

## Oral History Interview Transcript

**Interviewee: Lindsay MacGregor**

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**Location: Dundee**

**Time: 00:30:27**

**Interviewer: Morag Allan Campbell**

**Time period: 1980s, 1990s**

**Groups: Dundee Women's Aid, East Fife Women's Aid**

**Roles: unpaid worker (Dundee WA), founding member (East Fife WA)**

*That should be us recording. Ok, well, as I say, I've got these questions that I'm just going to, kind of, sort of, well, basically just refer to but I would imagine that what...*

Wherever we go.

*Yeah. So to start with, can you tell me what your connection was to Women's Aid, and how you first got involved?*

Yeah. Well I was a student in St Andrews University at the time, I think I was at the point of studying, finishing off my PhD, I think at the time, and I, I was teaching undergraduates mediaeval history, and I found it, ah, quite unsatisfactory, quite stultifying, 'cause the students ... I think in part they weren't entirely convinced that a postgrad teaching them was quite what they were expecting and were, were requiring, and, and also that they were, a few of them at least in the class were, not entirely committed to mediaeval history. I felt that they were, in their eyes, a kind of easy subject, and so I was looking around for something else at the time that would satisfy my interest in engaging with other people, basically, on a more committed level, and I'd always been interested in and was to some extent engaged in the feminist movement in St Andrews which at the time was pretty radical at ... I mean, it was probably past its heyday by then, I think this was the '80s, um, but it had been very, very vibrant, eh, at the university when I was an undergraduate, and um, so I was looking around for something else that would just, kind of, keep me interested in, in Fife and round and about, and, um, some of the women in St Andrews that I knew

through the Women's Liberation Movement were involved at Dundee Women's Aid, and, um, through my friendship with them I knew the work they were doing and that it connected to my own commitment to feminism, so I went there as an unpaid worker, and I couldn't give very many hours a week, it was a maybe a couple of hours a week, something like that, so I wasn't hugely there a lot of the time, but I, I...

So, some of the jobs I had at first were just things like endlessly clipping things out of newspapers, anything to do with women, it wasn't just about violence against women, anything at all to do with the position of women, the status of women, women's improvement, work, whatever it might be, finding them in the range of newspapers that we got in the office and clipping them out. And I don't honestly know what we did with them [laughs], there was just this huge, sort of, heap every day of clippings, but I guess we stuck them in something. I'd be interested to know if that archive does still exist, I don't know, but I spent a long time clipping. Um, and I did attend a lot of the collective meetings at Dundee Women's Aid, and possibly, most importantly for me, I did quite a lot of on-calls, and because I lived in Fife, and I think at the time I didn't have a telephone, it was kind of not such a common thing to have a phone, I guess, then, and certainly not for students. I didn't have a telephone, and I was at some distance from the refuge, so I did all of my on-calls from one of the other members' houses, so I was kind of sleeping on the floor in my sleeping bag with a phone next to me and it would waken me up in the middle of the night and I would go and do my on-call from there. So, um, and that, that was my main contact, I suppose, with women who were using the service. I was either going over to the refuge to admit women late at night or to go over to help someone out in the refuge when something was arising. Um so, so I had a wide range of experience there.

**00:03:40** I was really, really, hugely grateful, and it certainly did fill that gap in my life I was looking for, and, um, I was particularly taken with the whole concept and, um, implementation of collective working which was ... I was, I was, kind of, probably aware of through other aspects of the work in the Women's Liberation Movement at the time but because we weren't in a sort of working environment, I hadn't, kind of, put together the

necessity or the arguments for a completely integrated life, embodiment I suppose of life, so, that one's work context was not necessarily distinguishable from one's personal home life or social life. And so, if you're against hierarchy and, em, power, dominance in home life then it makes equal sense that that should not be a part of work life either, and so for me that was really, kind of, big, eye opening aspect of, em, my life really. It was ... scales sort of fell away from another layer of my own consciousness-raising at that point. Em, so that was my introduction to it, I guess, and, em, yeah, just a range of little pieces of work that I could get involved with, with such a, kind of, minimal commitment that I could give at that time, as I was writing my PhD, but certainly really benefitting from both learning about the environment and also just that hands-on working with women who'd come through it and were now working in, in Women's Aid as workers, having themselves come through the refuge at different points. So, in all sorts of ways, it gave me a huge amount.

**00:05:35** *How long did you do it for, was it just when you were doing your PhD or did your involvement...?*

Eh, then I, I think I left academia after my PhD because I wasn't inspired by that academic teaching side of it, I found it disappointing and so I went then and because, again, because of the Women's Aid experience I thought I'd gr-, I'd prefer to do adult education and work with, with adults who were perhaps more actively engaged with wanting to, em, re-enter education or whatever. So, I went to Edinburgh and studied at Moray House for a year, in adult education, and, um, yeah, so that took me away from Dundee and that, I think, was probably the end of my Women's Aid involvement for that period of my life and ... Eh, however, through Women's Aid also, when I was at Dundee, one of my jobs was picking up, eh, donations from women, who ... or from families, or households, for women in the refuge, and at one point ... I had a car, and I went to pick up some stuff and I reversed the car into the lamppost, and somebody back at Dundee, and I wr-, I didn't wreck the car, it was slow speed but it was pretty done in – and I don't even think it was my car – so somebody back at Dundee said, 'Oh, you should phone Scottish 'cause I think they may have insurance for unpaid workers'. They didn't know but they thought it might be a possibility

that it'd be covered. So, I phoned Scottish Women's Aid, and I got this really, kind of, grumpy sounding woman who was really amazed that I could even be so naïve as to ask the question, 'Was ... Sid Women's Aid have insurance cover for unpaid workers who'd reversed their car into a lamppost?'. Um, so that was an inauspicious start, but it turned out that that person was **[name anonymised]** who, once I'd moved to Edinburgh, and we met up and had loads in common and we ended up, you know, twenty years relationship together. So, through Women's Aid also was a kind of introduction to loads of friends who are still friends, um, through Women's Aid, um, and **[name anonymised]**, I think, she'd maybe left Women's Aid by the time I got to Edinburgh, she had left, you know, we, we ... It continued to be a big part of our lives, for both of us, and at some point we did jointly do, em, research for Tayside Regional Council on, em, aspects of domestic ... I think it was, em ... Yeah, well, it, it was ca-, a piece of research called **[name anonymised]** that we did for Tayside Regional Council, and, em, a sort of qualitative piece interviewing twenty women about their experiences of, um, domestic abuse.

**00:08:18** So, it remained part of our lives, and then, we moved up to Fife, to **[location anonymised]**, where I still live, and, I can't remember how many years into being there, but there had been various things in the local papers, from councillors, quite early on, saying, you know, well, there was a Women's Aid in West Fife and a Women's Aid in Central Fife, but they said there was no need for a Women's Aid in North East Fife 'cause it didn't happen in that kind of profile of population. There would [not] be, um, any kind of domestic abuse in North East Fife, so, there's always been that sort of concern about those of us living there that it was difficult, if not impossible, to get funding for a refuge in the area although clearly there was a need for it, um, and then some years later, a woman in Cupar, I think, called a meeting, to say, were there any other women in the area who might be interested in looking into the prospect of setting up a refuge specifically for North East Fife. So, I went along to that first meeting and, I don't know how many of us there were, but it was enough, probably about six or seven of us, to agree at that point that we would become the, kind of, small group that would take forward the idea of setting up, at first an office, and later a refuge for women in Cupar, St Andrews and East Neuk and, em, Howe of Fife area, and, eh, I

don't know again how many years I was involved there, probably, maybe about, two or three, something like that maybe, three or four, I'm not sure, but, em, getting into that beginning phase of finding office premises, and then refuge premises, and getting funding and, eh, yeah. We had our ups and downs there, as well, I must say. It wasn't an easy process, but, em ... And it was a different era from the Dundee time, quite a different era, because I think in the Dundee era it was very much a grant from the council, and, as I say the ethos very much in Dundee was, wherever possible, being alongside women who were either workers, paid or unpaid, and that sort of levelling out and the valuing of experience, um, experience of domestic abuse, as a route into becoming a paid worker at Women's Aid, whereas by the time I was in the Fife group, it was much more of a contractual environment and much more of a professionalised environment and I think it was around about the time of the move away from collective working into a more hierarchical, perhaps more traditional form of working. So it was interesting for me to come back into Women's Aid but with quite a different shape, I guess.

**0:11:06** *So can you tell me a bit more about the collective to more hierarchical, how that happened and what you feel about that?*

Yeah, well, I don't think I was actually ... I mean, I was very much aware of the process of change, of how that was going on and, and across the collectives and so on, but I ... For me, certainly, it was a very important part of my time in my late twenties at Dundee, was as I said, that kind of, kind of experience of collective working, which wasn't always easy and didn't always have positive outcomes for individual women or indeed for collective practice, but having worked since then endlessly in hierarchies, you know, I'm not sure whether that necessarily is the right way to judge whether collective working versus hierarchical working is successful or not. Because I'm not ... You know, it's human nature that probably gets in the way of any form of, of working and, em, and as I say, I did very much appreciate that integrity of what Women's Aid was saying about patriarchy and power and how that was then reflected in ways of working within, within the refuges, within the offices, and so on. Um, but, without a doubt it was hard work, and, uh, you know, there was a lot of discussing, but ... And a lot of time in the week was dedicated, I suppose, to meetings as well, because

of that need to always be teasing things out and exploring and trying to hear every single perspective on a lot of different issues. But I always found that positive, and interesting, but I know, amongst my friends, that's not their experience, that many of them felt undermined, and didn't find it always at all positive. But from my perspective, even though things didn't always go the way that I might have felt or wanted, I did really appreciate the desire to hear everybody's voice and to try and negotiate some sort of consensus at the end of the day.

And I've since then lived in collectives, you know, at **[name anonymised]** in Edinburgh, with women and, uh ... I so, I, I feel drawn to that, that lifestyle, and not just as a way of working, but as a way of living, and, em ... So, I suppose I was disappointed when ... And I felt it was some sort of external pressure that was coming in from outside to professionalise, to regulate, um, and to probably bring into play something that was more familiar to funders, and to elected members and so on, and I can understand all the reasons for that and all, and their need for, um, some sort of way of knowing the outcomes they were getting for their money, I can understand all of that, but I regret it in some ways as well, that it was just all swept away so easily. Um, but as I say, I do ... I have many friends who don't agree with my view of it, who didn't have a good experience of it. And when it came to the Fife experience, we still were working collectively, but not everybody there had had that experience of it, and many women had come from a much more traditional, em, work experience of hierarchy and found it really, really frustrating, to try to implement collective working and a lot of our time was just spent arguing about collective working per se, rather than necessarily, um, the agenda.

**00:14:51** So it was, it was with some inevitability, I think, that, with pressure from outside, em, not everybody from within Women's Aid feeling that it was the right way to go, em ... I understand it utterly, you know, and, and possibly the way society is at the moment and how things are, Women's Aid is a different sort of being and there are, there are many other agencies whose practice has been changed by what Women's Aid said and did and showed, and who have now very much improved their practice. I mean, you know, working with the

police at Dundee Women's Aid compared with then with working with the police in [East] Fife Women's Aid, they were like two different organisations, around domestic abuse, because of their perspective and understanding of the issues. Similarly social work and many other voluntary organisations, who, you know, Women's Aid weren't necessarily trained or had that understanding, and yet should have had and were working with women and children who had experienced abuse and, and so, there were lots, there were lots, by the time I got to [East] Fife Women's Aid, there were lots and lots of agencies who had, who could say they had as much expertise and experience in lots of ways, of, of working with women in a more useful manner than maybe there were in the earlier period. So, I understand entirely how it's happened and why it's happened, but there's a part, a big part, of me that hankers back to ... Because of that need for integrity, because I still think that's how we should lead our lives across the piece. It's a struggle and, eh ... Yeah, [laughs] that's where I am on it.

**00:16:34** *So, eh, did you do any, or, do you have any views about Women's Aid's work with children?*

Yeah, I mean it, uh ... I wasn't involved directly with children's work at Dundee, but there was a children's worker there, who was a good friend, and I often was in the children's room playing with children and so on, and, eh, I think at the time, at that Dundee stage, certainly, work with women was the priority, and the feeling was, whatever women need, whatever's good for women, is gonna be good for children, and that was absolutely the ethos. And by the time I got to Fife, it wasn't quite as straightforward as that. I think it was more nuanced, that children had an equal right to women's work and have their voice, to the time of women rather, to the time of workers, as much as the wom-, as their mothers would have, and that their perspective and needs were not necessarily entirely reflected by the needs of their mothers, and so that had shifted, that understanding of children's needs and children's place in that collective experience of abuse. Em, I'd say there, there was more of an understanding of something, they had a rightful place in their own right, for the need of services by the time I was at [East] Fife Women's Aid, and so a lot more of our funding was going into children's work, um, alongside work with women, rather than as part of work

with women which it definitely was more of that at Dundee. So that, that focus had shifted, and I think that was probably the right way to go, um...

**00:18:05** *What do you think had caused that change?*

Well, I think in lots of ways there had been, there has been more emphasis on children's rights, children's rights movement and other voluntary agencies campaigning on behalf of children, giving children and young people a voice, and that feeling that children themselves could speak and tell us something. And Women's Aid were at the forefront of that, of asking children and young people what their needs were, what their experience was, and as Women's Aid got more confident around that way of working, that kind of outed more voices from children and more perspectives and the benefits of asking children and young people, which I think did come very much through Women's Aid's approach, em, and has altered, I think, that, em, that original belief that whatever was good for women was going to be good for children. And, and I mean, I can remember lots and lots of discussions around the cut-off for young men being in refuge and, you know, how can you just have a number when all young people are different and, there are just these impossible arguments. I don't really know that I have an answer to it, it's a really hard one, um, and I could understand utterly both sides of it, and it, and it caused lots and lots of torment both at Dundee Women's Aid and then at [East] Fife Women's Aid, those kinds of issues. Um, so, so I think, I think it was the ... just that rising consciousness of children and young people's rights which has led to things like Youth Parliament and so on, which ... And at, in my work since I've, I've been, I worked for a little while at COSLA, and I worked alongside young people who came through Women's Aid, um, who were meeting with ministers to talk about their experiences and to advocate on behalf of other young people about the kind of services and resources which children and young people should be receiving and, that, that's fantastic, that's really something that Scotland should be proud of. But I think Women's Aid has absolutely contributed to the fact that we are at that point, yeah.

**00:20:10** *So, can you describe any significant turning points, or ... You talked about change quite a lot there. Is there anything, any particular turning points that spring to mind?*

Well, I suppose I've touched on the main ones. For me, I suppose, uh, the contractual, the grant contractual turning points, the way that councils started to commission services which, in a way, required all of their, um, commissioned organisations to look similar because it would ... For monitoring purposes and so on, it was too tricky for them to try and handle anything that didn't look similar to the kind of structure that they'd put in place. So there was that, kind of, structural change in, in grant funding that was pivotal, but I think it came along alongside a, kind of ... Well, there was always been there, that tension within Women's Aid, between those that were heartfelty as well as headfelty, wedded to collective working, and there always were those within Women's Aid, I think, even, even in it's heyday, that, that didn't necessarily believe it was the most productive and effective way of working, em, so I think it probably, there was probably a groundswell of all sorts of different tensions and nuances that just came along together at the same time that, eh, led to that switch from collective working to a more managerial response. Um, what was the question again? It was, eh...?

*Any significant turning points.*

Yeah, for Women's Aid? Yeah.

*I mean, that's fairly significant [laughs]*

Yeah, yeah. I think it's had huge ramifications in lots of ways and done ... You know, it's also that thing, it's, it's a sort of paradox, it's a both and ... It's not like hierarchy is never there within collective working. There is always somebody ... And I think that's what women were always criticising, saying there were always these unspoken hierarchies and power, er, cliques within the, eh, collectives that, that aren't necessarily defined in the way they would be in a more top-down structure, but they're there anyway. So, I suppose, em, all of that sort of discussion around, well, what can we do about that? How can we ... What can we ... How can we use that or, or make some-, something that's both in some way acknowledging power but also collective, so it's not one or the other, it's something that brings all of that

together in a different sort of way. I think that, that opportunity, it was probably too difficult because of the external pressures. Ultimately, Women's Aid's hands were tied because it was dependent on external funding and what the funders said was what had to happen, um, that was the, that was the bottom line. And, um, and, I suppose, it started out as a sort of campaigning, as much a campaigning organisation as a service deliverer. It was there at a time when there was nothing for women and things were desperate, and it was as much a campaign from women who were already involved with the Women's Liberation Movement, um, and who ... and it became a service delivering organisation and maybe that, maybe that, um, characteristic shifted from the campaigning element dominating to the service delivery element dominating. It's not that, it's not that one's gone and one's only there, it's always been a bit of both, but I guess maybe the balance has shifted a wee bit.

**00:24:13** *What about the changes in Scottish politics in recent years, what sort of effect do you see that as having had on Scottish Women's Aid?*

Yeah. I'm not sure so recently because I've not been directly involved since I left [East] Fife Women's Aid, but even at the time, um ... I would say at that time, the political, the fact of the Scottish Parliament, I think brought Women's Aid closer to the politicians. Up to that point, the close proximity, in Fife at least, was probably with the local councillors and, em, Fife council or maybe in Dundee with Tayside Regional Council, em, but I think the successes of Scottish Women's Aid, in getting domestic abuse onto the Scottish Parliament's agenda and women's issues more widely, um, and, as I also said, the children and young people's perspective, um, I think that, bringing government closer to us on the ground, to people in Scotland on the ground, rather than a sort of more remote Westminster, has helped, eh, and, and certainly having a more left wing characterised government I think are more, eh, likely to listen to the kind of discussions, and understandings that Scottish Women's Aid and the local groups would bring has been, has been helpful, and Scottish Women's Aid and the local groups have been well placed to deliver really strong arguments and to use their voice, and I think have had good connections to civil servants and so on as well, and civil servants themselves who have come through a Women's Aid understanding and training, and all of that in Scotland can have a big influence.

But it's a small country and there are good connections between women and between movements and between political movements, and so I think that's always been a strength as well, that women involved with Women's Aid have – because of that campaigning, eh, heavy rooted campaigning aspect – have always been connected to other aspects of campaign, whether that's been anti-nuclear or, or knitted into other organisations, Rape Crisis and so on. So, so it's that sort of strength politically, I think, which, with a small 'p', which Women's Aid has had, which they were able to capitalise on, with the establishment of the Scottish Parliament, um, but, on the other hand, yes, there, there's ... It also was part of that commissioning, um, process in its own way as well. So, it's never straightforward, but I think it's been definitely a factor in supporting the cause of, of women in Scotland, to some extent. There's a long way still to go but when I look back on the changes that have come about, in some respects I think, 'Wow, that's really amazing, what changes, Women's Aid in particular, but women as a whole have managed to bring about in the last thirty, forty years in Scotland'. On the other hand, I think, 'Crikey, you know, we've done all of that and in lots of ways it doesn't look dissimilar to how it was thirty, forty years'. So it's, everything, there's kind of pros and cons to it.

**00:27:43** *So, what would you like to see happen next? Specifically, in, for Women's Aid, but...?*

Well, I think it, it is that recognition of Women's Aid's expert role, because they remain, their work remains, informed by women, children and young people, and that's a very particular approach to take, and one very well worth listening to for the Scottish Government and for local authorities and, and the others working in the area. So, I think it's important that Women's Aid retains that position in Scotland, and, well, globally, you know. Scotland's playing a big, important role, Scottish Women's Aid workers are playing an important role in supporting other countries around the world, to get their networks off the ground and, as well, and, em, and that's something to be proud of, and, I think, we don't want to lose sight of that, you know, the amount of, em, expertise, the genealogy which Women's Aid has, going back all these years in Scotland. There's such a lot of, a richness of understanding and experience that's in there that shouldn't be lost at this point and, um, it

should not be lost sight of. So, it's something for me about taking that forward, and supporting it to continue to flourish in that way, um, yeah, not diminishing it. I think it's quite precious, what, what it's, what its history has been, and where it is now. It's quite a precious thing, not to be just, um, lost along the way, perhaps. I don't think it will be [laughs]. I'm sure it won't be because it's not the nature of Women's Aid, but, em, yeah, it's just keeping an eye out on what those different dimensions are of where we're at politically at the moment. But it's ... There's loads of opportunities for Women's Aid too, in the constitutional questions that are arising even as we speak [laughs] and, and also there are huge dangers for women and children in the constitutional issues which we're facing at the moment, you know, with, eh, potential for increasing divisions and poverty and fracture. Very often, almost always, women and children are at the forefront of the, em, fallout out from those kinds of, em, changes, so I, I can imagine that Women's Aid may be even more important than ever should that worst case scenario unfold.

*Well, I think that's quite a good note to finish on, thank you very much.*

Thank you.

**End interview**