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Women's campaigning, petitioning, and grassroots activism, 1945–1997

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ABSTRACT

Petitioning provided a flexible repertoire for women's political activity in the decades after 1945. Petitioning was a popular, widespread practice: aside from voting, signing a petition was one of the few political activities that engaged a majority of women. Building on a long tradition of British women as active petitioners, petitioning was used by a variety of different groups —local action groups, voluntary associations, political parties, pressure groups, and radical social movements, including those associated with the Women's Liberation Movement. Connecting formal and informal politics, petitioning was a relatively cheap, accessible form of political activity that enabled activism. In particular, the practices associated with name-signing created informal, temporary political spaces for women. Petitioning also provided a mechanism for representation and making representative claims to authority on behalf of women. The media-friendly spectacle of presenting petitions to authority was useful for attracting publicity as a range of activists, including conservative moral campaigners like Mary Whitehouse realised. The flexibility of petitioning explain its popularity as a form of political participation for women, particularly in facilitating local, informal activity.

KEYWORDS

Political participation; women's activism; representation; representative claims; political spaces; gender; petitioning

Introduction

Petitioning was the most popular form of political participation among British women in the late twentieth century, apart from voting. Surveys of political participation from the 1980s and 1990s suggest that a majority of British women, like men, had signed petitions. The European Values Survey recorded in 1981 that 61.4% of British women respondents had signed a petition, and the equivalent figure was 75.7% by the time of the 1990 EVS.[1] Such a finding is less surprising when placed in the context of the long history of women

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petitioning in Britain, which dates back to at least the late medieval period.[2] In the nineteenth century, petitioning was a key mechanism for the political agency and mass mobilisation of British women during a period in which they were often 'borderline citizens', as Kathryn Gleadle has put it. Nineteenth-century women did participate in politics, particularly through informal channels, but their ability to do so remained fragile and contested because they lacked political rights within a highly gendered political culture.[3] Within this context, petitioning was key to mobilising women's collective political identities and making increasingly assertive claims for rights.[4] This tradition was carried forward and reworked by different elements of the Edwardian suffrage campaign.[5] Even after the First World War, when women over 30 gained the right to vote in parliamentary elections and the right to sit in Parliament, petitioning remained an important mode for women's activism. For example, petitioning was crucial to the transnational peace campaigns organised by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, most significantly the 1932 Disarmament petition, which was signed by almost 1.6 m Britons.[6] Interwar women also petitioned about local issues as well as transnational campaigns, as in the case of the women of Newlyn, Cornwall, who interestingly appealed to the Queen instead of the King or a male-dominated Parliament against the demolition of their cottages in 1937.[7]

Women continued to be prolific petitioners after 1945, whether more responsively as signatories to petitions or more proactively as organisers using petitioning as part of their campaigns. As well as playing key roles in campaigns coordinated alongside men, women campaigners embraced petitions to promote women's issues and perspectives. The broad appeal and adaptability of petitioning is evident in the diversity of causes for which petitions were used, which ranged across the political spectrum and from the very local to the global. These included the Campaign Against Pornography's demand to the art retailer Athena that it withdraw 'all merchandise which depicts women and children in positions of servility and display'; the Women's Rights Committee for Wales petitioning the European Parliament to change the directive on equal treatment for men and women workers; the Birkenhead Women's Labour Council's drive for signatures requesting the government preserve free milk in primary schools; and schoolgirls' demands to their headteachers to be allowed to wear trousers as part of their uniform.[8] The popularity and breadth of activity means that our article provides a new perspective on women's activism in the period after 1945 by focusing on practices rather than particular issues, campaigns, groups, movements, or places.

The popularity of petitioning has been obscured by the fact that in this period most petitions were sent to authorities, which aside from Parliament, did not formally record or preserve them. Surviving petitions are dispersed across archives associated with particular institutions, social movements, voluntary associations, politicians, activists, and issues. This makes it difficult to quantify the overall volume of petitions, and the proportion of petitions sent to different authorities, or to different levels of government, such as local or national. It also makes it impossible to recover the extent to which petitions were gendered according to the issues involved, such as whether women were more likely to engage with local 'everyday' topics through petitioning than men.

A rich literature has examined the various forms of women's political activity in this period, including the radical activism associated with the Women's Liberation Movement or left-wing campaigns, women's voluntary associations, or party politics, which

has been supplemented by specific studies of particular events, campaigns, and organisations, such as the other articles in this special issue.[9] Rather than focusing on a particular campaign, organisation, issue, or movement our article provides a different perspective on women's activism through studying a widespread practice, which emphasises some of the common methods used by women across the political spectrum, from feminists promoting Women's Liberation to conservative moral campaigners like Mary Whitehouse, and across different levels of political activity, whether local, regional, national, or global.[10]

As well as emphasising the widespread use of petitioning, we can also identify different trends over time in terms of the way these practices were used. From the interwar period until the 1970s, women petitioners often, although not always, presented themselves collectively in ways that emphasised their role as housewives and consumers.[11] The use of the 'housewife' label seems to decline somewhat from the 1970s, while at the same time it becomes an identity linked to the petition campaigns of moral conservatives like Whitehouse seeking to mobilise an older generation. This shift may also be linked to changes in women's associational culture. The housewife label was frequently adopted by mass membership organisations such as the Women's Institute. By contrast, many petitions associated with the Women's Liberation Movement and the later half of our period were linked to particular issues, action groups, and places, with even national petition campaigns such as the ones in favour of the sex discrimination bills of the early 1970s organised by coalitions of different groups and activists rather than a single association. In this way, petitions reflected the increasingly pluralistic and diverse nature of women's activism and are suggestive of the ways that social and political changes made it harder for mass membership organisations to make representative claims to speak for all women.

In analysing the uses of petitions by women campaigners and activists after 1945, our article borrows from the sociological literature on social movements to define petitioning (the practices associated with the drafting, signing, presentation, and reception of petitions) as a part of a broader 'repertoire' of collective action.[12] This is useful in deepening our analysis in two respects. First, framing petitioning in this way emphasises the connections between petitioning and other forms of political activity and protest, such as meetings, associational culture, demonstrations, or letter-writing for example, rather than studying it in isolation. Many mid and late twentieth-century organisers and signatories of petitions did not define themselves as petitioners as their Victorian predecessors had done. Rather they saw themselves as campaigners or activists, and used petitioning as just one element within a wider body of activity on an issue. For example, Jan Clements one of the founders of the Women's Committee of the Anti-Apartheid Movement in 1981 recalled collecting signatures alongside organising boycotts, and writing to and lobbying companies among other activities.[13] In the case of Ros Hamill, who organised a 1984 road safety petition in the Suffolk village of West Row, she remembered nearly forty years later the details of the issue—but had only the vaguest memory of the petition with which she was photographed in the local newspaper.[14]

Second, analysing petitioning as a form of collective action moves the focus beyond the rather stale measure of whether specific petitions were 'successful' in narrowly instrumental terms. It is possible to find petitions that achieved their aims. In 1975, Staffordshire county council installed road lighting in Burntwood after a campaign from 'young

mothers' that had comprised sending petitions to the local district council, MP, and police.[15] Regardless of the success, or more often the failure, of specific requests, a growing historical and social scientific literature has demonstrated that people persisted with petitioning for a variety of other reasons.[16] For example, there is a link between petitioning and political recruitment and organisation.[17] Historically, signing a petition has served as a gateway into further activism.[18] Building on these insights, the article argues that petitioning remained a vibrant mode for women's political activity after 1945 regardless of the oft-disappointing outcome of specific petitions or campaigns because of its broader utility. In particular, the article examines the use of petitioning for politicising spaces associated with women's everyday activity, making representative claims, facilitating political organisation and recruitment, and attracting publicity and raising awareness.

Petitioning and space

Although impossible to quantify systematically, it seems clear that women played a disproportionately important role in organising petitions and gathering signatures. This saw women politicising their place in private and—more often—public spaces. In 1954, for example, 30 trades unionists approached shoppers in Birmingham's Corporation Street to support their petition for equal pay. All but three were women, and the 22-year-old teacher Mair Rees reportedly set the pace in securing 100 signatures per hour.[19] The paucity of men as signature-gatherers might be unsurprising in causes prioritising women's equality; but a wide variety of other campaigns relied heavily on female labour. Reflecting on the Stockholm Appeal of 1950–51, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) leadership generally criticised their members' apathy. However, they enthused that:

> the outstanding feature has been the way in which women have taken a leading part in every aspect of the fight for peace. The women were particularly ready to sign the atom bomb peace petition, and some of the champion collectors were women, and they have carried out all forms of agitational activity.[20]

Miss Kitty Margueritte Dennis, canvassing for signatures in Chelsea, ended up pressing charges of assault after one male resident seized the petition sheets from her and insisted 'poor child the only place for this is in the fire' because '[i]t is nothing but Communist propaganda'.[21] From 1966, the Conservative MP and former cabinet minister Duncan Sandys's national petition campaign to restore hanging built on the administrative work and local initiatives of three London-based women, Charlotte Hurst, of Pimlico, Athlene O'Connell, of Fulham, and Marjorie Arnold, of Wood Green.[22] Indeed, when Hurst briefed Sandys on the regional campaigners already collecting signatures for capital punishment, four of the five were women.[23]

To prove 'the mass of public opinion is in our favour', Hurst described to the press 'a woman in Newcastle who had collected 500 signatures while she was out shopping'.[24] In suggesting the petition was a causal sideline to the chore, this underplayed the effort involved in putting the petition before hundreds of shoppers; it did, however, point to the importance of retail spaces where women spent more time than men.[25] The feminised public spaces of high streets and retail areas could be good hunting grounds for gathering

signatures on causes—global or parochial, traditionalist or radical. Victoria Gillick, best known for her campaign in the 1980s against prescribing contraception to under-16s without parental consent, recalled collecting signatures against a cinema screening 'sleaze' in St. Ives, at the end of the 1960s, by standing outside shops as well as her home in the town centre.[26] After moving house, Gillick would feature in the local newspaper in 1972 as the 'Swaffam housewife' renting a market stall to seek 'local support for a nationwide petition for public decency' by the Festival of Light.[27] Two feminist activists described to *Spare Rib*, in 1978, how they protested against pornography sold in a newsagent's 'but were moved on by the shopping centre manager' since 'apparently precincts are private property and there is no automatic right to picket.' They persisted by standing outside the retail space, and '[i]t was raining, but women stopped, put down their heavy bags, talked and signed the petition' meaning they 'collected 190 signatures in an hour and a half'.[28] As this example suggests, even if they gathered relatively few signatures, there was a performative element to the practice of signature gathering. The sociologist Charles Tilly emphasised the public display of Worthiness, Unity, Numbers, and Commitment, as key to the claim-making of social movements. Signature gathering, particularly in adverse conditions, allowed women to showcase their 'worthiness' and 'commitment' to a cause.[29]

Precisely because they spent time doing the shopping, women would often be the targets and initiators of petitions seeking to represent consumer concerns.[30] The British Housewives' League (BHL) grew from an Anti-Queue Association that agreed to gather petition signatures in North Croydon in 1946, after frustrations lining up for groceries. They subsequently formed one of the biggest umbrella groups mobilising a series of petitions against post-war rationing by the Labour Government.[31] One rival, the United Housewives Association, distributed posters to butchers advertising to 'the housewives of the district' that they could sign the petition against meat rationing.[32] In the summer of 1972, at a more local level, Runcorn's newspaper reported that a 'militant group of Dukenfield housewives' had been accosting shoppers to sign a petition protesting that '[t]he town centre looks a damned disgrace with all the empty shops'. This assessment came from Edna Wakefield, who 'just saw red' when learning of the plans for the Co-op to shut shop, and so agreed, first, with her sister and, then, with neighbours and other women to collect signatures for a petition. They demanded action from their councillors to preserve their local businesses, raising their collective voice to protest against a major loss to their everyday amenities.[33]

The casual versatility of petitioning meant it could be deployed routinely in unpolitical spaces, regardless of the cause at hand. The Equal Pay Campaign Committee listed a full range of spaces where its supporters should seek signatures in 1952, and these included canvassing door-to-door, at market stalls, with tables in shops, and any queues that formed, but 'especially at cinemas' showing Jill Craigie's film 'To be a woman', which the committee financed.[34] Some supporters proved even more innovative, reportedly gathering signatures by ambushing passers-by at their garden gate, visiting a hairdressers' salon, or approaching the audience for a 'mannequin parade'.[35] In this way, seeking signatures could become a prompt for political conversation in everyday places and in between other commitments. For the 1956 Parliament For Wales petition, 'two young women collected 238 names in one week during tea breaks and lunch-hours'.[36] As Jill Hills's survey of women councillors and party activists in 1977 demonstrated, time was a greater constraint for women and, unlike men, showed less variation by class.[37]

Not coincidentally, petition campaigns often required the skills from occupations dominated by women. By 1961 more than a quarter of the female workforce were employed as typists or clerks.[38] A photograph in the Co-operative Archive provides a glimpse behind the scenes of the 1950s 'Purchase Tax Petition', with seven young women carrying, sorting, and organising the sheets, watched by a male supervisor.[39] With 13.3% of working women in retail, shops also offered women a chance to circulate petitions.[40] In 1956, the general dealer Annie Sampson placed a petition for road safety on the counter of her store on the Ridges Estate in North Shields. Some 350 'angry women'—as a local journalist described them—signed her petition following a series of accidents nearby, although one lorry driver stopped to ask if he could be first to sign 'a petition against careless mothers' instead.[41] The organisation and opportunity required for petitions might complement women's occupations.

The deep local roots of female associational culture also offered an ideal opportunity to seek signatures of support.[42] The Secretary of the Co-operative Women's Guild in Methil, Fife, organised the printing of forms for a 1954 petition demanding safety measures after a boy drowned in the River Leven.[43] One Aberdeen grandmother started her 1961 petition for more hangings of murderers and flogging of thugs after discussing her concerns with a friend in the Aberdeen Ladies Town and County Club; she then immediately found her first forty signatures.[44] Women's Institute meetings shared petitions on such diverse causes as: the need for the Post Office to install a new post box in Painters Forstal, Kent, in 1957; the preservation of Shipston-on-Stour's hospital, in 1965; the 81 bus service to Enderby, Leicestershire, in 1970; for breast cancer screening in Somerset, in 1986; against Kenneth Clarke's cuts to adult education, in 1991; and concerning the dangers of overgrown shrubs on Lincolnshire's roundabouts, in 1997.[45] The Scottish Women's Rural Institute, similarly, mounted its own assault on the exorbitant charges for the Kyle ferry service, in 1976.[46] While associational culture would be the bedrock of many twentieth-century petition campaigns, it offered a political space for women's campaigns beyond male-dominated formal organisations.

Some typically maternal responsibilities involved waiting around or transporting children to the same location, which lent itself to both to creating informal networks that were largely feminine and gathering signatures. The school gate proved an ideal habitat for signature-gathering, therefore. Gladys Newman of Swansea and her daughter asked their fellow grandparents and parents to sign a 1957 petition demanding more hangings for child murderers, for example.[47] Playgroups or informal networks offered a chance to share petitions, especially when they related to parental concerns. Hence, in 1976 the Colwich Playgroup petitioned their parish council in Warwickshire on the frequency of the local welfare clinic, while in 1988 the North Hillingdon Mother and Toddlers Group organised a petition for rubber mats or wood chips in a local playground.[48] One mother noted that she started a petition to save the local toddlers' group threatened with closure in 1992 precisely because '[w]ithout the group we will be desperately lonely because the parents provide each other with moral support'.[49]

In the period after 1945, women continued a nineteenth-century pattern of female door-to-door canvassing for signatures. A group of miners' wives from Royston, in Yorkshire, 'trudged from house to house' through 'the week-end snow' to gather 2,500 signatures in 1949; they hoped their petition would reverse local education chiefs' decision not to fund their daughters trip to compete in the finals of a singing competition in

America.[50] Some women found it possible to fit this form of activism into an odd hour between domestic duties. In 1970, 47-year-old mother-of-four Edna Swindley gathered signatures for a petition she started to demand industrial development by 'touring Rugeley housing estates calling at homes during her spare time, which is limited'.[51] While petitioning was used by men as well as women, the spaces and activities associated with it were often gendered, and seem to have involved women disproportionately compared to other forms of protest and political participation.

'We the undersigned': petitions as representative claims

Even though, as we have shown, much of women's petitioning activity took place alongside men and in support of petitions that drew little attention to the sex of the signatories, some campaigners saw advantages in coordinating women-only petitions or in actively promoting petitions that had a high proportion of their subscribers who were women. In 1963 the Archbishop of Liverpool declined to sign a Nuclear Test Ban petition on the grounds that he thought the women's groups organising the petition should keep the sponsors 'entirely feminine'. His explanation that 'an all-women's petition loses by having the names of men, however distinguished they may be', though rather patronising, pointed to three widespread beliefs: that women made up a meaningful constituency with distinct interests and concerns, although this tended to overlook differences based on age, class, or race; that, in certain circumstances, women's opinions mattered more than men's; and that this constituency could be represented through a petition.[52] Since women-only anti-slavery and suffrage petitions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women's petitions have been embraced as a popular tool through which to make what Michael Saward calls 'representative claims'.[53] As this section illustrates, petitions played an important role in the processes by which these representative claims were made and, in turn, the gender relations that were constituted by and through them.[54]

Petitions, by their nature, obscure the nuanced perspectives, motivations, and internal conflicts of their signatories and present, instead, a single collective voice. Women campaigners have used lists of signatures to underpin claims to represent all women, whether locally, nationally or internationally. In 1981, Women Oppose the Nuclear Threat aligned themselves with women worldwide by conducting a national women's petition that they hoped would be seen in the context of similar recent or ongoing petitions by women in Scandinavia, Greece, and the USA. They connected their national representative claim to universal claims about womanhood by presenting their petition on International Women's Day.[55] In 1991 the Global Campaign for Women's Human Rights presented half a million signatures to the UN that called for action to prevent violence against women. The coordinators' claims to speak for global women rested not only on the high number of signers, but on the fact that the signatures were collected across 124 countries and in 23 languages.[56] Other campaigns rested their claims for breadth less on the total number of signatures and more on the diversity and/or combined expertise of their signatories. The National Abortion Campaign, for example, asked subscribers of petitions against restricting access to abortions to list their job or organisational affiliation alongside their name and address.[57] Victoria Gillick, consciously aping a strategy used by the Victorian feminist and moral reformer Josephine Butler, coordinated both a national petition to raise the age of consent at which young

people could be given contraception without their parents' permission and a much smaller petition signed by one hundred and twenty 'notable women'.[58]

Campaigners also made more targeted representative claims, implying that it was less a 'universal' idea of womanhood and more the distinctive experiences of particular groups of women that made their collective voice important in the context of specific campaigns. This might include very particular interests, as in the case of the Navy wives' 1990 petition to Thatcher in protest at the Admiralty's decision to allow Wrens (members of the Women's Royal Naval Service) to serve on warships. The women from Plymouth and Portsmouth marched from Big Ben to Downing Street to try and win public sympathy for their case.[59] But it also extended to broader categorisations of womanhood. In petitions related to peace, nuclear weapons, and conscription, petitioners often described themselves as mothers. Representatives of the British 'Mothers against War' campaign, for example, made up part of a group of ninety mothers and grandmothers from ten countries who travelled to Geneva to present petitions to the disarmament conference in 1962.[60] The petitions drew on constructed notions of femininity that claimed a 'natural' association between women, motherhood, and pacifism.[61] Press coverage of women's petitions also emphasised motherhood, itself making representative claims about which aspects of 'womanhood' were important in the context of peace protests. In 1963, for example, the *Guardian* described how 100 women in Liverpool — 'many with children and some pushing prams' — took part in a National Women's Peace march to deliver a petition.[62]

Perhaps the most popular designation for women petitioners, particularly before the 1970s, was 'housewife'.[63] Petitions and their press-coverage drew upon and reinforced popular images of the 'housewife' who was assumed to possess gendered expertise on household budgets, food, and related taxation issues.[64] Petitions about food prices and the cost of living in 1953 and 1973 simultaneously presented women as the primary victims of policy changes and as experts, through lived experience, on the policies being discussed.[65] Describing petitioners as housewives was also a key part of making claims to represent 'ordinary' people's interests. When a procedural error led to all but 5 of the 100,000 signatures on a 1951 petition to end the meat ration being disregarded by the House of Commons Committee on Public Petitions, the National Federation of Housewives Associations, the organisers of the petition, complained that 'this is a petition of the common people. There is no reason why the ordinary housewife should know the technicalities of presenting a petition to the House.'[66] 'Ordinary' housewives' petitions about 'everyday' issues were typically presented as being 'unpolitical' or above politics, even if they were often conservative with a small 'c'.[67] Mrs. Underwood, who collected 500 signatures in 1951 to bring back National Servicemen from overseas told the *Hampstead News*: 'I am just an ordinary housewife … [The petition] is nothing to do with any political association at all.'[68] Though the salience of 'ordinariness' reached a high peak in the immediate post-war period, it remained enduringly popular for the rest of the century, particularly among centre-right and right-wing organisers.[69] Campaigners mobilised both the political purchase of housewives' ordinary expertise and their assumed unpoliticalness for wide-ranging causes. The British Housewives League, for example, used petitions with high numbers of women signatories to claim widespread endorsement of their interpretations of housewives' needs. Their 1972 petition to Parliament protested against Britain's entry into the Common Market on the grounds that it

would lead to higher food prices.[70] Moral conservative campaigners who were opposed to the perceived permissiveness of the 1960s social reforms like Mary Whitehouse also used petitions to implicitly claim the support of a 'silent majority' of 'ordinary' people who they often contrasted with radical or left-wing protestors.[71]

Whether centring their status as housewives, mothers, or working women, women made strategic decisions about how to describe themselves in their own representative claims, making judgements about which groups were likely to be received as sympathetic messengers. Jessica White's work on black mothers in Moss Side shows that their 1969 petition about the redevelopment of their area deployed a 'rhetoric of working-class housing activism' that promoted solidarity with white members of the community, downplaying the racial component of their demands.[72] This framing was reflected in both the community-run newsletter *Moss Side News*'s and the *Manchester Evening News*'s choices of headline: 'Housewives present the petition' and 'Home-fight mums march.'[73]

NGOs, trade unions, and lobby groups have also used petitions to make a representative claim that women supported their demands. The Union of Shop Distributive and Allied Workers recognised that women made sympathetic messengers when it arranged for milkmen to gather signatures from housewives petitioning the government to protect door-to-door deliveries.[74] This means that it is not always straightforward to differentiate between women as the originators and women as the messengers of a petition campaign. In 1964, for example, a 'group of ladies' were received by the Board of Trade with a petition signed by a quarter of a million housewives asking that practices of trading stamps should not be regulated by new legislation. When the petition was discussed in the House of Commons it was acknowledged that it had been organised by a stamp trading company, but the Parliamentary Secretary to the Board of Trade reflected that 'nevertheless a quarter of a million housewives would be a mighty number of women to persuade to sign a petition if they did not agree.'[75]

While the stamp trading petition illustrates a productive alignment between the interests of the company who coordinated it and the women who chose to sign it, not all attempts to mobilise women subscribers were as effective. Tensions arose in cases where women rejected a petition's simplistic characterisation of them as victims or mothers. For example, women support groups for the miners' strikes in County Durham were insulted to be asked to sign a women's petition to the Queen in 1984—likely distributed by the National Union of Mineworkers headquarters—because it pleaded with the Queen to intervene in the strike for the sake of the children. As one of the women who refused to sign explained, 'We weren't going to let Maggie Thatcher have us look as if we were begging from (the Queen)'. Another, Mary Stratford, recalled thinking it was a 'total and utter waste of time' and 'accidentally lost' the sheets she was asked to circulate in her village.[76]

As the miners' strike petition illustrates, representative claims of any kind are always open to contestation. Petitions often became a site of competition for groups making opposing claims to represent women's interests. This was true at the start of the century when pro and anti-suffrage women presented petitions, in the inter-war period when women could choose to sign petitions for or against changes to divorce law, and from the 1960s onward when campaigns around reproductive rights generated multiple, conflicting petitions. Women were not the only campaigners on reproductive rights, but they were central to many petitions. Anti-Abortion practitioner Ian Donald collected signatures for an anti-abortion petition from the women in his ante-natal wards.[77] LIFE (an anti-

abortion group) coordinated petitions nationwide in support of Enoch Powell's Unborn Children (Protection) Bill in 1985 and The National Abortion campaign coordinated another against it.[78] *Spare Rib* regularly reported on the progress of local and national petitions in support of women's reproductive rights and related health services.[79]

Publicity, media, and raising awareness

Most—but not all—petitioners would plan for the eventual presentation of signatures to the body to which their demand had been addressed. This regularly transported women activists, as well as female signatures, into political spaces where they remained underrepresented, even if they were not formally excluded—most notably in elected bodies. That said, the formal requirements and anti-climactic nature of petitions to the House of Commons made it a relatively unpopular venue with petitioners. Aside from the symbolism of female incursion into traditionally male-dominated political spaces in Westminster and Whitehall, the presentation of petitions was useful for campaigners in terms of attracting coverage from the local and national media, and through them reaching a broader public. The signing and presentation stages of the petitioning process provided opportunities for fashioning media-friendly events or photo-opportunities that more creative activists were not slow to exploit. As the suffragettes realised at the start of the century, the moment of presenting a petition to formal authority provided campaigners with the opportunity to create newsworthy spectacles.[80]

Leading authorities in London, particularly Downing Street, provided the most popular arena for such presentations. To attract the attention of the national media petitioners frequently marked their presentation with some visual element to make their activity stand out. In 1976, for example, 'thirty forces widows, wearing their husbands' medals on their dresses' handed a petition in at Number 10 for improved pensions.[81] Presentations might also target private addresses rather than institutions. In 1968, 'a chorus of middle-aged women waving Union Jacks' accompanied Joy Page, Secretary of the Immigration Control Association, from Victoria Coach Station to the Conservative MP Enoch Powell's Belgravia residence following his controversial 'Rivers of Blood' speech about race relations. There, the women presented the MP with a petition from 2,000 residents in Slough and Southall endorsing 'his racial policies' and call for 'gradual repatriation' of non-white immigrants.[82] Petitions to foreign governments, via their embassies, provided another way of attracting publicity regarding international issues. On May Day 1983, members of Women For Defence took 13,000 signatures to the Soviet Embassy in London, protesting Eastern Bloc intransigence over disarmament. Miss Marjorie Brady, who had collected 500 signatures in the Lichfield area, condemned the Russian diplomats for rejecting their petition and leaving it to sit on the pavement outside.[83] In all these cases, the gender of the petition delegation added to their newsworthiness in media reports on military, immigration, and diplomatic issues.

Local press coverage required somewhat less fanfare. In 1991, parents travelled from Newcastle to deliver a petition to Downing Street as part of a campaign to save a local nursery, and the mothers were photographed with the local MP for the report in the *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*.[84] Using high-profile presentations to authority to attract publicity was a highly flexible tactic that could be adapted to different contexts and without travelling to London. In 1962, 'about thirty housewives, with their families'

handed in a petition at the American Consulate in Liverpool calling on President Kennedy to end the US blockade of Cuba.[85]

The local signature gathering process also afforded opportunity for the creativity of women activists in ways that could attract publicity for their cause. As part of their campaign for the expansion of nurseries in 1975, the Norwich Working Women's Charter group organised street theatre 'with the purpose of getting people's interest aroused and to collect signatures' for their petition to the council.[86] Creative use of the material form of the petition was another way in which activists could fashion their activity to attract publicity. For instance, in 1986 women in Newcastle organised a petition against the Conservative government's plan to freeze child benefit. The petition took the novel form of a mothers' day card to Margaret Thatcher, winning coverage in the local press.[87] Petitioning could also be a supplement, rather than an alternative, to direct action—for women, as much as for men. In Handsworth, Socialist Mothers for Active Self-Help (SMASH) blocked traffic with a 1973 petition against proposals to take away Family Allowances. Their sit-in only allowed a car to pass once the driver signed the petition.[88] Like militant suffragettes, these women did not abandon petitions as a tool in the repertoire of protest, but instead used them in a more confrontational way.[89]

Studying petitioning as a practice reveals the ways in which women activists responded to the growing importance of the media in campaigning, which presented new opportunities, and challenges, for all campaigners regardless of sex. The national petition in support of the anti-discrimination bills of the early 1970s was started by activists in Watford. Shirley Conran, a well-connected London-based columnist and writer worked on the campaign from September 1971 until March 1973, and on a full-time basis from December 1972 to February 1973. As she recalled 'Women in Media appointed me to get signatures and (later) to handle all the Women in Media publicity for the campaign'.[90] She quickly displayed her flair for publicity, and promoted the petition through innovative tactics such as getting the head girl from her old school, St. Paul's, to contact head girls in other schools to organise signature gathering by schoolgirls more generally.[91] This example also highlights the use of women's and indeed, girls' networks, to disseminate petitions and promote signature gathering. Conran contacted women's organisations across the UK to support the petition, and wrote to MPs asking how they were going to vote, which was then collated to produce a story that 64% of MPs backed the bill, and she also informed local newspapers about their MP's stance on the bill.

Most campaigns could not call on the talents of a figure like Conran (or her contacts) to mastermind their media strategy in tandem with their petition drive. However, petition organisers were able to capitalise on the publicity given to petition signing or presentations to interact with the media. Organisers of national campaigns increasingly scheduled media interviews or press conferences as part of their activity surrounding the high-profile presentation of petitions. The conservative moral campaigner Mary Whitehouse held a press conference to coincide with the delivery of the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association petition to Downing Street in 1973.[92] In 1992 Whitehouse organised a 'Campaign to Outlaw Pornography' petition, this time to Parliament, in support of a private members' bill, and gave radio interviews in Westminster. She returned home gratified, on the whole, by the media coverage the campaign had received.[93] It was not only experienced national campaigners like Whitehouse who

demonstrated an ability to communicate through the media. The development of local TV news from the 1960s onwards provided new opportunities for women leading locally-based petition campaigns to publicise their activity to regional audiences. In 1976, ATV, the regional ITV company serving the English Midlands, carried a report on women living in the shadow of Derby County's Baseball Ground starting a petition against football hooliganism. The chief organiser told her interviewer: 'well, we've started a petition you see, these petitions here, now we've already been down in the town centre and round to some of the districts and we're getting a very good response with these petitions. Now we want these petitions to spread, not just in Derby, but outside Derby, we want it down in Birmingham, everywhere else where they have this trouble, we want them to join in with us.'[94] Part of the value of petitioning then, lay in the opportunities it created for activists and campaigners to attract publicity and media coverage for their causes and activity. In seizing those opportunities, women activists showed an awareness of the media and developed sophisticated communication strategies structured around their petitioning activity.

Conclusion

Petitioning often attracted disdain precisely because it seemed so routine and casual to sign a sheet of paper; but this also made it accessible to women with time-consuming responsibilities or fewer opportunities in formal, male-led organisations, such as political parties. By 1995, one male newspaper columnist challenged gendered assumptions:

> that issues like cuts in local hospitals, schools, bus routes, women's clinics (and so on) that are happening on the doorstep are only "political" with a small p, while pompous summits and shouting in the Commons are the stuff that Politics with a capital P is made of.[95]

Petitioning might lend itself to specific local campaigns, as well as providing a chance to contribute to national and international struggles by procuring or providing signatures. Margaret Stanton, one of the chief activists in the Birmingham Campaign for Peace in Vietnam in the 1960s, later recalled that petition-signing meant that 'people who want to do something but can't commit themselves to too much are always anxious that at least they can put their name down to something, and they like to participate to that extent'.[96] Rather than diverting energies from more active forms of protest, petitioning likely politicised many women who strengthened their identity with a cause or might be approached for further actions. Petitions fitted into the time and space of many women's everyday lives; they could flexibly represent women's claims as women; and they might attract publicity precisely by novel demonstrations of female activism when men dominated much political discussion.

This article has suggested positive reasons why petitioning remained an especially important form of political participation for women. Naturally, these possibilities stood in contrast to, though by no means a substitute for, formal and elected political roles, which remained stubbornly male-dominated throughout this period. After 1945, women made up less than 5% MPs until 1987, and the landmark election of 'Blair's Babes' in 1997 still meant that less than a fifth of all MPs were women.[97] The proportion of women councillors in England and Wales rose from an eighth to a sixth between 1946 and 1976, only reaching a quarter at the end of the century.[98] Although there is no

comprehensive way to count the greater numbers of signatures gathered or given by women, compared to men, in the second half of the twentieth century, our research leads us to this conclusion: never merely a poor substitute for voting, but useful for positive as well as negative factors, petitioning continued to play a significant—if undervalued—role in female political participation.

Notes

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