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**The coverage of the reproductive freedom movement  
from 1980 to 1993 in American feminist newspapers :  
Sojourner, Big Mama Rag, off our backs and New  
Directions for Women**

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**UNIVERSITÉ RENNES 2**

**Mémoire de recherche**

**Master 2 Recherche • Master LLCER Aires Anglophones**

**Études américaines**

**The coverage of the reproductive freedom  
movement from 1980 to 1993 in American  
feminist newspapers.**

*Sojourner, Big Mama Rag, off our backs and New  
Directions for Women.*

**Émilie Jacob**

**Sous la direction de Anaïs Le Fèvre-Berthelot**

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## Introduction

Feminist newspapers historically played a key role in the advancement of the American feminist movement. From newsletters to recent online periodicals, the feminist movement has always sought out methods of communicating with women to share its ideas. Reproductive health is a long-standing and complex feminist issue that is still topical. As such, this research investigates four feminist newspapers and their coverage of the contested issue throughout the 1980s.

During the 1980s, the feminist movement in the United States was facing many issues that still required movement organisation to tackle them. Although American women had made progress in fields such as the workplace or health in the 1970s, many issues remained on hold at the end of the decade. The win on abortion led to the rise of Catholic and Conservative groups ready to do everything in their power to eradicate what they considered a threat to traditional American family values. The controversy around abortion, legalised in 1973 with *Roe v. Wade*, started the backlash against feminism and culminated with the election of Conservative President Ronald Reagan in 1980. With an anti-feminist agenda, the New Right intended to “make America great again”,<sup>1</sup> not only economically, but also socially. The Hyde Amendment, which aimed at banning federal funds for abortions except from when the life of the woman was endangered by the pregnancy, was first introduced in 1976 to Congress. The Amendment evolved throughout the years and two other exceptions were added, in cases of rape and incest. With *Harris v. McRae* in 1980, the Amendment became constitutional in all states. The 1980 presidential elections brought “pro-life” members from the Conservative party to the Senate, leading to the exceptions of rape and incest being withdrawn until President Clinton agreed to reintroduce them in 1993. Attempts to outlaw abortion continued

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<sup>1</sup>“Let’s Make America Great Again” was Reagan’s slogan during the 1980 campaign. “Reagan at 1980 Convention: “Make America Great Again””. C-SPAN.Org, uploaded by chrismarkdonovan, 24 June, 2015. [www.c-span.org/video/?c4541862/user-clip-reagan-1980-convention-make-america-great-again](http://www.c-span.org/video/?c4541862/user-clip-reagan-1980-convention-make-america-great-again). Accessed 29 Jan. 2021.

with debates over when life begins and, in 1989, *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* threatened *Roe*. The *Webster* decision in Missouri aimed at restricting funds for abortion and giving power to the states to regulate abortion. *Webster* reanimated the movement and thousands of women took to the streets to contest the decision. In the meantime, feminists, especially women of colour, continued fighting for their rights as they foresaw the threat on reproductive freedom, beyond the right to abortion. In the 1970s, many underground publications emerged, such as newsletters, magazines and newspapers. *Sojourner*, *Big Mama Rag*, *off our backs* and *New Directions for Women* were four newspapers that first came out in the 1970s and continued into the 1980s. The reproductive freedom movement was then led by women of colour, who found allies in the mainly white feminist press. The editorial policy and political agenda of these newspapers focused greatly on the issue of reproductive rights, which is one of the reasons why they have been chosen for the study of this research. The topics approached in their pages intended to be inclusive and testify to a feminist demand for “women’s forums” – a place where all women are given a voice and they can exchange information on various issues. Therefore, this research will focus on the coverage of the reproductive freedom movement from 1980 to 1993 in *Sojourner*, *Big Mama Rag*, *off our backs* and *New Directions for Women*.

### **Corpus definition**

In the 1970s, the women’s liberation movement enabled women to make their voices heard through print. Many feminist publications emerged at the time, as it was the optimal choice of media for activist groups. This study will focus on four alternative publications: *Sojourner*, *Big Mama Rag*, *off our backs* and *New Directions for Women*. These publications have been chosen for their similarities – they are all feminist newspapers that came out in the 1970s and dealt with reproductive health issues, but with slight differences. As underground newspapers operating independently, away from the mainstream press, funding was often an issue, sometimes to the point

where they had to cease production. For example, *Big Mama Rag* only survived twelve years. The three others survived until the 1990s, and even the 2000s, relying on their readers and other contributors, although never becoming mainstream as *Ms. Magazine*, which had a circulation of 350,000 in 1973 (*Ms.* vol. 1, no. 7, 96-97). To put this in perspective, *off our backs* peaked with 15,000 copies sold in 1977 (Farrell 24) and *Big Mama Rag* distributed around 2,700 copies each month in 1980 (*Big Mama Rag, Inc. v. U.S.*). *Ms.* was considered mainstream because it saw rapid success and attracted influential advertisers such as Sheaffer, while alternative newspapers advertised for lesser known and women-owned businesses. This essay will study the newspapers' position as underground publications, including their struggles as such, and will analyse the movement's demand for "women's forums" – a place where women are given a voice and can exchange information on various issues. Moreover, this thesis will analyse how the issue of reproductive freedom took up considerable room within the feminist agenda and thus within the four newspapers' pages, at a time when women's reproductive rights were still threatened. To start with, in 1976, Republican Congressman Henry Hyde presented an Amendment to ban federal funds for abortions, which passed Congress in 1977 and took effect in 1980. On another front, sterilisation abuse was a major issue faced by women of colour. Young women's access to contraception or abortion without their parents' consent was also being debated. The four newspapers regularly dealt with these subjects, taking the broader definition of what "reproductive freedom" means into account. Every news section of every issue mentioned at least once the words "abortion" or "sterilization". Several feature articles focused on abortion or reproductive health in general. The words "abortion", "sterilization" and "reproductive" were mentioned more, by far, in the 1980s than in the 1970s. This paper will therefore study the coverage of the reproductive freedom movement in *Sojourner*, *Big Mama Rag*, *off our backs* and *New Directions for Women* from 1980, when the Hyde Amendment came into effect, to 1993, when President Clinton reintroduced the rape and incest exceptions to the Amendment.



## Corpus presentation

### Primary sources

*Sojourner*, *Big Mama Rag*, *off our backs* and *New Directions* were monthly or bi-monthly periodicals. Published on newsprint, the papers aimed to inform women and feminists, and contained articles and news related to women and feminist issues in general. They can therefore be referred to as “newspapers”. The cost of an issue varied between 25 cents and \$2 – all newspapers started with a low price which rose over time. Their readership was mostly from the U.S., but they also reached other countries such as Spain (*off our backs*, vol. 4, no. 3, 9) and El Salvador (*Sojourner*, vol. 17, no. 5, 4). The editors were, for the most part, white women but aimed for their newspapers to be inclusive and welcomed all feminist voices to their pages. This research will focus on the news sections and on several articles of the four newspapers that dealt with feminism and reproductive health issues. Other elements such as letters from readers and editorials will be analysed as well.

*Sojourner* was a newspaper based in Boston (MA) which was started in 1975 by a community of women from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The newspaper was then run by the few female employees and students of the university who, in a male-oriented environment, felt the need to communicate with each other. Due to its success, the newspaper expanded to the New England region a year after its first issue and grew out of MIT. *Sojourner* presented itself as “the New England women’s journal of news, opinions, and the arts”. A great part of the newspaper focused on the arts, with sections such as “Theatre”, “Dance” or “Poetry”. These sections dealt with women’s place in art industries, shared art projects or provided book and film recommendations. The rest of the newspaper was quite similar to any other newspaper, with local and international news, calendar, notices, services and classifieds, the only difference being that it focused on women. *Sojourner* was aiming to be a “forum for women”, what they defined as “a space in which

all women can speak freely about their concerns”.<sup>2</sup> The letters section (about three pages out of about 30 to 50 pages an issue) was where the readers could express their opinion on articles from previous issues. They were usually presented with the following issue’s theme each month and invited to send their views on a topic. Most of the reproductive health information was shared in the news section but the newspaper regularly shared articles on the topic and did several special issues on women’s health, including reproductive health. The “editorial notes” presented the issue’s topics, and those of the following issues, and kept the readers updated about the newspaper’s status. The editors shared their struggles which were usually financial – in 1984 and 1985, they decided to stop production for two months. *Sojourner* eventually ceased publication in 1998.

In Denver (CO) 1972, a small community of women started *Big Mama Rag*. Printed on cheap paper, it mostly contained drawings to illustrate the issues’ covers and articles. *Big Mama Rag* published eleven issues a year and shared local and international news in their “hot briefs” section, as well as political articles on a variety of topics linked to women. *BMR* was a radical-type of feminist newspaper, covering delicate topics such as women and psychiatry, women in prison or sterilisation abuse. They also approached American imperialism or Palestine history. In the 1980s, reproductive health issues were an important part of their editorial agenda and they included a section named “america held hostage” in which they reported what Reagan and his government had been doing during the last month. This section had an ironic, denouncing tone and they mockingly spelled Reagan “RayGun” and specified how many days it had been since his presidency had begun. The newspaper functioned as a “women’s forum” as well, as readers were invited to submit their criticisms and ideas to the newspaper. *BMR* was free for women in prison. With the “where we’re at” section, the collective regularly gave their readers updates of their financial situation, which was very often difficult in the 1980s. *Big Mama Rag* came to an end in 1984 due to production and financial issues.

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<sup>2</sup>“Open Editorial Policy.” *Sojourner*, vol. 5, no. 5, January 1980, p.2.

*off our backs* is one of the first national feminist newspapers. Based in Washington DC, the founding members launched the first issue in 1970. The newspaper contained several national and international news sections. It also had sections such as “commentary”, “reviews”, “chicken lady” (services, events and recommendations) and “interview”, and published letters from their readers. Influential feminist journalists like Carol Anne Douglas wrote for *oob*. The newspaper was accessible through tapes and in braille to women who were blind or with reading difficulties. In the 1980s, *oob* published eleven issues a year. Following Reagan’s election, they started to write about the way the government policies were affecting women. Reproductive health issues, and especially abortion, were therefore on their editorial line. *oob* grew from and within the women’s liberation movement and remains the most well-known and long running feminist newspaper. It discontinued publishing in 2008.

*New Directions for Women* first started as a newsletter, *New Directions for Women in New Jersey*, in 1972, changing the name when it became national in 1975. *New Directions for Women* was a bi-monthly newspaper with six issues a year. Its founding editor was Paula Kassell, who was a well-known women’s activist and member of the National Organization for Women. *NDFW* aimed at “publishing the many voices of feminism”. Their letters section was named “Speak up”, functioning as an invitation for their readers to express themselves. Its regular content included sections such as “Media Watch”, “Women in the Arts”, “Women and health” or international news. The newspaper regularly informed its readers of updates on reproductive health issues (especially regarding abortion) and often published book reviews of new publications linked with the matter. The paper ceased publication in 1993 due to financial issues.

### **Supportive primary sources**

Issues of *Ms.* magazine have been studied in order to compare their coverage of reproductive health issues with that of the four newspapers. First published in 1972, the magazine

revolutionised American media as it succeeded in entering the mainstream with the coverage of feminist issues, considered radical at the time. This study aims to understand how those questions were covered in a popular feminist publication which appeared in the 1970s as well as how their popularity impacted the issues they covered. The readers of these publications were not addressed the same way. The editors of the newspapers took the liberty to consider more radical issues that were rarely discussed in traditional media or in *Ms.* with a readership aware of feminists issues. *Ms.* was sometimes criticised for being too mainstream, as the issues covered in the magazine were also aimed at non-feminists and despite their significant participation in the movement in its early days. Their well-known and successful petition “We Have Had Abortions”, included in their first issue in 1972, has also been studied.

Furthermore, due to the lack of research on alternative feminist newspapers, interviews have been conducted with five women who worked for the newspapers in order to better understand how, why and by whom the newspapers were created and written by, and to have an account of more personal experiences. Three online interviews were conducted with Kathleen Riley, who joined the *BMR* collective in 1976, Shane Snowdon, managing editor for *Sojourner* from 1983 to 1987, and Eleanor Bader, who was the news editor of *New Directions* in the late 1980s. Vicki Bier, who worked for *Sojourner* from 1977, and Elayne Clift, who wrote for *New Directions* from 1985 to 1993, answered a questionnaire. These interviews provided a better understanding of the political context of the time and more detailed information about the three newspapers.

Finally, historical sources such as the U.S. reports for *Harris v. McRae* and *Roe v. Wade* will be partially cited when approaching the Hyde Amendment and legislation regarding abortion. Newspaper articles and the case reports for *Big Mama Rag* will also be used as they provide useful information about the newspaper.

## **The coverage of the reproductive freedom movement from 1980 to 1993 in feminist newspapers: A Literature Review**

The reproductive rights issue has always been an essential topic on the feminist agenda which was therefore covered within activist publications. This research will focus on the reproductive freedom movement and the part taken by feminist publications that covered these subjects during the hostile political climate of the 1980s. Although a backlash was occurring at the time, the American feminist movement was still persisting and women were organising. Studies of the feminist movement during the 1970s and 1980s, on the political climate and backlash of the time have been conducted, as well as on the reproductive freedom movement led by women of colour. The American feminist press has been studied, but only limited information about the four newspapers chosen for this research could be found. Moreover, studies on a possible link between feminist publications and the fight for reproductive rights have not been conducted. Therefore, this research will participate in filling the gap in American feminist media history and American women's history, "for the reality and the influence of [women's] lives are lost if they are not recorded"<sup>3</sup>. The literature review will help with analysing the corpus with various elements that will lead this research to a better understanding of the feminist movement's struggles towards reproductive freedom in the 1980s.

### **The historical and political context of the time**

Feminist studies show that, in the 1980s, the feminist movement was facing a backlash (Faludi, Marshall) as the New Right set an anti-feminist agenda (Petchesky, Rosen). The antifeminist agenda of the New Right brought Ronald Reagan to the presidency in 1980 (Eisenstein). Doug Rossinow offers an overview of the Reagan years and Reaganism. In this context, restrictions towards women's rights were implemented, such as the Hyde Amendment which banned Medicaid funds for abortions (Rovner, "The Hyde Amendment"). These restrictions

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<sup>3</sup>This sentence appears in "The Best of SOJOURNER." *Sojourner*, vol. 7, no. 5, January 1982, p.5.

targeted Americans living on welfare and what Reagan called “welfare queens” (Covert). The feminist movement, stemming from the women’s liberation (Evans, Fillard, Rosen) was therefore still very much active in the 1980s (F. Davis). American feminists continued fighting despite the challenges – while in other countries, the movement was weakening (Bashevkin), and was taken over by feminists of colour (Mann). The issues of health (Morgen) and reproductive rights (“A Timeline Of Contraception”, Gordon, “On the Job with Jane”) were long-standing feminist issues that resonated differently with women of colour.

### **Race and reproductive health**

In the 1970s, feminists of colour questioned the feminist movement which had been ignoring the issues faced by women of colour (Herr). Feminist studies demonstrated that there is a link between women’s access to healthcare and race (A. Davis, Kluchin, Nelson). Although the battle for abortion was over after Roe v. Wade for mainstream feminists who were mainly white and middle-class (Silliman), it was not the case for women of colour (F. Davis). The Hyde Amendment added new constraints to poor women whose “right to choose” was being attacked (Kluchin). In targeting low-income women, the Amendment also targeted women of colour as they were most likely to be poor (Silliman). The history of sterilisation abuse in the U.S. also shows that women of colour were the first ones to suffer from reproductive rights injustices and sterilisation abuse (Gonzalez, Kluchin, Mundt, “The History of Forced Sterilization in the United States”). A new definition of what “reproductive justice” meant was therefore needed in the 1980s (Nelson). With the existing racism within feminist groups, women of colour started to found their own feminist groups at the end of the 1970s (Collins) in order to discuss reproductive issues that they faced as women of colour (Nelson, Kluchin). The theories developed by Audre Lorde and Kimberlé Crenshaw on feminism and race have therefore been used for this research.

### **Organising for reproductive freedom**

Angela Davis has demonstrated that women of colour took an active part in the reproductive

rights movement, especially in the 1980s. Gutierrez and Lewis worked on how the reproductive freedom movement organised itself in the 1980s. At that time, feminists of colour were working on a more inclusive movement for reproductive freedom in which the woman's choice was the most important issue to work on (Nelson). For example, in response to the Hyde Amendment, the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse (CARASA) was founded in 1977 (S. Davis). R2N2 was also active ("Reproductive Rights National Network"). Silliman explains in detail how women of colour organised themselves, and the groups they created for reproductive justice.

### **Feminism and the press**

In such context, American feminist publications *Sojourner*, *Big Mama Rag*, *off our backs* and *New Directions for Women* published many articles on the reproductive justice movement. The significant amount of information they provide about the feminist movement of the 1980s and record on the lives of many women offers an in-depth look of the feminist struggles at the time. Studies on the link between the women's movement and the media showed how they both influenced each other (F. Davis). Activists need to reach audiences to share their political views (Endres and Lueck). Therefore, underground publications enabled community organising (Allen, Armstrong, Baughman). As powerful means of organisation (Pool), feminist publications brought awareness to their readers about current events, conveyed information about various topics relating to women's specific experiences, and called for political action. Newspapers, being the traditional means by which Americans obtained information (Lont), were therefore the best option for feminist groups. Lauren Kessler addresses American alternative press history and studies feminist journalism which offered a better understanding of the struggles that feminist publications faced ("Womankind"), such as the newspaper *Big Mama Rag* which had to cease publication in 1984. Only a few sources relating to the newspapers themselves could be found, apart from *off our backs* which has been studied. *oob* played a key role in the American feminist press history and feminist

movement as one of the first alternative feminist publications of the early 1970s and remains the most well-known of all and the longest-lasting feminist publication (Latham, Lont). Its members were interviewed and testified to the change in the way Americans began to perceive information in the 1970s, becoming aware of the media as a political tool (Douglas, Wachsberger). Endres and Lueck explore the history of several American women's newspapers, including *Big Mama Rag* and *off our backs*. Complementary information about *Big Mama Rag* was also found in Court decisions of the time – the newspaper was seeking tax-exempt status as an educational media to free itself from a substantial expense. Some details could be found on *New Directions for Women* on a ten years cumulative index (Kassell). Although *Sojourner* appears as a major feminist newspaper (“Here and There”, “*Sojourner (Cambridge, Mass.)*”), no studies have been conducted on it. Moreover, studies on *Ms. Magazine* have been used (Bradley, Farrell, Thom) as well as direct interviews with its founders (*Gloria: In Her Own Words*, Pogrebin) in order to compare the differences between the mainstream and alternative publications. An article from Barbara Smith has also been used when discussing the press of women of colour.

### **Conclusion**

The reviewed literature demonstrates that many general studies on the feminist and reproductive justice movements of the 1980s have been conducted, as well as on Reaganism and on the political climate of the time. The studies on the emerging ideas and perspectives of feminists of colour on race and gender enabled this research to better understand reproductive health issues. The reproductive rights movement of the 1980s was mainly led by women of colour, who were the first victims of sterilisation abuse and health restrictions. New groups were created as well as coalitions in order to fight and denounce bills or new restrictions more successfully. The main activist groups found allies in the feminist press that was often for the most part white and educated. Studies show that feminist publications were a means for sharing information and for movement organisation, here around reproductive justice. *Sojourner*, *Big Mama Rag*, *off our backs* and *New Directions for*



*Women* have been chosen for the study of this research for their large coverage of reproductive issues, going beyond the right to abortion and including all women within their pages.

There is a lack of research on publications that might have been run by women of colour in the 1980s. Studies on the archives of feminist publications still need to be done and to be made accessible. This literature review therefore helps to analyse and understand in which context these publications were situated, by whom and for whom, what they brought to the feminist movement and especially the reproductive freedom movement, whether they represented the majority of feminist ideas of the 1980s, and what their intentions were.

This paper will first focus on the feminist press and its role in the movement. This part will look at the emergence of feminist publications in the 1970s, the feminist alternative press and reproductive health issues historical background. Then, this research will examine what it meant to cover reproductive health issues in a hostile context. This second part focuses on how the four newspapers were run, despite the difficulties, and their role in opposing the backlash. Finally, this paper will analyse the feminist movement of the 1980s, which broadened its perspectives with the inclusion of larger feminist questions and moved away from more one-sided issues.

## **PART 1: Feminist publications and the fight for women's rights**

### **A. Feminist publications emerging in the 1970s**

A general overview on the context and emergence of feminist publications at the beginning of the 1970s is necessary to understand where *Sojourner*, *Big Mama Rag*, *off our backs* and *New Directions for Women* were situated.

#### **1. Women's entrance in the media industry**

In the 1970s, the women's liberation movement used the slogan "The Personal is Political", coined by Carol Hanisch in 1968, to politicise issues women faced in their private lives that were the result of the concepts of the private and public spheres and of the nuclear family. The slogan became a "recipe for consciousness-raising, for political organizing, and for a journalism that made a text out of the lives of the participants" (Thom 205). Kathie Sarachild, a member of the radical feminist group Redstockings, coined the term "consciousness-raising" that can be defined as the "process by which women in small groups could explore the political aspects of personal life" (Rosen 197). In becoming politically conscious of women's oppression, in which the media played a part, second-wave feminists were becoming increasingly influential on the mass media industry. Various feminist groups held a sit-in at the *Ladies' Home Journal* office in 1970 to protest against the stereotypes conveyed by the popular women's magazine which reached a circulation of 7 million in 1970 (Endres and Lueck, *Consumer Magazines* 177). Their demands included the possibility to produce a section of an issue which they obtained (Rosen 300; Endres and Lueck, *Consumer Magazines* 172). After the sit-in, women's magazines, which were very often male-dominated, were pressured to hire female writers and to include new content. For example, in 1972,

journalist Letty Cottin Pogrebin launched the column “Working Women” for *Ladies’ Home Journal* “part of the magazine’s response to the previous year’s feminist sit-in” (Thom 5). By then, “every major national magazine had done its cover story on feminism” (Thom 1). Feminism was in the spirit of the times. However, Gloria Steinem, who later founded *Ms. Magazine*, realised “that there really was nothing for women to read that was controlled by women” (*Gloria: In Her Own Words* 21:55-22:08). The women who started *off our backs* late 1969 “felt that, since the Left press was not covering the new women’s liberation movement adequately, a women’s newspaper was essential” (Wachsberger 157). Many of the feminist groups would meet after feminist workshops or conferences. In these consciousness-raising groups, women shared personal stories, ideas, and eventually agreed on joint projects. These reunions built up the feminist movement as they were “the central organizing tool of the women’s liberation movement” (Evans 289). Many feminist publication projects emerged in the 1970s from these meetings, whether newsletters, news journals or even magazines. In April 1971, a conference in New Jersey led a group of women to start *New Directions for Women in New Jersey*. The women, led by Paula Kassell, made use of the benefits earned at the conference to launch their first issue a few months later (Kassell 13). Feminists who started these publications believed that they could “bring changes to journalism as a whole and introduce feminist characteristics to their journalism” especially in giving a voice directly to women and letting them speak for themselves (Allen). Therefore, these publications were revolutionary for the women’s movement but also for the media industry. In the case of newspapers, they traditionally had “been a significant means by which Americans obtain news since their early days” but were meant for “business and government leaders” (Lont 3). In other words, newspapers had been “essentially men talking to men” (Molotch qtd. in Pool 468). With the women’s liberation movement and women starting their own publications, “newspapers began to rethink their purpose” (Lont 5). Moreover, feminist publications “were establishing a solid base for two decades of continuous expansion that was to build complex and extensive communication networks among

women” (Allen).

## 2. Building a women’s communication network

As women were still a minority within the media industry and were misrepresented within the mainstream media, groups of feminists such as the *off our backs* collective started to encourage women to build a communication network amongst themselves (Allen). Marlene Wicks, one of the newspaper’s founders, “advocated that women not give their stories to men for profit and exploitation but communicate directly with each other” (Allen). In building their own communication networks, women not only rejected publications controlled by men but also imposed themselves in and brought change to the media industry. Therefore, there was an increasing number of feminists who started their own writing projects. Although “in 1969 there was only one national feminist newspaper, *It Ain’t Me Babe*[,] a year later, more than five hundred feminist periodicals, newsletters, and magazines were being published in the United States” (Latham 222). Although these publications were not “designed for wide newsstand distribution” (Thom 4), feminists succeeded in expanding feminism to wider groups of women across the country and internationally. These publications functioned as a tool for the movement’s organisation. In order to make their voices heard by the many, social movements need to receive media coverage. For a social movement to be successful, its ideas must spread to a wide audience to maximise its influence and achieve social change (Kessler 155). Feminist activists used their publications to communicate with the movement, but this meant that they were only shared with a limited part of the population: “they were the glue that held the movement together, but for the most part they preached to the converted” (F. Davis 117). For example, *Big Mama Rag* explained in one of their first editorials that they oriented their newspaper “to women who have already developed some level of feminist consciousness” (BMR Collective). However, some publications aimed to also reach

women outside the feminist movement. In their Statement of Purpose, *New Directions for Women* explained that they were “committed to reaching out to those not yet dedicated to a feminist future” (Kassell 4). Kessler explains that “most dissident publications attempt to communicate both internally to a group of believers and externally to those not converted to the cause” (158). In this way, they target a greater readership and eventually convince them to be part of their movement. However, it was difficult for activist groups to get as wide an audience as conventional mass media because acquiring sufficient funds proved to be a significant challenge. This was a major reason why many feminist publications had a short life span. The Chicago Women’s Liberation Union for instance, launched the feminist newspaper *Womankind* in 1971, but because the group was struggling with money and distribution (30 copies each month), the last issue of the newspaper came out in 1973 (“Womankind”). However, for those which survived, enough copies were sold each month to keep going. *off our backs* reached a circulation of 15,000 in 1977 (Farrell 24). *New Directions for Women* and *Sojourner* had a larger circulation of around 40,000 (Allen; “Here and There”). Most newspapers supported themselves with advertising, subscriptions and other contributions. The groups used their own money to start their newspaper and received seed money or grants to expand publication. For example, in 1975, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Chancellor Paul Gray gave *Sojourner* \$1,700 to start (“*Sojourner*”) while *NDFW* were given a grant in 1981 to broaden their readership (Kassell 13). The Court’s decision in *Big Mama Rag, Inc. v. U.S.* details that the newspaper produced 2,700 copies in 1980, of which 2,100 were free. They had to cease publication in 1984. The popular feminist magazine *Ms.*, however, had a circulation of 350,000 in 1973, only one year after its launch (*Ms.*, vol. 1, no. 7, 97). While most of these publications had a broadly feminist readership, *Ms. Magazine*, on the other hand, entered the mainstream media and shared feminist ideas to the general public.

### 3. *Ms.* and the mainstreaming of feminism

“The story of *Ms.* is the story of the mainstreaming of feminism in the 1970s and 1980s” (Farrell 2). The women behind *Ms.* thought that a glossy magazine was the optimal media to reach a larger audience through which they could transmit their feminist ideas on a national and international level. Letty Cottin Pogrebin, one of the editors, explained that “being slick and being sold on newsstands was a stealth strategy to “normalize” or “mainstream” our message” (Pogrebin). Indeed, a magazine could reach women from within the movement, but also attract potential readers and initiate them into feminism. Furthermore, a magazine “could actually make money for the movement ... offer a mass-circulation voice for feminism and could push more mainstream women’s magazines – and the industry surrounding them – to change” (Farrell 711-712). Therefore, a magazine was the best strategy to enter the mainstream and reach numerous people. The idea of *Ms.*, launched by women, for women, came into reality at this conclusion. However, “it was a daring move”, as magazines “were clearly designed from their origins as magazines for consumers, not for politically minded women wanting to change the world” (Farrell 28). Moreover, the idea of mainstreaming feminism and forming an alliance with capitalism divided the women’s movement, as “some feminists would have preferred the women’s movement to continue speaking to the converted” (Pogrebin). Gloria Steinem was also despised by some feminist groups such as the Redstockings who believed that she “had taken over *their* radical movement” (Rosen 238). Steinem was well known by the media and the public as the main spokesperson of the women’s movement. She had founded alongside Betty Friedan, Shirley Chisholm and other feminists the National Women’s Political Caucus in 1971 and, as a freelance journalist, regularly published articles for a number of well-known magazines and newspapers. In the media, she knew how to use “her celebrity (and her photograph)” and was then “media’s agreement to an acceptable feminism” (Bradley 143-144), which was precisely what some feminists did not appreciate. Nevertheless, thanks to her influence, and despite radical feminists’

opposition, Steinem had *New York* magazine's editor assist her to publish a sample of the first issue in his magazine in December 1971. The first issue of *Ms.* officially came out in July 1972. The magazine quickly had great success, selling all 300,000 copies in eight days (Pogrebin). What could explain such a success? Benefiting from the simplicity of the name and memorable cover designs, *Ms.* also took inspiration from the traditional women's magazines' "use of departments and an anecdotal narrative style" (Bradley 170) to appeal to this specific type of reader. The magazine had different departments such as "Lost Women" or "No Comment" that readers could find every month, just like the *Ladies' Home Journal* had its regular "Beauty" or "Food" sections. *Ms.* brought a breath of fresh air in the mainstream media with articles about politics or women's health and this success encouraged a change in the media industry (Bradley 194). As for the feminist community, *Ms.* was sometimes considered too mainstream. Vicki Bier, who was part of *Sojourner*, explains that "most people in the women's community at that time probably had a bit of disdain for *Ms.*" which was "viewed as overly commercial, and a bit superficial – overall good (this was before "cancel culture"), but primarily for people less "woke" than ourselves (to use a contemporary term)" (Appendix B). However, feminism being so easily accessible to people was undoubtedly a revolution. Kathleen Riley from *Big Mama Rag* remembers "being absolutely thrilled" at the idea of being able to find a feminist newspaper "at supermarket shelves" which "covered issues of importance to women" (Appendix A). Thus, later "referred to as the "mouthpiece of popular feminism" and the "leading voice of feminist movement", *Ms.* almost immediately became the popular icon of the women's movement" (Farrell 1). The magazine indeed made history in becoming the first mainstream feminist publication as well as "the first periodical ever to be created, owned, and operated entirely by women" (Pogrebin). In using the mainstream media that had been ignoring them for decades, the women behind *Ms.* turned it to their advantage and used their codes to eventually succeed in bringing feminism into the mainstream. However, while *Ms.* entered the mainstream, most feminist publications remained

“alternative”, or never reached as wide a circulation as the magazine – resonating instead with more with radical feminist groups.

## **B. Alternative press: the case of feminist publications**

According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, “alternative” is what is “different from the usual or conventional”, or what is “existing or functioning outside the established cultural, social, or economic system”. Historically, alternative publications started with anti-slavery press and “marked the beginning of a print culture of protest, one that dared to raise issues outside of the accepted national conversation” (Baughman 5). *Sojourner*, *Big Mama Rag*, *off our backs* and *New Directions for Women* were alternative newspapers for the reasons that they were founded in a feminist context and for the women’s community. As such, their priorities and work were different than those of the mainstream media. The newspapers shared common characteristics specific to feminist publications and had various purposes that contributed to the women’s movement.

### **1. Feminist periodicals and movement organisation**

Martha Allen identified eight characteristics that feminist periodicals share:

(1) women speaking for themselves, not reporting for others, (2) preference for collective rather than hierarchical structures, (3) sharing instead of competitive, (4) analysis of mass media’s role relative to women and women’s media, (5) a non-attack approach, no name-calling or discrimination, (6) “open forum” emphasis, (7) provision of information not reported in the mass media, and (8) an activist orientation.

All four newspapers share most of these characteristics. First, they were founded by and composed exclusively of women feminists and aimed to be collectives, meaning that all decisions concerning the paper aimed to be taken collectively. *Big Mama Rag*’s statement of purpose emphasises the



fact that they were a collective for example (*BMR*, vol. 4, no. 8, 5). However, they struggled to remain structured as such as they realised they needed an editor to look after the staff and the general organisation and publishing of the newspaper (Allen). This was the case of all newspapers apart from *BMR* which remained a collective until the end. The hierarchical structure of the paper could be a source of conflict within the collectives, such as in *NDFW* where former news editor Eleanor Bader has a bitter memory: “the editor [...] treated us like we were her servants and it was horrible” (Appendix E). Similarly, newspapers aimed to primarily reach “all women” (Kassell 14) and were intended to be a forum, “a space in which all women can speak freely about their concerns” (*Sojourner*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2). *Sojourner* former managing editor Shane Snowdon explains that it “did not mean Phyllis Schlafly was welcomed” but rather that they wanted to attract all women who identified as feminists (Appendix C). They aimed to cover various issues and give to a variety of women a voice that they were denied in the mainstream media: Jewish women, women of colour... They covered topics such as lesbianism, domestic violence and women’s health. As alternative papers, they were free to cover “radical” issues without any exterior pressure. *Big Mama Rag*, whose collective defined itself as radical (*BMR*, vol. 4, no. 8, 5), regularly covered issues denouncing U.S. interventionism or American imperialism and their effects on women. As a point of comparison, the editors of *Ms.* had to deal with advertisers who sometimes refused to work with them because the magazine was considered too radical for the mainstream. One of them, for example, wanted “to be informed when any of four particular phrases were to appear in the magazine: *lesbianism*, *witchcraft*, *abortion* and *gun control*” (Bradley 180). Therefore, alternative publications had more freedom regarding the articles they wished to cover. They regularly quoted each other and denounced the ignorance of women’s issues in the mainstream media as well as the stereotypes and distortions they conveyed.<sup>4</sup> Finally, these feminist newspapers also aimed to “inspire activism” (*BMR*, vol. 4, no. 8, 5) as they were

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<sup>4</sup>See for example “Editor’s Desk” in *NDFW*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2 or “Herstories we need to hear” in *Sojourner*, vol. 14, no. 1, 6 which are illustrative of the papers’ regular discussions over mass media.

coming from a feminist background. All these characteristics contributed in making the newspapers a powerful tool for the feminist movement's organisation. Indeed, this communication network between feminists through newspapers or newsletters first enabled information about events linked with the movement, the calendar, to be shared, as well as local and national news. As newspapers, their primary purpose was to provide their readers with news from the area where the newspaper was based but also from across the country and internationally. Therefore, readers would find the same news sections in every issue – “hot briefs” in *BMR*, or “From Coast to Coast, our news” in *NDFW*. This would represent only a few pages (between one and four) as the rest of the papers generally went into greater details on various topics with “feature” articles relating to current events, or about issues women were facing in the U.S. or around the world. Vicki Bier from *Sojourner* explains that,

the paper helped feminists keep up on the latest developments (providing reviews of work by female authors or musicians, letting people know if some organization was in danger of closing, providing updates on relevant laws or political campaigns, etc)”. (Appendix B)

Newspapers indeed also covered news regarding new book publications or, especially in *Sojourner* which was more focused on women in the arts, new film releases or other cultural events happening that might interest women. An example being when the Boston Women's Health Book Collective published a new edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. Considered to be the women's health bible, it gathered vital information on health issues that women had always struggled to access. It was an important event for the feminist community that was talked about in the newspapers. Moreover, although public activist methods such as demonstrations were the most visible expressions of feminism before the 1970s, writing did not have the same immediate impact, as explains Carol Anne Douglas, one of the editors of *off our backs* (*off our backs*, vol. 16, no. 2, 20). Newspapers paved the way for female writers and published discussions, viewpoints or commentaries on various topics relating to women. They enabled women to directly share their experiences, and covered

issues that were not given attention in the mainstream media. Therefore, being part of and writing for a feminist newspaper became a form of activism. Besides sharing news, information and events regarding women's issues, feminist newspapers also functioned as a space in which women would be free to express themselves, with *Sojourner* in particular aiming to be a "women's forum".

## 2. Creating a women's forum: *Sojourner*

Many of the collectives behind feminist publications aimed at creating a women's forum in order to "provide women with communication outlets and to facilitate dialogue among women" (Pool 470). *Ms.*, for example, aimed to be an "open forum; a place where women of many different backgrounds can find help and information to improve their lives" (*Ms.*, vol. 1, no. 7, 97). As did *Sojourner*, subtitled *The Women's Forum*, which encouraged their readers to send in articles. The main aim behind this idea was to be inclusive, to reach and be reached by as many people as possible and to cover a variety of issues. The editors of the newspaper wished "all women to feel that their opinions are welcome on our pages, even if they disagree with some (or many) of the articles we print" (*Sojourner*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2). Shane Snowdon explains: "we were not publishing anything that wasn't feminist, but within feminism, we would print anything" (Appendix C). In that sense, they also limited editorials. According to Shane Snowdon, "if we editorialised too much, it would be less of a forum" (Appendix C). This was also the case for *off our backs* which did not publish editorials. That way, it could "provide more diversity of opinion and information as well as save time spent trying to get everyone to agree to one common position" (Allen). Moreover, while most feminist newspapers would not publish more conservative, "*Ms.*-like feminist articles", Shane Snowdon explains that *Sojourner* would, as well as try and be "on the cutting edge" for "mainstream moderate women to read [*Sojourner*] and to be open to less conventional, more radical ideas" (Appendix C). The newspaper would therefore enable all women to write to them, whether

“famous feminists like Audre Lorde” but also “women on the street who had really great ideas” (Appendix C). Letters (one to three pages), open letters, speeches or open discussions between women were published along with traditional articles on a specific topic. There were indeed articles from well-known activists such as Audre Lorde but also from women writers, women from the Boston area, feminist activists, students in journalism, or teachers for example. In order to make this women’s forum accessible, as well as reach more people, editors of alternative newspapers would distribute free copies. The editors of *Sojourner* would distribute thousands of free copies each month in places where they, as Snowdon explained, “felt they would reach women who didn’t have money, who couldn’t get to the women’s bookstore, couldn’t afford a subscription, didn’t have an address where they could get a subscription” (Appendix C). *BMR* was distributed to women in prisons. Another aspect linked with the distribution of free copies to public spaces is that it could be dangerous for some women to receive a feminist newspaper at their address. Indeed, Snowdon explained that “people would assume if you are subscribing to a feminist paper, you are a lesbian” and women could “physically be in danger if people thought they were lesbians, even if they clearly were not, or they did not identify as such, they were not known as such” (Appendix C). *Big Mama Rag* was also aware of this issue and, in order to prevent possible harassment, suggested to send issues in envelopes to women who needed it (*BMR*, vol. 11, no. 4, 2). Finally, as stated by Shane Snowdon, the two main feminist issues covered by the mainstream media were the E.R.A. and abortion (Appendix C). Alternative feminist publications aimed to look beyond these topics and broaden the spectrum as new perspectives on feminist questions were approached. They came up with articles ideas that were different and deserved as much attention such as thoughts on pornography, lesbian mothers, or bisexuality. As a women’s forum, but also as alternative newspapers that tried to think outside the box, feminist publications aimed to bring awareness on a great variety of women’s issues to their readers.

### 3. Bringing awareness and challenging readers

The main drivers of feminist publications were to “educate the “converted” public by presenting a forum for ideas generally ignored by the conventional press, and persuade the unconverted that their cause was righteous and worth supporting” (Kessler 158). The newspapers were successful in achieving these goals simultaneously. As discussed, as women’s forums, they published different opinions to encourage dialogue between women. They provided readers with thought-provoking articles which aimed at bringing awareness about issues or lead one to reflect on a topic. Interviews, as well as the “Viewpoint” section in *Sojourner* or the “commentaries” section in *off our backs*, offered readers different points of view on various issues. For example, *NDFW* published an open letter in their “Speaking Personally” column from a member of the Chelsea Women’s Health Team collective. In the letter, she describes her experience being the only Hispanic woman there and encourages Hispanic women to join health collectives (*NDFW*, vol. 10, no. 3, 9). Such sections enabled women to share precisely what they were going through. In this case, non-Hispanic women were not necessarily aware of the reality of life for those women who were. Therefore, it was important for the publications to include the voices of women who were often not represented in the mainstream media in order to educate their readers on other issues they might have not considered. As a voice for the feminist movement, it was equally important in order to be more inclusive and consider more women and issues in their fight. Shane Snowdon explains that, in *Sojourner*, they would cover for example issues that were not going to be in other more mainstream feminist publications. She stated that bisexuality for instance, which was a new term at the time, would be debated but also “prison rights, welfare rights, immigrant rights” because “those women’s experiences, they weren’t going to be in other publications” (Appendix C). While some publications tended to be more moderate such as *New Directions*, or less opinionated such as *Sojourner* because it was a forum, the editors of *Big Mama Rag* and *off our backs* would always share their point of view on various topics without mincing their words.

Carol Anne Douglas, an editor of *oob*, was known to always say “what she thought”, as explained by Shane Snowdon (Appendix C). *BMR* once received a letter of apology from the We Want The Music Cooperative (WWTMC) after an incident that happened during the music festival they organised in Michigan, in 1982. A woman had been evacuated from the festival and brought to the psychiatric hospital after she had what the organisers called a “crisis”, because she might have endangered herself and others there. Afterwards, the group had received a lot of criticism for dealing with this issue in an unsafe way, because of how psychiatric care and system treats women. Lori Bradford from *BMR* responded to the letter with a furious page and half answer to this letter in which she denounced the “language and attitude” used in the letter that only perpetuated “the “Myth of Mental Illness” (*BMR*, vol. 11, no. 5, 8). She counters the woman’s apologetic argument in saying “you have got to take the responsibility to educate yourselves to the issues and the political analysis of the women in the Mental Patients Liberation Movement” or that her argument is “such a bunch of classist shit!” (*BMR*, vol. 11, no. 5, 18). Bradford’s response and argument highlights that, in her view, the way the women from the WWTMC dealt with the matter was wrong and not “feminist” at all. This confirms the idea that the editors of these newspapers were not afraid to say what they think, sometimes in a harsh way. This letter also informed readers who had no idea about the way women were treated by the psychiatric system, about how offensive some common words can be to women suffering from mental illness, etc. Therefore, editors would challenge their readership with new subjects and issues to consider. More generally, the newspapers were always trying to break new grounds and cover issues or topics no one had really considered before in order to encourage further thinking. However, some long-standing feminist issues were largely covered by the publications, such as women’s health and particularly reproductive health.

### **C. Reproductive health at the heart of feminist publications in the 1980s**

In the 1970s, when consciousness-raising groups such as the Boston Health Collective started to focus on women's health issues, the women's health movement grew out of the women's liberation movement. Women's "need for information to know how their bodies work" (Morgen 3) led health activists to start sharing the information they had with other women. The media was used as a means to share information regarding women's health. The Boston Collective popularised this idea with *Our Bodies, Ourselves* and the feminist newspapers would regularly convey information on the topic to their readers. Reproductive rights is a long-standing feminist issue regarding women's control over their body that was thus very frequently covered in the pages of the four newspapers.

#### **1. Reproductive rights: a long-standing feminist issue**

So as to better understand the different aspects in the fight for reproductive freedom, a summary of the history of women's struggle for choice is first necessary. The issue of reproductive freedom results from centuries of women trying to have control over their body and reproduction. Angela Davis defines birth control as "a fundamental prerequisite for the emancipation of women" (117). Advocating for birth control became a social movement in the late nineteenth century with activist Margaret Sanger, inspired by her predecessor, anarchist Emma Goldman, leading the campaign. As a nurse, she cared for women from poor backgrounds with no contraceptive education and "saw the issue of unaffordable, unplanned families as recurring" (Mundt 124). At that time, birth control was controversial because it claimed women's sexual freedom and challenged their role in the society of the time: "the acceptability of birth control has always depended on a morality that separates sex from reproduction ... such a separation was considered immoral" (Gordon 1). Margaret Sanger created a birth control clinic in New York City in 1916 which developed the public interest and widened the movement (Mundt 125-126). However, the

“influence of the eugenics movement would soon destroy the progressive potential of the birth control campaign” (A. Davis 123). Indeed, Sanger supported the eugenics movement which Kluchin defines as “the science of racial betterment” (1) and that “advocated altering a population through selective breeding” (Mundt 125). Eugenicists would identify different traits such as race, class or mental health to evaluate reproductive fitness, which can be illustrated as follows:

a white native-born middle-class woman with no family history of crime, illegitimacy, alcoholism, or other “defects” would be deemed “fit” to reproduce, and encouraged to do so in defense of the white race. A poor eastern European immigrant woman, in contrast, would be deemed “unfit” on the grounds of her ethnicity and poverty. (Kluchin 2-3)

Therefore, the eugenics and the birth control movements worked hand in hand to make sterilisation on “unfit” citizens legal. Various laws passed, such as Law 116 in 1937 which legalised the sterilisation of Puerto Rico women explained by a fear of overpopulation that would lead to economic problems on the island (“The History of Forced Sterilization in the United States”). Between 1938 and 1968, a third of Puerto Rican women of child-bearing age had been sterilised without their full consent or without knowing the consequences of the procedure (Gonzalez). Angela Davis wrote that the birth control movement was an “ideological victory of the racism associated with eugenic ideas” and that it “had been robbed of its progressive potential, advocating for people of color not the individual right to birth control, but rather the racist strategy of population control” (124). Therefore, these practices had significant repercussions for women of colour, especially black women, and their relationship to birth control. In the meantime, oral contraceptives were developed. The pill was introduced in 1960 and made available to all U.S. citizens in 1972 thanks to *Eisenstadt v. Baird* (“A Timeline Of Contraception”). It was revolutionary as it changed women’s own experiences and views towards sexuality. White and middle-class women also sought sterilisation which became a popular contraceptive method, especially amongst couples: in 1975, 7.9 million Americans used the method (Kluchin 1). The



term “reproductive rights” appeared in the 1960s, coinciding with the re-emergence of feminism. Then, it meant the freedom for one to choose when or whether to have children, but also information and access to the means to do so – including, amongst others, the right to access birth control and abortion. It was the logical outcome of the sexual revolution and of women’s entrance in the workplace. In the 1970s, the women’s health movement mainly focused on the access to legal and safe abortions. Abortion was legal in a few states but these were often too expensive or inaccessible, and illegal abortions could be dangerous. In Chicago, this situation led some women to start an illegal abortion service, Jane, in order to help women getting access to more affordable and safe abortions (“On the Job with Jane”). Kathleen Riley, who was part of *Big Mama Rag*, shared her personal experience of getting an abortion in the early 1970s. She then lived in Chicago but in “the neighbouring state, Wisconsin, abortions were being done at a clinic in one part of the state but not in another” (Appendix A). She made the journey there and explained:

on the very morning that I was to have this procedure, the nurse came out and said I’m sorry, the attorney general was opposed to abortion and we cannot do any abortions this morning or the attorney general will pull the doctor’s license. So I was just devastated and frightened, you know. So we were taken to a doctor who was then doing underground abortions in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and I had a safe abortion there for which I was very grateful. (Appendix A)

Underground networks and groups such as Jane ensured abortions were performed safely on women who had to resort to it. Abortion was a daily issue for women, although it was illegal. Elayne Clift from *New Directions for Women* explained that she “personally covered for friends who had abortions” (Appendix D). In the meantime, when *Ms.* launched its preview issue in 1972, it included a petition inspired by the French Manifesto of the 343, “We Have Had Abortions”, signed by 53 notable women including Billie Jean King, Anaïs Nin and Gloria Steinem. It invited the readers to sign it, in order to demand “a repeal of all laws that restrict our reproductive

freedom” (Diamondstein). Signed by thousands of readers, the petition was later sent to the White House (Fillard 227). Eventually, with the cases *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton* in January 1973, abortion was legalised in all the U.S. states, determining a woman’s “right of privacy” to decide “whether or not to terminate her pregnancy” (*U.S. Reports: Roe v. Wade* 153). However, once legalised, “abortion became intensely controversial” (Gordon 300). It was particularly within right-wing groups that female conservatism was the strongest. Conservatives such as Phyllis Schlafly had spread the idea that the women’s movement was “a total assault on the role of the American woman as wife and mother, and on the family as the basic unit of society” (Evans 305). Schlafly had founded STOP ERA in 1972 to protect women’s traditional status, and this movement “mobilized several thousand dedicated women against the Equal Rights Amendment” (Marshall 355). The backlash strengthened after the Court’s decisions and the lobbies had such an influence in politics that the right to abortion, although just obtained, was under threat. In Chicago, a few days after the decision, 18,000 people marched to protest against it and in January 1974, activist Nellie Gray founded the March for Life which reunited thousands of people opposing abortion in Washington that year (Karrer 52-58). In 1976, the Hyde Amendment was introduced to Congress and took effect in 1980. In restricting poor women’s access to abortion, the New Right was attacking women’s fundamental right to choose. The heavy coverage of reproductive rights issues within feminist newspapers demonstrates that, in the 1980s, it still was a topical issue.

## **2. The fight for choice in the 1980s: a topical issue**

Reproductive rights, and especially abortion, were at the heart of feminist newspapers throughout the 1980s. First, because it was a fundamental feminist issue, as seen earlier. Shane Snowdon clarifies: “we felt like we are a feminist publication, we need to make sure we are doing what we must do around reproductive health [because it] is a daily issue for women” (Appendix C). Secondly, a large portion of the news related to current events linked with reproductive health, with,

for example, the coverage of anti-choice actions such as attacks on abortion clinics or teenagers' access to abortion without parental consent. Throughout the 1980s, more and more states were enacting laws requiring parental consent for minors seeking abortion. In March 1987, *Sojourner* revealed that "forty percent of all American girls will become pregnant at least once while they are teenagers" (*Sojourner*, vol. 12, no. 7, 13) which explains why access to abortion was important for young women too. The issue therefore regularly appeared in the news sections of the newspapers. The word "abortion" would appear the most out of other reproductive rights issues such as "sterilization". For example, "abortion" was cited 62 times in total in the twelve 1981 issues of *Big Mama Rag* while "sterilization" was cited 29 times that same year. Abortion was the most cited in the newspapers in 1981 and 1989 (apart from *oob* which cited abortion the most in 1986). This coincides with the Hyde Amendment being reinforced with the Supplemental Appropriations and Rescission Act of 1981 which allowed no exceptions for public funding apart from when the life of the woman was endangered ("The Hyde Amendment") and, in 1989, with *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services*. The Supreme Court upheld a Missouri law stating that "human life begins at conception, and that prohibited public employees, public facilities and public funds from being used in abortions except when the mother's life was in danger" (Bashevkin 687). Also, abortion rights activists had succeeded in reinstating the exceptions of rape and incest in the Hyde Amendment but the bill was vetoed by then President Bush (Rossinow 258). *off our backs* had a "health" news section that would cover various topics including "abortion news", which became a section of its own, separated from "health" in the late 1980s. The newspapers would also run "special issues" relating to health and consequently reproductive rights. For example, in February 1984, *Sojourner* ran a "women's health issue" and did "annual health supplements" from March 1990. *Big Mama Rag* wrote a special issue titled "Control of our bodies" in September 1980, a women's health themed issue in two parts in May and June 1981 and an issue on "Native People and Reproductive Rights" in January 1983. *Ms.* Magazine would also regularly cover abortion issues and, in April

1989, ran a special report on abortion. They felt the threat on *Roe* prior to the *Webster* decision and wrote “the right to choose is in serious jeopardy. What’s going on?” (*Ms.*, vol. 17, no. 10, 87). Following the decision in July 1989, the event made the periodicals’ headlines. In August 1989, *Ms.* printed a black cover with a red inscription reading “IT’S WAR!” (*Ms.*, vol. 18, no. 2). *Sojourner*, *oob* and *NDFW* had more neutral covers also titling other topics approached on the issue. For example, while *Sojourner* titled the event “Roe v. Wade Guttled: Prochoice Activists Take to the Streets” (*Sojourner*, vol. 14, no. 12, 1), *Ms.* used a more dramatic approach. *Sojourner* published the speech given at a rally organised after the *Webster* decision and dedicated just over a page in their news section to the event, *oob* dedicated four pages of their issue and *NDFW* three pages. *Ms.*, on the other hand, had their editor’s note dedicated to the event as well as twelve pages, three of which were written by Gloria Steinem, about abortion, the decision and a woman’s personal experience with an unwanted pregnancy and abortion in 1986. The comparison between the two demonstrates the different approaches to the event between the alternative newspapers and *Ms.*. While *Sojourner*, *oob* and *NDFW* only dedicated a few pages to the event, *Ms.* printed a special issue on the topic. This demonstrates how important the issue of abortion was for *Ms.* and its readers while the newspapers covered a broader range of issues. Despite the importance of the *Webster* decision, there were other topics equally as important to cover. Shane Snowdon remembers that the Equal Rights Amendment and choice “were two topics that the mainstream press would cover. They were seen as the feminist topics” (Appendix C).

Apart from abortion, an essential news topic within feminist periodicals, sterilisation abuse and sterilisation in the workplace were also covered. Readers would learn about forced sterilisation on women of colour and organisations that would fight against it. For example, Paula Kassell from *New Directions* wrote two articles in the March/April 1980 issue about sterilisation abuse and the organisation CARASA (Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse). One of the articles reveals that the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) had established

“regulations to protect poor women against being sterilized without their consent” a year before but that “the rules are not common knowledge even among the house staffs and physicians of some public hospitals” (*NDFW*, vol. 9, no. 2, 11). The article also details when exactly a procedure is considered as sterilisation abuse, therefore opening their readers up to the topic. Moreover, the newspapers covered sterilisation pressure on women in the workplace. Indeed, women who worked in jobs in which reproductive hazards existed were pressured to be sterilised if they wanted to keep their job or had to accept losing their position. In November 1980, both *Big Mama Rag* and *Sojourner* wrote articles on the issue following the case of the American Cyanamid Company and its exclusionary policies. *BMR* wrote about “Making The Workers Fit The Workplace” and denounced the company’s exclusion of women from working in the lead pigment department from 1978: “exposure to high levels of lead may harm unborn children, the company explained” (*BMR*, vol. 8, no. 10, 4). They explain that companies should instead pay to protect their workers and improve the workplace environment. Vicki Bier wrote in *Sojourner* about the better working conditions for women during pregnancy but that there were still some discriminations:

The Occupational Safety and Health Act, passed in 1970, applies to a broader range of situations, giving employees the right to a workplace “free from recognized hazards...likely to cause...serious physical harm.” In particular, exposing employees to chemicals which are likely to cause infertility, and requiring that women working in such jobs be sterilized, are both violations of the Act. (*Sojourner*, vol. 6, no. 3, 8)

She then adds that “awareness of the issue has increased greatly in recent years, and that is the crucial first step. It remains for women and men to join together—especially through their unions—to translate that awareness into action” (*Sojourner*, vol. 6, no. 3, 8). Again, these kinds of articles function as a way to bring awareness to women on such issues, highlighting a more general employment discrimination in non-traditional jobs for women.

Finally, commentaries and thoughts on motherhood were also published to question these

issues in the context of the 1980s. In December 1984, *oob* ran a special issue challenging motherhood in relation to lesbian mothers, adoption and the persistent pressure imposed on women not wanting to have children. *Ms.* did a special issue on “Giving Birth in America” in September 1984 in which they shared birth stories but also an article titled “The Fetus and the Law – Whose Life Is It Anyway?”. This article was published during the same time a proposal for a Human Life Amendment was discussed in Congress. This Amendment, which never passed, aimed to legally recognise foetuses as persons (Silliman 32), and would therefore overturn *Roe v. Wade* which “recognized that U.S. law had never treated the fetus as a legal person” (*Ms.*, vol. 13, no. 3, 62). The article questions the “fetal rights argument” used by anti-abortion forces and the threat of this Amendment on abortion rights (*Ms.*, vol. 13, no. 3, 66). Therefore, the issue of reproductive health was a major concern in the 1980s, first as a fundamental feminist issue with a significant history of fighting for choice but also as a topical issue with the coverage on attacks on choice. Such coverage of reproductive rights issues in the 1980s raises questions on the political and social context of the time. The following part will explore the newspapers’ coverage of these issues in a context historically referred to as “backlash”.

## **PART 2: Covering feminist issues in a backlash context**

### **A. Running feminist publications in a hostile context**

The second-wave feminism period was followed by a conservative backlash. “A backlash may be an indication that women really have had an effect,” wrote feminist psychologist Dr. Jean Baker Miller, “but backlashes occur when advances have been small, before changes are sufficient to help many people ... It is almost as if the leaders of backlashes use the fear of change as a threat before major change has occurred” (qtd. in Faludi 11). Following *Roe*, right-wing forces reacted violently and the mainstream opinion on feminism gradually shifted. The mainstream media popularised antifeminism and spread the idea that if women were still not happy, it was because they were too liberated (Faludi 91). In such context, taking an interest in how feminist newspapers were run raises several questions: was there still a united feminist movement in the 1980s that needed press coverage and organisation? Was it harder to run these papers if the more mainstream public, or moderate feminists were supposedly no longer interested in feminism (and therefore its press)? Were feminist periodicals responsible for the third-wave of feminism emerge in the 1990s? This section takes a closer look at the internal organisations of the newspapers whose survival was either helped or hindered in this hostile period.

#### **1. The feminist movement post *Roe*: a loss of impetus?**

After the win on abortion rights in 1973, the feminist movement appeared to have lost its impetus. At the beginning of the 1980s, the media, in its role as “backlash collaborator” (Faludi 92), was spreading the idea that feminism was over as the second-wave feminist movement went into decline from 1975 (F. Davis 138). The feminist “visionaries”, such as the founders of *Sojourner*,

“were tired”, as Shane Snowdon explains (Appendix C) and, after the failed ratification of the ERA in 1982, the Right emerged triumphant (Rosen 332). Other feminist movements in western countries such as the United Kingdom or Canada appeared to have similar experiences with feminism fading and conservatism settling in with, respectively, the elections of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 and Brian Mulroney in 1984 (Bashevkin 669). In the U.S., “the election of Ronald Reagan abruptly stalled progress for women” (F. Davis 433). The Conservative government set an anti-feminist agenda that aimed at “dismantling nearly every legal achievement of the women’s movement” (Faludi 247) and advocated for “pro-family” and more traditional values. The issue of abortion, for Catholic and Conservative groups, was perceived as an attack on American family values because it “resonates many social and political meanings – about the family, sexuality, the position of women – that go far beyond the status of the fetus” (Petchesky 220). Once religious groups became politically involved against abortion, in the election of Reagan, and the establishment of conservative policies, the New Right movement had won. Thus, after the non-ratification of the ERA, it seemed like there was no longer a feminist movement. However, feminism did not disappear – in reality, the movement was expanding and, at the end of the decade, “was broader than ever before” (F. Davis 471). Indeed, at the end of the 1980s, “it had become a network of interlocking movements” (F. Davis 138) – feminism blended into other groups such as eco-feminism (F. Davis 484). Feminists continued to fight for issues such as access to childcare, fought new battles including on pornography, a controversial issue at the time, and the right to abortion was still topical. The newspapers had a lot to cover, and the fact that they existed during that time meant they still played an important role to their steady reader base. The expansion of the movement throughout the 1980s, however, also created division. Kathleen Riley from *Big Mama Rag* remembers that “as feminism grew, perhaps the interest separated more” (Appendix A). This idea is confirmed with Shane Snowdon’s thoughts on the period:

there were many more intra-movement conflicts and battles, really serious ones. For



example, I mean, a huge one was the war over porn ... there was a clear bad position and a clear good one in the early years of feminism. Domestic violence? Bad. Sexual assault? Bad. Incest? Bad. Unequal pay... I mean, we could all agree these things are bad, bad, bad, bad, bad. But of course, as the movement matures, there are grey areas. There is nuance, much more sophisticated and difficult topics arise around which reasonable people, women, can disagree. (Appendix C).

However, younger feminists, radical feminists and feminists of colour took the mantle and stood up against inequalities that prevailed in the 1980s. Women of colour built coalitions between the various groups they had created for stronger movement organisation (Gutierrez and Lewis 244). The Reproductive Rights National Network (R2N2) was co-founded in 1978 by the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse (CARASA) and gathered more than eighty other grassroots organisations to counter the anti-abortion movement actions (“Reproductive Rights National Network”; S. Davis 56). With feminism expanding and new perspectives forming, the newspapers’ editors worked actively to cover voices of feminism, ideas emerging and, through their activist work, paved the way for the next wave of feminism.

## **2. Activist work: volunteerism and commitment to feminism**

Being part of *Sojourner*, *Big Mama Rag*, *off our backs* and *New Directions for Women* was a form of activism. The newspapers were organised as collectives although, as discussed, an editor was needed to oversee the staff and the general organisation and publishing of the newspaper (Allen). Shane Snowdon was managing editor of *Sojourner* but the newspapers were all “collectively edited and produced” (Armstrong 231), the *BMR* collective would read and evaluate each copy before publishing (Armstrong 231) and the members of *off our backs* were all “responsible for editing and laying out one page of the paper” (Armstrong 231). Vicki Bier details how *Sojourner* was produced:

The paper was literally put together by hand. The articles were printed, cut up, and pasted onto the mockup of each page, with “graphic tape” of various widths to create the physical design of the paper (masthead, divisions between columns, etc.) ... every one of those stripes or ovals, etc., was put on by hand. Then, once the mockup was complete, it was taken to the printer ... On “production weekends,” a lot of people would be hanging out in the offices, working side by side, doing the mockups of different pages. (Appendix B)

Producing the papers was a lot of work. Moreover, as they were alternative feminist periodicals, the newspapers’ staff were for the most part volunteers. *New Directions for Women* had volunteers but paid their main staff such as Elayne Clift who would write for them regularly. Eleanor Bader was paid as a news editor and explains that “Phyllis [the editor of *NDFW*] was never paid, but everyone else got a small salary” (Appendix E). The women at *off our backs* were all doing volunteer work (Douglas). Shane Snowdon worked for *Sojourner* for free although “there was supposedly a salary for the managing editor” but at the time “there wasn’t enough money to pay myself” (Appendix C). In the early 1980s, she explains, “there were just two paid women ... so the paper had been run overwhelmingly by volunteers” (Appendix C) such as Vicki Bier who was then a graduate student (Appendix B). The women of *Big Mama Rag* were all volunteers too. Kathleen Riley states that the original collective of *BMR* was paid by an association of methodist women with a grant that expired before she arrived, adding that it could sometimes be “hard to volunteer in a job that you were once paid for” (Appendix A). It was indeed a demanding job. Kathleen Riley explains that working at *BMR* “required weekly meetings, which involved of course getting ready for the current issue, planning ahead for the next issue, handling financial matters, who was going to do advertising” (Appendix A). Shane Snowdon remembers working “60, 70, 80 hours a week after week after week” but also that “you feel you can’t leave and you can’t rest because you’re letting down the movement” (Appendix C). Working as volunteers, the women were strongly committed to the papers and the feminist movement. Although Eleanor Bader was paid and her experience eventually

transformed into a job, “it started off more as a feminist commitment” (Appendix E). Kathleen Riley explains: “I thought my “real” work was the feminist movement and I didn’t care if I was paid for that” (Appendix A). Although she loved to write and edit, Shane Snowdon explains that she joined *Sojourner* “not because it was writing and editing but because it was activism” (Appendix C). Writing for and helping with the production of the newspapers was activist work because “writing was and is a deeply important political act,” according to Elayne Clift (Appendix D) while Vicki Bier confirms that “being a member of *Sojourner* was a form of activism.” (Appendix B). Their mission served the feminist movement because they were working on newspapers that spread ideas, various voices of feminism and useful information for women. Above all, they sought equality. The *off our backs* collective aimed “to create a paper to drive social change” (Latham 225). The readers would receive a strong message of empowerment from witnessing the collectives functioning as they did, sharing the production work, as well as sharing information, news and feminist ideas with others (Armstrong 231). Finally, the force driving the newspapers and the movement as a whole was the joyful working environment and the strong links created between the women. Vicki Bier remembers that “the environment was fun and social” (Appendix B) within *Sojourner* offices. The women would forge strong bonds between themselves. Shane Snowdon explains that “what was great was that we formed very passionate friendships and often romantic relationships” (Appendix C). Through passion and hard work, the newspapers persevered to survive despite the hostile political context. However, some of them experienced some publishing difficulties.

### **3. Publishing difficulties**

In an issue of *Sojourner*, the editors approached the financial difficulties feminist newspapers had, how it sometimes felt like “everything” was “stacked against [them]” and added: “our readers are not generally affluent and our focus – women’s experiences, thoughts, and feelings

– repels many potential advertisers and distributors” (*Sojourner*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2). Being a feminist non-profit organisation meant sometimes encountering financial issues that could threaten the newspaper’s survival.

**a. The case of *Sojourner***

When Shane Snowdon arrived at *Sojourner* in July 1983, the women who worked there were close to bankruptcy. She says she was hired “as kind of a one last try to keep the paper going” (Appendix C). She explains that the paper was down to around 16 pages “from having been 48” and that there was “practically no advertising” (Appendix C). In March, the former editors published an editorial asking their readers for help and said the newspaper was in “a precarious financial situation” (*Sojourner*, vol. 8, no. 7, 2). Shane Snowdon, then 26, “full of passion, energy and idealism”, decided to “make it the centre of [her] life to revive *Sojourner*” (Appendix C). She explains that, at the time, the ways of supporting a publication were through subscriptions and advertising, as well as through receiving donations which was a form of supporting activism (Appendix C). Her idea for *Sojourner* was to focus on advertising. Since the newspaper had their own typesetting equipment, they could work on making thorough advertisements that would attract both advertisers and readers. They also continued to ask readers for donations and it was a success: the readership and subscriptions went back up. In October, they published some of the supportive messages they had received from readers: “I’d be lost without you; I live 50 miles from Boston and sometimes you’re my only connection to women roots” or “I want you to know you mean a lot to us in North Dakota” (*Sojourner*, vol. 9, no. 2, 3). Snowdon also looked for “great writers” to write for the paper and created “community events” where women would meet and listen to women such as Alice Walker, Adrienne Rich or Audre Lorde (Appendix C). Thousands of women would pay a few dollars to come to these events, which generated benefits for the newspaper. Shane Snowdon explains: “after a year and a half, we were doing much better: way more subscriptions, way more

advertising, these great community events” (Appendix C). However, the staff was not entirely paid, Shane Snowdon was not paying herself, and they had no health insurance or retirement funds. Therefore, Snowdon “deliberately stopped publishing the paper for three months” and said “even though we’re doing much better, we would like to last” (Appendix C). Snowdon aimed to build an “endowment” and recalls:

The response was fantastic ... For over three months, we raised three times more money than I hoped we would. And then we reopened ... we planned to reopen, but we can’t put out the paper and also do fundraising ... that was one of my better moments, one of my better ideas. (Appendix C)

This pause enabled *Sojourner* to ensure a few years of existence. The newspaper received a great response from its readers who “realised that they missed *Sojourner*” and this really strengthened their relationship (Appendix C). When Shane Snowdon left her position as managing editor in 1987, the newspaper was up to 64 pages: “we had this huge growth in readership and size” (Appendix C). While *Sojourner* succeeded in substituting despite previous financial difficulties, other feminist newspapers could not survive.

#### **b. The case of *Big Mama Rag***

*Big Mama Rag* experienced several difficulties from its start in 1972. First, in 1975, their office was vandalised and the collective saw it as a “deliberate political attack” (*oob*, vol. 5, no. 8, 3). No money was stolen but advertising and mailing lists were missing, files were overturned and equipment such as the phone and typewriters were destroyed (Allen; *oob*, vol. 5, no. 8, 3). Then, from 1974 to 1980, the collective was in a battle with the Internal Revenue Service to obtain a tax-free status (Allen). In 1974, they applied to obtain the status which was denied because, according to the IRS, the newspaper “carried political and legislative comment and [because] its articles promoted lesbianism” (Allen). The IRS “challenged the publication’s nonprofit status as an

“educational organization”” (Endres and Lueck, *Social and Political Issues* 15). However, Kathleen Riley explains that the collective contested the decision: “we felt we were an educational group”, therefore, “a circuit court of appeal sided with us” (Appendix A). They won the case in 1980 and Kathleen Riley explains that “the latest court said it was a violation of free speech, the First Amendment, to put that burden on newspapers or other projects” and that this decision later “benefited many other groups like us who had a distinct point of view” (Appendix A). Indeed, the decision had a significant impact on several organisations which received tax-exemption as educational groups. In 1981, this had benefited 164,000 organisations primarily engaged in educational activities and more than 350,000 engaged in some degree of educational activity<sup>5</sup> (*Implications of the Decision in Big Mama Rag* 13). However, the tax-exempt status did not save *BMR* from ceasing publication four years later: “nonprofit status is not necessarily the answer to the financial problems facing these feminist periodicals” (Endres and Lueck, *Social and Political Issues* 15). They had a small circulation – in 1980, 2,100 of their monthly 2,700 copies were distributed for free (“*Big Mama Rag, Inc. v. U.S.*”), and a few advertisements, one or two pages per issue. Therefore, they mostly relied on their readers with donations or contributions to the paper. From 1983, *Big Mama Rag* experienced serious financial issues which they shared with their readers in their regular editorial “where we’re at”. They raised their subscription rates in May 1983, going from \$7 to \$9 a year, and received donations. As time went on however, the debt increased and the collective went from five to three women. This forced the paper to ask for more donations, shorten the issues and occasionally run late in mailing them. In their last issue, they start their editorial by saying that they are starting the month “anxiously and fearfully wondering whether

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<sup>5</sup>Until recently, some politically committed organisations have been affected by the issues they faced when applying for tax-exemption, similar to *BMR*’s. In 2013, a scandal hit the IRS after they revealed that they had been mistreating organisations applying for tax-exempt status based on their political positions and names. The main reason for the controversy is that it happened prior to the 2012 presidential elections and appeared to have affected mostly Conservative groups. In 2018, the IRS politically-based discrimination was still being discussed. See Overby, Peter. “IRS Apologizes For Aggressive Scrutiny Of Conservative Groups”. *NPR*, 27 Oct. 2017, [www.npr.org/2017/10/27/560308997/irs-apologizes-for-aggressive-scrutiny-of-conservative-groups](http://www.npr.org/2017/10/27/560308997/irs-apologizes-for-aggressive-scrutiny-of-conservative-groups), Smith, Bradley A. “The Unresolved IRS Scandal”. *Wall Street Journal*, 9 May 2018, [www.wsj.com/articles/the-unresolved-irs-scandal-1525905500](http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-unresolved-irs-scandal-1525905500).

there will be a next...” and urgently ask for financial, physical and emotional support “or the paper will fold!” (*BMR*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2). Kathleen Riley believes that, in addition to the financial issues they encountered, the collective probably was “dispirited” and “also getting older, this is coinciding with people going ... and making other arrangements in their lives” (Appendix A). Due to a lack of support, the newspaper could not continue. *Big Mama Rag*’s story echoes other feminist newspapers’ that disappeared with the passing of second wave feminism, linked with the aforementioned loss of impetus of the early 1980s. However, the feminist newspapers that did survive stoked the fire to stand up against the anti-feminist context and its right-wing policies throughout the 1980s.

## **B. Facing the backlash**

The Conservative backlash translated into the media, whose role was central “in propagating the myths of the backlash” (Faludi 379-380). For example, in the mid-1980s, the press started to re-establish a “well worn backlash tradition” targeting single women that already existed in the late Victorian press (Faludi 111). Being a single woman was, according to them, a mental illness caused by the women’s movement. While national magazines featured only five articles about single women between 1980 and 1982, “between 1983 and 1986, they ran fifty-three – and almost all were critical or pitying” (110-11). This hostile environment led the feminist newspapers’ editors to make an even greater effort to convey information and their ideas to their readers. They made sure that they were kept informed of recent American political events in detail, especially when they were related to women. *Sojourner*, *Big Mama Rag*, *off our backs* and *New Directions for Women* opposed Conservative actions and political decisions when they targeted women and provided resources to their readers on how to get involved.

## 1. Keeping readers well-informed

The editors worked considerably hard to keep their readers informed of all Conservative actions and political decisions. It was clear from the start of Reagan's presidency that its administration policies would impact women. First, as a Conservative candidate, Ronald Reagan initially attracted American people with his economic program (Rossinow 29). Once President, he immediately introduced a certain amount of budget cut policies, many of which were in the social field and especially welfare (Bashevkin 674). "Reaganomics" had an important impact on the lives of millions of American women and the newspapers made sure their readers were informed of such policies. *Big Mama Rag* started a column named "america held hostage" from March 1981 which consisted of a small paragraph in which the collective mockingly reported the Reagan administration's latest news each month. The first one, entitled "day 39" as it was written 39 days after Reagan's presidential inauguration, lists each day's news from the White House and shows that the President immediately started his programme once in office:

on the 4th day, military spending increased; on the 5th day, food stamps and welfare were drastically cut ... on the 11th day, food programs for mothers with young children were eliminated. (*BMR*, vol. 9, no. 3, 10)

The newspaper, therefore, covered in this column updates from the Reagan administration that would concern women. Here, the budget cuts especially impacted poor women. In October 1981, the *BMR* readers learned that,

Among Raygun's proposed casualties are 4,89 million women who will lose unemployment insurance benefits, 900,000 women cut from the food stamp program, 750,000 women to be dropped from medicaid ... 100,000 women to lose jobs from cutbacks in public service employment, 32,000 households headed by women will lose funding for subsidized housing and 700,000 women and children to be cut out of WIC program which offers food and counseling. (*BMR*, vol. 9, no. 9, 3)



This summarised information and staggering numbers echo a more detailed article from *off our backs* published earlier that same year. *oob* wrote regularly about Reagan's government policies and analysed in detail the way these policies would impact women (Wachsberger 182). In April, they published an article on the impact of the "Reagan budget axe" on women and children in various social services: health, education, public housing... The article details how many billions dollars would be cut from these services and the number of women and children it would impact. For example, "a \$1.8 billion reduction" in food stamps, of which 69 percent households are headed by women, which would "eliminate 1.2 million of the 22 million people who now depend on food stamps" (*oob*, vol. 11, no. 4, 6). Such articles aimed to alarm readers on the gravity of the situation. The federal funds cuts of 1981, including Medicaid, indeed deeply increased poverty amongst women. More than a million mothers and their children were affected, including 100,000 who were cut off from the food and health care they received through the WIC programme (F. Davis 438-439, Faludi 436). Moreover, the enforcement of the Hyde Amendment in 1981, as discussed, allowed no exceptions for Medicaid funding for abortion apart from when the life of the woman was endangered ("The Hyde Amendment"). Since it was clear that the Conservative government had declared war on women as well as their right to choose, the newspapers covered a great number of anti-choice activists' actions. Throughout the 1980s, "the New Right tried a number of different strategies in its efforts to outlaw abortion" (F. Davis 454). One of these strategies was to directly attack clinics and medical providers:

between 1977 and 1989, seventy-seven family-planning clinics were torched or bombed (in at least seven instances, during working hours, with employees and patients inside), 117 were targets of arson, 250 received bomb threats, 231 were invaded, and 224 vandalized. (Faludi 420)

The newspapers regularly covered these attacks. Each issue of *oob* in 1984 reported new abortion clinic attacks (Wachsberger 182). In 1985, *Sojourner* published one and a half page on the

“Escalating Attacks on the Right to Choose”. It was a compilation of news relating to bomb attacks on clinics, harassment and threats on doctors by anti-abortion groups such as Operation Rescue. They reported for instance that the “Goddard Medical Associates in Brockton, MA, one of the nation’s largest private clinics offering abortions, voted to stop performing abortions” due to harassment on patients and bomb threats from anti-abortion activists (*Sojourner*, vol. 10, no. 5, 14). Moreover, the newspapers would also cover bills that the Reagan administration tried to pass such as the Human Life Amendment discussed before but also a bill on Hyde that would have shifted the Medicaid administration from state to federal government. *Harris v. McRae* had ruled in 1979 that “a State that participates in the Medicaid program is not obligated ... to continue to fund those medically necessary abortions for which federal reimbursement is unavailable” (*U.S. Reports: Harris v. McRae* 307). Only a few states would thus continue to fund abortions. Paula Kassell from *NDFW* stated that Reagan’s proposition had “a hidden agenda” because this would give his administration “complete control of abortion funding”, making the situation worse for poor women as not a single state would allow Medicaid funding for abortions (*NDFW*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2). Readers could therefore find this detailed information every month in all four newspapers. Other periodicals such as *Ms.* would not report this news regularly, their focus being less on sharing news with their readers as a magazine but rather on publishing thought-provoking articles about various aspects of feminism. However, the newspapers would also publish in-depth articles contesting these policies, inspiring readers to take action.

## **2. Contesting governmental decisions**

The newspapers regularly published thought-provoking articles on the Conservative backlash against the right to choose, aiming to raise awareness on these actions and how they threatened women’s reproductive rights. In *off our backs*, an article recognises “Reagan’s victory” on women and asserted that the devastating budget cuts were “a calculated attack against women”

(*oob*, vol. 11, no. 6, 11). Although the social programs only took ten percent of the federal budget, these cuts “pushed nearly 2 million female-headed families and nearly 5 million women below the poverty line” in the first four years of Reagan’s presidency (Faludi 8-9). The *oob* editors encouraged readers to “write and call [their] representatives in Congress and join the groups protesting against the Reagan plan” (*oob*, vol. 11, no. 6, 11). Following the HLA proposal in 1981, Vicki Bier wrote an article in *Sojourner* encouraging “those who value women’s lives and those who value reproductive rights, including the right to use various forms of birth control” to work against the HLA and join the NOW campaign (*Sojourner*, vol. 6, no. 6, 13). Actions that the National Organization for Women proposed included “a Stop HLA signature ad with the names of prominent individuals” against the proposal and lobbying in Congress (*Sojourner*, vol. 6, no. 6, 13). *Sojourner* also published in 1981 an article titled “Suffragists’ Spirit Inspires New Fight” in which activist Pam Elam explained that “the strategies of these foremothers “provide useful models of political action for feminists in the 1980s”” and that women must take action to fight Reagan’s policies (*Sojourner*, vol. 6, no. 9, 9). The newspapers regularly provided information on organisations that were doing political actions. The “calendar” section at the end of the papers included dates of protests to attend and events where women would meet to discuss political actions. Another attack on women’s reproductive rights that was often discussed in the papers was the parental notification laws. From the late 1980s, some clinics started to ask for parental consent if a minor wanted to have an abortion (F. Davis 459). Pro-life legislators introduced more and more bills like these that aimed to dissuade women from seeking abortion (Kluchin 211). Feminist organisation increased at the dawn of the 1990s with the *Webster* decision as well as the escalation of violence against abortion clinics: “clinic patients were harassed and even kidnapped; staff members received death threats” (Faludi 420). Between 1993 and 1998, six doctors were murdered (F. Davis 494). In 1992, feminist activist Emily Toth wrote a commentary for *oob* entitled “Aborting Operation Rescue: We Did It and So Can You” in which she gives details on how she

and her small pro-choice community in Baton Rouge, LA, came together to defend their abortion clinic against the pro-life group. In a few weeks they gathered “1,200 people statewide”, did a defence training and gave each activist a specific role – Toth was escorting patients to the clinics (*oob*, vol. 22, no. 9, 11). At the end of the article, she makes suggestions for other cities that would want to “learn from [their] victory”, including:

do tell patients they may be facing mobs, but let them choose whether they want to reschedule or go elsewhere. A number of our patients deliberately chose Operation Rescue week for their abortions, to make a point about choice and women’s rights. (*oob*, vol. 22, no. 9, 18).

Now aware of the various attacks against women, readers also had resources on how to contest them. The feminist community was becoming more and more organised to fight and contest these actions. In March 1989, *Sojourner* published a lengthy article on women’s right to choose and emphasised on the movement’s need

to reconsider our strategies ... While we should continue defending clinics with strong and creative efforts ... it’s time for supporters of abortion rights to take to the streets in our own demonstrations nationally ... as well as in local actions. (*Sojourner*, vol. 14, no. 7, 21)

NOW was particularly active and organised in April 1989 the first national march for abortion rights, at the time the largest women’s march in U.S. History (Silliman 38). Following the *Webster* decision in 1989, “there was a massive response from thousands of Americans who had previously been indifferent because the right to choose seemed to have been guaranteed by the courts” (F. Davis 454). Newspapers covered these pro-choice actions – *oob* “covered the 600,000-strong April march in support of reproductive rights and the November demonstrations around the country for abortion” (Wachsberger 182). In April 1992, an even larger demonstration brought 700,000 persons in Washington to support Planned Parenthood in the *Casey* decision (*Sojourner*, vol. 17, no. 9, 10). For feminists, the newspapers were therefore the optimal media to stay informed on what was

happening across the country and to understand the realities behind Conservative policies regarding women's rights. It was also a way for women to organise and fight. This raises questions on the role and impact of feminist newspapers in the fight for reproductive freedom in the 1980s.

### **C. The impact of the feminist press**

Opinions are divided on whether the feminist movement made any progress in the 1980s. Politician Patricia Schroeder stated that the women's movement "have made no gains over the decade. If anything, we've marched backwards" (qtd. in F. Davis 452). The feminist press proved however to have kept the movement together despite the backlash.

#### **1. 1980-1993: mixed results**

The waves of feminism correspond to the periods of time when the movement was unified, but in-between these waves, feminists were still active. Compared to the 1970s, it is true that the feminist movement did not win any fundamental rights in the 1980s. The decade is not remembered as a time of advancements but rather of stagnation. As discussed, with the backlash and the defeat of the ERA in 1982, "women's energies were diverted and ultimately exhausted in fending off antifeminism's punishing blows" (Faludi 466). However, the period between 1980 and 1993, or "the Reagan/Bush years ... cannot be reduced to a simple tale of the triumph of the right and the demise of feminism" (Bashevkin 672). Throughout the 1980s, feminists mostly spent time resisting anti-feminist forces and "defending ground they thought they'd won". (F. Davis 433) The main question here "is not whether women [were] resisting, but how effectively" (Faludi 463). It took a whole decade to once again unify the movement behind the abortion rights issue and overcome right-to-life groups. Eleanor Bader stated that "reproductive freedom was really kind of the glue that everyone agreed on all the time" (Appendix E). In 1989, the mobilisation for *Roe* thus "rejuvenated" the pro-choice movement (Faludi 464). The abortion rights issue, being essential to

all women, gathered thousands of people who, until then, had been silent when the Hyde Amendment was reinforced or when parental consent laws were implemented. With *Webster*, women realised *Roe* was not guaranteed and organised en masse. NOW saw its membership increase by 40,000 between the demonstration in April 1989 and the *Webster* decision in July, reaching 200,000 members (F. Davis 466). In October 1989, following the special issue on abortion, *Ms.* Magazine's editors published some of the letters they had received after the issue. *Ms.* had set the tone and their readers were ready for what was coming: "I won't take this sitting down. None of us should ... Your August cover said, "It's War!". So let's be warriors" (*Ms.*, vol. 18, no. 4, 8). Following the mass mobilisation, the pro-choice movement "defused all but a few of the hundreds of antiabortion bills introduced in the state legislatures in 1989 [and] swept pro-choice candidates into gubernatorial and congressional office" (Faludi 464). Similarly, in 1991, the Supreme Court ruled that fetal protection policies, which, as discussed, discriminated against women working in jobs exposed to chemicals, violated civil rights laws (F. Davis 245). The organisational resources of the American women's movement therefore proved not to have been destroyed by the backlash (Bashevkin 672). At the beginning of the 1990s, the feminist movement was more unified and some of the demands they had had throughout the 1980s were heard. The issue of childcare for example, which feminists had been demanding since the early 1970s following mothers' entrance in the workforce, was eventually considered in the late 1980s and bills were introduced in Congress (F. Davis 449-450). Although no significant victories can be remembered from the 1980s, the feminist movement kept working against anti-feminist activists and to make their voices heard. Feminists did not allow themselves to be swayed by the backlash and the laws that restricted their rights. Without their involvement throughout the 1980s, there would have been far fewer moderate feminists to defend the fight for abortion rights at the beginning of the 1990s. The 1980s also paved the way for the third wave of feminism. The newspapers, as well as *Ms.*, certainly played a role in keeping the movement alive.

## 2. The impact of the newspapers on the feminist movement

The newspapers' editors are not sure how much impact the newspapers had on the feminist movement and, if so, on which matters. Kathleen Riley explained that she “often wondered what our impact was ... [if] *Big Mama Rag* was read by a wider community” (Appendix A) and Vicki Bier “can’t easily point to specific things where *Sojourner* had a specific impact (e.g., in getting a law passed)” (Appendix B). Elayne Clift believes that *NDFW* was making a difference because “it was the leading alternative paper at the time” (Appendix D). Eleanor Bader thinks that *NDFW* contributed and did their “little piece of it, but it was a very small little slice” (Appendix E). Throughout the 1980s, alternative feminist periodicals were the main, if not only, way for feminists to stay informed on questions relating to women and to stay connected to other feminists. Feminist periodicals therefore kept the movement together during the decade. As Vicki Bier stated,

I think *Sojourner* functioned mainly as a “community newspaper” – helping people stay connected to what was happening in the women’s community, what other people in the community were thinking and doing ... [it] helped the community stay connected and healthy. (Appendix B)

The readers would certainly not have been so aware of what was happening to women across the country and how Reagan policies impacted women without their work. As discussed, they participated in helping women to organise at the end of the 1980s for abortion rights. In their first issue of 1990, *NDFW* looked back on the past-year encouraging mass mobilisation for choice. They explained that young people had been “stepping out for choice” in large numbers and reflected upon their role as a feminist newspaper:

we must back up their militancy with the kind of information that has always been a hallmark of our coverage, the kind of information they don’t find anywhere else ... These young people need cutting edge news and historical perspective to turn their awakened

consciousness into real political power. (*NDFW*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2)

This reinforces the important role and impact of the feminist newspapers on the movement. Despite bringing the feminist community together, the newspapers also contributed in raising awareness on advancements of new feminist perspectives and theories. As voices of the feminist movement, they functioned as a platform on which feminist ideas were discussed and shared, sometimes by important thinkers of the time. Shane Snowdon explained that “people like Audre Lorde, Alice Walker and Pat Parker ... who we now think of as leading second wave writers and thinkers” wrote for *Sojourner* (Appendix C). In the 1980s, new ideas emerged and new theories on feminism appeared. In 1990, Carol Anne Douglas detailed some of the theories that had been developing since the 1980s in an article for *oob*. She mentioned for example how “writings by Women of Color have grown in number and power since the landmark *This Bridge Called My Back* was published in 1981” (*oob*, vol. 20, no. 2, 24). As alternative feminist periodicals, their role was essential for the movement in the 1980s and therefore impacted women in many ways: they kept the feminist community together, participated in mobilising women behind reproductive freedom, shared information that readers could not find elsewhere, and opened them up to new ideas and theories that were to be more discussed in the next decade. However, despite these small victories, some feminists believe that better work could have been done at the time. In the case of feminist newspapers, Eleanor Bader thinks that *NDFW* indeed “missed some opportunities to really expand and to really do the outreach that was necessary to get it out of the upper class white bubble and out into the world” and wishes they “had been able to figure out a way to be a more significant contributor to the feminist movement” (Appendix E). Moreover, Snowdon explained that, unlike other feminist groups such as the bookstore women, “the women’s publications did not meet, we really did not know each other ... And I think that’s a terrible shame” (Appendix C). In fact, Eleanor Bader remembers that feminist newspapers even considered each other as competitors (Appendix E). Shane Snowdon explained that *Sojourner* lost most of its funding coming from



advertising when a new weekly feminist newspaper, *Equal Times*, appeared in Boston, and this created tension between them (Appendix C). Although the feminist movement was not destroyed by the backlash, “it was clearly challenged both internally and externally” (Bashevkin 672) by the hostile political context and internal challenges and tensions between feminists. The next part investigates in greater detail the internal challenges faced by the feminist movement.

### **PART 3: Questioning the feminist movement in the 1980s**

Throughout the 1980s, the feminist movement was not only under attack from external threats but also faced challenges from within. The issues stemmed from the women's liberation of the 1970s which, although founded and led in part by women of colour, was from the start mostly white and middle-class (F. Davis 356). During this time, the voices of women of colour grew louder and began to challenge those of white feminists. Their relationship with reproductive health raised questions for the reproductive rights movement. The feminist movement profoundly changed and evolved throughout the decade towards a more inclusive and global movement. The newspapers, which played a significant role in the evolution of the movement, also attest to these changes.

#### **A. Feminist publications: representative of a united feminist movement?**

Feminist periodicals that emerged in the 1970s resulted from the women's liberation movement and thus were traditionally run by white and middle-class women. In the '80s, although still predominantly white and middle class, the editors worked to make their content more inclusive by ensuring many perspectives were represented. As discussed, the movement was not as united but the newspapers provided a sense of community between feminists. The feminist community, however, faced internal issues.

##### **1. A community with common struggles?**

As voices of the feminist movement, the newspapers aimed to represent various feminist perspectives. Readers were an important part of the newspapers, as they could not exist without them and their contributions. *Ms.* had a particularly strong relationship with its readers. The editors even encouraged them to write "with the result that the magazine was swamped with letters"

(Bradley 178). For the first time in American mass media history, a magazine had a strong relationship with its readers who participated in the production of feminist journalism (Bradley 178; Thom 205). Feminist periodicals connected and therefore united women concerned with feminist issues from all across the U.S. and sometimes from other Western countries. This sense of community was resulting from the previous decade's prevailing idea of sisterhood between women. In the 1970s, "sisterhood" appeared from the idea that women, because of their identity as such, could all unite. The issue of abortion, for example, was a common struggle for women all around the world that was continually approached. In the early 1980s, the four newspapers covered Spanish feminists' fight for abortion. The readers learned that, from 1983, abortion was allowed but only in cases of rape, malformation of the foetus and danger to the life of the pregnant woman (*Sojourner*, vol. 10, no. 8, 8). In a letter to *BMR*, the Partido Feminista de España wrote,

We know we can count on INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY in the fight for free abortion. That's why we are calling on you, so that you will give all the information to the mass media and to the progressive political groups in your country about the fight of Spanish women for free abortion. We need your help that can be shown among other things with sending telegrams or letters to the MINISTERIO DE JUSTICIA ... calling for the legalization of free abortion. (*BMR*, vol. 11, no. 6, 15)

Just as the newspapers encouraged their readers to take action in the United States, they also shared the struggles of women in other countries. The letter ends with "thank you sisters for your feminist solidarity ... In sisterhood" (*BMR*, vol. 11, no. 6, 15). The editors strongly believed that "informed, aware women could work together to bring lasting change" (Endres and Lueck, *Social and Political Issues* 16). However, "sisterhood" implied a homogeneous female universality that hid differences amongst women. Feminists realised throughout the 1980s that to build a strong movement, these differences had to be taken into account. Feminists united and agreed on most fundamental issues such as domestic violence, but some issues relating to specific groups of women – black women

who faced racism and sexism for example, needed to be considered. As Audre Lorde stated, “there is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist” (116). In 1984, *NDFW* published an article on “Black and White Perspective” highlighting both groups’ relationship to feminism. They reported what Constance Carroll, a black feminist writer, said at a conference: “I find that many of my concerns and different needs are ignored, overlooked and rarely discussed due to the powerful myth of an all-embracing sisterhood” (*NDFW*, vol. 13, no. 1, 3). It was indeed a recurrent feeling amongst women of colour. The newspapers gradually detached themselves from sisterhood and attempted to be inclusive. Moreover, the newspapers’ editors all had disillusionments with sisterhood. Shane Snowdon explained that “sisterhood felt powerful” (Appendix C) and Eleanor Bader stated that it was a “nice idea” (Appendix E) at the beginning. However, Snowdon explained that “just as sisters can have terrible quarrels”, so did they (Appendix C). Elayne Clift lost a job she loved because of ““sisters” who let it happen” (Appendix D), Snowdon stated that they “believed in it too much” and “were not ready for the challenges of sisterhood” (Appendix C) and Eleanor Bader explains that “there’s a lot of work that needs to be done in order for women to actually hear each other and treat each other with respect” (Appendix E). She added that,

people bring their race and class assumptions to every situation ... I think there was a lot of talking down to other women, especially by white upper class women who didn’t really see working class women, women of colour, poor women, as equals and were educating them in feminism. And nobody wants to be educated if they are made to feel like they’re empty vessels and you’re filling them. (Appendix E)

These internal tensions explain why the unity of the feminist movement was compromised in the 1980s. The newspapers’ editors, however, acknowledged their privileged background.

## 2. A predominantly white and middle-class feminist press

Although a wide variety of people worked or volunteered for the newspapers, their staff was overwhelmingly white and educated. The editors were however becoming aware that they lived in a system in which they were privileged, even if many women in the collectives were lesbians. The feminist press reflected the world American women lived in. In January 1982, the *BMR* collective opened up on the topic. In their editorial, they mentioned a meeting they had with the Woman to Woman Feminist Bookcenter collective a few months before. The collective said they “couldn’t support *BMR* as it is an all-white collective, and that the paper looks white when viewed by women of color”. In their editorial, *BMR* explained this situation as follows:

The reality is that the majority of presses, publishers and newspaper collectives of the women’s movement are in the hands of white women. The white ownership, power, that we have – to selectively publish, has protected and segregated us. We have come to recognize how women of color [have] been excluded/overlooked/not been heard in print. It is so striking to us how easy it was for each of us to walk in, join the collective and see our articles in print. Some of us don’t think of ourselves as writers, we have not honed the craft to an art, but we are in print – white privilege is certainly apparent. (*BMR*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2)

This situation applies to all feminist periodicals. The editors acknowledged their white privilege, as the *BMR* collective stated, and that “all oppressions are intertwined” (*BMR*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2). They then explained their wish to work with women of colour but recognised that,

women of color are too angry, too suspicious of white feminist rhetoric to believe that white women want to hear their anger. And for good reason ... For too long, we have defined political issues from a white, working and middle class background, and have defined feminism by what we have gone through in our lives. (*BMR*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2)

This demonstrates the thought process many white and middle-class feminists were going through at the time after listening to the experiences of women of colour. The collective then stated that they

“have a lot of self-educating to do to find out that our experience is only one of many” and approached their responsibility as a newspaper to “challenge the movement[,] to examine our racism and change it” (*BMR*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2). This was relevant to the readers and other feminist newspapers as well. They concluded the article by saying that feminists “must enter into struggle with women of color” (*BMR*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2). That same month, the theme of *Sojourner*’s issue was “The Best of *Sojourner*” and covered articles from previous issues they deemed important and still topical. It included an article written by Evelyn Hammonds in 1980 in which she discussed racism in the women’s movement and the importance of addressing it. She stated that,

when white women use the term “women,” they usually mean white women. It is racism that is preventing the full participation of women of color in the women’s movement. Yet we do participate in spite of our “invisibility” and the pervasive racism that we face. (*Sojourner*, vol. 7, no. 5, 12)

The feminist movement was working towards a more inclusive movement, questioning its own racism. The discussed *BMR* issue covered an article titled “Racism in the Abortion Right Movement”, a title later criticised by the author of the article, Sara Grusky, who said it was “inaccurate” as it “does not focus exclusively on the abortion rights movement” (*BMR*, vol. 10, no. 3, 4). This three and a half pages article discussed how the feminist movement had “been dominated by white women who decide its direction and priorities” and that “changing the direction and priorities oftentimes means dealing with racism” (*BMR*, vol. 10, no. 1, 10). In order for the feminist movement to be more inclusive, white women needed to face their white privilege and racism and to question their methods of organising. Moreover, classism was also an issue facing the feminist movement and therefore some newspapers. Eleanor Bader explained that, at *New Directions*, “the classism was unbelievable” and is one of the reasons she left (Appendix E). The newspaper was then run by Phyllis Kriegel, a wealthy woman who “donated fifty thousand dollars a year” to the newspaper, most of the newspapers’ annual budget (Appendix E). The newspapers’ editors

nonetheless worked on these issues and approached the differences between women that needed to be considered in the feminist community. If women realised they were indeed oppressed as a group, concepts of oppression and privilege could then be applied within groups of women too.

### **3. The white feminist press challenged by women of colour**

Audre Lorde explained that “white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age” (116), therefore, “emphasizing “women” as a group, and implicitly assuming a white and middle-class norm” (Evans 293). In the 1970s, black feminists started to think about their identity as black women and how both identities intertwined. In 1984, *Sojourner* published a speech on “Black Feminism” made by Barbara Smith, a member of the Combahee River Collective. As she explained, the Collective was a black women’s organisation founded in 1974 in Boston. In 1977, they wrote: “We see as our particular task the development of an integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the condition of our lives” (*Sojourner*, vol. 10, no. 4, 13). In the 1980s, this idea was developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw who coined the term intersectionality. She defines it as “the various ways in which race and gender intersect in shaping structural, political, and representational aspects of violence against women” and how “racism and sexism factors into Black women’s lives ... cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately” (Crenshaw 1244). Racism and sexism faced by women of colour were not separated forms of oppression but operated together. Moreover, in 1980, Hammonds wrote in the aforementioned *Sojourner* article that,

Black feminist critics are hampered in several ways: by the lack of access and control of media; by the lack of our own institutions; and by the influence of white definitions and white cultural values. First, we do not have continuing access to the media. We have no newspapers, no mass marketed magazines or journals that are explicitly oriented toward the

involvement of women of color in the feminist movement. (*Sojourner*, vol. 7, no. 5, 12)

Since the 1970s, women of colour began organising and founding their own groups such as the National Black Feminist Organization in 1973 (Silliman 63). They also started to create their own publications that specifically aimed to question their identities as women of colour. In the 1980s, periodicals such as *Essence* or *Vanidades Continental* started to grow (Endres and Lueck, *Consumer Magazines 79-86*, 390-398) and new publications emerged. In 1985, *oob* shared the recent publication of a new newspaper, *Between Our Selves*, a forum for women of colour by women of colour, and explained “it is up to all of us to keep this newspaper alive so we will not have to mourn its loss; as we have done for so many of our efforts” (*oob*, vol. 15, no. 3, 16). In that same year, Audre Lorde and Barbara Smith founded Kitchen Table, the first feminist press for women of colour (Smith 11). In 1981, the book *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* was published. *This Bridge* was an important event for women of colour and the feminist community. In 1982, *oob* published an interview of the book’s co-editor Cherríe Moraga with one of the contributors, Barbara Smith. Smith had also co-edited another landmark feminist anthology published later that year: *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*. In the interview, the two women explained that *This Bridge* encouraged women of colour to write and get published even though they did not “come from academic or writing backgrounds” and Moraga explained that “one significant change is that now white women are doing anti racist work” (*oob*, vol. 12, no. 4, 4). Kathleen Riley, for example, remembers that the anthology

was a shock to me because I thought my politics were quite progressive and I did not consider myself racist at all, but it opened up a whole new dimension that I was not considering and has been part of what I think is really a life-long examination of race and white privilege and how those play out. (Appendix A)

The writings of women of colour enabled the white feminist community to question itself. Women



of colour wrote for the newspapers to share their experiences. In 1983, Evelyn Hammonds and Demita Frazier, who wrote regularly for *Sojourner*, chose the theme of the January issue: “Women of Color: Our Visions for Our Lives”. In their editorial notes, the two women explained that they received a lot of contributions and could not print them all, affirming what they already thought, that “women of color want to be heard” (*Sojourner*, vol. 5, no. 8, 3). All contributions came from women of colour who had never been published before. Such an issue inspired women to write, as the editors claimed that writing was “an act of empowerment, of claiming and naming our place in this hostile world” (*Sojourner*, vol. 5, no. 8, 3). Moreover, the concept of intersectionality resonated with women who faced other forms of oppression such as ableism. It helped them understand how identity politics, factors linked with their sexuality or religion for example, could shape their lives. The newspapers would therefore consider all these issues and how they intertwined. In 1990, an article on “Jewish Feminism and Identity Politics” was published in *oob* and approached the ignorance of Jewish women in the feminist movement (*oob*, vol. 20, no. 5, 12-13). In their first issue of 1991, *NDFW* published the story of two disabled women of colour who “face triple threat” and how the three communities they belong to are “isolated from one another” (*NDFW*, vol. 20, no. 1, 4). Intersectionality also questioned fundamental issues such as reproductive health. Abortion remained at the heart of media attention, but feminist newspapers covered the experiences and needs of women with low income or women of colour to whom reproductive rights meant “more than just abortion” (F. Davis 366).

## **B. Women of colour and reproductive health issues**

Although the feminist movement “agreed on certain basic ideas, namely, reproductive rights that supported reproductive choice and abortion ... this shared agenda did not translate into a harmonious women’s movement” (Collins 232-233). As discussed, the historically racist stance of the birth control movement and forced sterilisation deeply impacted women of colour. In the 1980s,

they were the main victims of budget cuts, which also impacted their right to choose. The relationship between women of colour and the reproductive rights movement remained complex – a new definition and new organisations were needed. Women of colour fought for their reproductive freedom, as shown the activism in the 1980s and 1990s, but it has remained “undocumented, unanalyzed, and unacknowledged” (Silliman 7). The feminist newspapers, in their aim to be inclusive, supported women of colour in their fight and attest to their activism.

### **1. Women of colour and the reproductive rights movement**

As discussed, the budget cuts implemented in the early 1980s especially impacted poor women, “a disproportionate number of whom were black” (Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement* 109). Reagan had indeed “declared war on “welfare cheats” and, later, “welfare queens”” (Bashevkin 674) or, in other words, the myth of the black single mother living on benefits (Covert). While poor women of colour were the most in need of the social programs that provided childcare for low-income families (F. Davis 449) or Medicaid, the federal cuts in these programs made them the first victims of these restrictions. It also consequently restrained their reproductive freedom. As they could no longer afford an abortion without Medicaid, many “poor women have been forced to opt for permanent infertility” (A. Davis 119). This echoes the history of the eugenics and the birth control movement: these cuts were still targeting “unfit” women not to reproduce depending on their racial and social background. These restrictions also emphasised the gap that already existed in reproductive health between white women and women of colour. In the 1970s, white feminists focused on “natural childbirth, self-help groups, and even the battle against dangerous contraceptives”, but these were extraneous for poor women and women of colour because their main concern was “simply finding and paying for adequate medical care” (F. Davis 245). Moreover, Angela Davis wrote that the abortion rights activists’ ignorance of the movement’s historical link with eugenics “led to a dangerously superficial appraisal of Black

people's suspicious attitudes toward birth control in general" (117). Women of colour were indeed shaped "by their sterilization experiences, which in turn influenced their ideas of reproductive freedom" (Kluchin 184). The abortion rights campaign had completely ignored the issue of sterilisation abuse faced by women of colour, which was brought into the public attention at the time with the Relf sisters case – two girls who were sterilised without their knowledge in Alabama, 1973 (Kluchin 151). In May 1982, *BMR* published an article on "Sterilization Abuse & Population Control". They explained that population control is "nothing new", mentioning the history of eugenics and population control, and that feminists "must become familiar with this part of [their] history" (*BMR*, vol. 10, no. 5, 22-23). They also revealed that "by 1976, 25% of all Native women and 35% of all Puerto Rican women had been sterilized" (*BMR* vol. 10, no. 5, 25). The racism linked with the reproductive rights movement led Puerto Rican and black activists such as Black Panthers to believe that birth control was genocide of people of colour (Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement* 53, 102). There indeed existed some population control organisations "such as Zero Population Growth or the Association for Voluntary Sterilization", as explained by Sara Grusky in the January 1982 *BMR* article (*BMR*, vol. 10, no. 1, 14). However, as Grusky states, "the feminist demand for abortion and birth control, coming from the necessity we, as women, have to control our reproduction, cannot be labelled genocide" (*BMR*, vol. 10, no. 1, 14). Towards the end of the 1970s, feminist women of colour broadened the definition of reproductive rights. Women's right to birth control and right to have children were equally important (Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement* 2). After Congress passed the Hyde Amendment in 1977, CARASA, in its founding conference the same year, detailed their definition (S. Davis 1). Reproductive freedom meant "not just abortion rights and better birth control and women's health care, but childcare and good public schools, adequate wages and welfare[,] gay rights" (qtd. in Kluchin 196). This new definition and reproductive freedom agenda "revealed that they faced a very different set of reproductive health issues than white women did" (Kluchin 149).

The notion of “choice” did not resonate the same way for both groups of women. Until the end of the 1980s, women of colour were still confronted with choices they did not really have. At the time, the AIDS outbreak strongly impacted women of colour<sup>6</sup> and in January 1988, *Sojourner* mentioned the story of two Latina women, accidentally pregnant and positive for HIV, who “were given two options: sterilization paid for by the state or abortions which they would have to pay for themselves” (*Sojourner*, vol. 13, no. 5, 10). Despite the long-term repercussions of sterilisation abuse on the health of women of colour,<sup>7</sup> the feminist movement had taken years to acknowledge it as a feminist issue. In the *BMR* article, Sara Grusky explained that “white feminists must not sidestep this issue or deny the reality of genocide” (*BMR*, vol. 10, no. 1, 14) and of racism in the reproductive rights movement to unite with women of colour. In 1987, Marlene Gerber Fried, then member of Boston R2N2, wrote an article on “The Right to Choose” for *Sojourner* in which she explained that feminists “must combat efforts to erode reproductive rights by broadening the political base of the abortion rights movement and widening its agenda. We need to evaluate our strategies with these goals in mind” (*Sojourner*, vol. 12, no. 7, 13). In the 1980s, it was therefore vital to build a reproductive freedom movement that considered issues that had been ignored for too long and to move into action.

## 2. Building the reproductive freedom movement

The “mutual elisions” of antiracism and feminism to respectively question patriarchy and race within their groups “present a particularly difficult political dilemma for women of color” (Crenshaw 1252). Women of colour, who could not prioritise race over gender and vice versa, and whose reproductive health issues were not approached enough in feminist and antiracist groups,

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<sup>6</sup>*Sojourner* revealed in their January 1988 issue that eighty percent of women diagnosed with AIDS were women of colour (*Sojourner*, vol. 13, no. 5, 2).

<sup>7</sup>Frances Beale’s essay “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black And Female” published in 1970 argues that “sterilization abuse contributed to black women’s poor health, as fear of sterilization abuse prevented many women from seeking necessary medical care” (Kluchin 178).

therefore started their own organisations. In 1983, the first National Conference on Black Women's Health Issues at Spelman College in Atlanta gathered "more than 1,500 African American women" (Silliman 7). The conference led Byllye Avery to found the National Black Women's Health Project (NBWHP) in 1984, the first women of color reproductive health organisation and the only national women of colour group until the late 1980s (Silliman 42, 69). The activism of women of colour "challenge the common belief that communities who have suffered the most from restrictions on reproductive rights do not organize on their own behalf" (Silliman 7). The newspapers attest to this activism and reported on conferences, workshops and actions of women of colour for reproductive freedom. In January 1983 for example, *BMR* reported on Native American Women's actions on reproductive rights in their communities such as "the Sacred Shawl Society, a group of traditional Indian women at Pine Ridge, S.D., [who] work in their community to counsel and support Indian women in crisis situations" (*BMR*, vol. 11, no. 1, 10). At the end of the article, the collective provided the contact details of the organisations mentioned and wrote that this article had been written "on behalf of the cultural survival of Native American communities by Native people" (*BMR*, vol. 11, no. 1, 17). This asserted first that women of colour were organising, but also that only groups directly concerned with specific issues should be the ones working with their community or, in other words, be active on a "primary level" (Gutierrez and Lewis 243). However, political groups needed support in order to be heard. In the 1980s, reproductive health groups built coalitions, which helped non-members of a given community to work on secondary and tertiary levels (Gutierrez and Lewis 243). The coalitions could benefit all of its organisations' members. In 1984, *NDFW* published an article to warn readers of the threat to abortion and to build coalitions to preserve women's reproductive rights. The author started her article urging the readers to think about

What are you going to do when Reagan manages to outlaw abortion? ... More than half of you are sitting there thinking it will never happen. I'm sitting here telling you it will

happen. Unless you do something about it, it will happen. (*NDFW*, vol. 13, no. 2, 8)

In order to collectively fight this threat, coalitions were the solution for feminist groups to be stronger and recognised. The author's group, Bergen United for Reproductive Rights (BURR), was a coalition of Bergen County organisations such as Planned Parenthood and Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights. They were becoming a political force and she encouraged other feminists to do the same:

I hope you understand my reason for telling you all this ... It is to convince you that you can do it, too. You have to ... [Reagan] is going to try to stack the Supreme Court against us ... Get involved. Work with pro-choice candidates and form coalitions like BURR. We'll help you. (*NDFW*, vol. 13, no. 2, 8).

For political groups to be effective and reach social change, they need to break down “societal boundaries to build alliances” (Gutierrez and Lewis 247). Therefore, to strengthen their movement, the white feminist movement for reproductive freedom worked with women of colour and considered “accusations of racism in mainstream feminism” – NOW, for example, hired Loretta Ross (Nelson, *More Than Medicine* 167). The coalition between women of colour and white feminists proved to be difficult and numerous conflicts arose, particularly around race. R2N2 split in 1981 due to divisions on racism within the movement (Silliman 40). However, although conflict was inevitable (Gutierrez and Lewis 247), the support from white feminists to women of colour organisations enabled “some significant action, such as sponsoring national conferences and meetings of women of color” (Silliman 297). In 1989 for example, reproductive health groups were still talking about the need to build coalitions, as seen in the pages of the newspapers. Following the *Webster* decision, an article in *NDFW* stated that “*Webster* gives us an historic opportunity to effect major political change by building the coalitions which will bring about every woman's reproductive freedom” (*NDFW*, vol. 18, no. 5, 2). Moreover, Ross's work at NOW contributed to expand the definition of reproductive health and address internal racism in

the mainstream feminist movement (Nelson, *More Than Medicine* 180). The newspapers, as a traditional white feminist press, also strived to be allies of women of colour.

### 3. The feminist press: an ally to women of colour?

The American women's movement is remembered for being mainly white and middle-class. However, as discussed, women of colour, disabled women or poor women also took part in the movement. On this point, Shane Snowdon believes that,

second wave feminism has been unfairly caricatured as overwhelmingly white and middle-class. It was actually much more diverse in terms of class, race and ethnicity and also disability and education than it's portrayed. In fact, many of us [at the newspaper] didn't ever finish school. (Appendix C)

The situation was indeed similar within the newspapers. She explained that "there was a predominant white middle-class educated readership, but less so than is often recognised" and that "there was tremendous emphasis on diversity within the collectives, within the publications" (Appendix C). Feminist groups, including the collectives, were constantly questioning themselves on the oppression they faced within their groups. The editors of *Sojourner* and *Big Mama Rag* did what they called "crit/self-crit" sessions, of which most were "about race and class" explained Shane Snowdon (Appendix C). *BMR* also published a criticism/self-criticism section in the paper in which they published criticisms from their readers or questioned the way they had covered past issues. In December 1983, Deb Luger from *BMR* wrote an article titled "Self-Criticism Of Mid-East Coverage" in which she reflected on their lack of coverage on racism and anti-semitism and acknowledged "the limitations of our collective being all white" (*BMR*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2). The newspapers sometimes received letters that criticised their lack of coverage on some issues. For example, in February 1983, *Sojourner* published a letter that was in response to their special issue on women of colour. The reader wrote that "these ideas shouldn't just be included in a special issue.

They should be in *Sojourner* on a regular basis” and that the editors should publish more articles about racism in general and in the women’s community (*Sojourner*, vol. 8, no. 6, 2). She added that she hoped for “the presentation of the concerns/thinking of women of color as a major and integral part of all types of articles in every field” (*Sojourner*, vol. 8, no. 6, 2). The newspapers’ took these remarks into account and worked to be more inclusive and accessible. *Sojourner*, as a women’s forum, increasingly worked “with women who had never written before and who didn’t think they could write ... largely because of lacking class or race or ability privilege”, as explained by Shane Snowdon (Appendix C). Moreover, as discussed, the papers distributed many free copies, *BMR* was distributed to women in prisons and *oob* was accessible on tapes and in braille for women with disabilities.<sup>8</sup> As regards reproductive health, Eleanor Bader remembers that *NDFW*

talked about all of the reproductive freedom issues that are now under the umbrella of reproductive freedom. We definitely saw it as more than just the fight to keep abortion legal, although that was the most salient back point that we saw. (Appendix E)

The newspapers regularly approached the various reproductive health issues faced by women and covered the past history of the movement to question topical issues of racism, classism and ableism within the movement. In October 1983, *oob* published an article on “Disability & Reproductive Rights” summarising the history of eugenics and forced sterilisation of disabled women. Ann Finger, the author of the article, explained that the reproductive movement “has also failed to address the denial of reproductive rights to disabled women and men” (*oob*, vol. 13, no. 9, 18). Moreover, the failure of pro-choice activists in opposing the Hyde Amendment and the refusal to join women of colour in their fight against sterilisation abuse proved how race and class were shaping reproductive choice and the feminist movement (Silliman 39). However, acknowledging

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<sup>8</sup>Several feminist groups such as the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival and other feminist publications like *Sinister Wisdom* or *WomanSpirit* worked with the Womyn’s Braille Press. The WBP was a feminist group composed of blind women who started to make feminist content accessible to women who were print disabled from 1980. They provided books in both tape and braille but also had a quarterly newsletter which was, in 1988, still the only one by and for women with disabilities. Volunteers recorded themselves reading and braille was done by hand with a machine that was similar to a typewriter (*oob*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2).



that the history of the reproductive rights movement was fundamentally racist, as well as acknowledging that the movement ignored the problems faced by women of colour or poor women were the first steps in advancing the movement. Although the feminist periodicals could have been more inclusive, they tried and helped the community to evolve. Vicki Bier believes that *Sojourner* “could have done a lot more to facilitate the participation of minority and poor or working-class women, to make sure that their voices were represented” (Appendix B) and Shane Snowdon thinks they were indeed “far from” attaining “the kind of diversity that would be ideal” (Appendix C). However, they endeavoured and, in the case of *Sojourner*, Snowdon explained that they “tried much harder and succeeded much more than people realise” (Appendix C). The newspapers acknowledged the existing differences between women, faced oppressive acts within their movement and worked hard to make the voices published in the papers accessible. They knew they could not include every single voice and that their newspaper could not be successful amongst all groups of women. Feminist newspapers were sometimes confronted with criticism because they were thought to be covering too many lesbian issues and ignoring heterosexual women. In April 1984, *Sojourner* published an article “Is There “Too Much Lesbianism” in *Sojourner*?”. The article was written in response to letters that stated for example that the newspaper “devotes so much copy to homosexual relationships that I’m sure it narrows your readership” and “hopefully there is still room in the feminist movement for straight women, too” (*Sojourner*, vol. 9, no. 8, 14). The author did research on recent *Sojourner* issues to see when lesbianism was the main topic, in the background of articles or just mentioned. She revealed that lesbianism made around eleven percent of an issue and wondered whether the readers’ assumptions came from from vocabulary, as “feminist” often meant “lesbian” for some, or from the fact that “some readers may be sensitive to the placement or prominence of the word “lesbian” in the paper, particularly on the cover” (*Sojourner*, vol. 9, no. 8, 14). The acknowledgment that the newspapers could not include and be successful with all women gradually grew throughout the 1980s and enabled feminists to move

forward and think about a broader, more inclusive movement for the next decade.

### **C. The future of the movement: third-wave feminism and globalisation**

The failures to build a united feminist movement and the mistakes made in the fight for reproductive freedom slowed down feminists, who then realised what could have been done in the 1980s. With the development of identity politics and intersectionality, white feminists eventually joined forces with feminists of colour who reshaped the movement and pioneered the third wave of feminism (Mann 59-60). While the second wave aimed to unite women around the world behind the concept of sisterhood, the third wave took the interlocking oppressions faced by women into account. Third-wave feminism aimed to “to refigure and enhance [the feminist movement] so as to make it more diverse and inclusive” (Mann 57). As new theories developed, feminist groups merged with other groups where “domination”, in the sense of “all forms of oppression”, was the point of focus (F. Davis 484). Global feminism and international movements were also developing at the same time, as a result of globalisation (F. Davis 485; Mann 66). The feminist newspapers contributed in building this new feminist movement which became more internationally oriented.

#### **1. The Hyde Amendment: learning from past mistakes**

After the mass mobilisation for *Roe* in 1989, feminists were more active. This newfound activism enabled them to think about future strategies to reach reproductive freedom but also what could have been done to uphold women’s reproductive rights at the end of the 1980s. In September 1992, *Sojourner* published an article titled “A Question of Access: Is Abortion Really Still Legal?” in which the authors explained that access to abortion was in a poor state and impacted all women. The harassment and attacks of anti-choice activists on clinics, doctors and patients had “made providing services much more difficult and less desirable”, leading to a decline in the number of medically trained doctors able to perform abortion. (*Sojourner*, vol. 18, no. 1, 17). Clinics had

slowly been giving up on abortion service. At the beginning of the 1990s, there was therefore a limitation of abortion services and access. With Medicaid funds for abortion being only accessible in thirteen states and the procedure being less affordable than before, abortion was not even an option for many women who could not afford all the other expenses it could require: travelling, unpaid leave and childcare. Julia Scott, “director of public education and policy of the NBWHP”, argued that this situation started from the Hyde Amendment from which women “never recovered” (*Sojourner*, vol. 18, no. 1, 17). She explained that,

when white women’s groups and the reproductive rights groups let that happen, when they decided that was too tough an issue to fight ... it’s been a downward spiral ever since ... they made a serious mistake when they let funding for poor women go by the wayside. (*Sojourner*, vol. 18, no. 1, 17)

According to her, feminists should have been fighting against the Hyde Amendment from the start. Some groups of feminists, however, especially women of colour, did stand up to fight. In November 1982, *oob* wrote an article following “Rosie Jimenez Day” on 3<sup>rd</sup> October. Rosie Jimenez was a 27-year-old working-class Chicana and the first known woman who died from an illegal abortion after the cut on Medicaid funds in 1977. “Rosie Jimenez Day” was initiated by R2N2 because “not enough attention has been given to that point” (*oob*, vol. 12, no. 10, 13). *Sojourner* provided information on the commemoration demonstration in their calendar each year from 1984 and sometimes reported the event the next month. The only demonstration day directly targeting the Hyde Amendment was not so much shared in the newspapers apart from *Sojourner*: between 1980 and 1993, “Rosie Jimenez” appeared at least twenty-six times in *Sojourner*, three times in *off our backs* and *New Directions* and one time in *Big Mama Rag*. From this event, a significant pro-choice movement could have grown. Loretta Ross and Byllye Avery believed that,

mainstream feminists had an opportunity in the 1980s to build a large, inclusive movement that joined white women and women of color in common cause to fight intensifying right-

wing forces supported by the Reagan administration and opposed to women's reproductive freedom. (Nelson, *More Than Medicine* 186).

Historians indeed agree that the 1980s “could have become American women's great leap forward” (Faludi 466). At the end of the 1980s, the feminist movement learned from its past mistakes linked with racism and classism in the movement and by 1990 they were ready to move forward and talk about a third-wave of feminism. *oob* often reported on conferences and, in June 1990, reported that the Radical Women National Conference that year focused on the third wave of feminism and that it would be led by women of colour. They stated that “women of color will lead the U.S. revolution” (*oob*, vol. 20, no. 6, 9). In regards to politics, there was a “record number” of women running for national office, bringing women's issues into the political spotlight (Faludi 11-12). They helped Democrat Bill Clinton to be elected president in 1992 and hoped for slight improvements. Clinton advocated against the Hyde Amendment (*Sojourner*, vol. 18, no. 9, 8). In August 1993, *Sojourner* covered “the only small concession made for prochoice advocates” in June 30 – the decision that allowed federal funding for abortion “in cases of reported rape, incest, or threats to the life of the woman” (*Sojourner*, vol. 18, no. 12, 15). From 1981 to 1993, Medicaid funds were allowed only if the life of the pregnant woman was threatened. In 1993, the “amendment came the closest to disappearing entirely” (Rovner). It is still in place to this day. Feminists learned from their mistakes and rose above to fight within a renewed, more inclusive movement. Throughout the 1990s, third-wave feminism still fought for reproductive freedom, on a broader scale.

## **2. The growth of global feminism**

From the 1970s, feminists started to think about global feminism, as countries were progressively becoming more interconnected. Charlotte Bunch, in an interview for *oob* in 1987, explained that she, like many other feminists, initially “wanted to find out more about what women

are doing in other parts of the world” (*oob*, vol. 17, no. 9, 10). Feminists therefore organised international conferences to discuss women’s issues. In 1976, “2000 women met in Brussels for the International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women” (F. Davis 489). However, the discussed prevailing “single-minded focus on gender as the primary cause of women’s oppression worldwide led white feminists to believe that Third World women were suffering from the same kind of oppression as white women: universal patriarchy” (Herr 4). Again, the notion of “sisterhood” was not relevant when discussing international feminism. In the ’80s, the influence of emerging discourses on intersectionality and on feminist postcolonial theory reinforced the global feminist perspective (Mann 66). In the discussed interview of Cherríe Moraga and Barbara Smith published in *oob*, 1982, the two women stated that “the most important thing about third-world feminism is it emerges out of identity politics” and that it required to “incorporate anti-imperialist politics related to what’s happening to third world people in other countries” (*oob*, vol. 12, no. 4, 5). Indeed, they explained that third-world feminism focused on a

real belief and commitment to the integrity of our own race and culture, and keeping that ...

Third-world feminism is talking about the vital, life-giving necessity of understanding your roots and how they influence your entire life. (*oob*, vol. 12, no. 4, 5)

Global feminism had to take these factors into account. As American women living in what Sara Grusky called “the most powerful imperialist nation in the world” (*BMR*, vol. 10, no. 1, 12), it was also necessary for them to know about the influence of American politics abroad. Reagan policies not only impacted women in the U.S. but also women and children from third world countries. *BMR* regularly covered articles denouncing U.S. imperialism and its “direct effects” on women:

That system is our enemy as women, as lesbians, as mothers, as workers and as people committed to fighting against the oppression of colonized people. In order to develop an effective strategy to fight against women’s oppression we need to fully understand that this system is responsible and that no true women’s liberation will be possible without the

destruction of US imperialism. (*BMR*, vol. 9, no. 8, 13)

In regards to reproductive health, the Reagan administration decided to withhold funds for International Family Planning programs (F. Davis 490). In their 1986 January/February issue, *NDFW* explained that they “also decided to fund international agencies that offer only natural family planning methods – the least effective of all methods of contraception” (*NDFW*, vol. 15, no. 1, 17). The same month, *Sojourner* wrote that these cuts were especially enacted in Africa “where the fertility rate is the highest in the world and millions are starving” (*Sojourner*, vol. 11, no. 5, 6). In October, they mentioned the withdrawal of

the Agency for International Development’s (AID’s) annual contribution of \$25 million from the United Nations Fund for Population Activities, ostensibly to prevent the funds from being used to “coerce” abortions in China. (*Sojourner*, vol. 12, no. 2, 12).

The effects of the American politics on women in third-world countries raised concern with American feminists, who therefore came together to build international organisations with women from other countries to support reproductive freedom across the world. The newspapers’ coverage of international news publicised the feminist global activism for reproductive freedom. In 1982, *NDFW* published an article on the International Contraception, Abortion and Sterilization Campaign (ICASC), an organisation founded in 1978 in London. Their role was to publicise “appeals for help from reproductive groups in nations all over the world” as well as “to support women building campaigns in their own countries and to promote solidarity” (*NDFW*, vol. 11, no. 6, 10). In 1982, ICASC reached “women in about 50 countries” and “three hundred reproductive rights organizations participate[d]” in the campaign (*NDFW*, vol. 11, no. 6, 10). *NDFW* helped in making such organisations known by feminists. Moreover, *Sojourner* wrote about how NOW was getting involved in global feminism. In June 1989, NOW brought together international feminist leaders to do a public statement after the illegal detention of doctors, nurses and patients of an abortion clinic in Mexico (*Sojourner*, vol. 14, no. 10, 9). A month later, *Sojourner* published an

article titled “Organizing to Bring RU486 to US” in which they explained that American feminists leaders (including Molly Yard from NOW) were organising to make the French abortion pill RU486 available in the U.S. in the next couple of years, “legally or illegally”. Molly Yard stated that “RU486 can save so many lives that we are determined to build a network both nationally and internationally to ensure that its research and development proceeds as fast as possible” (*Sojourner*, vol. 14, no. 11, 13). The involvement of mainstream organisations such as NOW enabled the global feminist movement to expand. Throughout the 1990s, international organisations focusing on reproductive freedom continued to develop. The start of the third wave of feminism brought hope to the younger generations who were fighting for women’s rights, globally.

## Conclusion

*Sojourner*, *Big Mama Rag*, *off our backs* and *New Directions for Women* are significant testaments of the American feminist movement. All launched in the 1970s during the women's liberation, the emergence of feminist periodicals coincided with women's entrance in the media industry. As a movement, it was essential for feminists to communicate with their members and spread their ideas. They built a large communication network across numerous publications to communicate with their members and reach those outside the movement. Their goal was to reach social change, and for that they needed to reach the many. *Ms.* Magazine succeeded in entering the mainstream, but many feminist publications remained alternative. As alternative newspapers, *Sojourner*, *Big Mama Rag*, *off our backs* and *New Directions* covered issues that did not appear in the mainstream media. They gave a voice to a variety of women, provided useful information that women could not find elsewhere and brought awareness to their readers in covering issues from various perspectives. The feminist publications covered many feminist issues, including reproductive health. Reproductive freedom was a long-standing issue over women's control over their bodies and, in the 1980s, the right to choose was a topical issue. The newspapers therefore covered reproductive rights' issues and shared news regarding abortion, childcare, the right for single women and lesbians to be mothers, and sterilisation abuse amongst others. Abortion was a particularly controversial issue since its legalisation in 1973. Right-wing and religious forces opposed abortion and organised to fight what they called an attack on American family values. A backlash against feminism started to grow and culminated with the election of Ronald Reagan. The 1980s proved to be a difficult time for the feminist movement which had lost its impetus. Older feminists grew tired, the movement was divided, and many moderate feminists were disheartened after the defeat of the ERA in 1982. However, younger feminists took the mantle and



were ready to stand up against the strong anti-feminist forces. The newspapers' editors were strongly committed to the feminist cause, most of them were volunteers and worked hard for the survival of their papers, however the hostile environment coupled with financial difficulties put a strain on the newspapers. While *Sojourner* survived its financial difficulties, *Big Mama Rag*, like many other feminist publications, had to cease publication in 1984. The hostile environment led the newspapers' editors to double its efforts to convey information and ideas to their readers. They kept them informed of current political events that impacted women. The newspapers also contested political decisions and called their readers into action. The threats on abortion rights with *Webster* and *Casey* brought thousands of people to the streets to defend *Roe* in 1989 and 1992. The newspapers therefore played a role in keeping the feminist movement alive in the 1980s. Although feminists did not celebrate victories in the 1980s, the newspapers, as voices of the movement, played a key role in advancing new perspectives on feminism. The feminist movement needed the newspapers as the newspapers needed the feminist movement – they were the movement. Their impact was significant for the American feminist movement and is not properly recognised. In the 1980s, they kept the movement alive and, although it was not completely destroyed by backlash, it faced significant internal challenges. Feminist periodicals resulted from the women's liberation movement, which, although founded and led in part by women of colour, were from the start mostly white and middle-class. The feminist newspapers thus were traditionally run by white and middle-class women. In the '80s, although still predominantly white and middle class, the editors worked to make their content more inclusive. The feminist movement was not as united as before, but the newspapers provided a sense of community between feminists. This sense of community resulted from the notion of "sisterhood" that prevailed in the 1970s. Sisterhood was questioned in the 1980s as the voices of women of colour grew louder and began to challenge those of white feminists. The newspapers shared new emerging ideas on intersectionality, a concept that enabled feminists who faced interlocking oppressions linked with

race, sexuality or class to better understand their identities and how they intertwined. The voices of women of colour also shed light on their relationship with reproductive health issues and were shared in the newspapers. The historical link between the birth control movement and eugenics seriously impacted women of colour, who were victims of forced sterilisation. The newspapers would regularly discuss racism in the reproductive movement. Women of colour strongly organised in the 1980s, built coalitions and redefined reproductive freedom as the right and means to have or not to have children. As a traditional white feminist press, the newspapers strived to be allies of women of colour. They shared voices of feminists of colour, acknowledged the existing differences between women, faced existing oppression within their movement and worked hard to make the voices published in the papers accessible. They knew they could not include every single voice and that their newspaper could not be successful amongst all groups of women. However, their work enabled voices to be heard and the movement gradually evolved. Feminists learned from past mistakes and were able to move forward and think about a broader, more inclusive movement for the next decade.

This research led to a better understanding of the struggles that feminists faced in the 1980s. History recounts the backlash, the stagnation of the movement and women's defeats in the 80s, while the movement was still very much active and evolving. The interviews enabled this research to change its former perspective of the context into a more complex and nuanced one. Although the broad focus on the period between 1980-1993 was necessary to understand the challenges of the decade as well as the evolution of the papers, analysing almost every issue and selecting which articles to use for this paper was a significant challenge. Many other interesting articles and ideas could also not be used for this research and would need to be their own object of study. Moreover, the lack of resources on the newspapers limited the perspective of this research. The late decision to conduct interviews with women who worked for the newspapers however solved this issue and brought the research to life. Without these interviews, this paper would not

have had the same perspectives on the context and the feminist movement.

The different themes approached in this essay have the advantage to lead to new avenues. There is a lack of research on the history of American alternative feminist periodicals. Research on periodicals run by feminists of colour are particularly lacking, as well as their role in the feminist movement. As the periodicals played a significant role from its origins within the American feminist movement and eventually impacted American women, to keep working on feminist publications archives would participate in the development of research in American women's history. Moreover, this tradition of building communication networks also recalls contemporary ways for feminists to educate, share information and organise through social media, which can also be a further focus of research.

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## Appendices

- **Appendix A:** Transcript of interview with Kathleen Riley

Kathleen Riley was a member of the *Big Mama Rag* collective. We had an hour long conversation on Skype where she gave me an insight of her life as a young American woman of the late 1970s who was part of the feminist movement.

Interviewed on 02 March 2021. Transcribed and edited by Emilie Jacob.

EMILIE: I wanted to start with a question about yourself, you could tell me what you're doing now, and if I may say, "where you're at" now?

KATHY: Where I am at now, yes. Well, I'm now 74, I'm retired and I'm living here in Denver, Colorado, very happily. I find myself more and more interested in history these days. During the pandemic I have not been very active at all, except on zoom or virtual communication. Like so many, I've been inside. But it's also been an introspective time, I've done a lot of reading and thinking, wondering about this half-century that I've participated in and observed what it all means - I could spend hours just thinking, and not doing! However, I was quite active in the presidential elections and I've been immensely relieved that we've... so sorry! I keep apologising to everyone for the stress of the Trump years. Anyway, I returned to Denver ten years ago after spending twenty years in Japan. My major career had been teaching English at a university, which was a great gift in my life and gave me an international perspective that went beyond the American one, that I thought was international back in the day. That's pretty much where I am now. And I'm thinking about what's important given my own energy, my abilities at this point in my life and probably the issue that concerns me the most right now is climate change. I think that it will touch everything and I hope I can find ways to support movements in that area.

EMILIE: Yes. We can start talking about *Big Mama Rag* now, if you want to.

KATHY: Sure! I guess I did the first question, talking about myself and where I'm at now!

EMILIE: Yes, that's one question done! Okay, so I believe you started to take part in *Big Mama Rag* in 1976 as a collective member. You worked on local news and advertising. Is that right? How did it all start for you? Why did you want to join *BMR*?

KATHY: My reproductive rights were such a turning point in my life. When the collective began in Denver, I was still living in Chicago. I was actually a journalist for a community newspaper and I had gotten, I had an unwanted pregnancy in 1971-72. This actually was before *Roe v. Wade* but at time the law was changing and in the neighbouring state, Wisconsin, abortions were being done at a clinic in one part of the state but not in another. I was a young Catholic woman who had graduated from a Catholic school, I decided I did not want to continue the pregnancy. So we made an appointment and on the very morning that I was to have this procedure, the nurse came out and said I'm sorry, the attorney general was opposed to abortion and we cannot do any abortions this morning or the attorney general will pull the doctor's license. So I was just devastated and frightened, you know. So we were taken to a doctor who was then doing underground abortions in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and I had a safe abortion there for which I was very grateful. But then I became so angry that, you know, politics could affect my life so fundamentally. So, not long after that I was covering a story and woke up the next day seeing that one of the teachers whose work I was covering had been part of an underground abortion network in Chicago for ten years. It's written about quite a bit, it was called Jane.

EMILIE: Yes.

KATHY: Yes, and I was kind of embarrassed, I never knew about Jane, first of all. I was not part of a women's movement then, although my feminism was starting to grow just from the culture. So that catapulted it. Some of these women started a clinic after all the charges were dropped against them... They had been busted, which is why they were in the newspapers. But the charges were dropped when *Roe v. Wade* was passed, a big relief obviously... And then that happened. Several of the women said "abortion rights have been won forever now, we don't have to worry". Little did we know... And some women in the Jane Collective wanted to start a well woman clinic. So they did and I was very interested in joining this new group. I realised how little I knew about my body. I was embarrassed I even got pregnant and when I acknowledged that, you know, it's like, why, how did I get to be this age, you know, and not know this. So I joined as a volunteer and we did well

woman care. We kept a file of doctors who treated women in respect. We didn't do abortions but we did referrals to places, we helped counsel women and we would do basic screening tests under the guidance of a doctor and teach women about their bodies. This is the era of "learn to see your own cervix", which has been mocked in films but anyway, it seemed very empowering at the time.

EMILIE: Yeah, it was the era of consciousness-raising and self-help.

KATHY: Yes.

EMILIE: So what year was it, was it 1973 then?

KATHY: Actually... Roe v. Wade was what, 72 if I'm not mistaken.

EMILIE: January 73.

KATHY: 73, right, so very early in 73. I worked for about two years as a volunteer at the clinic. We called it the "Emma Goldman women's health centre", we were very entranced with the anarchist Emma Goldman from the nineteenth century. It was a powerful time when you feel you're learning very quickly, and at the same time there's much dissension, stress and people feeling very passionately about different ideas. Also, and this is the next turning point, I fell in love with a woman and came out as a lesbian. That changed things a lot!

EMILIE: I can imagine.

KATHY: Yes. And then, around 1975, I didn't know how to create my life anymore in Chicago. I felt I wanted to change and during that time I visited a former coworker who was living in Colorado and I just loved the mountains, the state, the climate. And I heard about a feminist newspaper called *Big Mama Rag*! And I decided I would move here, I had never lived elsewhere and my friend helped that transition. I thought "wow!". One of the first things I did when I finally moved in 1976 was joining the collective. So that was the beginning, and it was late 1976. But in that era, as you know, feminist newspapers were widely available, you know, so, the Chicago paper I had first learned about, the Denver paper and everything in California...

EMILIE: Yeah, I think most of them were on the east and west coast, and not so much, I guess, in Denver. I'm thinking about the newspapers I am analysing and Denver was the only one in the centre of the U.S., all the other ones were on the east coast.

KATHY: Right. It's interesting. A number of us were transplants from other places because Denver was still very much, I think, an overgrown western town, you know. Its great building boom came later. Now it's a little bit trendy but in that era we were a solidly conservative state and with a smaller population than elsewhere. I had been a political science major with a minor in journalism and in Chicago I had worked in journalism so, somehow, shifting my feminist work into writing seemed very natural. So I started doing that and my memory was... Well, first of all, thanks to a very nice man who owned a building in Denver, we were allowed to use, rent free, the basement. There, we had our collective meetings, we sat in a circle. There were maybe, I have to look at again, the number, perhaps eight. We were generation two of the paper because, as you know, it started in 73. That original collective did so much work and they were also paid by an association of methodist women. It was a grant, and that grant expired before I arrived so there was a shift in what people could do. Sometimes it's hard to volunteer in a job that you were once paid for.

EMILIE: I can imagine, especially when it's journalist work.

KATHY: Exactly. And we were all... It was the time we were young and single and I think most of us were in our twenties or early thirties. We could do part-time jobs, you know, and still live cheaply in Denver because Denver was still a small town in a way. But we still had to work and I got a temporary office work because at the time I thought my "real" work was the feminist movement and I didn't care if I was paid for that. In fact, I even thought it was better if we weren't. So I think I was actually on the collective for about two years. And at the end of two years I think I was just a bit exhausted, I mean, it required weekly meetings, which involved of course getting ready for the current issue, planning ahead for the next issue, handling financial matters, who was going to do advertising. We needed money for printing, but everything else was done by volunteers. And I'm so sorry that I don't have statistics, I don't remember our press run or the costs...

EMILIE: Right, yeah I was quite interested in that because I know it will be useful to see where *Big Mama Rag* was situated but I understand completely.

KATHY: Right. We paid for something called the Liberation News Service, I still remember. And so we would always end every session with something called “crit/self-crit” and this was the time when we would say “oh, I’m sorry, I was feeling crappy when I came in but, you know, my boss is a jerk and I was feeling upset”. And I’ve always found those very valuable that it kind of calmed any ruffled feelings that may have occurred during the discussions.

EMILIE: Very interesting. And I think you were doing that as well in the paper itself.

KATHY: Yes. Anyway, after that period, let’s say, probably late 1979, I left the collective but I wanted to be a supporter. That means I would write stories, I didn’t want the regular job, I wanted to be able to help. So I was doing distribution. And, you know, during that time of course life was going on, I was falling in love... Trying to balance many things, keep my job going, explore wonderful states... Many women’s groups started about that time. There was a feminist federal credit union that started to help get women credit, to make up for the very real problems women had with financial institutions. Then, there was also a feminist bookstore that was run by a collective. My girlfriend was a member of that collective and I eventually joined it, I think in late 1980, so things were starting to shift at that time. But I also think I became more, I don’t know, what’s the word... I wondered sometimes how much we were really read in the community. There seemed to be lots of little groups, there were the athletic women starting softball teams, there was a whole cultural movement, and I am thinking lesbian feminist community which overlapped with perhaps other more heterosexual women or more diverse groups. Interestingly, and this is a good point, *Big Mama Rag* was probably entirely lesbian, except for one woman. But we never defined ourselves as a lesbian paper. We really felt that our mission was much broader and included issues affecting women.

EMILIE: Right. I remember that readers would sometimes criticise the paper for being “too lesbian”... It’s interesting.

KATHY: Yeah... And then, maybe from the other side, “you should be more a lesbian”.

EMILIE: Yeah, and obviously you couldn’t satisfy everyone in every issue, so...

KATHY: Exactly. Anyway, that was funny... So I think there might have been... Well, first of all,

we had, I think, a broad idea of what feminism was. And because many of us came of age, I think, in the anti-war movement or earlier movements, there was a strong, I think, commitment to carry news, women's news affecting women of colour as well. And to some extent maybe U.S. military policy. It was maybe more in the early 80s that women started working against U.S. policies in central America. But then, overtime I realised I wasn't sure that any of the women I knew in the cultural movements, the ones organising concerts and dances and whatever, did they ever actually read *Big Mama Rag*? And we didn't have the tools, social media that we have today so if we asked for a donation to a women's fund it was never clear who actually sent anything, did women respond or not... And we didn't either have the ability or life was moving into other areas. So I've often wondered what our impact was. Did they just read it for the ads, you know... Or did they just read stories if they affected them? I may be overly sceptical, I don't know, but that I simply don't know to what extent *Big Mama Rag* was read by a wider community.

EMILIE: Yeah. Did you get a good response from the readers or was it quite small compared to how many issues you sent every month? I don't know whether you received that many letters?

KATHY: We did get letters and that made us feel good, but once again I don't know how to balance that against how many people who actually read it. We didn't have number views, you know, and things like that so it's very hard. Or maybe I should say "easy" to decide whether it was without any evidence. We liked to think we were broad read.

EMILIE: Of course. And *Big Mama Rag* seemed to intend to write about and include many women in its pages. Can you tell me more about that?

KATHY: As I recall, I think also because as a lesbian collective and not directly confronting, for the most part, issues of child raising or getting reproductive health care, I think our coverage tended more toward a wider view like how sterilisation policies might have been affecting Native American women or others. And partly, that was due to the Liberation News Service which was keeping us informed of how communities of colour were affected, the treatment of women in prison, rape... And then of course pornography became a very major issue, so... We tried, in our desire to be broad and inclusive, I don't know, maybe we were too superficial with everything... We wanted to, and there were books to read. We did have the sense of something very important we were part of, that it was a whole awakening of women, you know. The beginnings of women's

studies at the university, publishing was just exploding, you know, with poetry and history and obviously, sexuality. The LGBTQ movement was growing alongside too.

EMILIE: Yes. Last year, I worked on *Ms.* Magazine and wrote a paper on their coverage of abortion in 1973. What did an underground feminist newspaper such as *Big Mama Rag* think of the mainstream *Ms.* in the 1980s?

KATHY: NOW, of course, was very active. I think in our group there was perhaps some disparagement of NOW as being too mainstream and many of us remembered Betty Friedan calling lesbians the “Lavender Menace”, so... But I felt differently about *Ms.*, I remember being absolutely thrilled that I was a charter subscriber, you know, that it covered mainstream news of course which I was happy to read, that here, at supermarket shelves, you know, was a magazine that covered issues of importance to women, so... So that was really great. Oh and then the ERA was in the mix, that was happening. And I know of course some friends who actually went to one of the conventions in Texas, you know, to push to the ERA. So, so much and then meanwhile we’re going to work. In 1981, also, my partner and I became part of a small group of women who were foster mothers for a little boy. So, in some ways that brought me back a little bit more into reproductive rights in the sense that it then included the ability to raise a child regardless of your marital status. *BMR* became just, you know, part of a larger picture of things I was dealing with. And I was aware when *Big Mama Rag* ended in 1984, partly because I had a very good friend who is now deceased, named Bobbe Ross, who stayed until the end. She was very stressed by the collective, she felt it got very divisive and argumentative and stressful for her. That made me feel even more upset when I saw how marginal *BMR* was to the work others were doing. Some of the women I knew had gone back to law school, one had just become a judge, you know. People were moving into larger areas and we were also more and more, I think, interested in the cultural movement. We were running off to music festivals in the summer. Messy lives!

EMILIE: Yeah. Do you want to talk more about Bobbe Ross? I’d also love to hear more about the other women who were part of the collective, how it was like to work with these women, were you agreeing on everything or was it more difficult sometimes...

KATHY: Oh do I wish I had a recording! We had very different personality types. One of my friends, in fact her name was Deb Taylor whom I’m still in touch with and Zoom with sometimes,

let's say is not the most organised person and sometimes she would come in with her stories written on little pieces of paper which totally annoyed Eileen Bresnahan who was, at the time, we considered much more of a "hardass", you know, she'd be more confrontative than others. Our youngest member was Tea Schook, who had wandered over to Denver from Michigan, you know, naive about everything in the world. She was our bookkeeper. So the more naive member. And then, Bobbe was really different, Bobbe was a generation older than me and born in 1928. She had been socialised in New Jersey and had worked in prison work and on the left, and had raised several children, had been married, and I think wanted more than anything to be twenty years younger and be part of this wonderful revolution. Maybe in the same way that I sometimes wish I was forty years younger and I could be part of this wonderful new movement, you know, like your generation. Can I just tag along? So you know, those types of personality differences that, I think, sometimes affected the flavour but I don't remember great disagreements over what to cover. It could be my faulty memory here. I do remember one time, it just stands in my mind. We were upset because the department store window had tee-shirts in their window that we felt glorified rape. We were wondering if anyone was going to protest it but we didn't know any group that was going to protest it, so we decided we would. And then we covered ourselves! I should look up that story, you know, and see. So that was kind of fun.

EMILIE: Did it work? Did they remove the tee-shirts?

KATHY: Yeah they did. They probably did it carelessly, I don't know. And anyway they removed it.

EMILIE: So as a small feminist collective, you still had some impact somehow!

KATHY: Yes, yes. But you know, you've probably seen this but the thing I think *Big Mama Rag* have... Our most significant contribution was something we never intended and that was our seven-year battle with the Internal Revenue Service. Do you have that in your notes?

EMILIE: I think that's what I found on the Internet, the court decision? Actually, I wanted to ask you about that because I'm not sure I understood what happened.

KATHY: Well I've started googling to see what I could find, you know, on *Big Mama Rag*, and I



came across another academic paper, and maybe you'd be interested in that paper as well from just a couple of years ago, and it details the dates and the legal process that the court case went to. It started in 73 and wasn't resolved until after I had left, shortly before *Big Mama Rag* dissolved or ended. Basically, in the early stages, we lost the Internal Revenue Service money to tax us because we were a political group, we felt we were an educational group, and finally a circuit court of appeal sided with us and later this benefited many other groups like us who had a distinct, you know, point of view and didn't feel they should have to carry all sides. The latest court said it was a violation of free speech, the First Amendment, to require, put that burden on newspapers or other projects. So that was a great thing but during our discussions, I don't think we ever discussed it once! It was always in court, so... So maybe that's a funny little metaphor of life, you know, the thing you think is not that important turns out to be very important!

EMILIE: Yeah, it seemed to be. I thought it was linked to maybe why *Big Mama Rag* ended in 1984.

KATHY: This paper speculates that maybe one of the, you know, reasons the group couldn't continue was financial, but they may also have been dispirited. I think volunteer collectives are always prone to that, you know, cycles of energy or feeling lack of support. And then financially that could have been a problem as well. And we were also getting older, this is coinciding with people going, you know, and making other arrangements in their lives.

EMILIE: I can imagine.

KATHY: We had a reunion and I so wished that it'd been recorded because it was so wonderful. Not just the backyard reunion but a women's studies instructor at Auraria college asked us to speak a couple of years ago to a women's studies class and we all had a time to recall our memories. And it was clear we remembered... The different kind of impact was different for each woman, but it was a powerful time in our lives and we really loved it. Only one woman I thought was very negative, she is now a buddhist practitioner and felt that we were far too confrontive and unkind, far too often to each other. Jennifer Woodul – she had actually emigrated from South Africa to America. We had some photographers but to my knowledge there's no recording and I'm quite sorry about it because I would have loved to review that. And Jackie St Joan is the most... She is a retired judge, she's incredibly articulate, you know, and has a very wide view of the feminist

movement. She was part of the original collective, she was generation one, I was generation two. Another one is Carol Lease, she went on and she basically devoted her life to a nonprofit that she ran until recently when she retired, supporting women getting out of prison. And then Jackie St Joan, you know, entered the law. When I think of that era, those were the two, you know, maybe *BMR* was kind of a fertile ground for them really on and they went on to do really important feminist work.

EMILIE: So I think you answered most of my questions, I am going through my notes... Yeah you said you were part of other organisations as well...

KATHY: Yeah, originally Emma Goldman women's health centre was first and *Big Mama Rag* and then I spent about a year in... Actually less than that, in the Woman to Woman Collective. And then, we, the bookcentre had a very difficult split over race that was very traumatic for everyone. I was part of the collective that was essentially primarily white who was challenged by women of colour. This coincided with a book that was coming called "This Bridge Called My Back", the writing was by women of colour, that was a shock to me because I thought my politics were quite progressive and I did not consider myself racist at all, but it opened up a whole new dimension that I was not considering and has been part of what I think is really a life-long examination of race and white privilege and how those play out. But after that I felt so lost, you know, we still had Gabriel, still being a part-time mom, I was realising that it was time for me to seriously look at what I was doing for a living for the rest of my life. That part-time job wasn't going to do it. My bubble had been burst, maybe, as I look back. I think I had had a somewhat naive view of movement work as a career. So I ended up going back to school and getting a Master's degree in education and with a specialty in English as a foreign language. So I just started a new career that I enjoyed greatly.

EMILIE: Did you remain in touch with the feminist movement afterwards during you teacher career?

KATHY: Yeah in fact I even did a seminar, I tried the best I could, you know, within the context of language teaching and the nature of the class, you know, to bring in women's issues for discussion. More English-language materials on feminism were starting to be available in Japan, and I did a seminar once on gender issues too. So that was a way to keep in touch and of course I met feminist Japanese and foreigners, non-Japanese. Foreigner being a relative word of course, I was the

foreigner.

EMILIE: Right.

KATHY: Anyway, I think being a teacher is a wonderful career because you end up being a life-long student, you're always informing yourself so you can teach better.

EMILIE: Yeah I understand.

KATHY: Yeah, but just going back to the topic, I think I felt a little lost in the 1980s after Woman to Woman folded and just didn't know what to do, so going to graduate school and having to deal with my work took me away from movement work. Although we always joined demonstrations, I always rather liked them. So I would join the Gay Pride which has of course evolved in this country into Mardi Gras but in those days it was much more serious.

EMILIE: Oh yeah?

KATHY: Oh it's incredible, it's filled with dancing and probably every group in the city and almost every church, except for certain ones, you know, and every corporate employer now seems to have a LGBTQ support group. But during the other days we were still fighting, you know, we had not won the right to same-sex marriage or certain other issues... And there was a strong movement in the late 70s, early 80s for safety in the streets, women against violence against women, and the issue of rape became more serious, and demands for university women to have, you know, escort to go to parking lots and better police protection.

EMILIE: Yeah. I have a question about an article published in January 80, "A Decade of Feminism, Is the Movement Facing an Identity Crisis?" which was a transcription of a discussion you had had with other members of *BMR*. You said, then, that you saw the feminist movement as more divided into separate "communities" and that you were "not accountable to each other as groups anymore". Can you tell me a bit more about your vision of the feminist movement in the 1980s? And I also had a question about sisterhood and what you thought about it then, if there was a difference in the 1970s and the 1980s.

KATHY: Yeah, it's so hard to separate my own experience or limited perception from the wider view. My feelings in the 70s when I first came out as a feminist is that there was a kind of excitement, a sisterhood feels-good kind of atmosphere, you know, there were press collectives, there were shows, we had a sense of doing different work. I had a sense that we were doing different kinds of projects all within a more harmonious world. But then, I think, as feminism grew, perhaps the interest separated more. Or was it always that way and it was just my perception that was different. Seriously, I'm not sure. So like I said I did not know if my, you know, concert organising friends ever really read *Big Mama Rag*. I think it might have been appreciated by some and not by others, but I don't really know."

EMILIE: Yeah, but I am sure you had at least a small impact on some women of the Denver community who have good memories of reading it.

KATHY: I think I was so ahistorical, I think somehow the era was ahistorical. We really believed that the national liberation movement around the world was going to bring peace and freedom across as soon as we unshackled colonial, you know, things, you know that once *Roe v. Wade* happened, yes, that we could focus on other things. And totally underestimated historical cycles and natural backlash, that would be one lesson I would say. That every generation... Never underestimate backlash.

EMILIE: Yeah, actually I was reading about *Webster* the other day, I think everyone thought that *Roe v. Wade* would be overturned. Did you think that this right might not to be taken for granted?

KATHY: Right, because we saw how they were getting around *Roe v. Wade*. I thought it would stand, but that it would be undercut due to the federal nature of this country. Some states are more conservative than others, and they would pass rules making it very difficult for clinics to operate. And that process has continued, and as you probably will know getting an abortion in America is very difficult now. Some clinics couldn't survive, and there was violence against some clinics. So that became a real fear, the growth of the christian right and its influence within the Reagan administration and later.

EMILIE: Yeah. But I think the American feminist movement really faced it, faced that backlash compared to other countries, European for instance. American feminism was still prevalent then.

KATHY: Right, the 80s was the time of the backlash gaining momentum, you know, and there was this feeling we were stalling. Radical movements were more fragmented.

EMILIE: Do you remember, generally, how important the reproductive rights movement was for the collective then?

KATHY: That's a good question, you know, I can see why data analysis is so important, it'd be interesting to go back and see how many stories were actually carried.

EMILIE: Yeah I noticed that in every issue abortion was mentioned several times for example, but many things were happening around that issue, so...

KATHY: Yeah, so I'm not sure I can bring that well but I will definitely look at those digitised copies.

EMILIE: Yeah. Did you hear about the other newspapers I'm working on, which are *Sojourner*, *off our backs* and *New Directions for Women*?

KATHY: Yes, especially *off our backs* I used to read and the others we would get complimentary copies and I don't know that I read them in depth. Oh and there's something I just have to show you and this is from Vicki Piotter. It's a poster, I just read it again and it almost just made me cry, you know, that we fought for these things, "we demand control of our reproductive process, we demand free adequate healthcare, free 24 hour day care, the right to the use of self defense, equality in the job market, the right to guaranteed jobs or income, free and relevant education, end of sexism in the cultural media, end of the oppression of the lesbians, end of privilege based on race and class, end of defining people in terms of their relationships to others, right of self determination for all people, the right to use any means necessary to eliminate male supremacy". And I looked at it and I wanted to cry for its idealism, its naïveté, its bravery, its "in-your-faceness".

EMILIE: Yeah... I saw this list in the pages of *BMR*.

KATHY: Oh great. And these are the covers... But I should let you go now.

EMILIE: Yes I will let you go, thank you very much for taking the time to talk with me. Have a nice rest of the day!

KATHY: Thank you, we'll stay in touch!

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Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as part of the above research project. Ethical procedures for academic research require that interviewees explicitly agree to being interviewed and how the information contained in their interview will be used. This consent form is necessary for me to ensure that you understand the purpose of your involvement and that you agree to the conditions of your participation. Would you therefore read the accompanying **information sheet** and then sign this form to certify that you approve the following:

- the interview will be recorded and/or a transcript will be produced
- you will be sent the transcript and given the opportunity to correct any factual errors
- the transcript of the interview will be analysed by Emilie Jacob as research investigator
- access to the interview transcript will be limited to Emilie Jacob and academic colleagues and researchers with whom she might collaborate as part of the research process
- any summary interview content, or direct quotations from the interview, that are made available through academic publication or other academic outlets will be anonymized so that you cannot be identified, and care will be taken to ensure that other information in the interview that could identify yourself is not revealed
- the actual recording will be destroyed
- any variation of the conditions above will only occur with your further explicit approval

**I also understand that my words may be quoted directly. With regards to being quoted, please initial next to any of the statements that you agree with:**

- KR I wish to review the notes, transcripts, or other data collected during the research pertaining to my participation.
- KR I agree to be quoted directly.
- I agree to be quoted directly if my name is not published and a made-up name (pseudonym) is used.
- KR I agree that the researchers may publish documents that contain quotations by me.

### **Contact Information**

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Date: March 1, 2021

Name of participant: Kathleen Riley

- **Appendix B: Interview of Vicki Bier**

Vicki Bier was a member of *Sojourner*. I sent her an email with my questions that she sent me back with her answers on 13 March 2021.

Edited by Emilie Jacob on 15 March 2021.

- **First, can you tell me a little bit about yourself and what you are doing now?**

I just retired in January, after a career as a professor of industrial engineering at the University of Wisconsin. I have continued to be active in women's issues during my career (e.g., advocating for better resources for women within the university), but have not been active politically.

- **Can you tell me about your experience at *Sojourner*? How did it all start for you? Why did you want to join the newspaper?**

It's so long ago that I can't really remember why I joined exactly. It's possible that Elly Schwartz (Elly Janesdaughter) encouraged me to get involved. However, I was in graduate school at the time (in applied math), and think I just wanted an "extracurricular activity" that was not related to what I was doing in school.

- ***Sojourner* was created by a community of women of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and then expanded to the New England region. Were the members and the readership therefore mainly educated?**

I don't know for sure about the readership, but yes, the members of the collective were mostly (if not all) educated.

- **How was the paper working and preparing issues? What was the environment like? Did you become friends with other women from the collective? (Any names can be changed if preferable).**



I did not really become personal friends with other women from the collective (or at least not close or lasting friends – I did socialize with one or two women from the group). During my years there, the paper’s offices were located on Albany Street, which at that time was in a somewhat decrepit industrial area. The building had previously been the Paramount Coat Factory. The neighborhood was not good, but we had a lot of space. To put things in perspective, this was before there was good software for typesetting and layout. So, the paper was literally put together by hand. The articles were printed, cut up, and pasted onto the mockup of each page, with “graphic tape” of various widths to create the physical design of the paper (masthead, divisions between columns, etc.). If you look at the physical image of the newspaper, every one of those stripes or ovals, etc., was put on by hand. Then, once the mockup was complete, it was taken to the printer. This process meant that producing the paper was more labor-intensive than today, but the labor was less solitary. On “production weekends,” a lot of people would be hanging out in the offices, working side by side, doing the mockups of different pages. So, the environment was fun and social.

- ***Sojourner* was a radical type of feminist publication – were you part of any other organisations at the time? How did you see the feminist movement in the 1980s?**

No, I was not part of other organizations. However, there were other institutions (such as a women’s bookstore, New Words, where I sometimes went to hear visiting authors, etc.). So, I was part of a women’s “community.” I’m not really sure *Sojourner* was all that “radical.” I remember *off our backs* as being more radical. Yes, we covered issues related to poor and working-class women, but we also wrote a lot about cultural issues that might have been considered luxuries by more radical papers. For example, I remember reviewing a couple of books about the Holocaust, interviewing a choreographer, etc.

- **I am working on the coverage of the reproductive freedom movement in the 80s in four feminist newspapers. *Sojourner* has many articles related to abortion or reproductive health in general. Do you remember how important these issues personally were for you and the members? Did you feel these rights were in danger with Reagan in power and with the right-to-lifers’ actions?**

Again, this was a long time ago, so I don’t really remember the politics of the Reagan

administration, etc. (especially since I personally was not really active in the reproductive-freedom movement). However, I came of age in the era of “the pill,” when heterosexual women could be sexually active without fear of pregnancy, and that was certainly important for me personally. (Some of the members of the collective were lesbians, so for them, reproductive rights may have been more of a political rather than a personal issue.) This was also the era of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, and the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective. So, there was a lot of interest in demystifying and reclaiming women’s health issues – teaching women how to use a speculum to look at their own genitals, learning from women’s own lived experiences instead of the “conventional wisdom” handed down by (male) doctors about what is “normal” for women, etc. I personally was more involved in that part of the movement (interested in women’s empowerment) than in the political side.

- **Do you think that writing about reproductive health issues helped the *Sojourner* readers to realise that there was “more” about reproductive rights than the right to abortion? More generally, was being a member of *Sojourner* a way of doing activist work?**

Definitely, being a member of *Sojourner* was a form of activism. However, I’m not sure that *Sojourner* played a unique role in educating our readers about reproductive rights, for two reasons. First, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* played a much bigger role in that educational process (since it was focused mainly on reproductive and health issues, whereas *Sojourner* was much broader). Moreover, our readership was already pretty educated on feminist issues – in other words, we were “preaching to the choir.” The paper helped feminists keep up on the latest developments (providing reviews of work by female authors or musicians, letting people know if some organization was in danger of closing, providing updates on relevant laws or political campaigns, etc.) – but I’m guessing that most of our readership already had a pretty expansive view of reproductive rights and women’s health in general. We were really a “community newspaper” for the feminist community (in the same way that a community newspaper lets people know about what’s happening in a town that they’re already part of), not so much a proselytizing or outreach publication geared at persuading people not yet educated on feminist issues. Thanks in large part to *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, a broad view of reproductive rights was already widespread in that community – it was part of the “zeitgeist” of the time.

- ***Sojourner* intended to be a forum in which all women were welcomed and were given a voice. The feminist movement evolved from a white and middle-class movement to a movement that included other issues that could participate in women's oppression, such as race or lesbian issues. In the 80s, what did you think of the notion of "sisterhood" that prevailed in the 70s?**

Well, *Sojourner* itself was heavily (although not entirely) white and middle-class, although a lot of the staff was lesbian – and lesbians might have found more of a personal or social community there than straight women. There was definitely an aspect of cultural feminism (focusing on the things that women have in common, so that an interview with an apolitical choreographer could be perceived as relevant, for example). In retrospect (not from the perspective of the 80s, but from the perspective of the 21<sup>st</sup> century), I would say that we could have done a lot more to facilitate the participation of minority and poor or working-class women, to make sure that their voices were represented, etc.

- **Last year, I worked on *Ms. Magazine* and wrote a dissertation on their coverage of abortion in 1973. What did an underground feminist newspaper such as *Sojourner* think of the mainstream *Ms.* in the 1980s?**

Again, I'm not sure that we were radical enough to be described as "underground"; a paper that was started with seed funding from MIT is hardly anti-establishment. Maybe grassroots or "alternative" would be a better description. I would say that most people in the women's community at that time probably had a bit of disdain for *Ms.*. It would have been viewed as overly commercial, and a bit superficial – overall good (this was before "cancel culture"), but primarily for people less "woke" than ourselves (to use a contemporary term).

- **Do you have any memories or sources relating to the number of copies *Sojourner* printed each month? Even a rough idea would help me a lot!**

I have no personal memories of this, since I wasn't involved in the business side of the paper (negotiations with printers, etc.). However, the sources I found suggest that the circulation peaked at about 40,000. See for example <https://news.mit.edu/1996/handt-0410>. I found another source for

this info in my poking around, but can't lay my fingers on it right now, so I'm confident that's pretty accurate. See also <https://snaccooperative.org/view/41476577>: 40 percent coming from the Greater Boston area, 30 percent from New England, 30 percent from other parts of the country, and a small percentage from overseas.

- **I noticed it could be difficult to produce an issue sometimes. How were you dealing with that?**

Not sure what you mean by difficult. If you're referring to the physical difficulty of putting together an issue, see above. If you're talking about financial difficulties, that was handled both through advertising and through fundraising. Martha, Dena, and Kathryn could tell you more about that side of things than I can.

- **Did you have the impression that it was worth it because it had an impact? Is it what drove you to keep on going?**

Personally, I stayed involved because I found the experience rewarding. It was social, a way to feel part of something bigger than myself, and I enjoyed writing and thinking about things that were not narrowly technical. Like I said earlier, I think *Sojourner* functioned mainly as a "community newspaper" – helping people stay connected to what was happening in the women's community, what other people in the community were thinking and doing, etc. That's a worthwhile function, but its impact is somewhat intangible. I can't easily point to specific things where *Sojourner* had a specific impact (e.g., in getting a law passed); it more just helped the community stay connected and healthy.

- **I am also working on *Big Mama Rag*, *off our backs* and *New Directions for Women*. Do you think that *Sojourner* had an impact on the feminist community? Were these newspapers well-known within the feminist press community?**

*off our backs* was definitely well known. I personally don't remember the other two.

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- I agree to be quoted directly. VB
- I agree to be quoted directly if my name is not published and a made-up name (pseudonym) is used.
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Date: 13 March 2021

Name of participant: Vicki Bier

- **Appendix C:** Transcript of interview with Shane Snowdon

Shane Snowdon was managing editor of *Sojourner* from 1983 to 1987. After that, she was the volunteer book editor for a few years. We had a very rich conversation on Zoom about her experience there.

Interviewed on 29 March 2021. Transcribed and edited by Emilie Jacob.

EMILIE: So I was first interested in what you're doing now, what your life has been since you worked for *Sojourner*, and if you're still part of some feminist organisations or other organisations as well.

SHANE: It's been almost 40 years since I started at *Sojourner*. I've done a lot since then. I was really, really happy to get the job at *Sojourner*. I was only 26 and I had been a feminist and a lesbian activist for nine years. I came out as a feminist and a lesbian when I was 17. And then, you know, there were no paid jobs... We called them "movement jobs". There were no paid jobs and we were building the movement, not organisations with salaries. So, you know, we were all volunteers, passionate volunteers, and I was incredibly lucky at *Sojourner*, 26, to get one of the very, very few paid, very little money jobs within the women's movement. And it was amazing. And having done that, I have been able for the rest of my work life, for almost 40 years, to keep on doing social justice work. So I'll just give you the sequence. After *Sojourner*, I was the head of an environmental centre. Then I was head of a sustainable agriculture organisation that provided education and support to men just out of prison. I was the director of a big domestic violence agency. I was the head of two national – actually one was international, women's cancer groups. I taught women's studies and I was the head of a university women's centre. And then I taught queer studies, LGBTQ studies and I was head of LGBTQ centres, both of those jobs, the women's centres and teaching in the LGBTQ centres and teaching at the University of California. Then I joined the largest LGBTQ organisation in the country, the Human Rights Campaign. I was in leadership there and I created their Health and Ageing programme. And now I consult with... Primarily, I consult with health systems on becoming much more welcoming and knowledgeable about LGBTQ people.

EMILIE: OK, that's great. So you had a career in activism.

SHANE: I'm very lucky, I mean, my entire work life has been around social justice and I always

tell people, you know, this really is possible. It can be done.

EMILIE: It's very inspiring, I know it's not easy. And you got to do all these different things as well.

SHANE: I followed the news that I cared about.

EMILIE: That's very interesting. So if you want to talk about *Sojourner* now, I'm interested in knowing how you joined, what exactly you were doing as the managing editor, right? I think that's what you were doing? And when exactly you joined.

SHANE: Well, as you know, *Sojourner* started as the women's newspaper at MIT. And that was a very big deal because, you know, it was hard to start a feminist newspaper in 1975 anywhere. But MIT had very few women except in secretarial roles. There were very few women students and there were almost no women faculty at all. And all of the technical staff were men. So there were very few women, it was an extremely male oriented environment. I mean, for all the obvious reasons, S.T.E.M., S.T.E.M., S.T.E.M., it was science and technology, you know. So the women at MIT decided they needed a women's newspaper. They needed some way to be in connection. So in 1975 they created the paper, they named it after Sojourner Truth, the great black abolitionist, and very soon they were very gifted as writers and graphics people. So the paper, which came out every month, was really good looking and really well edited. And you know, a lot of the papers people were just, you know, doing them in their spare time and they didn't know design, they hadn't been editors. But these women at MIT, they knew design, some of their jobs were as designers at MIT, and they happened to be, some of them, really good writers and editors. So very quickly, this was not, you know, just a MIT paper. After a couple of years, a lot of people were reading it outside of MIT. So first Cambridge women and then Boston women and then New England women and then around the country. And they realised, wow, we've outgrown MIT, we need to move off campus and have an identity as an independent feminist paper. But they got MIT to give them office space in one of the huge warehouse buildings, you know, pretty disgusting, unused warehouse buildings that MIT owns. MIT said, sure, you know, it's a disgusting warehouse building, we don't use it. Sure, you women can have a floor of it. So actually, again because they were MIT women, they moved into the space, they made it work and they moved in typesetting equipment. And that was another thing very unusual. I don't think any other, I mean, you're talking to papers, but I am 99.9 percent sure no other women's paper had its own typesetting equipment. And that was big.

EMILIE: Yeah, I can tell from what I've seen, it's not as clear, not as well done as *Sojourner*, actually.

SHANE: Oh, yeah. So *Sojourner* had very strong production values because we had designers, we did our own typesetting. We didn't have to go to, you know, some press and say, please, please, will you, you know, when you're not doing anything else, design or typeset our paper. The only thing we had other people doing was we couldn't print it ourselves so we had to find them. And this was difficult then, as you're probably hearing from other papers, because you had to find a printer that was willing to print a feminist paper that had lesbian content. That is not easy. But in other ways we were self-sufficient and that was really important. And if we needed to change an article, if we needed to add an article, we could do it ourselves. It was, you know, typeset that article and drop it in because we were producing the paper ourselves. Very unusual. And no other newspapers were doing that. Some papers were doing the design themselves, of course, like *off our backs*. They designed the paper themselves and they didn't do typesetting. They typed on a typewriter. So that way they controlled the means of production, as in Marx and Engels. But we, as you're saying, we didn't type, we typeset, and our graphics department, the women who did the graphics, they did it for a living over at MIT and around the Boston area. So it was pretty sophisticated. And, you know, of course it matters in publishing. How easy are you to read? How attractive are you? We had a lot of photos. We connected with some really great women photographers and we really showcased their work. You know, originally the paper was very focused on calendar items because there was no way to find out what was going on in feminism. The only way you could find anything out was from, you know, signs on light poles and our own publications. So the big things at first were the calendar, news, national and local news, and then letters to the editor were very big because this is how we argued and then built room with each other, in the letters to the editor. But once the paper moved off campus, they got more ambitious and *Sojourner* started to feature very important writing by some of the leading writers of the day. It really became a national paper. So people like Audre Lorde, Alice Walker and Pat Parker and, you know, who we now think of as leading second wave writers and thinkers were in the paper. And partly because it looked good, you know. "Oh, well, that's a good looking paper I'd like to be in that", the way they would like to be in *Ms.* magazine, that, you know, that showcases my work, they felt. And then we also very unusually, I think this was unique among the major women's papers, we printed fiction and poetry, very unusual, which was quite an enterprise. It's very hard to get especially lesbian fiction and poetry published. So we kept an eye, you know, obviously, that was important to us. And then we had, just like other papers, we had reviews of both mainstream and feminist movies and books and music.



EMILIE: Yes, I think that's what appealed to me first, as you said, the design of the paper that was very clean and easy... Catchy, almost.

SHANE: We tried.

EMILIE: Yes. And second, talking about women in arts and culture and what's happening there. I'm not focusing too much on that aspect in my research, but it's a big part of the paper, it was very interesting to look at them.

SHANE: I mean, there were two big ideas about *Sojourner* and thank you for saying that, it's good to hear. There were two big ideas. One was it was subtitled *Sojourner, The Women's Forum*. And the idea was, we were not publishing anything that wasn't feminist, but within feminism, we would print anything and that was also somewhat unusual. There were papers that felt, you know, they didn't want to publish more moderate or *Ms.*-like feminist articles. They wanted to be on the cutting edge. We wanted to be on the cutting edge, but we wanted other women to read us. We wanted, you know, mainstream moderate women to read us and to be open to less conventional, more radical ideas. So we called ourselves *The Women's Forum*. And then we had that look where it's like, oh, this looks like a real, you know. They were all real papers, but this looks like a real paper. So it's one thing to try to draw in a broad spectrum of potentially feminist women, not just the already converted. So that was very big. And the other thing was to have content that was really wide ranging. So you had the news, local and national, people loved the advertising because it was how you found out about women-owned businesses, just like super practical stuff like news and advertising and then opinion, whether it was letters or these articles. And some were by famous feminists like Audre Lorde, but some women who had really just... Women on the street who had really great ideas. And we had all the arts coverage. So we really tried to be all things to almost all women. And that was pretty unusual. That was more like *Ms.* and less like some of the grassroots publications. We had a lot of ambition in terms of who we reached.

EMILIE: OK, yes, it's interesting because I was actually writing about this this morning, I am doing a part on *Sojourner* and the fact that it was a women's forum.

SHANE: Well, that did not mean Phyllis Schlafly was welcomed. We, you know, we stretched the boundaries. We wanted to attract women, we wanted all the women who already identified as feminists, radical feminists, you know, all the varieties of feminist, socialist feminist, cultural feminist, spiritual feminist, separatist lesbians, non suffragists. Those women we knew would read

it. These other women, and what we would do to anticipate a larger question is we ultimately had a print run of 10,000, which is very, very high. And I know because I used to drive to the printer and put the papers in the truck myself. One of the many jobs of the, they called it managing editor at first but it really became publisher and editor, always was publisher and editor but managing editor was a nod to collective work. I'll say more about that. But what was going with a print run was we dropped off thousands of papers free around town where we felt they would reach women who didn't have money, who couldn't get to the women's bookstore, couldn't afford a subscription, didn't have an address where they could get a subscription because the paper, at that time, you know, it started in 75, even when I got there in 1983, the paper had to... How should I put this. It was dangerous for some women to read it and especially to drive to it, for men in their lives to see it. And then also for family members of these women, people would assume if you are subscribing to a feminist paper, you are a lesbian and that could be very dangerous. So we just dropped off as many free copies as we could, bearing that in mind.

EMILIE: I think I saw that in the pages of one of the newspapers, if some readers wanted to receive the paper covered in some envelope or something, it was possible.

SHANE: I mean, and that wasn't... As you know, we could think from the year 2021 that it was, you know, internalised homophobia. Not in 1983. Then, there was a real problem. Women would be physically in danger if people thought they were lesbians, even if they clearly were not, or they did not identify as such, they were not known as such. "Oh, but you get *Sojourner* so maybe you are a lesbian".

EMILIE: Yeah.

SHANE: So I've said there is this, you know, big growth trajectory. But actually when I got to the paper when it was eight years old in 1983, the founders of it were tired. They had stayed for a long time, the MIT women, and they were tired. And another feminist paper, more conservative than *Sojourner*, had started in Boston. And it was funded by one woman who really, understandably, wanted to be a women's newspaper publisher. Her paper had good production values and she had some financing. So when this other paper emerged in Boston, some of *Sojourner's*, a lot of *Sojourner's* funding had come from advertising from Boston businesses. They moved over to this other paper because it came out every week. We only came out once a month. So if you want to advertise, you want to be on a weekly. So what happened was this other paper had emerged, it's a weekly, it's much more advertising, much less content, much more conservative. But it was called

*Equal Times*, you know, it had feminist content. So *Sojourner*, its finances and its readership were going down and the women were tired. And so they were looking for an editor and it was... I was their fourth editor in a couple of years because they were... They fell upon hard times with the emergence of this other paper. In some ways, it's just economic competition, you know, it was a reality in feminist publishing, that was just the way it was. And fatigue, these women had been doing the paper for eight years and they were tired. And so they hired me as kind of a one last try to keep the paper going, one last try. They were that close to bankruptcy because they had formed as a corporation. They worked collectively in a lot of ways, but they had formed themselves as a corporation, which was also very different from the other papers. So they were this close to bankruptcy. But I, I was 26 and I was full of passion, energy and idealism. I was thrilled to have a movement job and I had also been the editor of several publications. I had started the women's publication at Harvard. As they had started a women's publication at MIT, I had been part of starting one at Harvard. I was the editor of my high school newspaper every year. I had been a writer and editor for a long time, even though I was just 26. So I was thrilled and I made it the centre of my life to revive *Sojourner*, and they had gotten down to, I think, 16 pages. And by the time I left in 1987, it was 64 pages. So we had this huge growth in readership and size. And *Equal Times*, actually, went out of business. It was much more advertising and a one woman's thing. It didn't start from a feminist collective and it was more kind of an advertising and events kind of paper. It didn't run, you know, political philosophical articles about feminism today. That was not its thing.

EMILIE: OK, yes. Very interesting. So you stayed until when, did you say?

SHANE: I left in 1987 and it went on for another 15 years. It was very different when I left. When I joined, I couldn't take... There was supposedly a salary for the managing editor. There wasn't enough money to pay myself, so I worked for free. There were just two paid women, part time paid women at the paper. When I left, there were many more paid women and we were able to pay our writers a little bit. So the paper had been run overwhelmingly by volunteers. When I left, there was a core of paid people and it stayed that way for the next 15 years. Very unusual, there was an office, and there were salaries and there was a staff and... Very unusual. Again, more like *Ms.* magazine than any of the other papers.

EMILIE: Yeah. Perhaps it would not have lasted that long if you couldn't have had any paid editors and staff.

SHANE: I mean, it was politically questionable to be a company, not to be a pure collective. A lot of decision-making was collective but there was a managing editor who eventually was acknowledged as the editor and publisher. And so it was organised as a company, it wasn't a pure collective, it went out and actively solicited advertising, which actually readers loved. They loved hearing about not only, like, what are the women-owned businesses near me, but, you know, if I want to go travel to Seattle, is there a women's guesthouse there? Is there a women's bookstore there? You know, people really read it for the advertising along with everything else. But all of this was really unusual and kept the paper going longer than any of the papers except for *off our backs*.

EMILIE: Yes. And I wanted to ask you about the evolution, because you stayed there for a few years and obviously times changed throughout the 80s and other things happened for the feminist movement and for American women in general in the U.S. at that time. So, I was just wondering if... You said that, at the end, more people were getting paid for their work, but are there any other changes that you can think about, things that were very different from when you started at the beginning?

SHANE: So I started in 1983 and I was on paid staff through 1987. So it was, yes, five years. So it's essentially all of 83, 84, 85, 86 and half of 87. And then I stayed on as the volunteer book editor for several years. So I think that what changed *Sojourner* most and why a lot of the women's publications disappeared is that we were successful in getting a lot of our ideas into the mainstream. The mainstream publications began to publish us, mainstream publishers, big book publishers began to publish us. Our ideas became better accepted and we became tired. We burned out. Also, from the excitement, the passion, the romance of being people with a vision for a new world, you know, remaking the world. From that, there is a certain... By no means do we disagree. This is before *Sojourner*. And I knew feminism well before I got to *Sojourner* because I've been out and an activist for nine years. There was... Even though we had disagreements, fierce disagreements, there was a sense of solidarity. We are the first of our kind, in the late 20th century, the mid to late 20th century, we will remake the world. There was a sense of solidarity and an excitement and a love for one another, whether or not it was sexual. Very, very powerful. By the time, so let's say that's the late 60s, the 70s. I joined *Sojourner* in 1983, that was the beginning of the turn. So first of all, you had much more mainstream acceptance, many more mainstream opportunities, but also the visionaries were tired and there were many more intra-movement conflicts and battles, really serious ones. For example, I mean, a huge one was the war over porn. That was huge, that separated people really like almost no other conflict had, the war over porn. A very serious struggle. There

was a lot to be said from both sides and I think that was part of the problem, it was not any movement. As it gets older, the issues move from stark, and so I use this phrase black and white, you know, there was a clear bad position and a clear good one in the early years of feminism. Domestic violence? Bad. Sexual assault? Bad. Incest? Bad. Unequal pay... I mean, we could all agree these things are bad, bad, bad, bad, bad. But of course, as the movement matures, there are grey areas. There is nuance, much more sophisticated and difficult topics arise around which reasonable people, women, can disagree. Bisexuality was very, very divisive, you know, would we accept bisexuality? We being the lesbians who disproportionately staffed the newspapers and disproportionately staffed women's organisations, were the volunteers. There were a number of battles that divided us and people who were already tired began to pull back and between those two phenomena of the mainstream press stepping forward and our becoming disenchanted and disillusioned, feminist publications began to disappear.

EMILIE: Yeah, and also with the context maybe, do you think that the backlash context had repercussions on...

SHANE: Well, actually many people think that. I don't think that because, you know, I became a feminist in a world where there was "lash", it wasn't "backlash". I mean, women lived under the lash metaphorically. And so for those of us who'd been in the movement for any period of time, and I know Gloria Steinem, for example says this, she is a more moderate feminist than I am in some ways, but the backlash was nothing for those of us who'd been through the lash. I mean, we had, you know, created institutions in a world where women held no visible jobs in most sectors. Where if you walked into a bookstore, the only books by women were romance novels and cookbooks. I mean, we lived in a world where rape was not even acknowledged. Domestic violence... So I think for my generation that was not the issue. I think it was, you know, for women coming in, I think they were daunted. They hadn't been through the experience of, you know, the early days of... Guess what, there is rape, there is incest, there is trauma, there is sexual assault, there is unequal pay. You know, we had worked with all of that, but I think that unfortunately, though, we got tired. We got tired. So I think the backlash... Where the backlash was difficult was on something like the Equal Rights Amendment that we never dreamed, I think that's the primary example of backlash. But a lot of more radical feminists like me were not that invested in the Equal Rights Amendment. But if you were a more moderate feminist and the Equal Rights Amendment was important to you and you would just assume, you know, endless progress and the ERA is a no-brainer. I do think that more moderate feminists became disappointed and were affected by backlash. I think the older ones

of us were more... We were tired. You know, we had to go to our lives. We had to, you know, we needed money for retirement. We wanted to have children. We wanted to attend to our children more. So I think there's a phenomenon of ageing and becoming fatigued and being in more conflict with each other. For people like me and people in the publications, I think those were more important than backlash. I would say just as important as backlash was acceptance, like how do you keep your women's newspaper going when it, you know, all the people used to write for, now they can be in *The New York Times*.

EMILIE: Yes.

SHANE: You know, like I said, which could never have been in ten years before, but who wouldn't be in *The New York Times*. Like Audre Lorde, she was in *The New York Times* but, you know, she could find an audience in the mainstream press. She didn't need to appear in *Sojourner* anymore.

EMILIE: Yeah.

SHANE: And I don't say that blamingly. I mean, as we know, it's a great thing that Audre got out there. It's not... Nothing not to like about that.

EMILIE: Yeah. Very interesting. So because it was born within MIT, in the context of a university, was it mainly... I mean it's funny because I'm reading the question and I'm thinking about the answer now that I know more about *Sojourner*.

SHANE: No, it's a good question. Was it mainly educated women.

EMILIE: Yeah. Even the people that would write to the newspaper as well, because obviously it could be anyone, but was it really anyone? That's my question.

SHANE: Exactly, and of course, there's a larger question for the movement. I do think that second wave feminism has been unfairly caricatured as overwhelmingly white and middle-class. It was actually much more diverse in terms of class, race and ethnicity and also disability and education than it's portrayed. In fact, many of us didn't ever finish school. So, you know, ourselves yes, we might be white or middle class, but we were definitely downwardly mobile. A lot of us didn't finish school, a lot, you know... So something I could talk at great length about is what I see as an unfair caricature of second wave feminism. I mean, where do people think that Audre Lorde came from? You know, she came from a lesbian feminist community and proudly so. The same with Barbara Smith, Gloria Anzaldua, Cherrie Moraga, Pat Parker, all of the icons, bell hooks, they all emerged

from second wave feminism. They were us. It was not a white middle class women's movement against which they were in perpetual exile. No, no, no, no, no, no, no. And this is another area where, you know, good history or history really needs to be written. So there was tremendous concern, a lot of attention, in my part of feminism to questions of race and class. In fact, we had, going into the night, many nights running what were called "crit/self-crit" sessions. And most of the "crit/self-crit" was about race and class. And so there was tremendous emphasis on diversity within the collectives, within the publications. Do I think we attained the kind of diversity that would be ideal? Far from it. But we tried much harder and succeeded much more than people realise. So, you know, for example, we distributed the paper free all over. A lot of my work as an editor, you know... Yes sometimes I got an article from Audre Lorde that I got to edit but a lot of the time I was working with women who had never written before and who didn't think they could write. And that was largely because of lacking class or race or ability privilege. And so more and more, the paper began to be not like articles written by people who identified as writers, but by people who not only didn't identify as writers but didn't write. They often told their stories. Increasingly when I was editor, and this continued, the stories were "as told to", "as interviewed by", because women didn't identify as writers. So, yes, there was a predominant white middle-class educated readership, but less so than is often recognised. And tremendous efforts... After I left, there was a huge effort to get the paper to women in prison that was actually very powerful, very successful. But we were very closely entwined with the welfare rights movement, they published a lot of pieces. *Sojourner* housing advocates published a lot of pieces. They were us, we were them. Very complex story. Much more complex than the caricature of us as a bunch of, you know, I don't know, white women, ever suggests.

EMILIE: Right. But I guess there were always people that thought it was not enough.

SHANE: No, of course, but I think there is confusion. You know, *Ms.* Magazine was one thing. I mean, I think Gloria Steinem was a wonderful woman. I know her a little bit, I had a lot of contact. Gloria Steinem is wonderful. And also, I know that she and *Ms.* Magazine conveyed an image of feminism of the time as white, middle-class, kind of glamorous New York City-ish. And that is not the story of other publications. We were grassroots and much more diverse. And of course, Gloria wanted this to be more diverse. But *Ms.* magazine was operating on a whole other level.

EMILIE: Yes. It was different with advertisers as well. I actually re-read something I wrote in my paper last year. One of the advertisers wanted to know when some words appeared in the magazine, for instance, lesbianism, gun control and abortion. And I thought that was just crazy. But it seems,

you know, fair for the time.

SHANE: Well, and I think that really captures the difference between *Ms.* and the other publications. Our readers would be upset if we didn't include the words lesbian and contraception and reproductive justice. So, yeah, Gloria was having to walk a whole other line. And in some ways, it's amazing she accomplished as much as she did with the pressure she was under. And *Ms.* was more diverse. I mean, Flo Kennedy, you know, there were a number of powerful, especially African-American women associated with *Ms.* as well as Wilma Mankiller and others. But it's certainly... But the grassroots publications were grassroots.

EMILIE: Yeah. I'm going back to my questions... I was wondering about the environment. Did you become friends with some of the people, of course, you might have become friends with some people, but I'm just wondering, what was the environment like when you were doing meetings, and...

SHANE: Well, one thing that was great about the publications, like all the women's organising, feminist organising, I think what was great was that we formed very passionate friendships and often romantic relationships. A lot of women who had previously identified as straight, were with boyfriends, were with men... I mean, and this is, you know, this is why a lot of lesbian feminists are not on board with the argument for LGBT civil rights. "We can't help it, it's biological, it's predetermined." Because if, you know, if you were a feminist at the time, you knew perfectly well there were plenty of women getting involved with women who had been involved with men and would be involved with men again. They wouldn't call themselves bisexual because the term bisexual didn't exist yet, but who were loving who they loved. And so there we are, we're working together, we're changing the world. There was a tremendous friendship and energy with all the joys of women's friendship and all the pain of women's friendship. We actually wrote a lot of articles in *Sojourner* about women's friendship because it's a thing, you know. Today, it's a thing. Then it was a thing so wonderful and so painful. And then there was, of course, the fact that we were having relationships with each other, you know, romantic relationships. And we used to joke, there was a slogan at the time in the... It wasn't then the LGBT rights movement, it was Lesbian and Gay Liberation, a slogan called An Army of Lovers Cannot Fail. And we felt that for a long time. And then we realised an army of lovers can but fail. Because you have the passion and you have the joy, which... It has a lot of romantic energy to it, of collaboration and worldchanging. And then you have the disillusionment, not only around your political work, but also with the person you had fallen in love with. So this was a great strength of the women's publications and it was something



that also could break us.

EMILIE: Yeah.

SHANE: I mean, the solidarity is unimaginable today. I don't think that any... I don't know any, and I've worked to universities, I started twenty six years ago working in universities on feminist and queer issues, there are no environments today like those of second wave feminism. There was an energy to changing the world, to having thoughts that had never been thought before. Not to say that we were better, but just to say... And women were working together and holding that up as a political principle. We work together. We won't be separated. We will not match the stereotype of women unable to be together and bickering and competitive and jealous. There was an excitement to that, an energy to that, that I have not seen since. You know, I headed a women's centre, I headed a queer centre. I've seen a lot of joyful activism, but none of it as intense as that first moment of, we used to say, breaking the world open. And we were breaking the world open.

EMILIE: Yeah.

SHANE: There's just a certain energy to that. And, you know, we were up all night, we gathered together at women's music events, which were very, very powerful at the time in bringing people together. We had a culture of bookstores and restaurants and music and a culture of intense volunteering at domestic violence agencies and homeless women's shelters. We were with each other all the time. And it was joyful and it was hard. These extremes that you really don't see as much now. You know, working on domestic violence was like I was working at a job. It's a job. It's not an adventure now. I mean, it is an adventure in some ways, but you know what I mean.

EMILIE: Yeah, it seems very different from your time. Were you part of any other organisations at the same time as you are part of *Sojourner*, or were you committed 100 percent? Because you said that before, but I was just wondering what you were doing other things.

SHANE: I mean, in a way, I was involved because, for example, *Sojourner*, we wrote news items about other groups and we interviewed other groups and we were asked all the time, "could you run a news article about us?", "can you run your article?", "can you give us a free full page ad?" There was a lot of dialogue about, you know, how could you print that? Well, we're a forum and, you know, we want to print our side... And so, in a way, you know, I was involved in a million groups, but actually *Sojourner* was so demanding that if you were big time involved in a publication like *Sojourner*, you were not like scampering off to go spend the night as, you know, the overnight

person at a domestic violence shelter. It just would have been too much.

EMILIE: Yes, of course. And you did that after.

SHANE: Yeah, yeah. After and before, but not during. I mean, *Sojourner*, I mean, we worked 60, 70, 80 hours a week.

EMILIE: Yeah.

SHANE: Burnout was a thing. It was definitely a thing for us. You're working 60, 70, 80 hours a week after week after week and then you feel you can't leave and you can't rest because you're letting down the movement.

EMILIE: Yes. Activist burnout, it makes sense. Also, I want to ask you more about the reproductive freedom movement, because this is the "line" of my paper. I'm focusing on that mainly. I chose *Sojourner* as well because the newspaper would deal with these issues a lot. When I found the newspaper online and I would type keywords, you know, *Sojourner* would come up a lot. And I found that you, as a newspaper, were covering a lot of issues linked to reproductive freedom. So I just wanted to ask you more about that. Was it one of the main issues that you cared about at the time or was it very important, maybe more important than... You said the ERA, for instance, was not that important for you as maybe a radical feminist or less mainstream?

SHANE: There were two issues that we felt were getting lots and lots and lots and lots of mainstream attention. By the time I got there in 1983, *Roe v. Wade* was established. Now, when the paper was founded in 1975, it was new. And so there was tremendous concern then about can we hold this decision in place, can we expand choice... By the time I got to *Sojourner* in 1983, the threats to *Roe v. Wade*, the threats to choice... The anxiety was down. Now in Boston, an extremely Catholic city, clinics... That's where the first clinic picketing happened because of the intense Catholicism of Boston and the prominence of the Boston Archdiocese. Abortion was up in Boston in ways that it wasn't in some other cities that are less Catholic like, you know, San Francisco, Catholic, but Boston, now there's Catholic. So in some ways, our geography meant more attention to this than in other places. But I think we felt that both the ERA and choice got a lot of attention in a lot of feminist publications. Those were two topics that the mainstream press would cover. They were seen as the feminist topics. *Ms.* did a huge amount of them. The mainstream press did a huge amount... Abortion and the ERA, these are big mainstream. NOW, the National Organisation for Women, was all over these issues. You know, we certainly felt, in every issue, I

mean, we had a lot of news about, you know, threats in other parts of the country, stuff happening in Boston. But we saw ourselves as wanting to be more on the cutting edge. Like, you know, the porn controversy, for example, could not happen in other publications. The question of are we going to accept... What is bisexuality? What do we think about that? That wasn't going to be in other publications. Prison rights, welfare rights, immigrant rights, those women's experiences, they weren't going to be in other publications. So, yes, I mean, we felt like we are a feminist publication, we need to make sure we are doing what we must do around reproductive health. I say more than the ERA, because reproductive health is a daily issue for women. So we did what we felt was the right thing to do. But these were well covered in other places by the mid 1980s. So we moved to the more cutting edge issues. Not moved to them, but devoted a lot of attention to them.

EMILIE: Yes.

SHANE: We just had a readership that said, you know, I don't need to get *Sojourner* to read about the ERA and abortion rights, I can read that other places. I count on you all to take me to new stuff, you know, write me something I don't already know, by the 80s. Now the 70s, that's another story. *Roe v. Wade*, you know, was relatively new. The struggle was still very intense.

EMILIE: But there was the Hyde Amendment.

SHANE: Right, now there were times when we needed to organise and then *Sojourner*, like all the publications, we needed to get people to rallies, we needed to get people to vote, we needed to get people to write to Congress. Yeah. So the times, like you're saying, all hands on deck. And, you know, we were like, we need to be on deck, but otherwise we tried to diversify beyond the big two.

EMILIE: OK, yeah. And because in 1983 there was more about choice than abortion, were you... Do you think that the newspaper was trying to cover other issues relating to reproductive freedom such as sterilisation and for instance, teenagers' access to abortion, maybe things like these?

SHANE: Exactly, yeah. We did a lot on forced sterilisation. We ran some leading edges... There was a leading edge within reproductive health justice, just as there was the leading edge outside them. Yeah, we tried to focus on the edgier, less well-known issues like forced sterilisation on disabled women, Native American women, poor women and yes, teenagers' access to abortion, both legal and then practical. So, you know, we were more interested in that kind of thing than the sort of... Observed in the mainstream. But other people were focusing on that at that point.

EMILIE: Right, yes. I am reading my questions and it just seems so easy to answer to now, like, was being a member of *Sojourner* a way of doing activist work. I know the answer, yes, obviously it was.

SHANE: Oh, yeah. I wouldn't have done... I mean, I love to write and edit. I love to write and edit, but I did *Sojourner* not because it was writing and editing but because it was activism.

EMILIE: Yeah. It was a feminist newspaper.

SHANE: I mean, yeah, when you can put what you love doing as a process, writing and editing, in the service of a mighty movement that's changing the world, I mean, it doesn't get any better than that.

EMILIE: Yeah. I wanted to ask you about the notion of sisterhood because you talked about solidarity earlier. What do you think of the word sisterhood, and sisterhood that prevailed in the 70s especially?

SHANE: I loved the word sisterhood. When I came out as a feminist and a lesbian in 1974, sisterhood felt powerful and we talked about sisterhood all the time. I've talked about disappointment and disillusionment, and just as sisters can have terrible quarrels, so did we. And I am one of those women who doesn't use the word sisterhood very easily anymore because our ideals and our hopes and our visions, I mean, I'll always feel like crying. We had so many ideals and hopes and visions of sisterhood, it was always on our lips. All the posters at *Sojourner*, in the women's bookstores, all the signs at the rallies, sisterhood, sisterhood, sisterhood, we believed in it. We believed in it too much. We were not ready for the challenges of sisterhood. And many of us thought we would never mirror our own families. Did we always get along with our sisters? Did we sometimes have terrible conflicts with our sisters? Yes. We thought we would be spared. We felt... So, I think, how I do think of it now is that we felt solidarity, communion, love, you know, mutual joy. We imagined sisterhood. But in the end, it wasn't powerful and I actually talked with Robin Morgan about this, and it's hard. It's hard, it's a tender spot. We believed in it. And in some ways it was joyful, in some ways it was just very disillusioning.

EMILIE: Thank you for answering that question. Can I ask you about *Ms.* magazine as well, because of all the things I've read, it appears as a mainstream feminist magazine and the paper I wrote last year kind of said that it was a feminist magazine and also mainstream. It was in-between. And I saw a few letters in the newspapers I am working on, and they sometimes would criticise *Ms.*

for being a bit too mainstream. And I just want to have your thoughts on that.

SHANE: Well it was definitely more mainstream than most of us were, however, two things about *Ms.*. One is it reached women, I mean, *Sojourner* reached 40, 50,000 women. *Ms.*, more. So it reached women and it had to look out for its advertisers, it wanted to be a forum too, it wanted to keep its circulation up, it wanted to keep its advertisers, it wanted to exist because it was the only national glossy publication. So they had all those concerns. But they did take chances. And when they took a chance, it was so powerful. I remember as a young lesbian just coming out. *Ms.* Magazine took a real chance because it was, you know, like Bella Abzug, oh, she's a lesbian, Gloria Steinem, she's a secret lesbian, *Ms.* Magazine, it's just for lesbians. None of that was true, in fact. But they took a big chance very early on in 1974, and they published a story about two women falling in love. And I will never forget, it was called Mountain Radio, and it was by Sandy Boucher who went on to become a fairly well-known feminist writer. And so here is this magazine that went out far more than any lesbian publication, I mean, not even close. It went out to all these women, it was on all these newsstands and it had a story of two women falling in love. And, you know, we could forgive *Ms.* a lot of, you know, mainstream's sins because every once in a while they published an article by Audre Lorde or they published a lesbian love story and they could reach people we couldn't. They did take chances. They did try. And that little lesbian in Maryland, that story, I mean, I could read lesbian love stories but from the lesbian presses bought at the lesbian bookstore. But, oh, look at this. You know, it lent us, you know, what can I say? There was a validation and a solidarity and a joy in seeing us, real us, out there that *Ms.* was able to provide.

EMILIE: Yeah. To represent lots of identities.

SHANE: Yeah, and they showed black feminists. I mean, you know, Gloria was continually presenting the images of the voices of especially black. You know, I think they struggled with... They did have some Asian-American women, they had some Latinas. But, you know, Gloria was especially close to black women and Native American women. And, you know, in a million ways, the covers and the images, they were fighting, fighting, fighting the idea that feminism has nothing to offer to women of colour.

EMILIE: Yeah, yeah, it is true.

SHANE: And they did that. Who else could do that? There was no other feminist representation that was nearly as much read, that could just keep saying to the world "don't you dare think that we are

eight angry"... I mean, there were eight angry lesbians in New York City doing a lot of work, but no, no. This movement is way, way bigger than that.

EMILIE: Yeah. Actually, you were talking about the fact that they had black or Latina women writing for the magazine. Did you have any women of colour in *Sojourner*?

SHANE: We did. I said there were a lot of roles at *Sojourner* and a lot of women, I meant to say this earlier, worked at *Sojourner* in order to meet other women, you know, to make friends, to meet a lover. So it was, you know, like everything else, it's a bookstore, but it's also where you meet other people. It's a newspaper, but it's where you meet other people. It's a concert, but it's where you meet other people. So there was always, how can we meet each other? So it was a crossroads and you could just come and you could be a proofreader, you could, you know, stack papers, you could...

EMILIE: I guess there was always something to do.

SHANE: A million gazillion things to do and women would come and meet each other. So, you know, so there was like who we publish where we could really kind of self-consciously control, you know, for diverse voices. And then in terms of our volunteers, you know, we were in this MIT warehouse building so that had some limitations. It wasn't very inviting, it was pretty, pretty crappy. And it was in an industrial part of town near MIT so if you didn't have a car, if you didn't feel great about coming over... That changed when the paper moved a few years after I left. But our volunteers, since they were self selected, I would say they were, you know, whether there were women of colour, definitely, more than our critics would ever acknowledge. It was helpful to have a car, especially going to work until twelve or one in the morning. I would say it was not as diverse in terms of volunteers and paid staff as I would have liked it to be for sure.

EMILIE: Yeah, yeah. It was just something I was wondering because I really thought it was only people from the university that just, the staff and the students that were just...

SHANE: Oh no, just the first two years. And it was actually much more staff than students because there were no women students there. You definitely could get eight women in one room. There were really almost no women students at MIT, so they had to rely on staff to get the paper going. And that's another reason why it lasted and why it had good production values because it wasn't people who had exams and who were going to graduate in a couple of years...

EMILIE: ... and be done and leave.

SHANE: Yeah. Just like an accident. But that was really helpful.

EMILIE: Yeah. So it really grew out of MIT in the end, as you said, it became national.

SHANE: In fact, it's interesting now, I've had a couple of interviews where, you know, we've talked about the history of the paper but I would say that by the time I was there, no one even knew it started at MIT, I mean, it wasn't, you know, it's a historic fact, but it's not something anyone was aware of.

EMILIE: Right. OK, yeah.

SHANE: People thought, well, how strange that you're down here in this weird, you know, MIT industrial area. But they didn't know it was because that's how we got free space originally.

EMILIE: And it's still an interesting history as well. As you said, only a few women were at this university, so it grew out from this context as well.

SHANE: Yeah, the few women there were had to be kind of super technically on it. You know, great designers, great typesetters, in order to make their way as women at MIT.

EMILIE: Yeah. Do you remember how funding the paper, as I know it was difficult. I think the newspaper paused for a few months, I can't remember when it was though.

SHANE: I closed deliberately...

EMILIE: Early 80s, I think.

SHANE: Yeah.

EMILIE: Yeah so how was it after that, because at the end of when you were there, the situation was better, funding more of the staff and everything. But in between, how was it like, every month, to fund the paper?

SHANE: You know, when I got there, they were on the verge of declaring bankruptcy, formally filing bankruptcy. They were down to 16 pages from having been 48, practically no advertising. The only two ways at that time to support a publication, said now and always, were subscriptions and advertising. What was unusual about the feminist papers is they were also supported by women

who had money, who were giving money to the paper because it was seen as activism, it's a way of supporting activism. It wasn't... You weren't giving money to... Who gives money to *The New York Times*? You know, it was a way of supporting your activism. So there were donations along with advertising and subscriptions, but subscriptions were way down because there was... The other women's paper, *Equal Times*, had started. So subscriptions were down and advertising was down. And women on the MIT staff, they had moved up in their positions, they were making more money. So they were able to put more money in to keep the paper going. But I realised this is not sustainable and it wasn't sustainable because they were on the verge of bankruptcy. Like, we were just women working at MIT, we don't have that much money. So for the first year and a half, I had been in marketing. My previous job had been marketing a computer that read out loud to blind people. I had just been working in marketing and so I thought, let's get the advertising up and we have our own type setting, we're writers, we can come up with really beautiful ads. You've probably seen in the paper, the ads are really pretty, and that's really different from other papers, too. And it wasn't because they were from like Absolut Vodka. It's because they were women-owned businesses. They were really pretty because what we would say is we will sit with you and design an ad that's really about you. You're a therapist, you're an accountant. We'll sit with you and design a really, really great ad for you. We weren't interested in like, give us your business card and then it shows up and it looks funky. So I really decided to pump up the advertising and it was very successful. This is not advertising, you're supporting the paper and you are putting yourself out there as a serious person doing serious work. So we pulled the advertising way up and then I changed the article mix quite a lot so more people were interested in reading it. I thought, well, let's not compete with *Equal Times* for local news and calendar. I mean, they're doing that or monthly. We're never going to be as good as they are at that. We can publish long, thoughtful articles. So I really went after who I thought were great writers and so our readership was going way up and our subscriptions started going back up. And then I also created community events. I thought, if women with money want to give us money, that's great. But what I did was I talked to famous women into coming and doing benefits for us and we would make from the benefits what was a lot of money at the time, like five to ten thousand dollars. That was a lot of money in the 1980s, it was like a fortune, like you won the lottery. So Alice Walker would come read, Adrienne Rich would read, Audre Lorde appeared three times, Pat Parker... These very famous women, we would put them on at a local theatre, we would get a thousand women. And so even paying five dollars, six dollars, seven dollars a ticket... So these were these events that people loved, you know, because we didn't have that many events in the women's community. But you could see like a thousand other women,



there were community announcements, there were tables. You could bring like 12 of your friends. These were really big. And so the donations were not from rich, affluent women anymore, they were from these big communities. So actually, after a year and a half, we were doing much better: way more subscriptions, way more advertising, these great community events. But I wanted to have a larger paid staff because I was doing like a thousand jobs, as some other women, and I still hadn't started to pay myself, we had no health insurance. Retirement? I don't think so. So I deliberately stopped publishing the paper for three months and I announced it, I said, even though we're doing much better, we would like to last, which we did, actually. We would like to last, we are deliberately stopping and we are asking if you will help us build an endowment so that we can really keep going. And it was... The response was fantastic. We would really, you know, we needed health insurance, we needed salaries. I don't think we ever got retirement but we needed to pay our writers something, we needed, like, an emergency fund. For over three months, we raised three times more money than I hoped we would. And then we reopened, which we said, you know, we planned to reopen, but we can't put out the paper and also do fundraising. So like no one had ever heard of it or done it but... Actually that was one of my better moments, one of my better ideas.

EMILIE: Great comeback as well, I remember the cover when it came back.

SHANE: We really... People realised that they missed *Sojourner*. And three months, it was the holidays, it was December, January...

EMILIE: And maybe they realised it was important, that it needed funds and that people were really working behind it.

SHANE: Yeah, it really strengthened our relationship with readers. They felt more a part of the paper. It wasn't like this magical thing that came every month like, oh, you're real women who are like working for nothing. It was, I have to say, a few life moments that I took a chance and it worked out.

EMILIE: Yeah, it's great. I think you really asserted your place then as a journalist for this feminist newspaper that was just not some small newspaper and that needed to be paid the right amount.

SHANE: Yeah. And it was great because we were able to reach out to new writers, we increased our circulation while we weren't publishing. People said "oh, it seems great, I'll sign up". And it was like twelve dollars, "I can do that".

EMILIE: Right. Do you remember... Do you know about *Big Mama Rag* – *off our backs* we talked about it, about *Big Mama Rag* and *New Directions for Women*?

SHANE: *New Directions* was, you know, it was way more mainstream and academic. They felt like another category. *Big Mama Rag* felt more like us. *Big Mama Rag* was a genuine collective, it was more grassroots, it didn't have the advertising we had, it didn't have the national aspirations. So I think we were more like *off our backs* than *Big Mama Rag* or *New Directions*. And we weren't that like *off our backs*. I mean I used to think *off our backs* was actually more politically intense and serious than we were and I admired that. I always read *off our backs*. I felt like *off our backs* was the theoretical, the cutting edge theoretical political publication. They were really a thought leader and we were not. Their collective was thinking things. They wrote a lot of the paper themselves and they were a group of really brilliant women. We were more publishing the words of other women, like a more conventional *Ms.* type of periodical. But that collective, those women were thinking things and they said what they thought. We were a forum. They were opinionated. They were not even pretending to be a forum. They were great. I mean, and we were very different beasts that way.

EMILIE: That's great. And I think you were all supporting each other because I would sometimes see the name *Sojourner* appearing in the pages of *Big Mama Rag* or the name *Big Mama Rag* appearing in *Sojourner*, or *off our backs*... It just seems like all feminist newspapers were supporting one another.

SHANE: Yeah, I mean, we... Except for *Equal Times* in Boston, I think we felt a little competitors, it was like, oh, there go all our advertisers. Ah! That sounds a little competitive. That's a very unusual situation. Here's the thing. We definitely were in solidarity, but they were almost.... Because we were putting out papers which are very... It's very difficult. We almost never met at national conferences like the bookstores would meet and women's music would meet, and... It's very strange, the women's publications did not meet, we really did not know each other, unless we happened to know each other from like the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival or NOW or NWSA. And that's a shame. And that means it's very difficult to write. Like if I contemplate writing about the periodicals... I didn't know other women. We really didn't know each other, except from what we read in each other's papers. We didn't know each other like the bookstore women, they all knew each other. Same time, similar movement. And they met a lot, they closed their stores and they met. And we just didn't. And I think that's a terrible shame. Like, you know, Carol Anne Douglas. I read Carol Anne Douglas of *off our backs*. I think she's brilliant, brilliant. I mean, I'm from that area. So I started reading her at 17 years old. I kept reading her and reading her and reading her. Not once

have I met Carol Anne Douglas in person. She is like... She was a big influence on me. And I don't think anyone would say that there was one person at *Sojourner*, you know, who appeared every month who was a big influence on them because we were a forum, you know, like Audre Lorde, whatever she wanted to publish that's like, I think we'll publish that, Audre. But, you know, Carol Anne Douglas, every single issue was saying really brilliant, interesting things. And that's very different from *Sojourner*. You really got to know the collective at *off our backs* as a reader. And no one, like no one could have told you who the editor of *Sojourner* was, but people knew who the collective of *off our backs* was, it was signed there. And I wrote, I signed articles, but they were like reviews, they weren't like these thoughty, interesting articles about issues of the day. I left that for people like Audre Lorde.

EMILIE: Yeah, I see. It's very interesting.

SHANE: Audre, not me.

EMILIE: Yeah. But yeah I guess in that sense you were really doing a women's forum, you were doing your work as a journalist who...

SHANE: That was the idea, right. And the idea was if we editorialised too much, it would be less of a forum. But *off our backs*, it's like "where's my editor?" You know, I'm reading it for opinion. No, don't go hide behind a forum thing, Carol Anne, tell us what you think, which is not... I do know enough about Carol Anne through mutual friends, you know, there's not really an option saying what you thought. She was going to say what she thought. I hope you talk to Carol Anne. I know she's still around, I saw her on Zoom the other day.

EMILIE: OK, yeah. And I had another question. Last question I think, about global feminism in general and also if you had any international readers, if you remember that you had readers from maybe Western countries. I was wondering if your readership would reach as well women from other countries

SHANE: We never had that aspiration. There were other journals that were really well produced, like, we were newspapers. We were all in newsprint. Well, *New Directions* wasn't a newsprint, but, you know, we're newsletters and newspapers and we looked like it. But then there were the very nicely produced quarterly journals, *Sinister Wisdom*, *Trivia*, *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives*, and then the non lesbian feminist ones. And they very often did want to have international reach. They did publish women from other countries. We considered, should we really try to have a lot more content

from outside the US, and it just, it felt like too much, and we felt incredibly busy with art and we had Boston, we had New England and we had the United States. And we just thought, we're going to have to leave this to *Ms.* and these very nicely produced, thoughtful journals of feminism, which did have a lot more international content. I'd say not tremendously diverse voices, I mean, predominantly France, Germany and the UK. But it just felt like too much like we would just start chasing and chasing and it would take more and more energy and we would not be able to keep up with our existing work.

EMILIE: You were doing enough work there I guess.

SHANE: And we published every month and we had to... Advertisers were coming in and saying, you know, I want you to make my business card look pretty and trying to combine that with seeking out working class women in, you know, Manchester. It's like, my head is going to explode. I can't do this.

EMILIE: Yes, that was enough, enough work. I don't know if you had any feedback from readers that told you you really had an impact on them. Obviously, with letters, but maybe you didn't publish all the letters that really...

SHANE: Well, an interesting thing about newspapers is... And whether they're feminists or they're mainstream, is you get... And this has changed since the Internet, but before the Internet, when it took some energy to write a letter to the editor, I mean, you're going to write it, you're going to type it out, find the address, find an envelope, find a stamp. Very commonly then, whether you were *The New York Times* or you were *Sojourner*, you got way fewer letters. A thing about publishing is you don't hear from readers except when you totally, totally, totally, totally mess up and infuriate them. Then you get letters. But apart from that, a famous thing in the newspaper industry is people don't write, they don't write to add things. They don't write to say you're great, when they write is you are so fucked up, I can't even begin to tell you how fucked up you are a newspaper, that's what they write. So it gives you... So you have a feeling of crickets until everybody hates you. I mean one of the hardest things about publishing is that you get very little feedback. And of course you're sitting in an office publishing, you're not out there in the community like the bookstore women. They were meeting people and, you know, smiling and getting to know each other. We were isolated. So the fact that in publishing you get, before the Internet, very few letters except when people are pissed, that was kind of demoralising. And so one nice thing about stopping the paper for three months is that people wrote in and said, "oh, you're really going to be missed". "You really

matter”. “I’ve got three dollars, here they are”. And that brought us a little bit closer. But so we had the moment when we suspended and then at the community events, we’d have a thousand women. And then it was clear, oh, you are, I mean, you’re really out there, you are reading the paper, you do appreciate it. But people did not write except to say you are really, mostly, you are really fucked up. “How could you publish that article? Don’t you see that blah, blah, blah”. But, you know, often they had a point, it’s like... Oh, you’re right.

EMILIE: Yeah, it’s interesting. It makes sense because obviously now it would be so easy to just send a message that says “oh, you’re great, keep doing the good work”.

SHANE: Yeah you have instant gratification, you know the person’s going to get it in a minute and they might write you back in a minute. And it’s just a whole other vibe in publishing. And now, of course, generally you get much more than you can handle in terms of reader feedback. But back then, no.

EMILIE: Yeah. OK, I don’t have any other questions, is there anything else that you wanted to add or talk about?

SHANE: I think that’s about it. Yeah. Good luck with your paper.

EMILIE: OK, great. Well, thank you very much for your time.

SHANE: Thank you!

### Interview Consent Form

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as part of the above research project. Ethical procedures for academic research require that interviewees explicitly agree to being interviewed and how the information contained in their interview will be used. This consent form is necessary for me to ensure that you understand the purpose of your involvement and that you agree to the conditions of your participation. Would you therefore read the accompanying **information sheet** and then sign this form to certify that you approve the following:

- the interview will be recorded and/or a transcript will be produced
- you will be sent the transcript and given the opportunity to correct any factual errors
- the transcript of the interview will be analysed by Emilie Jacob as research investigator
- access to the interview transcript will be limited to Emilie Jacob and academic colleagues and researchers with whom she might collaborate as part of the research process

- any summary interview content, or direct quotations from the interview, that are made available through academic publication or other academic outlets will be anonymized so that you cannot be identified, and care will be taken to ensure that other information in the interview that could identify yourself is not revealed
- the actual recording will be destroyed
- any variation of the conditions above will only occur with your further explicit approval

**I also understand that my words may be quoted directly. With regards to being quoted, please initial next to any of the statements that you agree with:**

- **SMS** I wish to review any quotations from me for publication
- I wish to review the notes, transcripts, or other data collected during the research pertaining to my participation.
- **SMS** I agree to be quoted directly.
- I agree to be quoted directly if my name is not published and a made-up name (pseudonym) is used.
- **SMS** I agree that the researchers may publish documents that contain quotations by me.

### **Contact Information**

If you have any further questions or concerns about this study, please contact: Emilie Jacob [emja.jacob@gmail.com](mailto:emja.jacob@gmail.com)

You can also contact Emilie Jacob's supervisor: Anaïs Le Fèvre-Berthelot [anais.lefevre@univ-rennes2.fr](mailto:anais.lefevre@univ-rennes2.fr)

Date: March 20, 2021

Name of participant: Shane Snowdon

- **Appendix D: Interview of Elayne Clift**

Elayne Clift was a member of *New Directions for Women*. I sent her an email with my questionnaire that she sent me back with her answers on 27 March 2021.

Edited by Emilie Jacob on 27 March 2021.

- **First, can you tell me a little bit about yourself and what you are doing now?**

My full bio is on my website: [www.elayne-clift.com](http://www.elayne-clift.com) but briefly I've had three careers that are all related: I began my work in women's health education and advocacy when I was program director for the National Women's Health Network in the late 1970s. That position helped shape me as a feminist, but it also revealed that even in "sisterhood" politics prevail. (I was forced out of that position, which I loved.) I went on to earn my M.A. in Health Communication and began working internationally in maternal and child health. That led to my academic career – I've taught at Yale and other colleges and universities, including one in Thailand, and I've been a guest lecturer internationally. But my first and always love is women's health and the sociocultural issues that affect us all. I began writing in the 1980s, as both a journalist and creative writer. I have written several books of fiction, creative nonfiction/memoir, poetry, travel and have compiled and edited 4 anthologies. My work is widely anthologized and published internationally. My work now is primarily writing, conducting writing workshops, and giving occasional lectures.

- **Can you tell me about your experience at *New Directions for Women*? How did it all start for you? Why did you want to join the newspaper? What did you do?**

I became familiar with *NDFW* while working in women's health. I started writing for them around that time and eventually became a regular contributor. They were instrumental in my being granted press credentials when I wanted to cover the UN Decade for Women conferences and other fora relating to women's issues. I was sad when they folded after so many years.

- **How was the paper working and preparing issues? What was the environment like?**

**Did you become friends with other women from the collective? (Any names can be changed if preferable).**

I was not involved in the production aspects of *NDFW*. I knew other writers that did work for them and made a few friends because of those connections. They continue to today.

- ***New Directions for Women* was an alternative feminist publication. Were you part of any other organisations at the time? How did you see the feminist movement in the 1980s?**

I chaired two groups in Wash. DC for a time that dealt with women's health issues. My other formal affiliations had more to do with public health and writing, but I was pretty well known in women's health and journalism circles so was often called on by media and others.. I wrote for a number of state feminist publications as well as other outlets. Sadly, although I was all in with the feminist movement of the 80s, I had some punishing experiences that revealed to me that politics and power are corruptive irrespective of gender.

- **I am working on the coverage of the reproductive freedom movement in the 80s in four feminist newspapers. *New Directions for Women* has many articles related to abortion or reproductive health in general. Do you remember how important these issues personally were for you and the members? Did you feel these rights were in danger with Reagan in power and with the right-to-lifers' actions?**

Of course I remember how vital these issues were. Prior to the pill (1960) we all had our pregnancies scares, and I personally covered for friends who had abortions. All Republican presidents have meant we had to fight for reproductive rights, none quite as hideous as what we are fighting for now. And we still don't have the ERA nor have we signed onto CEDAW. It is astounding to my generation of Second Wave feminists that we are fighting the same battles today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The right to privacy and decisionmaking over our bodies (and lives) continues. It has been women's reality through the ages.

- **Do you think that writing about reproductive health issues helped the *New Directions for Women* readers to realise that there was "more" about reproductive rights than the**



**right to abortion? More generally, was being a member of *New Directions for Women* a way of doing activist work?**

*NDFW* cared about all the myriad issues that women had to struggle with. Remember, this was the time when the Boston Health Book Collective was creating enormous change in how and where women got trusted information and regained agency over their healthcare issues. And yes, writing was and is a deeply important political act. It is activism in a democracy and we were advocating for women all the time. We made a huge difference for women (and some men) in trying to build a more equal society.

- ***New Directions for Women* intended to be a forum in which all women were welcomed and were given a voice. The feminist movement evolved from a white and middle-class movement to a movement that included other issues that could participate in women's oppression, such as race or lesbian issues. In the 80s, what did you think of the notion of "sisterhood" that prevailed in the 70s?**

I had trouble with the notion of "sisterhood". There were women in the movement who weren't very nice or were extremely egotistical and territorial. They were not women I would consider friends let alone "sisters". Eventually I came to embrace the notion of unity but I never used the sign-off "In Sisterhood." I lost a job I adored because of "sisters" who let it happen.

- **Last year, I worked on *Ms.* Magazine and wrote a dissertation on their coverage of abortion in 1973. What did an alternative feminist newspaper such as *NDFW* think of the mainstream *Ms.* in the 1980s?**

I really can't say but of course we all respected what *MS* was about and who it was for. In its own way *MS* was an alternative press. It has never been considered mainstream media. But it was star-studded and had its own issues. (Full disclosure: I currently have a query into them and have yet to receive the courtesy of a reply. Some time ago they also turned down a story I wanted to do about the four women "matriarchs" who created a constituency for feminism back in the 1960s. I think because they worked with men in Congress to get legislation passed, and one of them felt that the ERA would fail women who worked in fields and factories if they refused to recognize that there

were circumstances in which women did need protective legislation, e.g, farm laborers were suffering urinary tract infections b/c they couldn't pee in the fields like men did! Chicken pluckers couldn't go to the loo because it took too much time to get off the line, and out of the overalls they had to wear. Second wave feminism was quite elitist and as you said, white, well educated, and not always inclusive. The rhetoric didn't always match the positions they took or the behavior in some cases.

- **Do you have any memories or sources relating to the number of copies *New Directions for Women* printed each month? Even a rough idea would help me a lot!**

Sorry, no. I think they may have been bi-monthly but I don't remember for sure.

- **How were you dealing with funding the paper? Was it sometimes difficult to produce?**

I had nothing to do with that, but I know they always struggled to keep going.

- **Did you have the impression that it was worth it because it had an impact? Is it what drove you to keep on going?**

It definitely had an impact. It was the leading alternative paper at the time. It was worth it to me to write for them b/c there were so few outlets for what we were writing about, and it helped me, all of us, gain credibility as journalists because we could provide clips of our work.

- **I am also working on *Big Mama Rag*, *off our backs* and *Sojourner*. Do you think that *NDFW* had an impact on the feminist community? Were these newspapers well-known within the feminist press community?**

Yes, we had a big impact. And yes, the other feminist presses were well known to us feminists. We were all the only game in town.

### **Interview Consent Form**

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- any summary interview content, or direct quotations from the interview, that are made available through academic publication or other academic outlets will be anonymized so that you cannot be identified, and care will be taken to ensure that other information in the interview that could identify yourself is not revealed
- any variation of the conditions above will only occur with your further explicit approval

**I also understand that my words may be quoted directly. With regards to being quoted, please initial next to any of the statements that you agree with:**

- I wish to review the QUOTES collected during the research pertaining to my participation. EGC
- I agree to be quoted directly. EGC
- I agree to be quoted directly if my name is not published and a made-up name (pseudonym) is used.

### **Contact Information**

If you have any further questions or concerns about this study, please contact: Emilie Jacob [emja.jacob@gmail.com](mailto:emja.jacob@gmail.com)

You can also contact Emilie Jacob's supervisor: Anaïs Le Fèvre-Berthelot [anais.lefevre@univ-rennes2.fr](mailto:anais.lefevre@univ-rennes2.fr)

Date: 26 March 21

Name of participant: Elayne Clift

- **Appendix E:** Transcript of interview with Eleanor Bader

Eleanor Bader worked for *New Directions for Women* as a news editor for about two years in the late 1980s. We talked on Zoom about the newspaper that left her disillusioned.

Interviewed on 30 March 2021. Transcribed and edited by Emilie Jacob.

EMILIE: So first, I just wanted to ask you about yourself, what you've been doing since *New Directions for Women* and what you're doing now.

ELEANOR: I mean, I left in 1990, so it was a very long time ago. I left to work at a college called the New School for Social Research in New York City and I worked in a number of jobs for them. I was not writing at that point. I spent eight years there working as a director of student services, helping students arrange internships and working directly with students. And after that, I worked on a book called *Targets of Hatred Anti-Abortion Terrorism*. I was hired by someone to be the writer of this book that we co-authored but that I did the work on. And after that, I taught for 16 years at a community college in Brooklyn. Right now I'm not teaching. I hated teaching on Zoom. And I have been writing full time. I'm working now as a journalist pretty much full time, writing not so much about women's issues, but about poverty, about housing and homelessness, about education policy for mostly left-leaning magazines and blogs and newspapers.

EMILIE: That's great.

ELEANOR: Yeah.

EMILIE: Do you want to tell me about your experience at *New Directions for Women*, how it all started and what you were doing, you stayed there for two years I think?

ELEANOR: Yeah, a little more than two years. In the late 80s, I left to take the job at the New School. First of all, I live in Brooklyn, New York, which was a two hour each way commute to the New Jersey Office of *New Directions*. This was before we used computers, so I had to travel by bus. I don't have a car, so I had to travel by bus to *New Directions*. So the travel was nuts and I did that three days a week. That was part of the reason I left was because the logistics of travel were ridiculous. But the experience was not fabulous. I got there because I got a phone call one day from the editor. I was working then at a newspaper called *The Guardian*, which was a left wing weekly.

In *The Guardian*, I wrote a lot about women's issues, I did a column called "Women and Struggle". And the editor called me up one day and said "hi, I want to hire you to be my news editor". I didn't even know... I knew *New Directions*, but I didn't really know *New Directions*. So I went out to New Jersey, she interviewed me and she hired me. At first it was really wonderful because it's a feminist newspaper, it's all these wonderful women... Turned out not to be so wonderful. I was the kid. And even though I'm an old person now, I wasn't an old person when I started. So they treated me like I was 11 years old at all times, they treated me like I was an idiot. They were much more upper class than I have ever been. The classism was unbelievable. I got to work with a lot of wonderful writers, I got to write some really interesting stuff and do some interesting research, but the way the office was structured, the editor was here and everyone else was here and she treated us like we were her servants. And it was horrible. One of the reasons I left is I hated... She treated me like shit.

EMILIE: OK. Do you want to say her name? If you don't want her name to appear in the interview transcription, we can withdraw it.

ELEANOR: Her name is Phyllis Kriegel. I don't know if she's still alive, but yeah. She'd be about a hundred years old now.

EMILIE: Yeah, OK. Yeah, it's interesting because obviously we imagine everything was great and we don't think about how it really was inside the movement. And that's what I'm interested about as well. So you were doing the news?

ELEANOR: I was the news editor so we would come up with story ideas. It was my job to find someone to write those stories and then it was my job to edit those stories and work directly with the writers on any revisions that were necessary. And I also did my own writing a little bit.

EMILIE: Yeah. Do you remember any articles that you wrote that were important to you?

ELEANOR: Not really but I remember one series about this Orthodox Jewish woman whose child had been taken away from her by her husband's family based on a report that her mother had... Her mother said she saw the father of the child sexually abusing the baby. The woman sued for full... I think, I don't remember all the details, but she wanted full custody. And instead, the courts, the Orthodox Jewish courts, ruled that she herself was an unfit mother and they gave the child to the father who had been accused of sexually abusing the child. And I don't know whatever happened with that case, but I remember writing a series of articles and interviewing the mother, the

grandmother, about what she'd seen and the mother about how horrified she was that her ex-husband might possibly have sexually abused their child. And then the indignity of him getting custody of that child was pretty intense.

EMILIE: I can imagine. So were you working on preparing the issues, on the production part of the paper?

ELEANOR: Yes. Because, I mean, it was a very small staff. There was a book editor who came in once a week. There was a woman named Suzanne Messing who came in three days a week. I was there three days a week. Phyllis was there, I believe, five days a week. And then there was an administrative person who paid the bills and kind of oversaw the office functioning who was there a couple of days a week or so. And then there were different people who would drop in as volunteers for an afternoon here or an afternoon there. But when it was time, I mean, again, there were no computers. It's hard to wrap your head around now. We would literally count the words in an article. We would get printed out and we would have to figure out how much space it would take and then figure out how big the picture would be. I used to cry doing that. Maths is not my thing at all. So having to figure out how long an article was going to run and how much space it would take and how big... The pictures made me crazy. It was not my scale at all and I had to do it but it was torture.

EMILIE: I see. And do you remember how funding the paper was? Maybe you were not doing this at all but do you maybe remember if it was sometimes difficult to produce because it was a feminist publication, so maybe advertising was not always easy to find?

ELEANOR: Absolutely. And the subscription base was very small. So, you know, it relied on... First of all, let me backup. Phyllis Kriegel, the editor, donated fifty thousand dollars a year. She was a very wealthy lady. She donated fifty thousand dollars a year, which is the major piece of our budget. And then people would pay for subscriptions. I don't remember how much they were, but it was cheap. And we didn't really have the ability to do the kind of marketing that you would have needed to make it a really national publication and have a much wider readership. So it relied on kind of word of mouth for subscribers. So that was a problem. We did get ads from different women's centres, from different feminist bookstores and publishers but again, our rates were really low and there really wasn't enough money to do the jobs that we needed to do if we really, really wanted this to, you know, explode, have become widely known. It was not a widely known newspaper at all, especially because it had more of a left wing slant than a lot of the other feminist

publications that were exclusively focused on women's issues. We talked about... We did talk about, to its credit, we talked about race, we talked about class. It was just that the office was run like a plantation. So that was the problem.

EMILIE: Yeah, it's interesting because I read that it was the first national feminist newspaper, but when I was looking at the numbers and other things, I thought it was maybe not true. Also talking with a woman from *Sojourner*, I realised *Sojourner* seemed to be way more known than *New Directions*. And I thought that maybe it was linked with the fact that the founder, Paula Kassell, was from NOW and maybe that's why *New Directions* got some attention. I don't know.

ELEANOR: *Sojourner* was a better newspaper. Who did you talk to, did you talk to Stephanie?

EMILIE: I talked with Shane Snowdon yesterday and I also contacted Vicki Bier.

ELEANOR: OK, yeah. Now, I wrote for them a little bit, and Stephanie Poggi, who was the editor for a while, was a good friend. It was run very differently. They were much more process-oriented and they were much kinder to each other than the people at *New Directions*. But *New Directions*... Paula was, you know, she was a very middle-of-the-road, mainstream kind of woman who was a feminist, but NOW was her base, she was not to the left of NOW, but it was definitely... The Democratic Party was everything. And, you know, some of us at *New Directions* a little later wanted the magazine to be a little further to the left and not just rely on the Democratic Party. So there was that tension as well. And I don't know. *Sojourner*, *off our backs*, you know, existed for a very long time, so they may have had... They may have been, you know, they may have been earlier. I don't know the history. I don't remember the history.

EMILIE: Yeah, they appeared around the same time. And I wanted to ask you about the environment there. You talked a bit about that but did you still become friends with other women or was it always tense?

ELEANOR: It was OK. I mean, I'm still... Susan Davis, the book editor, was my friend and I helped her get the job. So we were friends. She died in September. So we were friends and we used to take the bus into New Jersey together. She came in once a week. I am on Facebook friends with Lynn Wenzel, but we were never friends. We were just sort of co-workers. Sue Missing is... She's got to be close to 90 now. She lives in Massachusetts in an assisted living facility. I mean, we exchange Christmas cards each year, but that's really it. I was 10 to 15 years younger than everybody.

EMILIE: How old were you?

ELEANOR: I was in my late 20s, early 30s when I was there, and they were all in their 40s, 50s and 60s. So part of it was that dynamic, too, that I was their daughter or granddaughter and they treated me like that. So it was never like we were never friends, friends-friends.

EMILIE: Yeah

ELEANOR: The office person, and this is horrible, but the office person, I don't remember her last name, Trish something. She died of a drug overdose. She was like a year or two older than me. I had no idea she was a drug addict. And then she died and it was just like completely shocking. No one really knew that she had this issue. We were kind of friends because Phyllis treated both of us like we were just her slaves. So we bonded over that to some extent. But she lived in New Jersey, I lived in Brooklyn, neither had a car, so we didn't really ever hang out.

EMILIE: Yeah, I see. So I'm working on the coverage of the reproductive freedom movement in these newspapers and I noticed that they are lots of articles relating to abortion or reproductive health in general. And I wanted to know more about that. Was it an issue that was very important for the newspaper in general. Did you feel that in the 80s these rights were in danger with Reagan in power and the New Right trying to do everything possible to withdraw these rights, these abortion rights, choice, for women?

ELEANOR: Absolutely. And it was also the era in which rescues were happening, so groups like Operation Rescue and Operation Save America were going in torturing clinics and clinicians and patients going into these buildings. So it was really important, we felt, to cover what was going on and to try to boost support for reproductive health and for the actual women who were doing the health care provision in clinics all over the country because they were really being targeted at that point. So that was a central focus. And we talked about all kinds of issues, though. Lesbian rights were pretty important, women's history was really important, but reproductive freedom was really kind of the glue that everyone agreed on all the time. But we really wanted to try to broaden it out a little.

EMILIE: Yeah. I guess you didn't want to cover only abortion but also other issues relating to reproductive freedom. And especially as a news editor, you had to choose which news you wanted to cover so I imagine that had an impact on that as well.



ELEANOR: Absolutely. And we wanted to focus on, you know, women's right to have children as well. And so we covered the need for child care, affordable, good, high quality child care. We talked about some of the gaps in the ability to get good ob/gyn care. So we definitely talked about all of the reproductive freedom issues that are now under the umbrella of reproductive freedom. We definitely saw it as more than just the fight to keep abortion legal, although that was the most salient back point that we saw.

EMILIE: Yeah. So do you think that writing so much about different aspects of reproductive health helped the readers to know that there were more to it than abortion and to expand their vision on the issue? And in a way, you were doing activist work in educating and getting the readers informed about these issues, especially as you were saying that *New Directions for Women* was a bit too upper class and maybe the readers might have been as well.

ELEANOR: Oh, I'm sure they were. But they were legitimately concerned about reproductive freedom. And most of the people who read the publication were at least Democrats or NOW members kind of people. They were not necessarily leftists, they were not necessarily socialists, but they had an elevated consciousness about the centrality of abortion and access to birth control and the whole gamut of reproductive health issues. So I don't think that anyone looked at the paper and said, "oh my God, they're pro-choice, don't send me this rag ever again". Most people were on board with that. They may have not always agreed with every article, but in general, it was a liberal publication read by liberal white feminists. I don't think it ever broke out of the white community. I don't think it had... We would try to get writers of colour and we reviewed a lot of books by women of colour. But in general, the readership and the staff was white.

EMILIE: Yeah. I noticed a few times that the newspaper was trying to be more inclusive and include all of these issues that would not necessarily concern rich white women, basically, but do you think that it was enough? Did you receive letters that said it was maybe not enough, not inclusive enough?

ELEANOR: It was never inclusive enough, and we did try to get writers, but we were paying something like twenty five dollars an article, if we paid at all. So it was hard to get a lot of writers who were writing as their income to write a two thousand word article for twenty five dollars because it would be a week's worth of work. And in terms of where we were able to distribute the paper, because we didn't have a lot of money, we didn't print a huge number of issues. So we would send it to subscribers and then have a few hundred issues left over. If we really wanted to get

the issues out, we would have been distributing it all over the country to all kinds of women's centres and places where feminists were having conversations. But we didn't do that. We didn't do the outreach because, you know, basically Phyllis wasn't willing to give more than fifty thousand dollars, which I certainly... I don't blame her at all, I mean, she was more than generous for a very long time.

EMILIE: Yeah. I was wondering if there were any volunteers working for *New Directions*?

ELEANOR: There were volunteers who came in, but they came in erratically so... I remember one woman who came in maybe for three hours one afternoon a week to do proofreading, and she only came in after all the articles were in and we were ready to go to press. She proofread before we had the columns printed out so she would come in and help with that. And there were a couple of other volunteers. But most of the people there, Phyllis was never paid. But I believe everyone else got a small salary and I don't remember how small, but we were paid.

EMILIE: Were you working at the same time or where you also part of other organisation, maybe feminist organisations too?

ELEANOR: Yeah, I think so. I think I was still writing for *The Guardian* then, and... I think I was still doing that and occasional other freelance jobs. But *New Directions* took up a lot of time and a lot of space in my head and in my life for the time that I was there.

EMILIE: Yeah. I guess it was more a job rather than a feminist commitment.

ELEANOR: It was both, but it was certainly also a job. It started off more as a feminist commitment and it turned into a job because it just, you know, at a certain point I just couldn't deal with the commute anymore and I couldn't stand Phyllis for one more second. So it was time to go and I was lucky I was able to get other work that I loved.

EMILIE: Yeah. Do you want to talk about the word "sisterhood" because I know it differs so much from the 70s to the 80s, I don't know what you think about this word, especially after this maybe deceptive experience at this feminist newspaper. I don't know, does it ring a bell to you?

ELEANOR: It doesn't. It's a nice idea but people bring their race and class assumptions to every situation and unfortunately, the assumption that we're all sisters is false. There's a lot of work that needs to be done in order for women to actually hear each other and treat each other with respect. And race in particular, race, transphobia, homophobia, all those things colour the way we look at

each other. I think there was a lot of talking down to other women, especially by white upper class women who didn't really see working class women, women of colour, poor women, as equals and were educating them in feminism. And nobody wants to be educated if they are made to feel like they're empty vessels and you're filling them. And it was very little real interaction, though, you know. If you really are in sisterhood with someone, you really talk to each other. And we didn't.

EMILIE: Yeah. Right. So how did you see the movement of the 1980s compared to maybe earlier in the 70s, were you maybe committed to feminism before that?

ELEANOR: I grew up in a very poor working class environment, I didn't know feminism existed. And even in college I worked full time. I went to school full time. I was not really plugged in at all. My first introduction to feminism was when I was in graduate school and I needed a job desperately. And I got hired by something that doesn't exist anymore, that was called the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights. I am not religious, I have never been religious, but I needed a job and I was doing community organising mostly in the tenant movement. But I felt really strongly about reproductive rights, I mean, certainly hated the attacks on abortion, supported *Roe v. Wade*... And when I got hired to work at the religious coalition, it's now called the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, I believe it's the same, RCRC, you know, that was my first real introduction to the women's movement. Again, it started as a job, but that was a passion. And it was a really important organisation at the moment, because it really was trying to come up against the religious anti-choice movement, which was at that point claiming the moral high ground. So it was really... I was a quick study and basically plugged in to a whole bunch of other work that was going on to protect reproductive freedom more generally, but also in the context of feminism. So that was my introduction, but that was something that was in the 80s and I was already finished with graduate school. And I was, you know, I didn't join a women's organisation earlier. And, you know, the stuff of the 70s went by me. I was a kid and it just, it went by me.

EMILIE: Yeah. You had other things to focus on too, I guess.

ELEANOR: Yeah, I just didn't know about it.

EMILIE: Yeah. Last year, as you know, I worked on *Ms.* Magazine and I wanted to know about your perspective on the magazine, and maybe if you remember what *New Directions* thought about the magazine as well, because it was more mainstream.

ELEANOR: I think that most of us at that point, and I no longer hold this view, but at that time it

was like “ugh, *Ms. Magazine*, they’re just so liberal”. They’re just, you know, we were like, we’re so much better because we cover poverty and we’ll put a black woman on the cover. We treated them as though they were really, you know, insignificant. In retrospect, they were doing some pretty incredible stuff and they should have had the support of everyone. We really should have... We saw them as competitors. We didn’t see that... Going back to the point about sisterhood, they were... There was no sisterhood. They were our competitors. So that was, that’s messed up. We should have all been part of this movement to bring, to make journalism more feminist but instead, we were competing with each other. And that was true of *Sojourner*. But, you know, I’m not speaking for them at all. But we saw *Sojourner*, we saw *off our backs*, we saw all of the other publications as competitors, as opposed to sisters, and that, you know, in retrospect, was not real healthy and helpful for people interested in building a movement.

EMILIE: Yeah. So you think that maybe that caused the conflicts within the movement itself, because the newspapers were a part of the movement itself and were causing troubles as well?

ELEANOR: Yes.

EMILIE: Yeah, OK. Do you have the impression that working for *New Directions* was doing much difference and was having an impact on people, on women who were reading it, and had an impact on feminism in general as well?

ELEANOR: I wish I knew. I don’t know.

EMILIE: Yeah, I’m just asking from you, your memories and your personal point of view.

ELEANOR: People would renew their subscription, so to the extent that... They did renew their subscriptions, they must have been getting something out of it. But I feel like we missed some opportunities to really expand and to really do the outreach that was necessary to get it out of the upper class white bubble and out into the world. So I think that we wrote some good articles. I think that we produced some good media. I’m proud of some of what we did, but I wish that it had been better known, I wish that we had been able to figure out a way to be a more significant contributor to the feminist movement. I don’t know, that we, you know, we did our little piece of it, but it was a very small little slice. So I don’t know. I, mean, I do think we contributed. I do think so. You know, I haven’t looked at it, I don’t have copies anymore, it’s not online...

EMILIE: I found it online. I could send you the link you want.

ELEANOR: I'm not sure I want to revisit it, but are there issues online?

EMILIE: Yeah.

ELEANOR: Really. I wonder who did that. That's interesting.

EMILIE: It's an archive website called underground... Independent Voices. I could still send you the website because it's very interesting, it's got issues from many publications.

ELEANOR: Oh, I had no idea. It's interesting. I'm glad that's online so, I mean, people like you can then see that feminism didn't spring up yesterday. I mean, there are deep roots. And to the extent that it contributed to those deep roots in that history, it made a contribution. And, you know, I think that it may have had a very limited lifespan and a limited impact, but it had some impact. So that's all good.

EMILIE: Yeah. Do you want to add something else about your experience there that you want to share, or about the newspaper?

ELEANOR: No, I mean, it was a moment in time. It was in a building, there was the women's centre on the ground floor, we were on the second floor. And it was just this one little room that we all crammed into. And I think everybody legitimately cared about feminism and wanted to promote feminism and wanted to elevate the status of women. I think everybody's intentions were really good but at the same time, they were blindspots in terms of race and class and even sexual preference. So, you know, I kind of plugged in for a particular time and it was exciting. I was glad to be there until it just became oppressive and it was time to go. I'm glad that it existed. I'm glad that it's... I'm shocked that it's still available. I had no idea about it.

EMILIE: Yeah, well, I will send you the website, not necessarily the page with all the *New Directions for Women* issues, but if you are just interested in seeing old newspapers that you maybe read.

ELEANOR: Yeah, most of them don't exist anymore so it's very, you know, most of them lost funding or never had enough funding to begin with, or people burned out or there were little wars in-between different groups of people. *Ms.* survived as part of the Feminist Majority, but it did survive. So that's a testament.

EMILIE: Yeah. *Sojourner* lasted until the 1990s I think.

ELEANOR: I think sometime early 90s maybe. Maybe even later.

EMILIE: Yeah maybe late 90s. And for instance *Big Mama Rag*, I don't know if you remember this newspaper, but it lasted only until 1984.

ELEANOR: Oh sure, yeah.

EMILIE: Yeah. So, thank you, you answered all of my questions very clearly, I will let you go now.

ELEANOR: Of course. I wish you good luck in your writing. I hope it goes smoothly and you get an A!

EMILIE: Thank you very much.

#### Interview Consent Form

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as part of the above research project. Ethical procedures for academic research require that interviewees explicitly agree to being interviewed and how the information contained in their interview will be used. This consent form is necessary for me to ensure that you understand the purpose of your involvement and that you agree to the conditions of your participation. Would you therefore read the accompanying **information sheet** and then sign this form to certify that you approve the following:

- the interview will be recorded and/or a transcript will be produced
- you will be sent the transcript and given the opportunity to correct any factual errors
- the transcript of the interview will be analysed by Emilie Jacob as research investigator
- access to the interview transcript will be limited to Emilie Jacob and academic colleagues and researchers with whom she might collaborate as part of the research process
- any summary interview content, or direct quotations from the interview, that are made available through academic publication or other academic outlets will be anonymized so that you cannot be identified, and care will be taken to ensure that other information in the interview that could identify yourself is not revealed
- the actual recording will be destroyed
- any variation of the conditions above will only occur with your further explicit approval

I also understand that my words may be quoted directly. With regards to being quoted, please initial next to any of the statements that you agree with:

- I wish to review the notes, transcripts, or other data collected during the research pertaining to my participation.

- I agree to be quoted directly.
- I agree that the researchers may publish documents that contain quotations by me.

**Contact Information**

If you have any further questions or concerns about this study, please contact: Emilie Jacob [emja.jacob@gmail.com](mailto:emja.jacob@gmail.com)

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