramsci and Marcuse and the activists Castro, Che Guevara, Malcolm X and Ho Chi Minh, targeted the injustices and hypocrisies in everyday attitudes and political systems that appeared to be inherently oppressive.5

It was not only the ideological ferment of the 1960s that was conducive to the creation of an emancipatory 'movement' claiming and upholding the specifically aggrieved category of 'women' and constructing the revolutionary position of the 'liberationist'. The economic climate of expansion and opportunity increased the demand for female labour and hence women's involvement in the politics of trade unions. Added to the relative prosperity and minimal unemployment of the time was the influx in the numbers of women entering institutions of higher education. The increased accessibility of this avenue of personal independence and

'enlightenment' for women meant that many were placed in a fertile environment in which they had the opportunities to participate in the resurgence of 'radical' political organisations on many campuses. They could also increase their chances of broadening the scope of occupations available to them in society generally. The advent of a supposed sexual 'freedom' via the introduction of the contraceptive pill (made available in Australia in 1961) has also been posited as contributing to an atmosphere of change and possibility for women. Marilyn Lake and Verity Burgmann have pointed to the introduction of birth control as being a significant factor in the increase of married women in the workforce. This medical 'advancement' has been seen as playing a crucial liberating part in what has been described as the 'awakening of women' in this period, though it has been argued that this development ushered in a new type of enslavement for women who were now trapped by the ideology and practice of unfettered availability and sexual 'permissiveness'. Many feminists have argued that sexual freedom, far from having liberated women, has historically often led to an increased male access to women's bodies, allowing exploitation not just sexually, but economically and politically as well.

Though the men in politically 'radical' organisations expressed a view that society should be divested of its rigidity and become more fluid and flexible in its social relations so that its politics would cater for 'people not parties', it increasingly appeared evident to growing numbers of women who had joined these men to fight the injustices committed against the oppressed in various parts of the world, that they themselves experienced oppression at the hands of their male comrades. As some women were increasingly participating in the process of 'radicalisation' and

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6 Patricia Grimshaw, 'Only the Chains Have Changed', in Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee (eds), Staining the Wattle: A People's History of Australia since 1788, Melbourne 1988, p. 82; and Verity Burgmann, 'Two Steps Forward, One Step Back? The Women's Movement', in Power and Protest: Movements for Change in Australian Society, Sydney 1993, p. 80, for a discussion of the increased demand for female employment in the post-war era due to an economic boom and an increase in the manufacturing and service industries.

7 Sol Encel, Norman McKenzie and Margaret Tebbut, 'Sex and Inequality', in Encel, McKenzie and Tebbut (eds), Women and Society, Melbourne 1974, p. 300.


9 Betty Friedan, The Feminine Mystique, Hammondsowrth 1983; Lesley Johnson, The Modern Girl: Childhood and Growing Up, Sydney 1993, p. 154. Also see Sheila Jeffreys, Anticlimax: A Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Revolution, London 1990, for a discussion of some of the far from liberating consequences of the 'sexual revolution' of the 1960s. Lake also argues that the 'sexual freedom' promised by the pill was offered on masculine terms and represented a new form of control. See Marilyn Lake, 'A World of Difference' (n. 8).

10 See for example Biddy Martin, 'Feminism, Criticism, and Foucault', in Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby, (eds), Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance, Boston 1988, p. 11.

enthusiastically embracing many of the ideas and practices of the Left, they began to extend these analyses to their own experiences of injustice. By the late 1960s, a discourse of oppression, recognition and deprivation was increasingly present amongst women involved in the Left in Australia, often in direct response to the patronising articulations of some male intellectuals who believed it was necessary that they 'point out to women exactly how much they are discriminated against'.

The noticeable absence of any discussion of the opinions or experiences of women in the New Left literature inspired protest from increasingly agitated women, such as the plea from Mrs. E. B. Wilson, who wrote to the *Australian Left Review* in 1969 stating that 'in these days of a resurgence of publications about women - surely we could spare a paragraph to describe something of the way of life or attitude of mind of Australian women of the Left, past or present'.

By 1969 in Australia, as in the United States and Britain, the New Left had made its own unwitting contribution to the emergence of a 'feminist' consciousness and the desire for a united political movement. As women in the New Left gained experience, formed connections, organised communities, learned skills, articulated ideologies and became radicalised, a highly motivated, informed and talented pool of women was created. As these women continually confronted sexism in myriad forms and began to identify and label its presence and its tactics, and as their initially timid but increasingly assertive protests met the same indifference and hostility from the movement's men, many women came to see an independent, 'authentic' and clearly-defined women's movement as not only a possibility, but a necessity.

Ann Curthoys, a participant in the Sydney Women's Liberation Movement, has recently argued that women's general place in the anti-war movement seems to have been far more contradictory, ambivalent and varied than many Women's Liberation accounts would have it.

She has claimed that for many women such organised protest was the best opportunity they had ever had to be political actors, though it was in the mixed organisations, as opposed to groups such as Save Our Sons, that women usually felt subordinate. However, Curthoys own writings from the

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13 E. B. Wilson, 'Where have all the Women Gone?', *Australian Left Review*, October-November 1969, p. 36.
15 Save Our Sons was an anti-war and anti-conscription women-only group which arose indirectly from the Union of Australian Women, a leftist women's organisation modelled on similar groups which began in France and Italy after the Second World War. SOS was formed initially in Sydney in May 1965 by Noreen Hewett and Joyce Golgerth and began in Melbourne in August 1965 with Jean McLean as one of its high profile members. See Siobhan Mc Hugh, *Minefields and Miniskirts: Australian Women and the Vietnam War*, Sydney 1993, pp. 205-212. See *Farrago* July 25, 1969, p. 7 for an interview with Jean McLean.
early 1970s emphasised many women’s exasperation with the ability of New Left men to challenge oppressive class, cultural and racial relationships without surrendering their traditional privileges concerning women.17

The growing identification of 'women' as an oppressed category, with each woman supposedly sharing similar experiences of discrimination at the hands of men and a male-defined and constructed system, initially led women to form their own committees residing under the umbrella of the particular left organisation to which they belonged, as had been the pattern in the United States. In Melbourne, 'The Bakery', in Greville Street, Prahran, was the homebase of the Worker-Student Alliance, which had as one of its 'working-groups' the 'Women’s Liberation Organisation'. Begun in February 1970, it consisted of 'workers' and students who so strongly identified the group as part of the Marxist-Leninist Left-wing Movement, that its adherents denied that there was, or needed to be, an independent women’s movement.18 The self-proclaimed 'theoretical' rather than 'activist', 'Women’s Liberation Organisation', included in its fold some Monash University women who had attended a 'Left Action' Conference in Sydney in May 1969 where they were inspired by the fledgling women’s liberation groups formed there as adjuncts to the main Left organisation. Upon their return to Melbourne, the Monash women formed their own group which later tied in with the Worker-Student Alliance in Prahran.19 The perspective of the Worker-Student Alliance was that the question of Women’s Liberation should be identified as being part of the overall quest for the liberation of the working-class.20 Barbara Wishart, who was a member of the early Monash University group in 1969,21 described how many student women were involved in a number of political groups where men were in control, leading them to eventually seek collectives where women could meet

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17 For example, the paper she co-wrote with Lyndall Ryan, 'Up from Radicalism: Problems of Organisation in Sydney Women’s Liberation', reprinted in Curthoys, For and Against Feminism: A Personal Journey into Feminist Theory and History, Sydney 1988.
18 See hand-written notes from interviews with members of various Liberationist groups conducted by Jan Harper in 1970 in her donated collection at the University of Melbourne Archives.
19 Loc. cit.
20 The Women’s Liberation Organisation produced a leaflet titled 'On the Question of Women’s Liberation' which was distributed on May Day 1970.
21 Though this initial Monash contingent did identify itself as part of the Worker-Student Alliance, based in Greville Street Prahran, there was a later independent Monash University Group which firmly positioned itself as a women’s liberation activist group concerned primarily with gender issues. See the Jan Harper Collection at the University of Melbourne Archives. Also see Hugh Blakie, Women and the Anti-Vietnam War Movement in Melbourne, 1979, B.A. Hons thesis, Politics Dept, Melbourne University, p. 19 for a discussion of the way in which the women involved in the groups which were still closely aligned to Left organisations on campuses defined their feminism as being a part of the overall socialist struggle.
without the interference and intrusion of men. The growing desire of these academic women to form their own groups can be described in terms of the discovery or recognition that their focus fell increasingly upon the issue of their own oppression, as women, and how the immediate injustices they suffered surpassed the often distant sufferings of peoples elsewhere, and became the priority in their revolutionary outlook.

A motivating and inspiring factor for the creation of 'Liberationist' groups in Melbourne, independent from the New Left/student political structure, was the instigation of an 'independent' Women’s Liberation group in Sydney, which was formed by a small gathering of friends who were mainly from left-wing organisations, and who began meeting together in mid-to-late 1969. At an anti-Vietnam march on the 15 December, the members of this new collective distributed a pamphlet entitled 'Only the Chains Have Changed', which equated the oppression of all women with the oppression of the Vietnamese people. In answering 'Why Women's Liberation?', the pamphlet cleverly deployed the language of the Left in its construction of the category of 'women' as the newly identified 'victim'. It explained not only how the oppression of women benefited capitalism, but more specifically named the particular grievance of women as a group who had for too long been imprisoned in their 'proper place'. The pamphlet explained that the Women's Liberation Movement had developed in response to the 'needs of women' who must 'all work together - to change those things in our society which tell us we are second-class'.

The significant impact of the emergence of a 'liberationist' voice in Sydney upon many women in Melbourne cannot be underestimated, for the women's liberation groups that formed in Melbourne by early 1970, such as the Melbourne and LaTrobe University groups, cited the formation of the Sydney group in January 1970 as providing much of the impetus for the establishment of similar groups in Victoria. Even the groups which identified as working-groups of the Worker-

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22 Personal interview with Barbara Wishart 17/2/95.
23 Some members of this new group were Sue Bellamy, Sandra Hawker, Julie Gibson, Diedre Ferguson, Lyndall Ryan, Martha Kay and Barbara Levy. For a description of the beginnings of this pioneering women’s liberation group see Ann Curthoys, 'A Short History of Feminism, 1970-1984' in For and Against Feminism, pp. 79-80; Patricia Grimshaw, 'Only the Chains have Changed', in Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee (eds), Staining the Wattle: A People's History of Australia, pp. 66-67; Ann Curthoys, 'Doing it for Themselves: The Women's Movement since 1970', in Kay Saunders and Raymond Evans (eds), Gender Relations in Australia: Domination and Negotiation, Sydney 1992, pp. 430-433; Verity Burgmann, 'Two Steps Forward, One Step Back? The Women's Movement', in Power and Protest: Movements for Change in Australian Society, pp. 77-81.
25 Loc. cit.
26 See the Jan Harper collection in the University of Melbourne Archives.
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Student Alliance, and who saw women's liberation as merely an organisation within the left-wing movement, explained how the Liberationist activity in Sydney had influenced their decisions to create groups concerned with the alleviation of the restraints capitalism imposed on women. With the formation of the liberationist groups in Melbourne, the desire for the forging of a united radical 'liberationist' identity had been planted, and the discursive project of naming and constructing and controlling the definitions of this category was to be a time-consuming and contradictory process. As Shane Phelan has argued, this new identity politics resulted from a need for women to put their own identities and oppressions at the centre of their analysis. She argues that identity politics was not 'narrower' than class politics but broader because the refusal to subsume one movement into another offered greater possibilities for common action than an imperialist agenda resting on a binary opposition. To many liberationists, a class analysis did not fully address the specifics of the lives of women, yet the early liberationist groups did adopt much of the politics and strategies of the New Left and, according to Marilyn Lake, were replicating and perpetuating 'masculinist' discourses and constructions.

Members of the Melbourne University Women's Liberation Group (which had formed in February 1970) had described its politics as being in accord with that of the Sydney collective, in that both shared similar ties to New Left theory and practice, and similar frustrations with the men in those groups. High on the list of this group's targets was the need to 'smash' the Melbourne University beauty contests, intimate knowledge of which was possessed by the leader of the group, Liz Eliot, who had won the prestigious 'Miss University' competition in May 1969.

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27 Loc. cit.
29 Shane Phelan, Getting Specific: Postmodern Lesbian Politics, p. x.
31 It is interesting to note that initially men were not excluded from the meetings of the Melbourne University or the Monash University women's liberation groups, though the liberationists' intolerance levels and the men's discomfort levels soon weighed against their continued involvement. See the Jan Harper collection at the University of Melbourne Archives.
32 A report of Eliot's triumph can be found in the Melbourne University Student publication Farrago, May 16, 1969, p. 9. The Melbourne University Student Union promoted the sexual desirability of its female students through a number of such 'contests', namely Farrago's 'Bird of the Week', 'Miss
It also prioritised speaking at secondary schools and distributing birth control information to unions. Jan Harper recorded that, though most members of the Melbourne University group were students, (the minority of a total of around twenty consistent participants identified as 'workers'), a number of the women had no association with the Left, but 'had proceeded rapidly towards socialism'. It is not surprising that the socialist ideals that informed many of the activist organisations in the late 1960s, would initially also influence the Women's Liberation formations. As Steven Buechler has argued, even those who made complete organisational breaks with prior movements, nonetheless carried with them various residues from their earlier political involvement. In both organisational form and ideological belief, the women's liberation movement reflected its heritage from other movements and, therefore, initially showed the significant impact of the socialist tradition.

The fact that a number of the women involved in the first liberationist groups had had minimal association with the Left, however, reveals that many women were beginning to identify with the dialogue of 'oppressive sex roles' and 'male-domination' and 'equality' that became the common parlance of the women's liberationist. The publicity received by the stirrings of Liberation activity Overseas also inspired numbers of women who had not formally been politicised through involvement in New Left organisations. Though the media was at times scathing and derogatory in its description of the activities of Liberationists, the fact that their existence was noted increased the sense that a worldwide 'movement' was gathering momentum and 'power' through its discourse of 'sisterhood' and 'liberation'. At the same time that many women were becoming increasingly receptive to the developing discourses of women's oppression inspired by the ideology of the New Left, and buoyed by their experiences within those organisations and in their lives generally, a number of women unconnected to the campus-based groups and unfamiliar with the theory emanating from them, were becoming angry and disenchanted with the traditional roles allotted to them in the workplace and to the discriminatory treatment they received in trade unions and through the debates

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33 See the Jan Harper Collection at the University of Melbourne Archives.
34 Loc. cit.
concerning equal pay. As the numbers of women in the workforce increased throughout the 1960s, so too did women's involvement in trade unions, where they found that their male comrades harboured oppressive attitudes similar to those encountered by women in the New Left groups. This experience was not peculiar to Australian women, for in Britain, women in trade unions had already erupted in response to the absence of recognition from the male unionists.

As in Britain and the United States, the female workforce in Australia in the 1960s was growing at a faster rate than the male counterpart, for it was women, especially the married variety, who had virtually flocked to the factories and offices in the economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s. While in 1921 only 9.2% of women in the workforce were married, by 1970 the figure was 56%, and in fact one in three married women worked and one third of Australian workers were women. By the mid-1960s the issue of women in the workforce and equal pay had become a topic of increasing intrigue, speculation and relevance to men and women on the Left, media commentators, politicians and society generally.

Unions, however, seemed to be paying lip-service to the concept of equal pay and it was this complacency that led working women such as Zelda D’Aprano, who by the late 1960s was working in the Sausage Workers' Union and was already an active member of the Communist Party, to question the possibility of male union representatives taking the question of women workers' rights and entitlements

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39 Sheila Rowbotham, The Past is Before Us: Feminism in Action Since the 1960s, London 1989, p. 165. Rowbotham pointed out that in the late 1960s many women in Britain were exasperated by the lack of support from trade union men for their demands for equal pay and their efforts to break out of their confinement to low paid jobs. By 1968 women workers were accusing male unionists of 'industrial apartheid' because of their lack of action on equal pay. In Rowbotham's eyes, the increasing fury over the equal pay issue gave impetus to the emergence of the women's movement, and in fact, several of the first liberation groups in Britain started as equal pay groups. See Sheila Rowbotham, Woman's Consciousness, Man's World, Harmondsworth 1973, p. 96.


D’Aprano had encountered the prejudicial attitudes of union men in numerous conversations in which she was consistently ridiculed for attempting to point out the ‘woman’s angle’ of any industrial dispute. When the 1969 Equal Pay Case came before the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission, D’Aprano and numerous other union women from the Sausage Workers’ Union, whose industry was to be used as a test case for equal pay, attended the hearings and were appalled by the ensuing debate which they regarded as largely overlooking the views and interests of women workers themselves. Though Bob Hawke, the ACTU advocate, provided “irrefutable evidence” for equal pay, the final decision of the Commission, handed down on June 19, was seen as a humiliating and degrading piece-meal offering to women workers. The failure to grant equal pay if the work was essentially or usually performed by women and was done in only some cases by men, meant that approximately only 18% of women in the workforce received equal pay after this decision. The disgust and disillusionment expressed by many women workers in response to this decision far outweighed any displeasure expressed by many of the male-dominated unions involved in the case. Though the Sausage Workers’ Union officials claimed that ‘big things’ would happen if the equal pay case failed, D’Aprano noted that her union failed to respond ‘adequately’, to this incidence of ‘male hypocritical humbug’.

Failing to respond ‘adequately’ was not the intended course of action for Zelda D’Aprano when she decided to chain herself to the Commonwealth Building in LaTrobe Street on 21 October 1969. D’Aprano has explained that she ‘felt strongly about the need for women to begin fighting their own battles’ and proceeded to chain herself to the designated building, chosen because D’Aprano believed that the Commonwealth government should set the example by giving equal pay to women in government employment. The media had been warned of the impending

42 Zelda D’Aprano has written at length about her Union and Women’s Liberation experiences, initially in an article titled ‘Woman is Moving: A Herstory of the Women’s Liberation Movement in Melbourne’, in The Women’s Liberation Newsletter, July 1973, and later in her originally self-published Zelda: The Becoming of a Woman, Melbourne 1977, which has been reissued as Zelda, Melbourne 1995.


44 Ibid., p. 166.

45 Loc. cit.


49 Zelda, pp. 170-171.

50 Zelda, p. 170. The clandestine and controversial nature of this protest is evident in the fact that the supplier of the chain, the secretary of the Painters and Dockers Union, Jim Donogan, requested that D’Aprano refrained from revealing the source from which it was obtained! When asked by
demonstration and eagerly attended the 'chain-up', fascinated by the sight of a seemingly 'respectable' woman in her early forties conservatively attired apart from a sizeable chain and padlocks, undertaking such an action.\(^{51}\)

When answering one reporter's query concerning how she felt being the only woman prepared to undertake such a protest, D'Aprano allegedly prophetically stated 'today it was me, tomorrow there would be two, then four women, and it would go on until all women were demanding their rights'.\(^{52}\) By the next day, two supporters of D'Aprano's defiant but brief stand against wage injustice contacted her and expressed their interest in any further protests that the now 'notorious' activist had in mind. Alva Geikie and Thelma Solomon joined D'Aprano for the next 'chain-up' at the Arbitration Court on 31 October 1969, an event at which the media again attended, though there was an absence of any other women protesting, due in part, according to D'Aprano, to the fear or disinterest of many unions (whom she had approached for support), not only in actions of this kind, but in the equal pay issue.\(^{53}\) Once again, the media likened the protesters to 'suffragettes', invoking a somewhat genteel, quaint and anachronistic image for these earnest activists.\(^{54}\)

D'Aprano did not hesitate to use the media to publicise the impending first meeting of what the women had decided to name the 'Women's Action Committee' (WAC).\(^{55}\) John Hurst's article in *The Australian*, written after interviewing D'Aprano but omitting any direct quotes from her,\(^{56}\) employed numerous superlatives to praise the stand taken by 'latter-day suffragette' D'Aprano and her cohorts. He enthusiastically stated:

> It matters not that Mrs. D'Aprano and her friends were behaving

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\(^{51}\) An example of the mainstream media response to the 'chain-up' can be seen in the article 'In Chains on 'Equal Pay', in *The Sun*, 22 October, 1969. The article stressed that after 45 minutes of being chained-up the Federal Police 'cut the chain and sent her on her way'.

\(^{52}\) *Zelda*, p. 171.


\(^{54}\) 'She Bolts Chains for Equal Wages', in *News Day*, 31 October, 1969; 'Chains Again in Pay Drive', in *The Sun*, 1 November, 1969; 'Chains Out For Pay', in *The Herald*, 31 October, 1969. This time the chain was donated by the Builders’ Labourers’ Union. See *Zelda*, p. 172.

\(^{55}\) Though D'Aprano states in her book that the name 'Women's Action Committee' was decided upon after the first couple of WAC meetings in March 1970 (*Zelda*, p. 191), Hurst's article of January 1970 clearly refers to the forming by 'Mrs. D'Aprano and her militant friends' of a group by that name, indicating that the women involved had already designated this name for their organisation. See John Hurst, 'Just What Did Women Win in that Equal Pay Case?', in *The Australian*, 14 January 1970.

\(^{56}\) *Zelda*, p. 180.
unconstitutionally. History is full of examples of bad laws being repealed because a few were courageous enough in the first place to break them and take the consequences, including gaol. Similarly, antiquated traditions have been eroded partly by people who took direct action to awaken an indifferent, bovine majority.\(^57\)

Propelled by a belief in the desperate need to eradicate the 'present injustices' perpetrated by a discriminatory system, fourteen women attended the first WAC meeting, where, as D'Aprano explained, 'we sat around and spoke to one another of the need to do something about our own situation in society, and of our expectations of a women's organisation'.\(^58\) Though the response to the creation of such an organisation was not as overwhelming as some of the members of WAC expected,\(^59\) the women who attended shared a belief in the common and peculiar difficulties facing women as a particularly disadvantaged category and embraced the ideal of a community of women, a comforting and supportive network which enabled relationships of mutual identification and mutual affirmation to occur in the face of the alienation imposed by the consistently isolating and resourceless world of individual women. As Iris Marion Young has argued, this embracing of the belief in community is an understandable dream for those wanting to assert an 'authentic' alternative to the oppression and exploitation that they envisage as being their lot outside the sympathy and comfort of the 'group'.\(^60\) It was with tremendous hope and energy that the women who persisted with WAC engaged in the process of constructing its identity, that of a vibrant, activist and focussed collection of similarly angry and determined women. Just as the student women were rejecting the disrespect and denigration they believed they were experiencing at the hands of New Left men, so were the women of WAC rejecting the insincerity of many of the union men when it came to the issue of improving and transforming the attitudes and practices confronted by women in the workplace and in society as a whole.

Marian Sawer and Marian Simms have argued that the necessary ingredients for the successful transition from a militant public protest, such as the 'chain-ups', to a social movement, include members and publicity; it must be both self-proclaimed

\(^{58}\) Zelda, p. 190.
\(^{59}\) When new member Bon Hull offered her house as the venue for the second WAC meeting she enthusiastically hired a hundred chairs to accommodate the 'crowd' that she expected would appear after she had placed an advertisement in the local newspaper. However, rather than the hordes hoped for, eleven women attended the meeting that night. See Zelda, p. 190.
\(^{60}\) Iris Marion Young, 'The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference', in Linda Nicholson and Nancy Fraser (eds), Feminism/Postmodernism, New York 1990, pp. 300-302.
In compliance with these prerequisites, WAC certainly had an increasing number of adherents and publicity to assist in this process of 'proclamation'. Though the Australian equal pay campaign had been described as 'a polite squeak', it had inspired the belief in empowerment through an organisation such as WAC in a determined band of women who solemnly believed in the potential for change through their persistent efforts of demonstration and persuasion. The members of WAC speedily hurled themselves head-first into the task of 'being' an activist group for women. After its first meeting, the women undertook a program of writing letters to firms which discriminated against women in advertising for staff, to sponsors of television stations who were using 'sexist' advertising and they circulated a petition on the abortion issue. D’Aprano issued a leaflet advertising the second WAC meeting and distributed it to press and other interested groups to promote the aims of the Committee and to contribute to the public construction of the meaning of this organisation. In the leaflet D’Aprano offered short media-friendly explanations for the creation of WAC, such as the 'need to call attention to the human, civil and moral rights of our sex'. The leaflet enthusiastically explained in its rousing 'rallying cry' that there was 'so much to do; so many decisions to make. Countless numbers working together for Women’s Action in a world geared to men can achieve any goal to which we dedicate ourselves'.

WAC commenced the discursive project of establishing a viable identity for its constituency, of claiming social recognition and value on the basis of shared common characteristics, of attributing positive characteristics in the place of the negative ones imposed by 'society', and of demanding rights, acknowledgment and privileges that the dominant group, namely men, had attempted to keep for themselves. It was an affirming and exciting process of definition, not only of the issues and targets, but, inextricably, the nature of WAC itself. After the first couple of meetings, the members of WAC had already devised a policy statement, which included demands for economic equality, equal employment opportunities, equal pay, maternity leave, child care, social equality, including the prevention and

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62 E.B. Wilson, 'Where have all the Women Gone?', in *Australian Left Review*, October-November, 1969, p. 36.
63 Zelda, p. 191.
64 Loose leaflet, undated, but written by D’Aprano after the first WAC meeting on 2 March and before the second meeting on 16 March, 1970. See the Zelda D’Aprano collection at the University of Melbourne Archives.
65 *Loc. cit.*
66 *Loc. cit.*
67 See Elizabeth Grosz' definition of 'identity politics' in her article 'Identity and Difference: A Response', in *Critical Politics: From the Personal to the Global*, Melbourne 1994, p. 31.
discouragement of women being used as 'sex symbols', the opening of all businesses, political organisations, state functions and public places to women and a transformation in the attitude of society to women's 'role' so as 'to allow women to develop to their full potential'. Equal education, which would instil in girls their full working potential and encourage girls to undertake apprenticeships in all 'suitable' trades, abortion law reform, which the Committee asserted should be available at low cost to all women and included the necessity for an increase in family planning facilities and 'liberal' sex education for children were also part of the agenda. It was a bold and provocative statement of determination to overhaul the practices, attitudes and assumptions of what was seen to be a male-defined 'society', represented as a homogenous and united mass of opposition to the 'progress' of women and which WAC identified as being entirely responsible for the 'second-class citizen' status of women. The assertion of certain beliefs as being freer of the effects of error and domination compared to previous thinking, and therefore leading to 'better practices' is clearly evident in the truth-claims incorporated in the developing discourse of 'women's rights' and 'equality' as enunciated by the members of WAC. Jane Flax has argued that a consistent strategy of those who are the weaker in an unequal power relationship, is to correct the biases they identify in the current system by constructing a 'truthful' alternative that is assumed to be emancipatory rather than dominating, for truth and oppression are necessarily antimonious. However, this purely emancipatory perspective and knowledge does not incorporate the idea that it can also be generated by and generative of its own relations of dominating power. For the members of WAC, the optimistic expectation was that they would transform the discriminatory world of men into a supportive and inclusive world, not only for the sake of women's emancipation, but for human emancipation. The focus in much of the discourse of WAC, was firmly placed on the need to insert women into a world that was assumed to be constructed and maintained by men for their benefit.

Examples of WAC's determination to put into action its desire to insert women into the world of male privilege can be found in the daring 'invasion' of the public bars of two city hotels, the Arcade and the Australia, the purpose being to challenge the exclusionary rules relating to women's presence in a traditionally male domain and also to highlight the issue of economic discrimination against women. In a

68 'The Women's Action Committee Policy', undated but devised in March/April 1970. See the Zelda D'Aprano collection at the University of Melbourne Archives.
69 Jane Flax, Disputed Subjects: Essays on Psychoanalysis, Politics and Philosophy, pp. 142-143.
70 These sentiments were expressed in an interview with Jan Harper on 10 May, 1970.
71 Women were legally permitted to drink in public bars only if 'facilities' were readily available to them. Though this requirement meant that there were very few bars to which women could gain access, even if the facilities were adequate, few bar managers allowed women access to this arena of male privilege. See Sue Preston, 'The Last Male Bastion Crumbles (Slightly)', in The Age, 10 April, 1970.
characteristically amused and patronising manner the print media reported the event, at which the members of WAC were 'given the order of the boot' by the publicans for their insolence, though the point of the demonstration was generally not forgotten, if a little demeaned. The demand for 'equality' and 'justice' for women was also a motivating factor behind the 'tram-ride' protests during which D'Aprano, Geikie, Solomon and Hull refused to pay more than seventy-five per cent of the full fare, 'to draw attention to wage injustice'.

As WAC was undertaking the process of self-promotion and self-definition, the discursive project of creating an alternative that would counter the oppressive definitions of the dominant discourses in society, the women of the student Women's Liberation groups were engaging in a similar process of proclamation and the creation of counter-discourse. On the 16-18 May 1970, Melbourne University was to be the venue for what was the first National Women's Liberation Conference, an event that was dominated by the Sydney contingent of Liberationists. The conference was initiated by the women of 'The Bakery', associated with the Marxist Worker-Student Alliance, however it revealed a defiant determination to assert and define a 'Liberationist' perspective, one that was independent and different from the male-dominated Left view. The conference represented a confident, brash and conscious assertion of the need to establish a 'Mass Movement' of women. In her summary of the proceedings, Jan Harper noted that there were approximately eighty participants, the large majority of them being 'girls under twenty-three, students or newly graduated from Sydney (the largest group), Brisbane, Adelaide and 'The Bakery', with 'no make-up, slacks, long hair, very articulate, intelligent, middle-class, working-class and 'liberated'. Papers dealt with femininity, 'anatomy as destiny', the family, education, women in the workplace, the revolutionary potential of Women's Liberation, how to build a movement and sessions on strategies and dealing with the press and reports from all interstate groups. This collection of themes revealed an intense desire on the part of the participants to consciously construct 'The Women's Liberation Movement' and to firmly place its theory and action as the binary opposite to the practice of oppression and control exercised in deed and language by the system of 'male

72 The article by Preston in The Age gave ample space for D'Aprano to explain that because women only received 75% of the male wage it was not fair for women to have to pay more for drinks at 'ladies lounges'. She concluded the article by describing how the women were finally given a drink at another city pub, prompting D'Aprano to make the toast to 'Freedom, Girls'. See Sue Preston, 'The Last Male Bastion Crumbles (Slightly)', (n. 71).

73 Zelda, p. 191.

74 See a loose leaflet advertising the Conference in the Jan Harper Collection at the University of Melbourne Archives.

75 From handwritten notes taken at the Conference by Jan Harper held in the Jan Harper Collection at the University of Melbourne Archives.
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supremacism'. 76 Jan Harper noted that the Sydney women 'took the initiative' at the conference and were brazen (even arrogant) in their anti-bureaucratic attitudes and in their distaste for the traditional stereotypes of female behaviour, a fact that seemed to be somewhat confronting for Harper, who described their 'continual swearing - feet on the table and smoking', whilst being 'full of cliches on revolution and socialism'. 77

Though intended to be a conference for consolidation and unification, a gathering at which a concrete set of definitions and goals were to be agreed upon and adhered to, it provided an indication of the intense divisions and differences that were an inherent part of the artificial moulding of a disparate collection of people from various experiential and ideological backgrounds. The report of the conference in the Sydney Women's Liberation Newsletter stated that though efforts were made from the beginning to communicate with other groups, many people were 'too aware' of 'factional tensions' to overcome the barriers between them. 78 The report expressed regret that the conference had 'lost a good deal of its potential because of the inability of people to breakdown their preconceptions about themselves and each other,' and, though the report stressed that a considerable clarification of ideas had occurred, it warned that the embryonic movement must 'fight the tendency to create artificial factions', a tendency which it assumed was leftover from the 'old male-dominated organisations and ideologies'. 79 Anne Summers later wrote in Mejane that the 1970 conference had been a 'daunting' experience. 80 She asserted, in hindsight, that the fact that women from three states had come together for the first time 'probably constituted our only achievement'. 81 She described the proceedings thus:

There was much talking and shouting, there were heated exchanges between the protagonists of various 'lines' and those espousing minority views were frequently patronised or even jeered at. One woman abused several of us for wearing makeup - others were castigated for knitting during the sessions, one evening was devoted to acrimonious debate between the more vocal women and several male radicals. And although I exchanged brief words

76 The term 'male supremacism' was adopted by Sydney Women's Liberationist Barbara Levy in her influential paper at the conference titled 'Building a Movement'. Ann Curthoys also refers to this presentation in her chapter, 'A Short History of Feminism 1970-1984', in For and Against Feminism, p. 82.
77 Conference notes by Jan Harper in the University of Melbourne Archives.
79 Loc. cit.
81 Ibid., p. 6.
with quite a few women over those two days, I could not claim to have made a new friendship as a result of that conference’.\textsuperscript{82}

Summers’ less than complimentary review of the conference highlights the internal tensions and conflicts that already existed in the same environment which called for the necessity of unity and solidarity. Summers continued by stating that:

As our first national conference it provided the benefit of allowing us to gain at least a cursory idea of what was happening in other states, it gave us some sense that Women’s Liberation was struggling to define itself and that it was developing as a fairly widespread movement, but the ideals of a coherent expression of the oppression of women together with the sisterhood which putatively arose from such a common basis belonged to the distant future.\textsuperscript{83}

The conference was dismissed by Zelda D’Aprano as a ‘Left-wing women’s conference’ because WAC had not been invited to participate, and though she individually attended an afternoon session, D’Aprano claimed disparagingly that she ‘never did find out who organised it’.\textsuperscript{84} To her the conference seemed to represent the experiences and ideologies of women who were different to her and who seemed disinterested in her activism, therefore it was unrepresentative and insignificant.\textsuperscript{85} It seems that whilst WAC may have been increasingly labelling itself as part of a ‘Women’s Liberation Movement’, it was certainly maintaining its difference from the student liberationists, who were only interested in ‘talk’, too ‘inward-looking’, not ‘into action’ and therefore ‘disintegrating’.\textsuperscript{86} It was only when the Melbourne University group contacted WAC and asked them to attend their consciousness-raising sessions that D’Aprano overcame what Thelma Solomon described as her ‘worries’ about these young educated women whom she had assumed were very different from her.\textsuperscript{87} D’Aprano felt that after this contact with the university group she realised that these women were not different, that ‘despite their middle-class background we had a great deal in common as women’.\textsuperscript{88}

The intense need to connect with other women in the process of constructing a

\textsuperscript{82} Loc. cit.
\textsuperscript{83} Loc. cit.
\textsuperscript{84} Zelda D’Aprano, Zelda, p. 228; id., ‘Woman is Moving: A Herstory of the Women’s Liberation Movement in Melbourne’, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{85} Zelda, p. 228.
\textsuperscript{86} From 1 June 1970 WAC meeting. See Jan Harper’s notes in her collection at the Melbourne University Archives.
\textsuperscript{87} Personal Interview with Thelma Solomon 15/6/95.
\textsuperscript{88} Personal interview with Zelda D’Aprano 28/7/95.
'movement' led the members of WAC, in conjunction with the Melbourne University Liberationists and several women in left-wing unions, to hold a 'Women at Work and Women and the Trade Unions' conference at Melbourne University on the weekend of 28-29 August 1971, culminating in a march to the ACTU congress on the Monday in order to present the unionists with the demands they had formulated from their discussions. D'Aprano heralded this gathering as the first national women's liberation conference, despite the occurrence of the May 1970 conference, also at Melbourne University. To many liberationists it was an enormously significant demonstration of the strength and determination of Women's Liberation not only for the benefit of those who now identified as being participants within the movement, but for the general public as well. Certainly the conference and the ensuing march through Melbourne of 50-100 women to the ACTU Congress venue at University High School attracted the attention of the media as nothing had done since the initial protests of D'Aprano, Solomon and Geikie at the 1969 'chain-ups'.

To many participants the conference signalled the public arrival of a women's liberation movement in Australia and in Melbourne particularly, for it was the largest (approximately 270 women on the first day) gathering that had taken place.

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89 Two of the other organisers were Mavis Robertson, of the national executive of the Communist Party and Aileen Beaver, a shop steward with the Sheetmetal Workers' Union. See Zelda D'Aprano, Zelda, pp. 227-228.

90 Shortly before this conference, Zelda D'Aprano had had a confrontation with Bob Hawke on the 'Mike Walsh Show', the television day-time 'entertainment' program on Channel Nine shown Australia-wide. The Sydney Women's Liberation paper Mejane described the event as an all-in baiting of D'Aprano by Hawke and Walsh, who 'were not the slightest bit interested in what Zelda had to say except in so far as it acted as a trigger to their prejudices'. The article asserted that Zelda 'came off pretty well and refused to play the game of tit-for-tat, except to ask what the ACTU has done for women'. Hawke apparently failed to describe what, if anything, the ACTU had done for women and, according to the Mejane account, later leaned over to feel D'Aprano's shoulder to ascertain whether or not she was wearing a bra. This episode undoubtedly inspired D'Aprano to tackle the ACTU's attitudes to women workers and women generally in the August conference. The Mejane article had as its title 'Male Chauvinist of the Month', referring to Hawke, an honour that did not escape the attention of the mainstream press when it reported on the conference. See Mejane 2, May 1971. Also see 'Left Turn for Women's Lib.', in The Review, 3 September, 1971 in which the author, an unnamed 'special correspondent', advises Hawke 'not to pat any liberated woman on the shoulder to ascertain whether or not they are wearing bras' because, it warned, 'he might be torn to pieces'.

91 Zelda, p. 228.

at that time. The members of WAC had self-consciously adopted the women's liberationist label and welcomed the opportunity to direct the focus of the fledgling movement onto the topic that had been their original motivating issue, that of women in the workplace. Yet the ability to control the course of debate and the perceived need to foster a harmonious and unified perspective without major dissension, were not within reach of the optimistic organisers, as evidenced from the initial furious debate about the overall 'concept' of the conference and the attendance of the male members of the Press. The intense desire for the assertion of commonalities amongst women and the avowed desire to assert, with irreducible clarity, the universal determining 'requirements' and characteristics of the Women's Liberation Movement can be juxtaposed with the ever-present evidence of equally intense tensions and differences amongst the women present at the gathering. The review of the conference in Mejane could not fail to mention the 'inevitable disagreements and misunderstandings' that had occurred between women at the conference, however, it optimistically reported that overall it proved to be 'fruitful and exciting, enabling increased communication between old and new friends in the Women's liberation movement'. Whilst the emphasis in the Mejane account was on how the conference was an 'encouraging and stimulating indication of how powerful sisterhood can be', interviews with several participants in the left-wing paper The Tribune indicated that 'sisterhood' amongst women was not clearly or unproblematically present at the proceedings. D'Aprano expressed disappointment with the attitudes of some of the women present at the conference, and Eileen Harvey, a Canberra Liberationist, asserted that 'lots of women came to the conference hoping to form some sort of strategy for common action - (however) they probably felt disappointed at the end. So many bad 'vibes'
were set up at the start that we never really recovered'. 98 Yet, the contradictory nature of 'sisterhood' was evident in the fact that Harvey eventually found some 'sisterly solidarity', which she believed was necessary for liberation and was liberating in itself, 99 during the protest at the ACTU Congress, which was 'an experience of sisterhood made possible by the conference, and I don't think I, or any other sister who was there, will be down from that high for a while to come'. 100

Despite her apparent disappointment with the content and conduct of the conference itself, D'Aprano has suggested that as a result of the bonds forged at the gathering, and more importantly at the demonstration on the Monday at the ACTU Congress, WAC decided to stage a pro-abortion rally in the city, in conjunction with the Abortion Law Reform Association, to once again show the solidarity of women in the public arena. To D'Aprano, this protest, which gathered the support of five hundred people (mostly women), proved to be a further galvanising action which instilled in its participants an increasing sense of coherence and power. 101 By late 1971 a 'Co-ordinating Committee' for the various groups in WLM had already started producing a Newsletter which reported the urgent need for participants in the movement to meet to discuss the issue of 'group identity' and the 'drawing up of a set of aims'. 102 The emphasis on 'unification' was a central theme in the developing women's liberation discourse and a key to the identity asserted by those expressing what was supposed to be the 'essence' of women's liberation.

Occasions such as the conference, marches and public meetings 103 were events that encouraged a belief in many women that the liberationists were at the cutting edge of a 'revolutionary', spirited and energetic world-wide campaign to overhaul society and transform the traditionally subservient role of women to one of respect and power, simply through the bonding between women that would inevitably flow from the raising of consciousness and a recognition of the oppressive patriarchy which enslaved them. Optimism and faith in sisterhood were paramount to these new believers, so many of whom had joined the seductive excitement and enthusiasm of the new WLM by the end of 1971 that D'Aprano and the other members of WAC felt that it was both vital for the movement and essential for the

98 'Women's Liberation: Looking at the Melbourne Conference', p. 10.
99 Loc. cit.
100 Ibid., p. 11.
101 Zelda D'Aprano, Zelda, p. 229. The demonstration occurred on 20 November, 1971, and was referred to by D'Aprano as a 'history-making' event, the first pro-abortion demonstration of its kind.
102 Melbourne Women's Liberation Co-ordinating Committee Newsletter, November 1971.
103 One of the most significant public meetings at this time occurred on 2 February, 1972 at the Assembly Hall in Collins Street, during which Germaine Greer showed up as an observer and apparently expressed her 'pleasure' with the evening, commenting that she never believed she would see the development of women's liberation in Melbourne. See Zelda D'Aprano, Zelda, p. 311.
health of herself and the other members of WAC ("it became impossible for a few
women to carry the burden")\textsuperscript{104} that they obtain a 'Women's Centre' where
women could make contact and because, according to D'Aprano, 'we needed WLM
in the phone book, not only for organisational purposes but because we had become
a reality within society'.\textsuperscript{105} The sense of WLM being an undeniable 'reality' in
society belies the participants belief in the ability to assert what the Movement
actually was, to name it and to claim possession of it. The members of WAC were
so thoroughly convinced of the potential and viability of an all-encompassing
women's liberation movement that they 'disbanded' and identified purely as
adherents to the movement.\textsuperscript{106}

When the Centre was established at 16 Little LaTrobe Street in April 1972, there
was a tremendous sense of excitement, because it not only symbolised the
empowerment of women, but materially assisted the production and moulding of a
Women’s Liberation discourse of sisterhood and camaraderie. Yet tensions and
difference were ever present, as they had been at the earlier women’s liberation
conferences, which were the only other points of sustained contact that the
Movement had experienced. The Mejane report of the opening of the Centre noted
that many women found the general meetings 'alienating and unfriendly', whereas
the social 'get-togethers' engendered 'great warmth between women'.\textsuperscript{107} To many
women the Centre was the Women’s Liberation Movement,\textsuperscript{108} and represented the
fervour with which so many had joined in the idealistic hope that change was
imminent. Kate White and Jocelyn Clarke observed that the Centre represented 'a
central core, a clear organisational identity based upon the general meetings - which
made movement policy'.\textsuperscript{109} White and Clarke described how 'in theory' all local
groups were affiliated to the central group and all women’s liberation action groups
were subordinate to it, yet how 'in practice' it was 'impossible for the general
meeting to control the local or action groups'.\textsuperscript{110} The assumption of power on the
part of the Co-ordinating Committee revealed the intense desire of those intimately
involved in the establishment of the Centre to maintain some authority and control
over what would prove to be an uncontrollable and uncontainable farrago of
discourses.

\textsuperscript{104} Zelda D'Aprano, 'Woman is Moving: A Herstory of the Women’s Liberation Movement in
Melbourne', p. 6.
\textsuperscript{105} Zelda, pp.236-237 and 310-311.
\textsuperscript{106} D’Aprano has explained that early in 1972, as discussions of the possibility of a Women’s Centre
were taking place, it was decided that 'there was no need for our existence as a separate group - so
we became part of the movement'. See 'Woman is Moving: A Herstory of the Women’s Liberation
Movement in Melbourne', p. 6.
\textsuperscript{107} Mejane 8, August 1972.
\textsuperscript{108} The Centre was described in this way by Laurie Bebbington in a personal interview 25/6/95.
\textsuperscript{109} Kate White and Jocelyn Clarke, Women in Australian Politics, Sydney 1983, p. 161.
\textsuperscript{110} Loc. cit.
At the time of the birth of the Women's Centre, Nancy Dexter wrote in *The Age* that nine hundred women were 'active' members of WLM, women who were 'mostly - with a reasonably good education who have suddenly become aware that recognising a problem is halfway to doing something about it'. The process of recognition and identification was a crucial and central one in the creation of the Women's Liberation Movement and it was conducted initially with an overwhelming sense of optimism and belief in the possibility of sisterhood. Steven Buechler has argued that for a social movement to arise, it is necessary that a 'group' discovers both the motivation and the capacity to mobilise. Buechler argues that collective grievances, the establishment of group identity and the growth of group consciousness and the politicisation of these factors are necessary for the development of a social movement. To Ferree and Hess, the presence of grievances, collective identity, organisation and opportunity are required for the emergence of a social movement. They assert that a group of individuals only becomes a collective actor when there is a sense of identification with the fortunes of the group as a whole and a desire to change society on behalf of the collectivity, a sense obtained through the development of group consciousness and the ensuing empowerment from the feeling of 'we-ness'. The feeling of connection with other women with whom one has power to act collectively, was a crucial factor that fuelled the WLM in Melbourne as it began the discursive process of defining and sculpting its collective identity. The factors mentioned by Ferree and Hess were undoubtedly present in the initial stages of the WLM, for the belief in shared experiences of oppression at the hands of a common enemy, was of immense importance in the promotion of the idea of 'sisterhood' amongst women and the need for a united representative to speak on their behalf. As Ferree and Hess claim, identity emerges in the process of struggle, a process which is an on-going and turbulent one and which was only just beginning for those in the new women's liberation movement in Melbourne. Any discourse has numerous counter-discourses with which to interact, compete and negotiate. The discourse of unity, solidarity and commonality amongst the Liberationists did not exist in isolation from the many competing discourses, yet initially was constructed as the dominant and 'better' perspective for WLM. Power lay in the claim to know, and as soon as the right to speak on a particular group's behalf was assumed, ownership of that right was contested, as were the fragile definitions upon which the supposedly stable identity of the 'liberationist' and WLM were based. However, the attempt to forge

111 Nancy Dexter, 'Liberated Women are Grouping Now', in *The Age*, 20 April, 1972, p. 10.
a solid collective identity in order to combat what was assumed to be a solid and homogenous opponent was integral to the embryonic expressions of liberationist protest and identity. The construction of not only the category of 'women', but also the category of 'liberationist' was an exciting project, one that initially promised the 'pleasure and comfort' of an unproblematic sisterhood. To Liberationists such as Barbara Wishart, the energy, dynamism and enthusiasm of this 'innocent' time was about the 'euphoric' sense of connecting with other women around 'similarities', despite the fact that the women were students, old Lefties, unionists, housewives or professionals. Undoubtedly, the meaning of WLM was a contested site in which the discourse of sisterhood was inextricably intertwined with challenges that threatened its supremacy. The discursive conflict and power struggles that were to ensue at the Women's Centre and in the various pockets of women’s liberation in Melbourne revealed that ‘sisterhood’, whilst being an ideal so passionately embraced, was often in practice an elusive, contradictory and tremulous companion.

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118 Personal interview with Barbara Wishart, 17 February, 1995.