

ARTICLE

## Women's Activism in the British Anti-Apartheid Movement, 1986–1994

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### Abstract

Laying the groundwork for a new way to think through the history of British anti-apartheid activity, this article examines the liminal space between anti-racist and feminist activity through a case-study of Leeds Women Against Apartheid. Founded in 1986, LWAA were comprised of a dedicated nucleus of activists, and were concerned with imbuing international solidarity with a tangible meaning. To LWAA, solidarity had a quantifiable basis that could be articulated through the collection of material aid and the raising of funds. The first attempt to 'gender' the history of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement, this article argues for the importance of reconceptualizing women's activism, whilst also reflecting on the 'value' ascribed to their political engagement. As the example of LWAA shows, by organizing from an 'autonomous outside position', the group did so as a prosaic reaction to the realities of working with a masculinist movement. Furthermore, as is shown, while the movement may have been united by a commitment to anti-racism, matters of sexual equality were certainly understood as secondary, and were seen – on both the national and local level – as an unwanted interpolation. In a broader sense then, the article also reflects on the 'problem' of gender in progressive social movements.

The anti-apartheid movement grew into perhaps the strongest international solidarity movement of this century, bringing together citizens of all countries, governments and international organisations.

Oliver Tambo, ANC President, 1993

The struggle in South Africa really came to a head in the 1980s. And you couldn't really not know it was going on, but I think for most people you'd see it on the news, and you'd think 'oh gosh! That's awful, isn't it?', but it was thousands of miles away. So, we wanted...to educate and campaign.

Ailsa Swarbrick, LWAA member, 2019

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On Friday 22 July 1994, less than three months after the African National Congress (ANC) claimed an emphatic victory in South Africa's first democratically held election, and barely two months since Nelson Mandela had been inaugurated as the country's president, members of Leeds Women Against Apartheid (LWAA) – some 7,500 miles away – were meeting to decide the future of their organization.<sup>1</sup> Affiliated to the national Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) in London, and maintaining functional relations with the Leeds Anti-Apartheid Movement (LAAM), LWAA members came together for 'food, singing, [and] discussion'.<sup>2</sup> Formed some eight years earlier, LWAA were comprised of a dedicated nucleus of left-wing activists, and a wider if not particularly large circle of members. Despite their modest size and relatively short existence, LWAA's organizing principles of 'discussion, self-education and campaigning'<sup>3</sup> saw them model a form of activism that drew on one of the most famous rallying cries of the women's liberation movement, that 'the personal is political'.<sup>4</sup> In doing so, a new generation of women began relating their own experiences to wider social structures, and for LWAA this meant organizing 'as women in solidarity with women in South Africa'.<sup>5</sup>

Despite their raised consciousness, the women of LWAA were not immune to the domestic drudgery that was expected of them in 1980s Leeds, and many of them lived 'double lives' as working wives and mothers.<sup>6</sup> The perennial juggling women undertake in order to balance the competing demands of domestic duties and wage labour therefore has profound implications for their political visibility and activist engagement. By extension, this often renders women less visible in archival spaces and – as in this instance – in the histories of the British AAM. Yet this inadvertent exclusion is only part of the story. The historiographical consensus – such that it is – focuses on the establishment of the national women's committee in 1980 as emblematic of the rise of 'special interest' groups, nodding obliquely to the fractious 'internal gender relations' of the movement.<sup>7</sup> In this formulation, the establishment of women's groups such as LWAA is assumed to be part of a broader

<sup>1</sup> Feminist Archive North/Leeds Women Against Apartheid (FAN/LWAA) 12, minutes and notes, 'Card', n.d. but believed to be July 1994.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> FAN/LWAA001, leaflets and posters, 'Leeds Women Against Apartheid material aid collection for South Africans in exile', July 1987.

<sup>4</sup> This notion, that the personal experiences of women should not be dismissed as inconsequential and subjective, led to the development of a more expansive idea of what the 'political' actually was. Although the phrase is often attributed to radical feminist Carol Hanisch, she actually locates its origins to *Notes from the Second Year, Women's Liberation in 1970*, a journal produced by New York Radical Women, members of the American Women's Liberation Movement. For the journal, see [https://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/wlmpc\\_wlms01039/](https://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/wlmpc_wlms01039/) (last accessed 12 Dec. 2019), and for Hanisch's own recollections, see 'The personal is political', pp. 1–5, from [www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html](http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html) (last accessed 12 Dec. 2019).

<sup>5</sup> FAN/LWAA001, 'Leeds Women Against Apartheid: what we do', n.d. (estimated to be 1987).

<sup>6</sup> Helen McCarthy, *Double lives: a history of working motherhood* (London, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Roger Fieldhouse, *Anti-apartheid: a history of the movement in Britain: a study in pressure group politics* (London, 2005), p. 342; Håkan Thörn, *Anti-apartheid and the emergence of a global civil society* (London, 2006), p. 97.

process of political balkanization motivated by the rise in identarian interests, rather than being understood as a prosaic reaction to the realities of trying to work within a masculinist movement. Indeed, as Maud Bracke has demonstrated in her scholarship on gender and deindustrialization in 1970s Italy, women often adopt ‘gendered notions of conflict and struggle’ precisely because their male comrades – even those involved in progressive struggles – are indifferent to dismantling social reproduction.<sup>8</sup>

In the context of the British AAM, the historiographical framing of women’s groups as essentially sectarian thus trivializes the central role women played in the movement, and also underplays how the activism of groups such as LWAA was fundamental to the expression of international solidarity. Despite being a mere abstraction to some, LWAA were concerned with imbuing international solidarity with a tangible meaning. To LWAA members, solidarity had a quantifiable basis that could be articulated through the collection of material aid and the raising of funds. Although expressions of international solidarity had always featured in the global campaign against apartheid, by the 1980s, the concept gained increasing prominence, becoming one of the ANC’s ‘four pillars’ of political struggle and mobilization.<sup>9</sup> Despite this, the form and function of solidarity in the British AAM on the local level remains curiously undertheorized. As is argued in this article, one reason for this is the way in which ‘value’ is ascribed to women’s activism and political engagement. Although there is a rich body of literature that has interrogated attitudes towards the so-called feminization of wage labour in post-war Britain, considerably less attention has been paid to women’s activism as a distinct form of work.<sup>10</sup> Through a case-study of LWAA, this article begins the task of remedying this, and hopes to encourage other historians to think through the value (or lack thereof) placed on women’s activism in progressive social movements.

This article, then, has three main aims. In the first instance, it acts as a form of feminist recuperation, (re)constructing something of the history of the LWAA from their archive (which was collectively donated by four former members – Frances Bernstein, Caroline Bond, Judy Maxwell, and Ailsa Swarbrick) housed within the collections of Feminist Archive North at the Brotherton Library, University of Leeds. In many ways, the history of LWAA can be comfortably situated within a much longer genealogy of feminist anti-imperial activity.<sup>11</sup> Yet, as Claire Midgley and others have cautioned, the activism of white women on behalf of ‘their sisters overseas’ runs the

<sup>8</sup> Maud Anne Bracke, ‘Labour, gender and deindustrialisation: women workers at Fiat (Italy, 1970s–1980s)’, *Contemporary European History*, 28 (2019), p. 489.

<sup>9</sup> In the 1980s, the ‘Four Pillars’ of struggle were armed operations, mass mobilization, underground organization, and international solidarity work. For transnational solidarity, see Håkan Thörn, ‘The meaning(s) of solidarity: narratives of anti-apartheid activism’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 35 (2009), pp. 417–36.

<sup>10</sup> The literature that examines the distinction between women’s paid and unpaid labour is vast. See, for instance, Helen McCarthy, ‘Women, marriage and paid work in post-war Britain’, *Women’s History Review*, 26 (2017), pp. 46–61; Laura King, ‘How men valued women’s work labour in and outside of the home in post-war Britain’, *Contemporary European History*, 28 (2019), pp. 454–68.

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Caroline Bressey, *Empire, race and the politics of anti caste* (London, 2013).

risk of obscuring the role that white supremacy played in this form of politicking.<sup>12</sup> In a more recent domestic example, for instance, Natalie Thomlinson's research has underscored how the relationship between white and black feminist activity in post-war Britain has been uneasy at best. Detailing the universalizing tendencies of the white feminist perspective, Thomlinson examines how "race" has long been a troublesome issue for feminist politics, with left-wing groups being no exception in this regard.<sup>13</sup> Yet as I argue in this article, members of LWAA generally managed to successfully navigate a mode of political engagement that neither overemphasized the bonds of global sisterhood, nor acted as a vehicle for cultural imperialism.<sup>14</sup> Secondly, by looking at the intersection of anti-racist and feminist activity through the structures of the British AAM, this article draws on Karen Beckwith's ideas of 'double militancy'.<sup>15</sup> As Beckwith argues, 'the relationship between feminist movements and political parties, even leftwing parties, is not always amicable'.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, then, women navigate a terrain – often a rocky one – between a commitment to 'the' cause, and *their* cause. Using Beckwith's framework, LWAA emerge as a classic 'gender parallel group',<sup>17</sup> who were compelled to form their own organization and co-ordinate campaigns outside of the anti-apartheid activity already taking place in Leeds.

While this article offers a close reading of LWAA's activities, it tells more than a West Yorkshire story. It details a rich example of solidarity in practice and offers a new way to think through the local and everyday dimensions of anti-apartheid solidarity. As Saul Dubow writes, 'anti-apartheid [activity] should be seen not only as a transnational movement but also as a series of discrete local struggles with distinctly national features'.<sup>18</sup> Despite the vast numbers of 'local' and 'regional' AAM groups that existed throughout the country, the history of the movement remains dominated by the actions of the London executive, but as Sarah Kenny has argued 'historians have much to gain by seeking to understand the local'.<sup>19</sup> In addition, although the spectre of Thatcherism haunted many towns and cities in northern England in the 1980s, 'an overreliance' on 'identifying' the period with the high priestess of industrial decline and neoliberalism obscures – as Stephen Brookes has

<sup>12</sup> Clare Midgley, 'Female emancipation in an imperial frame: English women and the campaign against sati (widow-burning in India, 1813–1830)', *Women's History Review*, 9 (2000), pp. 95–121.

<sup>13</sup> Natalie Thomlinson, *Race, ethnicity and the women's movement in England, 1968–1993* (Basingstoke, 2016), p. 42.

<sup>14</sup> For a contemporary critique of the idea of 'global sisterhood', see Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under western eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourse', *boundary 2*, 12 (1984), pp. 333–58.

<sup>15</sup> Karen Beckwith, 'Beyond compare? Women's movements in comparative perspective', *European Journal of Political Research*, 37 (2000), p. 431.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 441.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 443.

<sup>18</sup> Saul Dubow, 'New approaches to high apartheid and anti-apartheid', *South African Historical Journal*, 69 (2017), p. 304.

<sup>19</sup> Sarah Kenny, 'A "radical project": youth, culture, leisure, and politics in 1980s Sheffield', *Twentieth Century British History*, 30 (2019), p. 584.

put it – ‘trajectories and developments’ in the history writing of the decade.<sup>20</sup> Exploring another ‘texture of identity’ in northern England, this article contributes to the burgeoning literature that locates Yorkshire as an important site of countercultural politics and activism, shedding further light on the history of left-wing activism in 1980s Britain.<sup>21</sup>

Laying the groundwork for a new way to think through the history of British anti-apartheid activity, this article examines the liminal space between anti-racist and feminist activity through a case-study of LWAA, reflecting on the ‘problem’ of gender in progressive social movements. In doing so, the women of the British AAM are brought from the hinterland to the heartland of the movement’s history. In what follows, the article sketches the institutionalization of the policy of apartheid in South Africa in 1948. It then examines the genesis and founding of the British AAM, detailing something of its ‘regional’ history, through examining the history of the movement on the ‘local’ level in Leeds. Drawing on the papers of LWAA, and an in-depth oral history interview conducted with one of its founding members, the article examines the campaigns the group ran and the form and function of their politicking. In doing so, it unites two complementary, but often discrete, historiographies – that of ‘second wave’ feminist activity, and anti-racist campaigning as personified through the AAM. In arguing for the importance of reconceptualizing women’s activism, this article therefore represents the first attempt to ‘gender’ the history of one of the most important social movements of the twentieth century.

## I

The year 1948 saw D. F. Malan’s National Party elected to power under the political mandate of apartheid – from the Afrikaans meaning ‘apartness’.<sup>22</sup> In practice, this saw a solidification of legally mandated racial discrimination, including a raft of laws such as the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1949; the Population Registration Act of 1950 – whereby all South Africans were classified into different racial and ethnic groups; and the Bantu Education Act of 1953 – which enforced racially separated education facilities. As the apartheid project grew bigger, then so too did black resistance. The African National Congress (ANC), originally formed in 1912, continued to orchestrate a variety of resistance campaigns, with the party’s armed wing Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) being formed in December 1961, following the bloody conclusions of what is now known as the Sharpeville Massacre.<sup>23</sup> Just

<sup>20</sup> Stephen Brooke, ‘Living in “new times”’: historicizing 1980s Britain’, *History Compass*, 12 (2014), p. 20.

<sup>21</sup> See, for instance, Daisy Payling, “Socialist republic of south Yorkshire”, <https://doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/hwu001>; Kenny, ‘A “radical project”’; Christoph Ehland, ed., *Thinking northern: textures of identity in the north of England* (Amsterdam, 2007).

<sup>22</sup> Nancy L. Clark and William H. Worger, *South Africa: the rise and fall of apartheid* (Harlow, 2004), p. 35.

<sup>23</sup> See Robert Skinner, *The foundations of anti-apartheid: liberal humanitarians and transnational activists in Britain and the United States c. 1919-1964* (Basingstoke, 2010), p. 156.

over three years later, almost all of the ANC's leadership – including Nelson Mandela – were found guilty of attempting to overthrow the government and sentenced to life imprisonment. It was against this backdrop that the Boycott Movement, the forerunner to the British AAM, was formed in London in June 1959. Initially a coalition between exiled South Africans, members of the religious community, various politicians, and trade union members, the movement grew to incorporate a wide collection of members and supporters including the establishment of many regional branches.

While the 1970s have generally been characterized as the fallow period of the movement, by the 1980s, it had transformed into a 'mass' action group, as it had succeeded in reaching people 'who had never been involved in a formal political organization, but who wanted to express their instinctive feeling that apartheid was wrong'.<sup>24</sup> To a certain extent, this shift was the result of over twenty years of political activity, but the 1980s also witnessed the 'popularisation of Mandela'.<sup>25</sup> Although the AAM had run a variety of successful boycott campaigns and had consistently called for sanctions against the pariah state, it was the launch of the 'Nelson Mandela: Freedom at 70' campaign in 1988 that turned Mandela into 'a symbol of the struggle against apartheid', further underscoring the moral imperative behind the movement.<sup>26</sup> While the movement had a variety of long-standing campaigns that worked to highlight the plight of political prisoners inside the country, the focus on Mandela marked something of a shift in conceptions of international solidarity. To a certain extent, it speaks to the 'moral dilemma of solidarity'.<sup>27</sup> As Robert Skinner has argued, the notion of solidarity encapsulates within it a set of tensions. While on the one hand 'solidarity' denotes an imagined 'transnational relationship between equals', it also speaks to the 'practice of support for distant "others" in South Africa'.<sup>28</sup> The personification of apartheid's iniquities through Mandela held powerful appeal in the 1980s, and one year after the 'Freedom at 70' concert, national membership surged to 19,410 in March 1989.<sup>29</sup> In order to achieve the overthrow of apartheid and the transition to democracy, the British AAM concentrated their efforts on cultural, consumer, and sports boycotts; lobbying activities (of governments and international organizations); and targeted campaigning such as the 'Freedom at 70' concert. In a broader sense, then, a commitment to solidarity – however abstract the notion – underscored these efforts, being the 'general concept that defined the movement's collective identity'.<sup>30</sup>

From Glasgow to Southampton, Cardiff to Cambridge, there were many 'local' AAM groups throughout the four nations of the United Kingdom. Although it is

<sup>24</sup> Christabel Gurney, 'The 1970s: the anti-apartheid's movement's difficult decade', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 35 (2009), p. 487.

<sup>25</sup> Genevieve Klein, 'The British Anti-Apartheid Movement and political prisoner campaigns, 1973–1980', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 35 (2009), p. 469.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 469.

<sup>27</sup> Skinner, *The foundations of anti-apartheid*, p. 202.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>29</sup> Fieldhouse, *Anti-apartheid: a history of the movement in Britain*, p. 303.

<sup>30</sup> Thörn, *Anti-apartheid*, p. 207.

difficult to discern a wholly accurate figure, by the late 1980s, there were approximately 1,300 'local' groups affiliated to the AAM.<sup>31</sup> Ultimately accountable to the executive, local and regional groups generally enjoyed a reasonable level of autonomy over their organizing activities. While of course, the activities had – in a larger sense – been defined by the policies and campaigns of the executive, local groups were generally free to interpret and instil their own meaning in the concept of 'solidarity', but their main focus – according to the national committee at least – should be fundraising.<sup>32</sup> Despite being united by a commitment to anti-apartheid activity, relations between the national committee and local branches were often strained, as local groups were reluctant to divert the fruits of their fundraising activity towards the running costs of the London office. Furthermore, as the 1980s progressed, the central office was – perhaps not unkindly – perceived as a 'cumbersome bureaucracy' that misspent its energies on 'internal organisation and management'.<sup>33</sup>

In areas that had long-standing histories of 'proletarian culture', the movement was a cornerstone of both left-wing political life and the wider culture of the city.<sup>34</sup> While in Sheffield, 'you were pushing an open door',<sup>35</sup> the vibrancy of the movement could be felt in a variety of large cities such as Glasgow, Bristol, and Swansea. For instance, in 1981, five years after the establishment of the Scottish Committee of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, Glasgow was the first of nine UK cities to grant Mandela freedom of the city.<sup>36</sup> To a certain extent geography influenced the activities of local groups. In 1989 – after years of prior campaigning – the Welsh Anti-Apartheid Movement (WAAM) succeeded in persuading the Welsh Rugby Union to break ties with apartheid rugby.<sup>37</sup> Considering the role that rugby union played in Welsh culture and national identity, this was a stunning victory. For WAAM, even the country's most famous sons and daughters were not beyond reproach, and in October 1982, Shirley Bassey's public appearance in Cardiff was met with protests and demonstrations, as Bassey had flouted the UN cultural boycott by performing in South Africa at Sun City casino the previous year.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Fieldhouse, *Anti-apartheid: a history of the movement in Britain*, p. 304.

<sup>32</sup> 'Fundraising against apartheid: a guide for local groups', Welsh Anti-Apartheid Movement (WAAM) papers, AE/2, Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru (National Library of Wales).

<sup>33</sup> Fieldhouse, *Anti-apartheid: a history of the movement in Britain*, p. 302.

<sup>34</sup> John Grayson, 'Developing the politics of the trade union movement: popular workers' education in south Yorkshire, UK, 1955 to 1984', *International Labour and Working Class History*, 90 (2016), p. 111. For the relationship between the AAM and local government in Sheffield, see Payling, "'Socialist republic of south Yorkshire'", pp. 602–27.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Kath Harding by Penny Capper and Jonathan Dobson on 14 Dec. 2012, reproduced on the Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives Committee Forward to Freedom project website: [www.aamarchives.org/archive/interviews/kath-harding.html](http://www.aamarchives.org/archive/interviews/kath-harding.html) (last accessed 15 Feb. 2020).

<sup>36</sup> Christopher Fevre, "'Scottish exceptionalism?' Trade unions and the Anti-Apartheid Movement, 1976–1994', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 45 (2019), p. 525.

<sup>37</sup> 'Don't scrum with a racist bum!', 'Forward to Freedom: the history of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement 1959–1994', [www.aamarchives.org/campaigns/sport.html](http://www.aamarchives.org/campaigns/sport.html) (last accessed 17 Feb. 2020).

<sup>38</sup> Letter from Hanif Bhamjee (secretary of WAAM) to the editor of *The Western Mail*, 12 May 1985, WAAM papers, AG3/8.

In terms of the 'everyday' politics of AAM campaigning, the goal of many local associations was to make their towns and cities apartheid free. In practice, this usually centred on consumer boycotts, with many local groups working closely with their respective city councils. For instance, upon Mandela's release from prison in February 1990, the ANC's flag was raised over the council buildings in Bristol, and the group consistently praised 'the commitment shown by the City Council' in the city's broader anti-apartheid efforts.<sup>39</sup> Similarly in Leeds in October 1981, the council agreed to boycott South African produce, having already refused to let the South African trade organization promote fruit grown in the Western Cape on the steps of the town hall. In a further expression of international solidarity, the council renamed the city's civic gardens the Nelson Mandela Gardens in 1983.<sup>40</sup> As well as maintaining a close working relationship with the council, the AAM in Leeds forged contacts with 'trade unionists...religious, peace and third world groups'.<sup>41</sup> Formed in 1976, the group saw themselves as the interlocutors of the London national executive in the West Yorkshire region. The successes of the movement in Leeds – like a great many other sites throughout the country – was contingent on the commitment, energy, and time of a core bunch of activists. The challenge, however, was to encourage others to take up the AAM mantle. As LAAM literature proclaimed in 1984: 'there is scope for every kind of talent in organizing the campaign against apartheid – pickets, leafletting, lobbying; public meetings; collection of basic hygiene products for South African and Namibian refugees; trade union activities; bookstalls at meetings'.<sup>42</sup> It was in this context that Ailsa Swarbrick – later one of the founding members of LWAA – became involved in the anti-apartheid activity of the city.

Although Swarbrick had been a member of the national AAM since the mid-1970s, the competing demands of full-time paid work, the raising of three children, and the untimely death of her husband Jim in 1980 meant that she had little free time to take an active role in the anti-apartheid activity of the city.<sup>43</sup> A couple of years later, however, Swarbrick decided that she had the time to become more involved in the movement, and through her job as a

<sup>39</sup> Bristol Record Office, Records of Action for Southern Africa, 1950–2001, 41242/Adm/m/1, Bristol Anti-Apartheid Movement Annual Report 1990, p. 4.

<sup>40</sup> 'Local Authority Action Against Apartheid', 1985. Digitized as part of the Aluka Project, p. 15, [www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=3&ved=2ahUKewif3ryHz9jnAhUSYsAKHbToCowQFjACegQIAxAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fpsimg.jstor.org%2Ffsi%2Fimg%2Fpdf%2Fft0%2F10.5555%2Ffal.sff.document.aam00022\\_final.pdf&usq=AOvVaw1ErBfnqunVsziFTwUd\\_br](http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=3&ved=2ahUKewif3ryHz9jnAhUSYsAKHbToCowQFjACegQIAxAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fpsimg.jstor.org%2Ffsi%2Fimg%2Fpdf%2Fft0%2F10.5555%2Ffal.sff.document.aam00022_final.pdf&usq=AOvVaw1ErBfnqunVsziFTwUd_br) (last accessed 17 Feb. 2020).

<sup>41</sup> 'Leeds Anti-Apartheid Group, Activities 1982', MSS AAM 566, Bodleian Archives, University of Oxford.

<sup>42</sup> 'Leeds Anti-Apartheid Group, A.A.M. Autumn Campaign, (1984)', MSS AAM 566.

<sup>43</sup> Despite being a paid member of the local Leeds branch, Swarbrick – like many others – first became involved in AAM activity through attending demonstrations and marches in London. Her decision to become more actively involved in local AAM activity was partly serendipitous: on the way back from a demonstration held in London, Swarbrick's coach had been leafletted by members of LAAM who were seeking new members. Interview with Ailsa Swarbrick, 23 Sept. 2019, Leeds, UK.



lecturer for both the Workers' Educational Association and Open University, she felt she could 'bring quite a lot' to the AAM, not least her connections with local libraries and educational facilities and groups in the city.<sup>44</sup> One of the first meetings she attended was LAAM's AGM at a 'packed room in the Trades Club' in Chapeltown, a suburb in the north-east of the city. As attendance at this meeting was Swarbrick's first foray into local AAM activity (and as the AGM would attract more members than a normal meeting), she was surprised that the atmosphere was 'very edgy...because there were always these struggles going on between different left splinter groups'.<sup>45</sup> Despite being politically active since her time at university in the mid-1950s, Swarbrick had little interest in the internal politics of the movement; rather she was concerned with contributing to applied forms of political activity that raised both the funds and political consciousness of people in Leeds to the iniquities of the apartheid regime. It was partly this desire to engage in practical and concrete activity – in order to escape male-dominated and internal political wrangling – that led Swarbrick and other women – in LAAM to go on and form LWAA in 1986.

## II

Frustrated by a 'big focus on procedure', and feeling that 'women's issues weren't very much on the agenda', approximately ten women – including Swarbrick, who was now in her fifties – founded LWAA in 1986, with a mandate that prioritized applied forms of activism.<sup>46</sup> Complying with the official processes set out by the central committee in London, the women of LWAA framed the establishment of the group 'as positively as we could' as they wanted to co-ordinate activities and maintain a sororal relationship with the existing anti-apartheid group in the city.<sup>47</sup> LWAA was therefore founded as what Beckwith terms another 'venue for action', operating as an anti-racist group guided by feminist organizing principles.<sup>48</sup> In her scholarship on Lancashire Women Against Pit Closures, Beckwith developed a typology of women's relationships to political movements; 'gender direct, nongender direct, or indirect'.<sup>49</sup> Before the founding of LWAA, all members were part of LAAM, with their gender not 'explicated as primary in the movement and the movement's issues'.<sup>50</sup> For Beckwith, this 'indirect location' often means that women are 'foreclosed from formal decision-making areas', something that compelled

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Ailsa Swarbrick, 23 Sept. 2019.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. The precise number of women involved in founding LWAA is unclear, but I take them to include Ailsa Swarbrick, Frances Bernstein, Caroline Bond, Judy Maxwell, Rachel Peto, Nancy Wall, and Jean Hawthorne.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Beckwith, 'Beyond compare?', p. 443.

<sup>49</sup> Karen Beckwith, 'Lancashire women against pit closures: women's standing in a men's movement', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 21 (1996), p. 1038.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 1038.

the women of LWAA to form the group.<sup>51</sup> Despite their efforts to present the group as a body that was supplementing and not superseding LAAM, their founding was met with antagonism, being interpreted as an explicit criticism of LAAM. In this sense, then, LWAA were part of anti-apartheid's 'movement of movements' and reflect broader national patterns of gendered organization.<sup>52</sup>

Founded in 1980, the national women's committee – according to Roger Fieldhouse at least – primarily campaigned on so-called 'women's issues' in the Southern African region.<sup>53</sup> Highlighting the 'integral role' of British women in 'all the different spheres' of anti-apartheid activity, the women's committee were also concerned with raising awareness of 'the triple oppression' of 'race, class, and sex' that black and 'coloured' women experienced under apartheid.<sup>54</sup> Fieldhouse's cursory appraisal therefore belies the radical impetuses that stimulated the committee's formation and the roles that legions of women played in meaningfully interpreting the policies of the executive, thereby devaluing their activism.<sup>55</sup> By the end of the 1980s, although there were a variety of women's anti-apartheid groups around the country, and so-called 'women's issues' had gained some limited traction within the movement, tensions evidently still existed.<sup>56</sup> In a report tabled at the 1989 AGM, the women's committee noted the paradox whereby women played a prominent role in 'grass roots work', yet were 'poorly represented' in the movement's executive. Acknowledging that 'financial constraints [were] genuine', for the women's committee they were only part of the problem, and the lack of progress reflected 'the AAM's perception of its priorities... and these have not included work amongst women'.<sup>57</sup>

For the women who would go on to form LWAA, 'male dominance at meetings' certainly influenced their desire for separatism.<sup>58</sup> As a result of this, and an absence of childcare, it became difficult for women to regularly attend branch meetings. This, in turn, was interpreted by their male counterparts as a lack of commitment, rather than the result of an oft 'unexamined assumption' that women were automatically responsible for childcare and housework and therefore did not enjoy the same levels of autonomous selfhood.<sup>59</sup> Acutely aware of these issues, LWAA therefore developed a strategy that accommodated 'one off support activities', which ran alongside a series of targeted campaigns

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1061.

<sup>52</sup> Thörn, *Anti-apartheid*, p. 193.

<sup>53</sup> In Fieldhouse's weighty tome, the role of women is summarily addressed in two pages. Fieldhouse, *Anti-apartheid: a history of the movement in Britain*, pp. 343 and 344.

<sup>54</sup> 'Appendix I: The Anti-Apartheid Movement Women's Committee', WAAM papers, AD6/11/1.

<sup>55</sup> The 'role' of women in the movement – both rank and file and those on the executive – receives scant attention in any number of anti-apartheid histories. See, for instance, Thörn, *Anti-apartheid*; Anna Konieczna and Robert Skinner, eds., *A global history of anti-apartheid: 'Forward to Freedom' in South Africa* (London, 2019).

<sup>56</sup> 'Mobilising Women Against Apartheid' was adopted as a national campaign in 1988. Fieldhouse, *Anti-apartheid: a history of the movement in Britain*, p. 344.

<sup>57</sup> 'Mobilising Women Against Apartheid: Report to the AAM AGM from the Executive Committee and the Women's Committee, November 1988', WAAM papers, AD6/11/1.

<sup>58</sup> FAN/LWAA004, minutes and notes, 1986.

<sup>59</sup> McCarthy, *Double lives*, p. 328.

that involved more substantial time commitments.<sup>60</sup> This emphasis on vernacular forms of activism was therefore central to the ways in which LWAA interpreted and expressed international solidarity for women living under apartheid.

Drawn together by a commitment to anti-racist activity, LWAA were also guided by feminist organizing principles that highlighted the importance of the small group process.<sup>61</sup> Although the vast majority of LWAA's activities were applied and public facing, they also existed as a forum for 'discussion and self-education'.<sup>62</sup> For LWAA, a 'feminist approach' to organization was both an intellectual choice and a prosaic response to the material conditions of their own lives; flexibility was key.<sup>63</sup> LWAA members would meet at each other's houses on a 'loose rota', and if necessary would alter their plans to accommodate domestic issues such as that of a sickly child, or a lack of child-care in general.<sup>64</sup> By stepping outside the 'rigid structures' of conventional anti-apartheid organizing, LWAA 'made it [activism] work in a way that didn't at the time'.<sup>65</sup> Rejecting an approach that prized meeting attendance over practical activity, LWAA implicitly understood that sporadic activity – either at meetings or events – did not mean that women were less dedicated to anti-apartheid activity, but was rather a reflection of the ways in which their lives were often circumscribed by domestic concerns.

With anti-racist feminism as their *lingua franca*, LWAA called attention to 'the incredible struggles' faced by women in South Africa.<sup>66</sup> Attempting to highlight that 'countless and nameless women' who were 'fighting on many fronts', LWAA produced a series of leaflets and posters that focused on issues such as the family and apartheid, women and healthcare, and women and work.<sup>67</sup> In particular, LWAA felt that the general public had little idea of the everyday reality of life for women living under apartheid and were particularly keen to educate the general public about the position of domestic workers in the country. As domestic service was 'a major sector' of the labour market, it

<sup>60</sup> FAN/LWAA004, minutes and notes, 1986.

<sup>61</sup> Sue Bruley, 'Consciousness-raising in Clapham; women's liberation as "lived experience" in south London in the 1970s', *Women's History Review*, 22 (2013), p. 717. For more on feminist organizing and community activism, see Lena Dominelli, 'Women in the community: feminist principles and organising in community work', *Community Development Journal*, 30 (1995), pp. 133–43.

<sup>62</sup> FAN/LWAA001, 'Leeds Women Against Apartheid: what we do', n.d (1987?).

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Ailsa Swarbrick. As Bruley notes when discussing the form of consciousness-raising groups in the women's liberation movement, small groups generally met on a weekly basis in each other's homes with 'no leaders or hierarchies'. Bruley, 'Consciousness-raising in Clapham', p. 721.

<sup>64</sup> Swarbrick noted that meetings would often be moved to the home of whichever member had the most pressing domestic emergency in order for them to participate in group activities. Interview with Ailsa Swarbrick.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> They took issue with the ways in which British press coverage of apartheid often ignored the position of women in the country. For more on the ways in which apartheid was 'broadcast' in Britain, see Gavin Schaffer, 'The limits of the "liberal imagination": Britain, broadcasting and apartheid South Africa, 1948–1994', *Past & Present*, 240 (2018), pp. 235–66.

<sup>67</sup> FAN/LWAA001, poster: 'Women Against Apartheid: what can we do?', n.d.

had a 'formative influence' on the way black women were viewed by the apartheid state.<sup>68</sup> As Shireen Ally has so incisively written: 'employing a domestic worker was not just a choice about how to manage one's household work, it was colluding with an institution that was crucial to the production and reinforcement of raced and classed inequalities'.<sup>69</sup> In their reporting, LWAA emphasized that domestic work in South Africa was little better than servitude. With their wage labour producing revenue and not capital, domestic workers were 'vulnerable to their employer's every whim', depending on them for 'housing, food, and the right to live in the city'.<sup>70</sup> Despite being 'on-call all day' without a legal minimum wage, white South Africans were certain of their beneficence, and the spurious trope of domestic workers being 'one of the family' was well-rehearsed in national public discourse.<sup>71</sup> This chimeric was powerfully laid bare in 1980 with the publication of Jacklyn Cock's *Maids and Madams*, which highlighted the 'ultra-exploitation' of women involved in domestic service.<sup>72</sup> Something of a sensation when it was published, Cock's candid account was discussed by LWAA, and when it was made into a documentary in 1987, LWAA ran public screenings.<sup>73</sup> Whilst perhaps overemphasizing the bonds of 'international sisterhood', LWAA were effectively asking women in West Yorkshire to imagine themselves in the same position.<sup>74</sup> Under their twin remit of 'educating' and 'campaigning', LWAA emotively laid bare the inequities of apartheid. The task now – as indeed with all anti-apartheid activity – was to convert raised consciousness into practical action.

### III

Since its founding in 1960, the campaign strategy of the AAM was 'remarkably consistent', as it focused on promoting international isolation as well as providing aid and advocacy for South Africans who fought against apartheid.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Deborah Gaitksell et al., 'Class, race and gender: domestic workers in South Africa', *Review of African Political Economy*, 27/28 (1983), p. 86; Cherryl Walker, *Women and resistance in South Africa* (London, 1982), p. 14.

<sup>69</sup> Shireen Ally, *From servants to workers: South African domestic workers and the democratic state* (Ithaca, NY, 2009), pp. 5–6.

<sup>70</sup> FAN/LWAA001, 'Women against apartheid: some facts about domestic workers in South Africa'; Gaitksell et al., 'Class, race and gender', p. 92. Staggeringly, there was no national minimum wage for domestic workers until 2002. See Debbie Budlender, 'The introduction of a minimum wage for domestic workers in South Africa', *Conditions of Work and Employment Series*, No. 72, International Labour Office, Geneva, 2016.

<sup>71</sup> FAN/LWAA001, 'Women against apartheid: some facts about domestic workers in South Africa'.

<sup>72</sup> Jacklyn Cock, *Maids and madams: a study in the politics of exploitation* (Johannesburg, 1980).

<sup>73</sup> FAN/LWAA002, poster: 'Women against apartheid: "Maids and madams" video about the lives of domestic workers in S.A., Tuesday 27th January, 8PM civic hall'.

<sup>74</sup> Francisca de Haan et al., 'Introduction', in de Haan et al., eds., *Women's activism: global perspectives from the 1890s to the present* (London, 2013), p. 3.

<sup>75</sup> Gavin Brown, 'Anti-apartheid solidarity in the perspectives and practices of the British far left in the 1970s and 1980s', in Evan Smith and Matthew Worley, eds., *Waiting for the revolution: the British far left from 1956* (Manchester, 2017), pp. 67–8.

While the 1970s might have been the movement's 'difficult decade',<sup>76</sup> by the 1980s, global solidarity 'peaked'.<sup>77</sup> Interpreting solidarity as a 'social practice', LWAA launched a series of ambitious campaigns, the most prominent of which focused on promoting consumer boycotts, and the collection and co-ordination of material aid for the ANC.<sup>78</sup> As well as 'providing vitally needed material for the liberation movements', material aid campaigns functioned as a 'useful channel of communication with members of the public', and were a 'regular feature of many local AA groups' in the mid-1980s.<sup>79</sup>

Directly responding to a call from the ANC Women's League, in 1987, LWAA set themselves the ambitious task of collecting 500 toiletry kits to send to the Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College (SOMAFCO) in Tanzania.<sup>80</sup> Established in 1978, SOMAFCO was founded by the ANC to educate those who had fled the country following the Soweto uprising. 'Health Education' was an important part of the curriculum at SOMAFCO, and the college relied on a steady supply of material aid.<sup>81</sup> For LWAA, the collection of material aid served three purposes. In the first instance, it 'eased[d] the physical hardships' of those involved in the liberation struggle, whilst also 'showing South Africans fighting apartheid they have friends and supporters around the world'.<sup>82</sup> Apart from this direct expression of solidarity, LWAA connected the collection of goods to an imagined post-apartheid future. As they explained, 'the worse things get inside South Africa, the more black South Africans are forced to flee the country to escape police harassment, arrest and torture to join the fighting forces of the African National Congress'.<sup>83</sup> Those at SOMAFCO were therefore being prepared 'to take over the running' of the country following apartheid's extinguishment.<sup>84</sup> In connecting the micro (collection of toiletries) to the macro (the end of apartheid), LWAA's rhetoric held powerful appeal. Moreover, LWAA understood that those attuned to apartheid's inequities were drawn from a wide political spectrum. Whether donating goods to support the activities of MK (the armed wing of the ANC), or – for those of a less directly radical hue – to

<sup>76</sup> Gurney, 'The 1970s: the anti-apartheid's movement's difficult decade', pp. 471–87.

<sup>77</sup> Hilary Sapire, 'Liberation movements, exile, and international solidarity: an introduction', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 35 (2009), p. 280.

<sup>78</sup> Gavin Brown and Helen Yaffe, *Youth activism and solidarity: the non-stop picket against apartheid* (London, 2018), p. 72.

<sup>79</sup> 'Anti-Apartheid Movement annual report on activities and developments', Sept. 1984, [http://psimg.jstor.org/fsi/img/pdf/t0/10.5555/al.sff.document.aam00062\\_final.pdf](http://psimg.jstor.org/fsi/img/pdf/t0/10.5555/al.sff.document.aam00062_final.pdf) (last accessed 2 July 2020). According to the annual report, in 1983, the AAM offices received 5,000 bars of soap and 2,000 packs of sanitary towels which they then sent to the ANC and South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) in Tanzania and Angola.

<sup>80</sup> It was latterly named for Solomon Kalushi Mahlangu, an operative of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) who was hanged in 1979.

<sup>81</sup> 'Health education', ANC SOMAFCO Tanzania Health Department box no. 7, folder 11, African National Congress Archives, University of Fort Hare.

<sup>82</sup> FAN/LWAA001, leaflet, 'Leeds Women Against Apartheid material aid collection for South Africans in exile' (1987).

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> SOMAFCO was The Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College and was located in Tanzania.

support the education of children in exile, the donation of material aid was framed as an activity that both Trotskyists and churchgoers could engage with. Aiming to collect 500 kits that would contain 'soap, toothpaste/brushes, sanitary towels, Vaseline/baby oil, and sterilising tablets',<sup>85</sup> LWAA organized a series of events in support of their endeavour. Co-ordinating collections outside supermarkets and chemists, and placing donation boxes in workplaces, libraries, pubs, hairdressers, and churches, LWAA's campaign was sustained through both piecemeal activity and special events. Aiming to generate as much interest as possible, on 14 November 1987, LWAA organized a car cavalcade through Leeds city centre, setting up a stall at Dortmund Square off The Headrow – a central thoroughfare home to many of the city's civic buildings – where members of the public could learn more about LWAA, and donate items to 'the struggle'.<sup>86</sup> To this end, their toiletries campaign raised £800, which was sent – along with a van full of toiletries – to the ANC via their London office.<sup>87</sup>

Writing to thank LWAA for their 'very substantial contribution', Mendi Msimang, the ANC's London representative, emphasized the importance of material aid as an expression of international solidarity.<sup>88</sup> Noting that it was 'most gratifying' that LWAA were already planning their next material aid drive, Msimang suggested that the group should next focus on 'children's sandals...babies' nappies and all toiletries for young people'.<sup>89</sup> Msimang's suggestion was a timely one, as four days earlier at their regular committee meeting, LWAA had decided to 'publicize what is happening to children', combining it with collecting 'goods needed by young people in camps'.<sup>90</sup> As well as launching a campaign to collect 'exercise books, pens, pencils [and] new sandals', LWAA held a series of benefits to raise money for the defence and bail costs of those who had been 'jailed and tortured' by Prime Minister Botha's regime.<sup>91</sup> Largely a response to the bloody conclusions of the Soweto uprising when 'the apartheid regime...declared war on its children', the plight of the country's youth gained increasing prominence in local and national AAM activities.<sup>92</sup> Believed to be 'the most effective way of bringing home to the world the impact of apartheid', this notion rested on a particularly gendered form of

<sup>85</sup> FAN/LWAA001, leaflet, 'Leeds Women Against Apartheid material aid collection for South Africans in exile' (1987).

<sup>86</sup> FAN/LWAA001, 'We are warmed by tangible solidarity with our struggle – ANC', *Leeds Other Paper*, 13 Nov. 1987.

<sup>87</sup> FAN/LWAA005, minutes and notes, 1987, 'Minutes of meeting 24 November 1987'.

<sup>88</sup> FAN/LWAA006, letter from M. Msimang, 29 Mar. 1988.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> FAN/LWAA005, 'WAA minutes', 24 Mar. 1988.

<sup>91</sup> FAN/LWAA002, poster: 'Free the children of Southern Africa'; FAN/LWAA005, poster: 'FREE THE CHILDREN: collect money and goods for the children of southern Africa'. For more on Soweto, see Julian Brown, *The road to Soweto: resistance and the uprising of 16 June* (Johannesburg, 2016).

<sup>92</sup> Bringing together ANC officials and members of the international community, Archbishop Trevor Huddleston convened the conference: 'Children, repression and the law in apartheid South Africa' in Harare in May 1987. The meeting highlighted the brutal tactics of the state and the indiscriminate detention of children.

politicking in which those in Britain were effectively asked to imagine apartheid's children as their own, and as scholars such as Emily Bridger have shown, largely obscured the role that young people played as active participants of the struggle.<sup>93</sup> For LWAA, focusing on children was a natural extension of their efforts, as it further underscored the 'incredible struggles' faced by women in South Africa.<sup>94</sup>

Despite the gravity of these issues, LWAA displayed a remarkable level of creativity in their campaigning. For instance, in February 1989 at the 'FREE THE CHILDREN' fundraiser, for an entry fee of £2 (unwaged £1) those in attendance were provided with lunch, entertained by a juggler, and could listen to a lecture by ANC member and South African academic Shirley Mashiane-Talbot while their children were entertained by the 'Caribbean storyteller Mr Mandingo'.<sup>95</sup> Such events not only raised funds, but were also structured to allow women – often primary caregivers – to engage with anti-apartheid activities. In particular, LWAA wanted those who were time-poor to feel that they could 'come and go'.<sup>96</sup> This concern therefore greatly influenced the nature of LWAA's mobilization. Whilst some quarters of the movement were marked by their righteous solemnity, LWAA modelled a different kind of political engagement that merged conviviality and militancy. In particular, by the late 1980s, the group had become increasingly inventive in their efforts, organizing a range of activities that were both 'useful' and 'enjoyable'.<sup>97</sup>

Although the collection of material remained the cornerstone of their activities, by the late 1980s, LWAA ran a number of highly original events that were raising funds and 'bring[ing] home to the general public of Leeds the realities of life' in South Africa.<sup>98</sup> The most creative included the launching of a series of 'skills auctions'. For instance, in December 1989, LWAA organized a 'disco by sister P. of Rapid radio'.<sup>99</sup> As well as the disco, those in attendance could bid on a skills auction, the contents of which included 'A children's party & outing; Indian & Italian meals for you and your friends; Guitar lessons for beginners; A mystery evenings [sic] entertainment; a jumper hand-knitted for you; a car service; a weeks [sic] ironing'.<sup>100</sup> LWAA devoted great energy to organizing skills auctions, and in March 1990 they held their most ambitious event in this regard. As their literature proclaimed, 'instead of coming to bid for second-

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<sup>93</sup> Archbishop Trevor Huddleston quoted in 'Child torture made anti-apartheid issue: conference told of shooting, detention of young S. African blacks', *Los Angeles Times*, 27 Sept. 1987. Emily Bridger, 'Functions and failures of transnational activism: discourses of children's resistance and repression in global anti-apartheid networks', *Journal of World History*, 26 (2016), pp. 865–87.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with Ailsa Swarbrick.

<sup>95</sup> FAN/LWAA005, poster: 'FREE THE CHILDREN of Southern Africa, AN EVENT FOR ALL AGES', Saturday 25 Feb. 1989. Mashiane-Talbot came to Britain in the 1960s, and founded one of the country's first Caribbean studies courses in Liverpool.

<sup>96</sup> Interview with Ailsa Swarbrick.

<sup>97</sup> FAN/LWAA005, poster: 'Leeds Women Against Apartheid are holding a women's "hoe down"', n.d.

<sup>98</sup> Interview with Ailsa Swarbrick.

<sup>99</sup> FAN/LWAA001, poster: 'Disco and skills auction', Thursday 7 Dec. 1989.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

hand furniture at our auction you can bid for first-hand skills'.<sup>101</sup> Despite the apparent gaiety of the event, LWAA reminded the people of Leeds that although Nelson Mandela had been released from Victor Verster prison in February, 'hundreds still remain behind bars for opposing apartheid' with the money raised at the event being sent to 'the families of political prisoners' through the International Defence and Aid Fund.<sup>102</sup> In promoting the event, LWAA listed the wide-ranging skills on offer, including a haircut, three days in a cottage in Ribblesdale, a training session on a word processor, the organization of a children's party, and for those who were 'brave enough to let someone see their cooker', a full clean.<sup>103</sup> By the time the auction had taken place, LWAA were able to offer twenty-seven lots, nearly half of which seemed to be targeted towards women. Whether bidding on a week's ironing, a lesson in dried flower arranging, or 'a women's weekend breakfast in bed', skills auctions were part of LWAA's attempts to 'do a variety of things' in an attempt to ensure that those receptive to their message continued to financially support the fight against apartheid.<sup>104</sup> LWAA's efforts seemingly captured something of the small group fundraising zeitgeist in the early 1990s, as they were featured in an article in the *Independent on Sunday*. Profiling three 'fundraising organisations' in West Yorkshire, the article examined the form of skills auctions, with Judy Maxwell of LWAA explaining the importance of encouraging people to donate 'auctionable lots' with an average of thirty lots raising £1,000.<sup>105</sup>

As well as being 'a very good fund-raising device',<sup>106</sup> the women of LWAA organized skills auctions and events such as discos and Karaoke because doing so was enjoyable.<sup>107</sup> As Bridget Lockyer has noted in her examination of the women's liberation movement in Bradford, the running of social events such as discos was both politically affirming and a paen to the power of female friendship.<sup>108</sup> The idea, then, that the activism of groups such as LWAA could be pleasurable was considered somewhat vulgar by those hostile to feminist anti-racist organizing. Indeed, as Nicholas Owen has observed in an allied context, 'the sexism of the male radical was a formidable obstacle'.<sup>109</sup> Blithely overlooked or purposefully undermined, the establishment of women's groups was therefore understood by such comrades as a needless distraction. Even after the establishment of the national women's committee in the early

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<sup>101</sup> FAN/LWAA002, poster: 'Benefit for the families of political prisoners in South Africa - skills auction', 30 Mar. 1990 (this is noted as 1989, but is in fact 1990, as Mandela was released in February 1990).

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> Skills auctions of thirty lots raised on average £1,000. FAN/LWAA003, 'Skilful way to raise a bid for charity', *The Independent on Sunday*, 6 Sept. 1992.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> Interview with Ailsa Swarbrick.

<sup>108</sup> Bridget Lockyer, 'An irregular period? Participation in the Bradford Women's Liberation Movement', *Women's History Review*, 22 (2013), pp. 643-57.

<sup>109</sup> Nicholas Owen, 'Men and the 1970s British Women's Liberation Movement', *Historical Journal*, 56 (2013), p. 806.



1980s, one member, Elaine, noted that the group devoted an inordinate amount of time to simply justifying their existence.<sup>110</sup> Delicately framing it as something more than bald chauvinism, in 1988, the women's committee highlighted some of the movement's blind spots when it came to women.<sup>111</sup> Noting that their 'low profile' had 'serious consequences', they argued that the movement failed to take women's activism seriously. As they argued, denying the 'potential contribution' of women not only hindered 'maximum effectiveness' but also limited membership, as those who did not find the movement 'accessible and welcoming' were unlikely to remain engaged in its activities. Feeling that 'the AAM has never seriously addressed women as a specific constituency', the women's committee made it clear that the 'campaigning tools' of the movement should not be 'those to which men can most closely relate'.<sup>112</sup> Furthermore, following the conclusion of the national 'Women Against Apartheid' conference in June 1989, the women's committee reaffirmed the importance of women-only groups as well as challenging members to ensure a more equal representation of women within the movement's decision-making structures.<sup>113</sup>

#### IV

If the national executive was 'a long way behind other progressive organisations in tackling sexism', then the picture on the local level is equally unflattering.<sup>114</sup> Organizing to 'make sure that women are enabled to participate' as 'at present only a few women are involved in the Leeds Anti Apartheid Group', LWAA stressed that their aims were ultimately congruous with those of LAAM.<sup>115</sup> A 'forum for more women to get involved in campaigning against apartheid',<sup>116</sup> LWAA struck a conciliatory tone, emphasizing that they were 'separate from, but complementary to' LAAM.<sup>117</sup> Although LWAA gladly pursued their own objectives and agenda, they also tried – unsuccessfully for the largest part – to co-ordinate activities with LAAM, and despite their attempts to engender a comradely relationship, by 1989, relations between the two groups were increasingly strained. Attempting to request 'closer co-operation', LWAA wrote to LAAM in early 1989 expressing both sororal

<sup>110</sup> Interview with Elaine Unterhalter by Eoin O'Cearnaigh on 3 Oct. 2013 for the Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives Committee project Forward to Freedom, [www.aamarchives.org/interviews/elaine-unterhalter.html](http://www.aamarchives.org/interviews/elaine-unterhalter.html) (accessed 30 June 2016).

<sup>111</sup> 'Mobilising Women Against Apartheid: Report to the AAM from the Executive Committee and the Women's Committee', WAAM papers, AD6/11/1.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> 'Women Against Apartheid, June 3 1989, conference report', WAAM papers, AD6/11/1.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> FAN/LWAA001, leaflet, 'WOMEN CONCERNED ABOUT THE SITUATION IN SOUTH AFRICA? INTERESTED IN COMING TO A WOMAN'S MEETING TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT?', 22 Oct. (n.y.), 7.30.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> FAN/LWAA008, letter to AAM Women's Committee in London about LWAA, n.d.

greetings and a desire to synchronize some campaign activity.<sup>118</sup> Four months later, LWAA were still waiting on LAAM's response. In an effort to get a sense of their feeling, two LWAA members, Gilda Petersen and Frances Bernstein (daughter of famous anti-apartheid activists Rusty and Hilda Bernstein) attended LAAM's April meeting.<sup>119</sup> Following the conclusion of the meeting, Petersen and Bernstein spoke to LAAM's chair, Peter Pilay. Although he expressed 'goodwill in the abstract', he would not be drawn on making a 'specific commitment' regarding a closer relationship between the two groups. Feeling that the group did not 'seem to have much independent motivation' as they were 'mainly responding to national initiatives', LWAA's members reasoned that they were now the main AAM group in the city.<sup>120</sup>

In spite of LWAA's attempts, the fissures between the two groups continued to grow and were thrown into particularly sharp relief over the organization of International Women's Day (IWD) in 1990. As Leeds was a site of 'municipal feminism' in which the Labour-controlled council had begun 'serious' work on 'gender friendly' activities in the early 1980s, the council had a history of funding 'equal opportunities projects in the community'.<sup>121</sup> As both groups had applied for a grant for IWD, the council's women's committee asked LWAA and LAAM to 'officially co-operate', with the two groups meeting to discuss this on 7 December 1989.<sup>122</sup> Four days later, LWAA held an emergency meeting where they discussed LAAM's refusal to co-operate in the organizing of IWD activities.<sup>123</sup> Less than a month later in January 1990, LWAA wrote to LAAM (and the national women's committee in London) to express regret at LAAM's recalcitrance. As they wrote:

we understand that you felt the gaps between us were too big to overcome...we did not feel this, indeed as both our organisations adhere to the principles of the Anti-Apartheid movement, we do not feel there is much gap at all...We would welcome closer co-operation and felt that doing a joint event would help bring it about. We feel it is unfortunate that there will probably be two separate events in Leeds, both at the same time, both focussing on women in Southern Africa. One event would have united the solidarity movement in Leeds, men and women.<sup>124</sup>

Despite LWAA's hopes for 'closer co-operation between [the] two groups', their relationship became increasingly strained in the run up to IWD in March.<sup>125</sup>

<sup>118</sup> FAN/LWAA12, minutes WAA meeting, 27 Apr. 1989.

<sup>119</sup> Gilda Petersen first became politically active during the global student protest movements of 1968. See Max Farrar et al. "Paris today! Leeds tomorrow!" Remembering 1968 in Leeds', *Northern History* (2020), pp. 1–27.

<sup>120</sup> FAN/LWAA12, minutes WAA meeting, 27 Apr. 1989.

<sup>121</sup> Sue Bruley, 'Women's liberation at the grass roots: a view from some English towns, c. 1968–1990', *Women's History Review*, 25 (2016), p. 733.

<sup>122</sup> FAN/LWAA007, minutes, 28 Nov. 1989.

<sup>123</sup> FAN/LWAA007, minutes, 11 Dec. 1989.

<sup>124</sup> FAN/LWAA008, letter to LAAM, 6 Jan. 1990.

<sup>125</sup> *ibid.*

Unbowed by such obtuse behaviour, LWAA member Gilda Petersen attended LAAM's AGM, tabling a motion for closer collaboration between the groups. Even at this stage, LWAA's proposals were hardly drastic. They mooted circulating each other's publicity material; called for early notification of events to 'ensure maximum attendance and unity'; the organizing of joint events, and the ability to present 'brief annual reports' at the AGM.<sup>126</sup> Despite this, LWAA's motion was defeated 24 to 21, and instead the group concentrated their efforts on engaging other women's groups in the city for IWD celebrations. While for some, IWD overemphasizes the cohesion of feminist movements,<sup>127</sup> on a more prosaic level it is a day to reflect on 'progress made, calling for further change, and remembering acts of courage'.<sup>128</sup> The fact that LAAM failed to accord control of – or at the very least co-operate with – LWAA on an event that specifically recognized and celebrated women is therefore emblematic of the structural sexism of the movement.

Struggling to forge a constructive relationship with LAAM, LWAA turned their attentions to engaging other women's and feminist groups in the city. Emphasizing that they organized as 'women, black and white', in 1988, they wrote to 'ethnic and minority women' groups in Leeds in an attempt to show that they too would be welcome in the movement and, according to Swarbrick, maintained 'very good relations' with Leeds Barbadian women.<sup>129</sup> Generally though, LWAA had most of their contact with women from minoritized communities through their engagement with the city council's women's committee. In particular, LWAA took part in events co-ordinated by the council that also included groups such as the Bangladesh Women's Association, Jamaica Society Women's Group, Chinese Women's Group, and the Mary Seacole Nurses Association.<sup>130</sup> As Thomlinson has argued, many feminist groups – LWAA included – were 'concerned with the struggles...[of] those subjected to the brutality and force of imperialist power', yet were seemingly less concerned with tackling racism in their own communities in Britain.<sup>131</sup> While this may have been true of the women's movement more broadly, the opposite

<sup>126</sup> FAN/LWAA007, minutes, 7 Feb. 1990.

<sup>127</sup> Barbara LeSavoy and Garrett Jordan, 'The capitalist hijacking of International Women's Day: Russian and American considerations', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 14 (2013), pp. 244–58.

<sup>128</sup> Beverley Peel, 'International Women's Day', in Cheri Kramarae and Dale Spender, eds., *Routledge international encyclopaedia of women: global women's issues and knowledge* (London, 2000), p. 1154.

<sup>129</sup> FAN/LWAA002, leaflet, South African Women urge stronger boycott', n.d., interview with Ailsa Swarbrick.

<sup>130</sup> FAN/LWAA002, leaflet for International Women's Day organized by Leeds City Council Women's Committee 1990.

<sup>131</sup> Thomlinson, *Race, ethnicity and the women's movement*, p. 42. This critique, that it was seemingly more appealing for the majority (white) rank and file of the movement to profess outrage at the brutality of apartheid, while ignoring Britain's systemic racism was often made by the AAM's black members. For more, see Elizabeth M. Williams, *The politics of race in Britain and South Africa: black British solidarity and the anti-apartheid struggle* (London, 2015); Morwenna Osmond, 'What does a study of the St. Paul's Apartheid Free Zone Campaign (SPAFZC), and its relationship with the Bristol Anti-Apartheid Movement (BAAM), reveal about black British anti-apartheid solidarity?' (unpublished paper, 2020).

was more representative of LWAA's thinking. Indeed, in 1992, the idea was mooted whether or not the group should broaden its remit and 'look more widely at intervening on issues of racism...or to be[come] an even more general socialist womens [sic] group'.<sup>132</sup> In many ways, LWAA had their most authentic relationships with black South Africans who were either exiled or studying in Britain, and in the late 1980s, two black South African students who were in Leeds on an exchange programme joined LWAA. The presence of these two young women was a real boon to the women of LWAA, as it gave their activism a 'kind of personal connection'.<sup>133</sup> Hailing from Soshanguve, a township approximately twenty miles north of Pretoria, the South African students were also members of the Soshanguve Women's League (SWL). LWAA developed a close relationship with SWL, regularly sending money and material aid to support their activities. Five years later in 1993, just as South Africa was on the cusp of holding its first democratic election, Swarbrick visited the country and went to meet the SWL. Arriving in Soshanguve, she recalled being overcome with emotion as she was greeted by SWL members singing *Bambelela*, a popular protest song.<sup>134</sup> When the meeting began, Swarbrick was surprised that SWL members asked her what she thought the group *should* be doing. With characteristic humility she recalled replying that she was there to learn and represent LWAA: 'just a group of women in Leeds who felt it was very important to show solidarity'.<sup>135</sup>

## V

When members of LWAA met in July 1994 to discuss their future, they decided to disperse, feeling that their 'goal had been achieved, sending their outstanding funds to the women's group in Soshanguve'.<sup>136</sup> A small piece of a 'huge tapestry of movements', 'although it's only a little tiny bit', LWAA played a decisive part in the fight against apartheid in the West Yorkshire region.<sup>137</sup> In recovering their history, this article has therefore sought to challenge the patriarchal 'struggle' narrative that continues to marginalize the role that women played in the history of one of the most important social movements of the twentieth century. In doing so, it challenges other researchers to acknowledge the fact that not all acts of solidarity were believed to carry equal weight, thereby foregrounding the implicit – often explicit – hierarchy of value ascribed to different modes of activism.

When LWAA was founded in 1986 it would *only* be another four years until Nelson Mandela was released from prison, and the country began the process of apprehensively edging towards its first democratic election. During this time, LWAA were keen to convince the people of Leeds of the need for

<sup>132</sup> FAN/LWAA008, minutes, 10 Sept. 1992.

<sup>133</sup> Interview with Ailsa Swarbrick. Unfortunately, Swarbrick only remembers the first name – Maggie – of one of the women.

<sup>134</sup> Interview with Ailsa Swarbrick. *Bambelela* is from the Zulu and translates as 'hold on'.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

'continued AA work'; although Mandela was free: 'hundreds still remained behind bars for opposing apartheid'.<sup>138</sup> If the early 1990s were a period in which the ANC 'search[ed] for direction',<sup>139</sup> LWAA were concerned that in this, the last crucial push towards democracy, there was a 'lack of alternative vision to the creeping sludge of capitalist ideology'.<sup>140</sup>

Some thirty years after F. W. de Klerk announced Mandela's release from prison, it is still difficult to pinpoint the precise reason that precipitated apartheid's downfall. Certainly, the combined pressures of economic sanctions, the scorn – or reluctant *realpolitik* – of much of the international community, and the rising tide of black resistance played their part, while the international anti-apartheid movement's greatest success was perhaps 'in helping to force apartheid into the public consciousness'.<sup>141</sup> The challenge for groups such as LWAA was to generate – and maintain – momentum in order to 'urge women in Leeds to continue their solidarity'.<sup>142</sup> A further obstacle for LWAA was the 'domineering, masculine ethos' of the movement in which their activism was greeted with indifference and hostility.<sup>143</sup> As Beckwith has so witheringly put it: 'women are always required to construct, or reconstruct, or reconstitute their political standing...because, fundamentally, women are seen as illegitimate political actors'.<sup>144</sup> The fact that LWAA organized from an 'autonomous outside position'<sup>145</sup> demonstrates that although the movement was united by a commitment to anti-racism, matters of sexual equality were certainly understood as secondary, and were seen – on both the national and local level – as an unwanted interpolation that fruitlessly diverted attention away from the *real* issue; the overthrowal of apartheid.

Despite this, in their eight-year existence, LWAA displayed an impressive knack for fundraising including material aid drives, discos, and skills auctions. The fact that solidarity was conceptually roomy enough to allow a variety of interpretations meant that whatever form of activity was undertaken in the name of ending apartheid – the refusal to buy apples from the Western Cape; the collection of toiletries to be distributed as material aid; participation in a demo – could be expressed as an act of solidarity. To date, however, these quotidian forms of activism have received considerably less historiographical attention than they merit. In addition, the decisive role that women throughout the United Kingdom played in the collection of material aid remains a curious oversight in a literature that is largely concerned with inscribing the importance of the AAM to the end of white supremacy in South Africa. To a certain extent, this can be explained by a larger problem: the reluctance to

<sup>138</sup> FAN/LWAA008, minutes, 13 Oct. 1990; poster: 'Benefit for the families of political prisoners in South Africa – skills auction', n.d.

<sup>139</sup> Matthew Graham, *The crisis of South African foreign policy: diplomacy, leadership and the role of the African National Congress* (London, 2015), p. 71.

<sup>140</sup> FAN/LWAA008, minutes, 13 Oct. 1990 and 10 Sept. 1992.

<sup>141</sup> Fieldhouse, *Anti-apartheid: a history of the movement in Britain*, p. 62.

<sup>142</sup> FAN/LWAA006, letter from LWAA to Women's Section of ANC in London, 11 Oct. 1987.

<sup>143</sup> Fieldhouse, *Anti-apartheid: a history of the movement in Britain*, p. 343.

<sup>144</sup> Beckwith, 'Lancashire women against pit closures', p. 1062.

<sup>145</sup> Beckwith, 'Beyond compare?', p. 442.

ascribe equal value to women's activism. Whether this is structural or inadvertent, it is important to continue to interrogate the differing emphasis placed on women's activism and to examine the reasons why the thoughtful solidarity work of groups such as LWAA has received less attention both publicly and within the historiography. As this article has argued, it can partly be explained by the perceived value (or lack thereof) attributed to women's political activism and solidarity work. Yet, as this article has argued, examining 'local' activism, such as that undertaken by the members of LWAA, allows us to map new co-ordinates on to one of the most important social movements of the late twentieth century, with the 'local' functioning as an important category of historical analysis.

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