

Oral History Interview Transcript

Interviewee: Maggie Sinclair

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Interviewer: Claire Thomson

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Groups: Aberdeen Women's Liberation Group, Aberdeen Women's Aid

Roles: Founding member (Aberdeen WA)

Okay, we're recording. So, yeah, thank you again Maggie for being up for being interviewed for the Speaking Out project. I'll start with some of the questions. So first of all, can you describe what your connection to Women's Aid was and how you got involved with Women's Aid, originally?

Right, well, I actually had to, as I say, I had to kind of work out a timeline for this because I couldn't even remember when ... And, looking at it, I got involved, well, before there was a real Women's Aid really. Right, what happened to me? [Pause] Well, I was a very young woman and reading in the media all sorts of stuff about feminism. I was just in my early 20's and thinking, 'I really need to know more about this'. I really wanted to meet other women and find out more about this. Living up in Aberdeen I'd never met a feminist and, of course, this was before the days of Google or anything. So there I was, reading books that came out, you know, Germaine Greer, Betty Friedan, everyone and getting more and more interested. Oh! Then I noticed when I was doing my timeline, *Spare Rib* then appeared, so I was reading *Spare Rib* all the time. It was probably there that I noticed that there was a Women's Liberation Movement Conference down in Bristol. You know, they had these yearly national conferences. So there I was, I got myself on a train and I left my husband.

Now, wait a minute, this was 1973 so I had two small children and went down on the train to Bristol, got there at this weekend women's conference and was absolutely gobsmacked by it all. I was so, so shy that I didn't speak to anyone all weekend, didn't speak to a soul, no one spoke to me. I just listened to all this and watched all this and was totally amazed, came back up home and thought, 'I really want to get involved somehow'. So, I suddenly thought, 'Right, public library' because that's

what libraries did, you know, before we had the Internet. I went there and said, 'Do you have any information about Women's Liberation Groups in Aberdeen?' and they checked their lists and said, 'Oh yes, there is one'. So, it was actually a university women's group but it was open to anyone and there was a name and a contact number. So, I phoned up and started going to meetings and that was ... I figured out ... The conference I went to in Bristol was July of '73 so it must have been quite soon after that.

I do remember there was a group of women from Edinburgh who had been down to England, certainly after the first refuge had opened. That was Erin Pizzey and the Chiswick refuge. And they were doing this meeting on what to do next and they were inviting other women from other parts of Scotland to come along. I got, kind of, sent along from the Aberdeen group, I can't remember why but I did. So, I went down to this meeting and, obviously, refuges seemed to be the way forward and so I came back up and reported this to my group. And we then wrote to, you know, went through the obvious channels, got in touch with the council asking for a place for a refuge. No we were told, they hadn't thought of it. No they didn't know there was any need for that in Aberdeen. So then it was a case of going to the police and asking what were their figures. Well, they didn't keep any figures for domestic abuse. They didn't in those days so it was a case of saying, 'Well, I think maybe you should'. So, I don't know, I'm not quite sure. It was just, kind of, by default that I was the person writing all these letters and doing all this stuff. So that would have been 1974 I guess, yeah. It just took a good while. In the meantime, somehow or other, women ... I think even some women who went to social work got sent to me. I just know we had women and children sleeping on the floor at home. I'm not quite sure where they always came from, I don't remember now. But I think even social work perhaps passed a couple of them on because there was nowhere, nowhere for women to go.

00:06:46 *So, there was nowhere else and they knew of you and they sent them to you. So, your home, your personal home?*

Yes, we had women and children sleeping in sleeping bags on the floor. I remember the police being incredibly, mostly, unhelpful. I remember one husband coming to our door because the police had told him that's where his wife was. After I'd said to them they really must not pass that information on. They promised they wouldn't but they did. Obviously, there wasn't me on my own, there was a

whole group of us and we would meet regularly and decide what to do next. But I'm not quite sure how. I'm not quite sure how it ended up being my house, it just did. Anyway, so that was 1974 and, yeah, it was just ... You wouldn't believe, you just would not believe the arguments, the fight that was put up from all sorts of quarters really, arguing that if you gave women who'd been abused by their own husbands, if you gave them an alternative place to go to you were encouraging the break-up of marriage. I mean, really incredible, quite incredible looking back on it now. Even what women themselves were told from other women. I can remember one woman coming to me saying that she had nowhere else to go. And I said, 'What about your mum?' because I knew her mum lived in town. She said she'd gone round to her mum's, she'd turned up to her mum's at two in the morning in her nightie saying please can she stay the night there and her mum had just said, 'No, it's just how it is. You know, I had to put up with it for years from your father, you're going to have to learn to put up with it'. As if, that's just how life was. So, a lot has changed, it has changed, thank goodness.

So, yeah, that was it and we finally, it must have been early '75 or late '74 that we were finally given a house on the outskirts of Aberdeen to use as a refuge. It needed renovating which we did ourselves. I actually left Aberdeen roundabout Easter of '75 to come down to Edinburgh. So that was my connection with Aberdeen. Well, it wasn't even really Women's Aid then, because there wasn't a Federation. It was '76, I think, in Scotland.

00:10:48 *So, it very much was the beginnings then. Pre-Women's Aid in title but in terms of the ethos and the values, or the aims, that was what you were all trying to do.*

I think we were very clear at that point. I think we were quite clear that Erin Pizzey had shown the incredible need for something like that and how amazing that was. But that it would be better if refuges were organised on feminist principles which the Chiswick one wasn't and so I think we were quite consciously thinking about it, of course, as feminists.

Yeah, grand. It sounds like it was almost by accident, you said it was by default. You were looking for something in Aberdeen, you found it, you got involved but it was by accident that you were, sort of, the person nominated to travel to meetings and in terms of it being your home. It sounds like you almost fell into that somehow, as opposed to actively seeking that out.

Oh no, it wasn't something I intended doing, no, no, no, no. I did just fall into it.

It's really interesting, isn't it?

And then when I moved down here, that was rather different because I had thought, 'I moved to Edinburgh. I didn't know anyone in Edinburgh. At least I won't have any problems finding friends or creating a social life because I'll just join up with the local women's group', which I did. I was very, very disappointed because Edinburgh Women's Group were going through a bad patch at that point and they were very much ... I went to a couple of meetings and they were so business-like and they just worked through an agenda. Once again, nobody spoke to me, absolutely nobody. Which just seems so strange, it was just so business-like. They did the agenda and walked out, no one spoke to anyone, there was no social anything to it at all. I went to a couple of those meetings and then thought that's not what I want to be involved with. I was very disappointed. So, I never actually did then join a women's group like that in Edinburgh. It was really horrible, quite a horrible experience and very disappointing. When I spoke to people about it years later they said, 'Oh my god, yeah, it did go through a very bad patch and it was like that for a bit'. But that was when I needed it; that was when I was looking for it. So that was my experience.

00:14:51 *Can you tell me about some of the different ideas connected with Women's Aid that were important to you at that time, any particular ideas or themes that were connected to women's groups or Women's Aid. So, I suppose, some examples I have on my sheet [are] if there were particular ideas where you got those from. Was it friends, was it books, was it films, what were some of the ideas connected to Women's Aid?*

[Pause] Now I'm not quite sure what you're looking for there.

Don't worry, it's not supposed to be a test [laughs]. I suppose one thing I'm thinking that you have already mentioned is feminism, in terms of that being so core to it. So that would maybe be one.

I mean, the obvious, just for starters, it just seems so obvious that women who are trapped ... No one, at any point, ever should be trapped in a violent situation in their own home. Well, I suppose thinking about ... realising, beginning to realise, as women did, all this research and put pressure on police forces to start keeping tabs on numbers, on getting social work to look at violence within the home differently ... It became so obvious that all the different reasons for women being trapped and the fact that married women not being able to collect proper benefits on their own, it being very

difficult financially, economically to move out with children. Or the way tenancies were organised, it was far more ... it was very difficult at that point for women to get violent husbands out of the home if their name was on the tenancy agreement. Or just so many different things, all kinds of fronts that women had to fight on, to work on to create change. Attitudes in general that just because previous generations of women may have had to put up with that, live with that, doesn't mean that's how things had to be. So just changing those attitudes that, no, nobody should ever be in that situation. So yeah, lots of things tied up with it.

00:18:52 *I was really struck when you were saying before about the woman who had turned up at her mother's house in the middle of the night and that was the response. So, even in terms of your family and your immediate support network...*

You couldn't necessarily expect support, no, because 'Well, this is how life is. This is how it is'.

A real sense of acceptance. No sense of this can be changed or I want something different for my children. Just, 'You have to live with this'.

And that ... I think for a lot of women the definition of a really good man was a man who just didn't drink away all the housekeeping money and who wasn't violent in the home. And if you've got one of them then you've got a fantastic husband. They didn't need to do very much to be regarded as absolutely wonderful. [Women] had such very low expectations.

So, it's about everyone around a person. How do I word that differently? It's about everybody else's attitudes but actually it's about the woman's own expectations and her own, everybody's sense of...

Yes the culture, the whole culture. And I don't know, I'm trying to think if Aberdeen was particularly [laughs], more particularly traditional. Probably not, no. No, I think it was pretty general all over the country.

Certainly with the project we're trying to interview people across Scotland so I think it'll be quite interesting once all the interviews are pulled together to see if there are particular themes in particular areas or, like you say, if, actually, there was common experiences across the country. So I think that'll be interesting.

I think you'll probably find it's much of a muchness. And in some ways, Aberdeen was actually ahead of its time for women. They had an amazing, well they had an amazing, gynaecology department which was really very progressive at the hospital there. They were doing terminations before the legislation actually came in in, oh when was that, was it '67 the Abortion Act came in? It was just very, very progressive in terms of contraception, abortion and that was really just because of the particular women who happened to be working in that area in that place at that time. They were very, very good. Yeah, so Aberdeen certainly wasn't backward in that way.

00:22:38 *Could you describe a day in the life of being involved with the women's group in Aberdeen? Was there sort of a typical day? What would you be doing in a day involved with the pre-Women's Aid group?*

[Pause] No I can't. I look back ... I think that's what really stunned me when I looked at the dates and timeline of that period in my life was [that] actually [it was] rather less, slightly less, than two years because there was just so much that happened. I was incredibly busy then. I was also doing two full-credit Open University courses, which they tried to tell me couldn't be done, two at a time. I said, 'No, well, I haven't got time. I'm in a hurry. So I'm doing two' and I did. That was fine. So, I was doing that and I had two small children. Yes, doing all this stuff. Was just incredibly, incredibly busy and still also being involved with the original women's group that was meeting every week because not everyone from that group got involved with the Women's Aid stuff. I just somehow happened to get involved with it. I was still going to the original group that really was consciousness-raising and that was amazing. That was incredible. So still doing that every week and then after a little while my husband went to the men's group that was, kind of, a by-product of the women's one. And we very much had a social life that was based around that as well. I don't know, it was just a very, very, very busy time.

Do you remember what some of the specific things you would be doing that was keeping you so busy? So, in terms of with the Women's Aid group, what kinds of things would you be getting involved with?

Well definitely ... Well, having meetings regularly. There was a group of us, I don't know, maybe six or eight of us would meet regularly and try to figure out what was the next best thing to do. Because it was a case of, still at that point, having to prove that there was a need for a refuge and how do

you prove that need? The only way we could do it, really, was getting figures from the police and from social work and persuading them that they needed to start collating these figures, then making them public. [Aside: the cat interrupted us at this point.] So, yeah, meetings and then writing lots of letters and phoning people all the time and discovering who were the people who were friendly people, on women's side, maybe within social work or within making allies, figuring out with them what could be done.

00:27:34 *I can see how that would keep you very busy [laughs]. Like you say, identifying the right people and that relationship building, phone calls and letters, just that constant chipping away at getting the message and, yeah, finding the right people to speak to.*

And all that without the Internet, without ... Not even knowing ... It's just ... Well, I'm just so amazed. I do not take the Internet for granted, being the age I am. I'm still amazed at it, you can find out anything now, you know. Of course, if you want to check up on a local authority department, if you want to find out who's who in social work, you just look it up. You even see photos of the people, you find out all sorts of things about them. You know, there it all is. Well, we were doing all this when there was no public information and it was just much more difficult to do, so much more difficult. That's just how it was.

Yeah, far from the click of a button. Proper leg work [laughs].

Absolutely, yes, and then finding out sometimes that you were just being led down the garden path and that the person we were negotiating with really was very determined that Aberdeen was not going to provide a refuge. Of course, we didn't realise that until afterwards and you waste a lot of time that way. Just stuff. But we just seemed to do so much and it was such a dramatic bus- ... I don't know, life changing in numbers of ways. Time for me that ... I still find it very difficult to credit that it was really just two years of my life, it seemed like a lot more, there was a lot more packed into it than seems possible in just two years. [Aside: Maggie checked her phone].

It does sound like it was the sheer quality of that couple of years, not the quantity of it but how jam-packed it was and how many different things you were involved in.

Definitely. I also became pregnant with my third child as well during that period so when we moved down here in early '75 I was five months pregnant. It was funny because she was a, she was definitely an unplanned baby. And I'd given away all the baby stuff from my first two, didn't have anything left at all. But once we'd actually got the refuge, once we'd actually got the house there, we got lots of publicity in the local newspapers and one thing that happened was people sent in all these baby clothes. They thought, right, this is one way they can support, they would provide baby clothes for all these babies that were...

That they were expecting to be there...

And they all came to my place as well and we had these bin bags – I don't know how many! – full of baby clothes.

My gosh.

[Laughs] I can remember my friend saying, 'Look Maggie, just take what you need for this baby before you go [laughs]. You can take a wee pile of stuff, that's fine'.

Yeah, there was plenty.

'There's plenty, nobody's going to grudge you that'. So my third child was dressed in...

Kind donations...

Kind donations [laughs], dressed by donation by the kind people of Aberdeen. They didn't know that though.

00:32:32 *Fantastic! I don't know if this question will be so relevant, actually, but during that time did the group have any links to Scottish Women's Aid?*

No, because there wasn't a Scottish Women's Aid until '7- ... Well, according to ... When I looked at this the other night it said that the Federation English Women's Aid started in '74 and Scottish one in '76. So that was after I moved down.

That sounds about right, actually, because this is the 40 year project so, of course, 2016 so that makes a lot of sense. So, actually, was there any sense at the time that it would be useful to have some sort of like overarching body, but some sort of central organisation that could support or...

I really don't remember that because we were just so caught up with trying to get something in Aberdeen. So caught up in doing what we were doing [that] I'm not sure, looking back on it, how much contact we had with anywhere else. I mean, I had come down to Edinburgh that once. We did have some contact ... [Aside: phone interruption.] You know, I only have one other recollection and that must've been after I moved down here and I'm not even very sure how that happened. [Pause] I do have one recollection of meeting up with Women's Aid women in Edinburgh after I moved here. It must have been soon after moving here because I was pregnant at the time, I must have been seven or eight months pregnant. I can remember there being ... I don't remember the context, if it started off being a meeting or ... I just remember there suddenly being a big hoo-ha that this woman had to be moved urgently from a house to a refuge. I was taken along and I actually got left in her house, [her] husband was out of the house at the time and she'd got moved with some of her stuff to a refuge and I was left in the marital home until ... Yeah, I think in case the husband came back, and I don't know what ... Not quite sure. Anyway, I was left sitting there on my own [laughs] for, I don't remember, I think it was the best part of an hour, having been assured if he did turn up I would be perfectly safe, that he was very charming to everyone else other than his wife. I don't know, I still don't remember how that evening actually happened. I think that's the only, I think that's the only dealings I had with Edinburgh Women's Aid and that was after moving down here. No, I really don't remember how much contact we had.

So, it was really in terms of local areas and, kind of, focussed on Aberdeen. That really was the focus and there wasn't necessarily that connection with other...

I know there was enough connection with Edinburgh. I know ... Just finding out what they'd done, how they'd done it, because they had refuges first. So, we must have been keeping in touch, I know we were but I don't remember anywhere else being involved. It was only Edinburgh that I think that we were in touch with.

00:37:34 *Okay, yeah. What about ... You've mentioned already some interactions with police or social work. Can you tell me a little bit more about working with external organisations? How that was, what were some of those dealings were with for example police or social work?*

[Pause] Well, I think the police found the whole thing just very, very ... I think what we were trying to do just seemed to alien to them, to begin with. [Pause] I really ... What do I remember? It just seemed it was something that was just so unimportant to them. It wasn't crime, it really wasn't crime. So, women being beaten up in their own homes wasn't real crime. I think they thought it slightly entertaining in some ways. That we thought of it very differently.

00:39:43 *How would interactions go? I'm imagining yourselves would try to change, try to change that perspective that they had. Do you remember how any of those interactions would go? Or how you would try to sort it, convince or persuade...?*

I don't remember anything specific, I'm sorry.

That's okay.

No, I just remember the general kind of attitude. I remember ... I think I had a general feeling that they were, kind of, laughing at us, that it was just, I don't know, something silly that we were doing.

Yeah, something amusing to them.

Yes, yes. Just very, very alien. That we were just ... Well, I was very young. I mean, I was incredibly young. Most of us were. I mean, well, how old was I then? We're talking about '73 [so] I suppose I was 25 then. Probably most of the women in the group would've been about that age as well.

[Aside: interrupted by cat].

00:42:03 *And then, similarly, with social work, what you'd said before was that social work were aware of you and they'd send people to you. Were they any better or different from...*

Well, yes. I don't think we felt they were laughing at us. They were obviously aware it was an issue although quite how aware they would have been, how involved they would have been, is difficult to tell because when you think about it what would have been the point very often of women who were in that situation actually getting in touch with the council because it wasn't terribly much the

council could do very often. So, so much domestic abuse was just, it just happened and it wouldn't have been reported anywhere because, to what point? There would be very little in the way of consequences. Yeah, I tried to get the police to take it seriously. There was not much very often that the council could do, even if they wanted to [sigh].

None of those, sort of, processes were in place. Nothing was really set up to support or help people in that situation.

No. I mean, there was so much that had to be changed. Yeah, things like making it possible to change council tenancies, to make it possible for women to have injunctions taken out against violent husbands. Benefits system had to accommodate situations like that and general attitudes, obviously, so that people in general were supportive of women.

00:44:56 *And what about – you'd mentioned before all the donations were baby clothes – was there much work done with children at that time? Obviously, now Women's Aid have children's workers, but around about the years you were involved how did that look? Were there many children coming into the refuge, or were you often also working with children or supporting...*

Well, I had left before the first woman moved into the refuge so I didn't see that. And, in fact, I don't really know what happened to the refuge after I did leave because I was so caught up in, well, various domestic problems. We moved down here and I had a new baby and so I didn't really have much connection. I lost touch with what was going on in Aberdeen. But certainly, for that short period when I was involved it was very much women and children with women coming first. I think maybe we, obviously, realised it was a dreadful situation for the children but we had to put so much work into just getting the needs of women recognised that, yeah, we didn't, no, research the effects on children, no. No, we didn't do that as well.

00:47:13 *Were there ... Do you remember any media stories on domestic violence, domestic abuse, that were in the news during that time? Was there much media awareness? Were there any stories that you remember from that time?*

No, I don't. The media stories I remember were, and I only remember them vaguely, were about ... Well, very, very much there was a lot of media attention on Erin Pizzey. She got a lot of attention. So, it all seemed to be, as I remember, it was all about: 'So, is what she's saying true? Is there really a

huge need out there? Is this a common problem? Is this something we need to look at? Or is this just some odd thing that this odd woman has, you know, thought up'. That's how I remember it being framed and discussed.

So it was in the news, but almost with a question mark over it. 'What's this about? Is this real?'

Oh yes, yes definitely question marks. Because I think it was actually quite difficult for a lot of people to understand. It was a completely new area for me to understand, for lots of us.

00:49:47 *Do you remember what it was that drew you, kind of, drew you to it in the first place? But also did you find it took time to get your head around it? I know you said when you went to the conference you just felt like, gosh, you learned so much. What was that process for you, that getting your head around that and being very drawn towards being involved?*

Well, as I said, the Women's Aid bit I just fell into, that was not planned. I'll tell you something that really, really amazed me though. That I was doing this, you know, I was doing this consciousness-raising group every week, which a lot of ... Well, you know, there were just all these divisions, different kinds of feminist groups going on at the time. Not everyone was keen on the idea of consciousness-raising. I think it was, actually, very important and it was an awful lot more radical, it was very, very radical, definitely more radical than some groups would give it credit for being. Anyway, one of the things we spoke about, of course, was violence and gendered violence. I can actually remember, I can remember being in this group, this circle – we were quite a big group, I don't know, maybe 15 of us – and talking about experiences as women having experienced some kind of violence personally, some kind of abuse. I was listening to these stories and, you know, in some shock [and] when it came to my turn thinking, 'Well no, no, I haven't met anything like that. I haven't been abused'.

Do you know, it took me years after that, and I don't even remember what sparked it off, I think because I was telling my daughters maybe something that had happened to me when I was young, and I thought, 'Good grief, of course I was abused, of course that was violence'. I hadn't seen it as such at the time. Two experiences: one when I was 14, just newly 14 actually. I was very ill when I was 13. I had peritonitis and I was in hospital for three weeks. I had my 14th birthday in hospital. That summer I was still very much convalescent and an aunt of mine, my aunt and uncle offered to

take me on holiday with them on Jersey for a fortnight. So, that was great, I got taken off to this hotel in Jersey. I woke up one night in my hotel room to find this guy standing beside my bed and he came out with all this stuff how he'd been watching me on the beach and all sorts of horrible stuff. And he just wanted to kiss me and, ugh ... I was just this very childish, very skinny little ... It's not as if I looked mature or anything at that age, I didn't. I just looked like a skinny little girl. Anyway, he reached over and he did, he kissed me, and I didn't know what to do. It didn't occur to me to shout or scream or anything and I didn't tell anyone afterwards. You know, I didn't tell my aunt and uncle the next day. And I don't know how I thought of it but I didn't see that as being, you know, at the time, I didn't see that for what it was.

And then again when I was about 20 and I went to have a ... I had a mole right on my waist that got caught on my waist band and I went to my GP and said, 'Look, can I have this removed because, you know, it catches and bleeds', 'Of course, of course, of course'. Off I went. This young, whoever he was, had the job of removing this mole for me and he removed it. He said, 'I see you've got a couple more moles there. Do you want me to take them off as well?'. I said, 'Great, fine, go ahead'. He said, 'Have you got any on your back as well?'. I said, 'I don't know actually' and he said, 'Well, turn over and I'll see'. He said, 'Oh yeah, you've got one up here. I'll just do that one for you'. Fine. Then I realised he had not in fact given me proper local injection there and I could feel absolutely everything. I said, 'No, uh, uh, you're going to have to stop, stop, stop. You haven't given me any anaesthetic there'. And he said, 'Oh, oh, oh, well, I'm nearly finished it'll be perfectly okay'. And I said, 'No, that's really painful'. By this point, I was on a ... it wasn't in an operating theatre, it was in a side room, dermatology unit I think. I was in just a narrow ... don't know what it was. Anyway, I was in such pain that I was gripping on to the sides of it like mad. I was, oh, sweating. When I stood up I could see the whole outline of where my body had been, just with the pain. As I was doing that, he lent over me to do this and he had an erection. I thought, 'Good god'. And I ... told my husband when I went home. I couldn't do anything there and then. And there was a young nurse who was there. I couldn't say anything. I didn't know what to say. I would've been about 21 then, I just didn't know what to say or do. Anyway, that was it. I thought, 'Good god'. It took me all those years to think that was abuse. That was, I'm sure, that was gendered. He probably didn't get the same whatever it was out of ... That was so sadistic as well. I can only imagine that part of that was the fact that it was painful for me, that he hadn't given me enough anaesthetic which is quite horrendous to think of.

So incredibly vulnerable in that position and that situation as well.

Oh, totally. Yes and what do you say? I had no, I had no idea. So, yeah, I would hope that now, how many years, you say how many years later? What is this? The 40th did you say?

Yes, 40 years of Women's Aid.

Right, 40 years on, you would just hope that young women are able to identify, they recognise violence when they come across it. Unfortunately, I don't think that's always the case by any means. You know, you read these surveys about teenagers, their expectations, their views of the world and you think, 'Good god'.

01:00:00 *I think, like you say, even when you are ... you do think about different issues, you are involved in consciousness-raising or, I don't know what that would be called today, just general awareness ... I think, like you say, it can be years, months, years later that you think back on something and think, 'Gosh, I wasn't seeing that for what it was at the time', with a different perspective. I imagine nowadays there'll be many situations where people, yeah, it's only with hindsight that they think that was utterly unacceptable, or wrong, or violent. Yeah.*

Yeah, I think we're very much, and we were very much, trained as women and girls, not to see it. Not to see it, not to think about it, not to question it, not to report it, not to ... Because of all that, didn't even see it in our own lives, which is...

You want to believe that's not the case. I feel a very strong sense of wanting to believe that's not the case, but I think that's almost colluding with it. In terms of, I want to believe that people would know but I think that's not the case. So we've talked a little about media stories and awareness.

The next question, Maggie, is along the lines of can you describe any significant turning points or times of change. So, thinking about things changing, how were these managed by the Women's Aid group, was there any particularly significant changes in your time there that you could talk about?

I can't. The very basic thing for us was, actually, just finding a, getting the refuge set up. We only had one aim. That was it. And so it would only have been women coming after who would have ... I was going to say had the luxury, but that's not right because it never was easy, it never was no, no, no. Yeah, we were just coming from nowhere, absolutely nowhere. We then built a culture and in our experience, that was it. We were just coming from nowhere and trying to do something. So we just

had this one, at that point the group I was involved with, just had this one fixed aim just to prove there was a need and get the refuge set up. Then I left just before it actually got going. That was it, that was my experience.

01:03:48 *Do you know what changed though, because you said you had tried for a long time to get a refuge. You know, kind of falling on deaf ears. But do you know what it was that changed that meant you were allowed the space for the refuge?*

Well, as I say, this was a long process. It can't have been because the whole process was less than two years, you know. No I don't, I really don't remember. And maybe other women in the group will remember better than I do. I don't remember why, because it was council that finally provided the house for us.

Yeah, no that's okay. I think that's what's really interesting about the oral histories. It is recollection and memory, and some things stay with you and some things don't and some of those details ... I'm sure as part of the project there'll be some kind of timeline but actually the interviews aren't about dates and times and specifics. They're about your memories and sense of your involvement, so, no, that's fine.

It'll be really interesting to put it all together.

The patchwork of different people's experiences.

Other women are going to remember different things. Yeah, we all just remember different things.

01:05:30 *Yeah, absolutely. So, the next question is thinking about the changes in Scottish politics over recent years. Would you say this has had any impact on the work of Women's Aid or how domestic abuse is talked about?*

Well, I'm not involved in Women's Aid at all so I don't really know what's happening other than what I hear very, very generally. It seems to me that the talk is very good. Coming from government, I mean, Scottish Government. But it also ... Because most Women's Aid are funded by local authorities, yeah, they've just had lots and lots of cuts and they're finding it more and more difficult. Is that not the case?

I must admit, I don't know, actually, in terms of funding situations. That's not something I have much awareness of.

I think they struggle. I think a lot of it is local authority funded and local authorities don't have any money. With local authorities I think that kind of project is one of the first to go. So, I have no idea, I really have no idea. Yeah, I'd like to see more positive changes and I would very much hope that an independent Scotland would be a better Scotland for everyone. We shall see. We'll also see what difference it makes, if any, with the local authority elections. I think there have been a lot of very ... There's just been a lot of very traditional Labour local authorities who have needed a kick in the backside for some time. I think a lot of them are going to get voted out.

So, there's the potential there, some of those changes may be coming up.

I'd say the possibility is there. The possibility is there. It's just so difficult because without the actual independence then the amount of money coming back to Scotland is just so ... The Scottish Government has to do a hell of a lot with it. There's not much there. We just need to be able to have all our own money.

Have the control over that.

Have control over that. I would ... That would be better because certainly I do feel that the comments, the arguments coming from Scottish Government, from women like Nicola Sturgeon, are very genuine, that she does genuinely feel that she is a feminist and that she does feel strongly about these issues. I think that is genuine. We just have to wait and see.

01:09:58 *So, last couple of questions actually. What do you think the impact of Women's Aid was both on society and also on you at a personal level? Feel free to answer that from your couple of years, what you feel the impact, if there was a societal impact from that time? But also, actually, the impact it's had on you, your involvement.*

I'd say the accumulative effects on society, over the years, has been amazing. Amazing. That that's where the ... It's all very well feminists making arguments about domestic violence but it's been Women's Aid who've been able to produce the figures, the statistics, who've done the research, who have years and years of experience, who can really make the arguments very, very clearly. I think

that's changed a lot of thinking, thank goodness. No, they've been the most instrumental group for change, of course. No, they've done great work.

And for you on a personal level, what sort of impact has it had on you?

[Pause] I don't know. I haven't asked you what is being done with the oral histories. What are you hoping to do with them?

Oh, that is a good question actually. So, I know there is going to be an exhibition and I suppose perhaps snippets of interviews will be selected for that exhibition. I know it's due to be launched in Edinburgh in November but then it will, kind of, travel around Scotland. So, I suppose it'll only be interviews that were collected up until a point but then we'll have the transcripts and audio files. So, I want to say they'll be stored in the Glasgow Women's Library and I imagine for the project parts will be taken out, nice quotes, and potentially some of the audio files as well as part of the exhibition. So, that's my understanding of what's going to happen but certainly Sarah ... I can always double check with Sarah if there's anything else in terms of letting you know what will happen and where. I think the hope was to make a short film as well, kind of, compiling some of the clips but I don't know what point that's at.

Right.

01:13:39 *So, certainly for after the interview I have a, sort of, post-interview consent form that just lets you say yes or no to how you're happy for your interview to be used. Because, obviously, it's your material, for want of a better word. So, you get the sign off on how you're happy for it to be used.*

Right. [Pause] Well, I certainly am very clear, I have been very clear since the early 1970's that I am a radical feminist as opposed to any other kind. And that certainly, you know, certainly a part of that is based on, has to be understood through the violence that women and girls ... so almost institutionally subjected to. So, a lot of my feminist thinking is based on that. Throughout my life ... Well, I went back to university as a mature student, having done a degree course at the Open University. The trick was then, because the Open University we had to, you had to pay for that but there was a lot of funding available. So, for me, with small children, I didn't have to pay anything like the full amount so I could afford to do it. But the argument was that even although you've paid for that degree course you could not then get funding from the state. That was back in the days when it was state funding for education, you know. You didn't have to pay to go and do a degree course. But

you wouldn't get funded if you already had a degree. So, the trick was then to stop just short of graduating so you'd do most of the course right up to the very end and then not graduate. So, you then, if you wanted to later on do a degree course, you would get funding. So, I went to Edinburgh University as a mature student. I graduated when I was 40 and I did Sociology and Politics. And the theme all the way through, in fact, was feminism, radical feminism. How it connected with Marxism and stuff like that, all sorts of stuff. And I kept up-to-date with the arguments on domestic violence as part of that. Then I went off to do a PhD. It was on the first wave of feminism. So, yeah, it's been, it has informed my thinking all these years but, and once again, I realised on a personal level, I realised that my partner was certainly capable of being abusive and had been abusive to me. [Pause] It took me ... It still took me a long time to realise that actually was an abusive relationship. So, I'm still, I'm still amazed how given that the whole point of what we were doing and saying I think, as second-wave feminists at that time, and very particularly those of who came at it through the consciousness-raising (to begin with) route, was that the personal is political which we did argue very strongly. I think when it comes to ... I still think for the abuse of women, I still think it's a difficult one for women to connect up in their heads when it's their own personal life. I think it's just a difficult one. It can be, it can be a difficult one. Even when you know absolutely, yeah, it's very strange.

01:20:48 *Is there something about, like you were saying just then, even if you were, I suppose, very well informed and maybe have a very, in some ways, objective, not so much academic, but that understanding and yet not having the connection with how subjective ... Somehow there's a disconnect there or ... That's really difficult to put into words Maggie, sorry I'm struggling there.*

No, I find it very difficult. Very, very difficult.

Is it somehow not seeing it's not relevant to you, not wanting to see...

Well, I think it's partly in the nature of the beast isn't it really? In that, you think about domestic violence and you think in categories. You have this term 'abusive men', so 'abusive men' right. You have this guy who is an abusive man. But it very often is, as I discovered, you're living with this man and that is not necessarily how you think of him. It's not necessarily how he presents. That, no, if he was just 'abusive man' then there's no way you'd be living with him, of course not. You wouldn't have been attracted to him in the first place. But no, that's not how you're used to thinking of him.

You know so many other things about him and you know all the good things about him. All the gentle things and all the caring things and, you know, all that. So, the abuse, when it comes, somehow has to fit in somewhere. But it's very difficult sometimes, it can be very difficult, then seeing this person as 'abusive man'.

By putting that category ... Like with all categories in life, it oversimplifies something that's so complex.

Of course, all categories, all generalisations, they're reductive, of course and they miss out so much. If only they were just 'abusive man' and they, kind of, have labels on them. Or it's just so obvious when you see them, 'Oh right, "abusive man". Right I won't bother with him'. That's obvious. I guess there are some men that are like that – I don't know any – but I think mostly they're not. I imagine mostly they're capable of being charming and loving, which is why it's often so difficult for women to explain or get support because the people around think, 'What are you talking about? He's a lovely guy'. Excuse me [phone interruption].

So, people around somebody would be like, 'What are you saying? What are you seeing?'. So many levels of complexity.

It's difficult. So, I think Women's Aid did an amazing job, have done an amazing job but it's just, it takes so long and so much effort to get the basic messages through. And still haven't. It's still so horrifying when you read these surveys of teenagers, 15/16 year olds thinking that it's alright for boyfriends to beat them up, to hit them, if they do certain things. You think, 'Good god, how can they be thinking that, the wee souls?'

01:26:28 *And do you have a sense of what the future might hold? I appreciate that's a very open question but is there, do you have a sense, Maggie, of what you would like to see next? Or what the future might hold? [Laughs] That's our final question for the interview and it's quite a...*

I suspect they'll be two different things. What I would like and what the future is likely to hold are maybe not quite the same thing.

Fair enough. Feel free to pick one or answer both, however you wish.

Well, obviously, the world we want is a world where Women's Aid is not needed, of course. I can't see that happening any day soon. They're very much needed. And they've done ... It's not just in terms of housing women and children. No, they've just done so much in changing the terms of debate, in educating police officers, in actually informing policy makers. Yeah, I just wish they were taken seriously by more policy makers. They've done a fantastic job. But still having to push the basic arguments that, you know, nobody should be in that situation and that's still not getting through properly. I mean, it's obviously changed a lot but where you would expect to see most of the change, as with most social change, you'd expect to see it most with younger people. That's why it's just so horrifying to read these surveys with teenagers with very low expectations, and boys as well, thinking if your girlfriend does X, Y, Z then you're entitled to hit them and that's okay. So, even the basic messages, there's still so much work to be done and I'm not quite sure how that's to be done. But the more subtle nuances of it, as with my own personal experience, I suppose one thing that does make a difference as well and that too has been affected by Women's Aid is how different media have then used it in terms of plays, films, novels. You know, that has changed immensely, thank goodness. There's been lots of stuff. There's been all sorts of books. Roddy Doyle's *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*. And the programme that I really don't like and don't listen to, *The Archers*.

I knew you were going to say The Archers there!

That sort of middle England-y stuff slightly gives me the creeps [laughs]. But hey, if they're actually getting that message over, that it's not all about having a black eye every Monday. There is a lot more to abuse than that and that that is getting through and being understood then that has to be a good thing. I don't know who's been advising *The Archers* but they're obviously ... they say they have been taking advice. I'm assuming that could very well be from Women's Aid. So yeah, and other soaps have done that. No, I can't remember which ones. I think *Brookside* did something many years ago. Yeah, I don't watch the soaps. So, yes, yes.

So, some of those ways that have challenged or awareness has been raised, they all chip away at it.

They all make a difference. They all chip away, get at different groups of people. It's changing.

Ways to go still.

Yes, absolutely. Women's Aid are not going to be out of a job any time soon, unfortunately.

01:32:21 *Maggie, thank you so much. Certainly, in terms of the list of questions/prompts I have, that's them, we've covered each of those. I don't know if there was anything else you had hoped to talk about today or wanted to add or if we're still happy to finish it there.*

No, I can't think of anything. If anything I think is really important or comes to me then I'll get in touch with you. But no, no I just wish ... I suppose it just is a long time ago for me and I had so much going on then. It really was a very, very busy time of my life. I just wish I remembered more details.

But no, there's lots that you've shared today, it's been brilliant.

You know, I'll tell you what I probably have and I will have a look for it ... I'm going to be moving house. My ex wants me to sell this house so that we can split the money and he can buy somewhere of his own because right now he's in a rented place. So yeah, well, that's reasonable enough. Not that I want to sell, hey, it's ... So, I'm going to be moving in the spring time. A lot of my stuff is already in boxes out in the garage. Now what I do have, I have kept diaries, not journal writing but appointment diaries and brief notes. I've kept diaries ever since I was young. I'm sure I have diaries from that time, those two years, which would have masses of appointments and meetings. There might just be something of interest in there. Yeah, they'll be in a box in the garage and they won't be open until spring time. I can't go looking in boxes in the garage just now but if they appear and they look interesting ... Well, they might even be quite amusing to look back on for me, I think. I look at it now and I think, 'Good grief, how did I manage all of that!', you know, two full-unit OU courses, two young children, all this stuff, kind of, running a house, and having a social life. Yeah, it was a good time for me. I look back on that very positively.

Slight disbelief that you managed as much as you did but, yeah, you have positive memories.

And, actually, it was less than two years. Just seemed to do so much.

01:36:16 *Well, certainly when you are opening boxes, if there is anything you come across that you'd be happy to share get in touch, probably with Sarah Browne would be best. In terms of if there's*

anything you'd be willing to donate to the project or even photos of diary pages. I feel that's the kind of thing that would be very interesting in terms of 'a day in the life'. I think that would be quite telling, wouldn't it?

I must have ... I'll have a look. I know there were interviews in the local press. I went and Googled it the other night but didn't have much time to be digging around but couldn't see it. But yet other people in the group will ... So, I don't know, do you know how many people from Aberdeen are involved in the project?

I know we have one volunteer who's based in Aberdeen and I know Sarah had mentioned she was up in Aberdeen doing an interview but I don't know how many have been gathered. Yeah, so I don't know actually. The idea once I've transcribed your interview, Maggie, [is that] Sarah will forward it to you, just if you want to read over it or if there's anything you would want edited she would do that. I'm sure at that point, if you're interested in how many, she'd be happy to share how many interviews have been gathered from Aberdeen because I think it is interesting.

Because there will be, there, obviously, will be women there who will have vast amounts of experience and can say ... I mean, I really have so little to say about it since I was just in in the very ground floor and then left.

But those beginnings are so interesting. You know, that's so important to capture how it began and what your involvement was.

Now what I have been told is that Aberdeen Women's Aid, when it kind of became Women's Aid, that there was a woman who managed to – I don't know how that worked either, I really have no idea – but there was someone who, kind of, took control of it, the whole thing. I don't know how that would have been done and that she was not, in fact, feminist. And there was a whole load of stuff about that. And, in fact, was Aberdeen actually expelled from the Federation? I can't think ... I don't know what went on, I really don't know what went on.

But you have an incline that something, from what people said, that something...?

Oh, yes. The only person I've spoken to is someone else who left Aberdeen. A woman called **[name anonymised]**. You haven't come across **[name anonymised]**? **[Name anonymised]** moved, she was very involved in Aberdeen, and she moved maybe not very long after me. She moved down to

Falkirk. I'm sure she will be part of the project because she's been involved in Women's Aid all this time. And she's great. I think she was the one who had told me Aberdeen had perhaps been expelled from the Federation. Anyway ... But I never did really find out what happened, but there were will be women there who will have a whole story to tell.

I'm sure. Well, if there's anything I stumble across...

I look forward to finding out!

End interview