What Women Want: Women's Voices, Social Research, and the Mainstreaming of Feminism in Contemporary Britain
Sarah Crook

'What do women want?' was the defining question of 1990s Britain. Answers were posited by figures as diverse as Conservative MP Edwina Curry, the Spice Girls, feminist campaigners, Labour policy-makers, and social researchers. It was a cultural preoccupation: Hollywood, the BBC, and novelists addressed it. By the close of the decade, politics, too, had newly oriented itself around the female voter, who was seen to have the power to sway the decisive election of 1997. It was not so long ago, however, that women's desires were widely assumed rather than critically examined. From the 1950s onwards social research –and later feminist activism in the 1970s – fundamentally challenged the idea that women's needs were being met, unsettling the idea that women's dreams and desires rested solely within the confines of the home. This chapter considers how the question came to pre-eminence at the end of the century, examining the ways that its circulation through society reflects the mainstreaming of feminist ideas, and uses a range of material – from feminist to anti-feminist, from social surveys and poll materials – to establish what women did want in the nineties, and to reflect upon what the act of *wanting* – as opposed to demanding – tells historians about women's desires, hopes, dreams, and about the place of activism as the twentieth century drew to a close.

In June 1995, while the sound of Robson Green crooning *Unchained Melody* filled the airwaves and the smell of The Body Shop's ubiquitous perfume White Musk fragranced the air, four million green and purple postcards were distributed around Britain by, among others, shops, trade unions, women's groups, and banks. For a brief moment the postcards could be found in shops, on buses, slipped into mass mailings, and folded into magazines: anywhere that women might find them. The postcards invited women to respond to a single provocative question: *what do you want*? Women took up this call. Responses soon flooded into the Women's Communications Centre in London, forming stacks across the office. Answers varied in tone, seriousness, and ambition: Rona, in London, wanted Celtic football club to be relegated; Sarah, in Kent, wanted world peace; C.M. in Burton-on-Trent, wanted affordable childcare and an economically fair society; Rachel, in Enfield, wanted to feel safe; E.B. in Weybridge wanted a pair of well-fitting trousers that had pockets; Sally Littlejohn wanted an end to male violence against women and children, and for women to have fairer representation in powerful positions.[1]

Some of the answers were eventually selected for a book published by feminist publisher Virago, while other answers were marshalled into a report for the British delegation to the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women that was held in Beijing in September that year. But conducting this kind of survey – not least ensuring the distribution of the postcards, collecting, synthesising, and analysing the replies – required financial and practical support. A coalition distinctive to that mid-1990s moment supported the study: Anita Roddick, founder of the cosmetics firm the Body Shop; the Co Operative Bank; the feminist campaigning group the Fawcett Society; Golden Rose Communications (a broadcasting company which in the 1990s owned, among others, Jazz FM); the Trades Union

---

[1] Bernadette Valley, *what women want: the campaign for social and political change* (London, Virago, 1996).

Congress; and, finally, Blackwell Science (which provided a computer programme that helped form a database of reoccurring emotional words). The research therefore brought together an unlikely alliance of trade unions, feminist activists, broadcasters, and beauty company founders. By the 1990s the question *what do women want?* was mainstream, of corporate interest – and argued to have urgent policy implications.

Indeed, 'what do women want?' was the defining question of the 1990s. It was, as this chapter establishes, asked by politicians courting women's vote; by companies seeking their custom; in newspaper columns; in Hollywood films; in music. It was not the first time the question had been posed – Freud, famously, had asked and failed to answer the question across his career, and in the early to mid-1960s professional women's organisations were, Helen McCarthy writes, 'gripped by a peculiar kind of survey fever', using postal surveys to find out not only what their members were doing but how they felt about it[1] – but in the 1990s it became mainstream, and was asked across the political spectrum. Conservative MP Edwina Curry's edited collection, *What Women Want* (1990), for example, suggested that what women wanted was for employers do more to support them. While this argument would have raised few heartrates in feminist circles, Curry felt her intervention was important as it broadened the ideological backgrounds of those intervening in discussions about 'women's issues'. As Curry noted, much of the writing about women came from the political left, and thus from people with whom she 'could not agree on any other issue.'[1] By the close of the decade, though, the emphasis on women's wants had become mainstream. A 'What Women Want' festival was held in August 1995 at the Royal Festival Hall, London, in part to promote the postcard survey, and featured popular musicians Chrissie Hynde and Sinead O'Connor.[1] The next year the Spice Girls burst onto the music scene with the chart-topping promise that they would tell Britain (and then the globe) 'what I want, what I really really want'; New Labour solicited votes from women in the run up to the 1997 election; in 2000 Hollywood asked viewers to believe that an advertising executive played by Mel Gibson might be able to answer the question having been gifted the dubious ability to listen to women's thoughts; in 2005 the Women's Library in London collaborated with students at London Metropolitan University and with community groups in the East End to host an exhibition entitled 'What Women Want'. The Overton window had moved: understanding what women wanted was now a shared cultural project.

This chapter thinks backwards from this point in the mid-1990s to consider the ways that the question *what do women want* was amplified, politicised, and appraised by feminist movements across postwar Britain into the decades that comprise our more recent past. In doing so, the chapter explores how feminism shifted from a movement on the margins in the late 1960s and 1970s to a sufficiently mainstream idea that a publishing house could release the outcomes of a research project on 'what women want' backed by organisations drawn from the charitable, banking, and corporate sectors in the 1990s. Finally, and perhaps most ambitiously, the chapter reaches towards the most fundamental question: what *did* mid-1990s women want?

---

[1] Helen McCarthy, 'Feminism, selfhood and social research: professional women's organizations in 1960s Britain,' *Precarious Professionals: Gender, Identities and Social Change in Modern Britain*, Eds. Heidi Egginton and Zoë Thomas (London: University of London Press, 2021), pp. 287-304, p. 287.

[1] Edwina Curry (ed), 'The Demographic Timebomb,' *What Women Want* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1990), pp. 1-23, p. 3.

[1] 'Festival: WHAT WOMEN WANT Royal Festival Hall, London', *The Independent*, 29 August 1995.

Women's hopes, desires, demands and experiences in postwar Britain is the subject of a phenomenally rich and evocative historiography. Historians have charted the transformation of women's participation in paid work across the twentieth century: as Deirdre McCloskey observes, between 1931 and 1961 married women's uptake of in paid work tripled, rising from 10 to 32 per cent, though the 'social earthquake' around women's work occurred during the 1960s and 1970s, when life expectancies, smaller families, and the changing shape of industries converged to enable more women to enter the workforce, which they did in great numbers. By 1980, 60 per cent of married or cohabiting women undertook paid work, with the availability of part time work enabling nearly half this. As McCloskey observes, social attitudes changed, too: women's work became more widely accepted, even if the kinds of work they did remained 'embedded' – that is, culturally circumscribed.[1] But, as Helen McCarthy has written, while attitudes towards married mothers' employment shifted over the postwar period – with their work becoming increasingly normalised – guilt was harder to dislodge, and childcare provision frequently fell far short of what was needed. Moreover, society continued to see women as carrying an uneven share of the responsibility for family life.[1]

Did women want to do paid work? As Jane Lewis and Penny Summerfield highlight, the kinds of work available to them shaped this; skilled, professional jobs exerted a more powerful draw than repetitive manual labour.[1] More recently, scholarship has examined the role of paid work in shaping women's sense of self in postwar Britain[1], a sense that became increasingly reflexive and self-consciously fashioned, as Lynn Abrams and Claire Langhamer have shown.[1] But taking up employment created other forms of work, and in light of this, scholarship has focused on the labour underpinning what 1950s sociologists Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein termed women's 'dual roles', which Eve Worth and Laura Paterson conceptualise as 'organisational labour'. Organisational labour, they say, 'describes the mental processes of always knowing which tasks must be done and when, managing the logistics involved, and the effort required in being conscious of, and responsible for, successfully co-ordinating competing demands — even before commencing the tasks themselves.'[1] Motherhood itself, in its full complexity and labours, retains a powerful draw for historians, with Anna Muggeridge and Ruth Davidson describing it as 'xxx'.[1]

The historiography has been clear, though, that motherhood was not the horizon or the limit of what women wanted. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, rather than marking

---

[1] Deirdre McCloskey, 'Paid Work', in *Women in Twentieth Century Britain*, ed. Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (Essex: Pearson, 2001), pp. 165-179, pp. 168-177.

[1] Helen McCarthy, *Double Lives: A History of Working Motherhood* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

[1] Jane Lewis, *Women in Britain since 1945: women, family, work and the state in the Post-war years* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 3; Penny Summerfield, *Women Workers in the Second World War: Production and Patriarchy in Conflict* (London: Croom Helm, 1984).

[1] Laura Paterson, 'I didn't feel like my own person': paid work in women's narratives of self and working motherhood, 1950–1980', *Contemporary British History*, 33(3), 2019, pp. 405–26

[1] Claire Langhamer, 'Love, Selfhood and Authenticity in Post-War Britain', *Cultural and Social History*, 9:2, 2012, 277-297 and Lynn Abrams, 'Liberating the Female Self: Epiphanies, Conflict and Coherence in the Life Stories of Post-War British Women', *Social History*, 39, 1, 2014, pp. 14–35.

[1] Eve Worth, Laura Paterson, 'How is She Going to Manage with the Children?' Organizational Labour, Working and Mothering in Britain, *c.*1960–1990, *Past & Present*, 246, Supplement 15, 2020, pp. 318–343, p. 318.

[1] Reference to their forthcoming review article when published.

the attainment of deep satisfaction, in some cases, the experience of motherhood and its constraints provoked women into activism.[1] Beyond this, mothers and non-mothers undertook a staggering range of activisms from across a vast array of settings over the postwar decades – all of which gestures to the breadth of what women wanted, and the diverse ways they worked towards it. The 1960s was an era of particular energy in self-help groups, many of which were generated by women in order to address their own needs. Indeed, the 1960s were conceptualised as the 'Do-it-yourself Decade' by Mary Stott, editor of the Guardian's Women's Page between 1957 and 1972.[1] Aside from this 1960s moment, though, there has been the explosion of scholarly interest in the abundance of feminist organising and thinking that occurred across the 1970s. Using its rich archives and oral histories, British historians have considered its campaigns, contributions, and fissures – not least around race, class, and sexuality, and have homed in on how place within Britain shaped activist experiences and priorities.[1] But historians have also broadened the category of 'activism', inviting us to be attentive to the work done across a wider range of sites than those that explicitly identified as feminist. Looking to the earlier part of the century, for example, Gillian Scott, Maggie Andrews, and Caitriona Beaumont have, for example, examined more 'traditional' and conservative women's organisations as sites in which women have been able to express agency and enact change.[1] Nonetheless, and as Edwina Curry conceded in 1990, women's activism has often been associated with the left. This, however, obscures a more complex relationship between left-wing politics and feminist movements. As Colm Murphy has observed, the Labour Party's engagement with feminism between the mid-1980s and late 1990s was selective and inconsistently enthusiastic; more broadly, as a recent roundtable noted, left-wing politics has frequently struggled to reconcile its approach to women as mothers.[1]

---

[1] Sarah Crook, *Unhappy Mothers: Women, Motherhood and Social Change in Postwar Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2025).

[1] Mary Stott (Ed.) *Women Talking: An Anthology from the Guardian Women's Page 1922-35, 1957-71* (London: Pandora, 1987), 225.

[1] See, for example, Margaretta Jolly, *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the UK Women's Liberation Movement, 1968-present* (Oxford: University Press, Oxford, 2020); Natalie Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement in England, 1968–1993* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); George Stevenson, *The Women's Liberation Movement and the Politics of Class in Britain* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019); Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014); Sue Bruley, 'Women's Liberation at the Grass Roots: a view from some English towns, c.1968–1990', *Women's History Review*, 25(5), 2016, pp. 723–740.

[1] Maggie Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism: The Women's Institute as a Social Movement* (Oxford: Lawrence & Wishart, 1997) and Caitriona Beaumont, *Housewives and citizens: Domesticity and the women's Movement in England, 1928-64* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013) and Gillian Scott, *Feminism, Femininity and the Politics of Working Women: The Women's Co-Operative Guild, 1880s to the Second World War* (London: Routledge, 2005).

[1] Colm Murphy, *Futures of Socialism: "Modernisation", the Labour Party, and the British Left, 1973-1997* (Cambridge University Press, 2023) and Colm Murphy, 'The "rainbow alliance" or the focus group? Sexuality and race in the Labour Party's electoral strategy, 1985-7', *Twentieth Century British History* 31:3, 2020, pp. 291-315. For the left and mothers, see Charlotte Lydia Riley, Lyndsey Jenkins, Emily Baughan, Laura Beers, Jade Burnett, Frankie Chappell, Ruth Davidson, et al. 'Labour Pains: Mothers and Motherhood on the British Left in the Twentieth Century', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 3, 2025, pp. 405–26.

Accessing 'what women wanted', then, invites a kaleidoscopic view of women's lives, in which structures, feelings, pressures, and possibilities slide in and out of view as our lens rotates. As the historiography underlines, while women's choices radically expanded over the postwar period – gaining footholds and rights in education and employment, for example – structural trends tell only a partial story: women's actions did not always align with their desires. How, then, can we foreground what women wanted? This chapter takes two approaches. It looks to feminism and its demands as one expression of their hopes. Here it is particularly attentive to how some of the demands formulated in the 1970s became mainstream and 'common sense' by the end of the 1990s. But again, this only tells a partial story, and so this chapter also turns to feminism's female antagonists: what did women who spoke out against feminism want, and what were their fears about the changes feminism threatened?

This chapter also attends to opinion polls and social surveys as a source of information about what women wanted. Social research both reflects social change and creates it: it circulates new norms and stimulates new conversations. As Helen McCarthy has shown, sociologists of women had been, earlier in the postwar period, 'agents' in shifting public views of married women's work. Sociological work in the 1950s to 1970s 'helped to reframe what had been understood as a social problem... into a sociological fact rooted in women's material aspirations and social and psychic needs.'[1] The uptake of questions about women's wants by social trend researchers in national attitudes surveys from the 1980s further normalised the idea that everyday people, not just policymakers and experts, could demur or animate changing traditions. The surveys were reported on by newspapers, disseminating research findings, sharing new ideas about what was an 'average' experience and opinion, and stimulating columns assessing the scale of social change. In 1986, for example, the *Sunday Telegraph's* women's page informed readers, under the title 'New World of Mr and Mrs Average Briton', that the British Social Attitudes survey could be used to draw up a 'portrait of the New Briton.' Such framing emphasised that change was happening – it was a 'new world' – but positioned 'Mr and Mrs Average' at the centre of it.[1] But readers needed to be assured of the integrity of the research as a vehicle for these insights. In 1987 *The Times* assured readers that the British Social Attitudes survey, conducted each year since 1983, had earned 'wide respect for its thoroughness', before explaining that the preceding year's survey of 3,000 adults had found widespread 'deep support' for marriage.[1] Other media engines used the survey to reflect on the tension between public opinion, contemporary trends, and expert opinion. A 1988 article in the *Economist* observed that the British Social Attitudes survey revealed that the condemnation of mothers undertaking paid work was out of kilter with social trends – as the magazine noted, 76 per cent of respondents to the survey thought that mothers of very young children should not do paid work, while nearly half of mothers of under-5s were, in practice, employed – and that moreover, this disapproval was unsubstantiated by expert opinion about childrearing. 'The children of frustrated or unhappy mothers, whether at home or at work, are likely to have difficulties', the magazine reflected. 'Provided she feels more fulfilled, a mother with a job is less likely to suffer from depression than one stuck at home.'[1] In 1991 the *Daily Mirror* used the British

---

[1] Helen McCarthy, 'Social Science and Married Women's Employment in Post-War Britain', *Past & Present*, 233: 1, 2016, pp. 269–305, p. 272.

[1] 'New World of Mr and Mrs Average Briton', *Sunday Telegraph*, 2 November 1986, p. 13.

[1] 'Britons Cling to the Traditional Views on Love and Family', *The Times*, 29 October 1987, p. 3.

[1] 'Minding the Baby', *The Economist*, 306: 7538, 20 February 1988, p. 30.

Social Attitudes report to sympathise with over-stretched working mothers and to reprimand inactive fathers: 'Young working mums are shouldering a superhuman burden while their husbands simply sit back, says a massive survey out today', the newspaper reported. The evidence of the survey suggested that 'women outstrip men as hard workers.'[1] That year *The Times* declared that sociology had 'come in from the cold', citing public opinion databases like the British Social Attitudes studies as an example of a 'rich source of material for researchers and policy-makers'. The role of sociological research, *The Times* said, was to 'provide understanding' and to 'enable more informed policy choices to be made.'[1] The hope that social research would inform policy was shared across surveys. In the 1980s and 1990s, then, research into attitudes stimulated discussions about gendered change and women's feelings about it. Alongside these generative surveys, books and popular culture shine a light on what women in the 1980s and 1990s wanted beyond the evocative and – in 1996 – ever-present suggestion from the Spice Girls that what women wanted was to 'zig-ah-zig-ah'.

We demand: Women, feminism, and change in the 1970s
The feminist movement of the 1970s met in a series of national conferences but was organised into organic, grassroots, disparate groups that formed at the local level. These groups were informal, small, and often held in women's houses. Information about them and upcoming events was largely disseminated through newsletters and magazines. Women who attended these meetings, and found themselves moved into feminism, were drawn from a range of social backgrounds; working class women were prominent within the movement, even while the voices of middle-class women have tended to dominate the archives and historiography. Their interest was inspired by global events, not least the emergence of the New Left, student protests and Civil Rights movement, by instances of women's activism closer to home – for example, the strikes at the Ford Factory and the 'headscarf revolutionaries' in Hull during the 1960s – as well as, perhaps most famously, their lived experiences. As Mica Nava explained, feminism in the 1970s argued that 'personal experiences were not individual isolated phenomena but the product of social circumstances which affect women in a systematic fashion.'[1] The politicisation and theorisation from personal experience formed a crucial part of the movement's praxis, and was most widely done within consciousness-raising groups, which was, as Sue Bruley has described 'the process by which women come together, talk about their experiences, try to put them into some sort of context and develop a feminist orientation and practice.' For Bruley, who was involved in a consciousness-raising group in south London, the experience was revelatory. Other women agreed: far from being 'bourgeois' – an accusation levelled at it by some men on the far left – for many women, Bruley writes, consciousness-raising was a politically galvanizing experience.[1] Within these groups, and beyond them, women explored the environment in which they had been raised, the educational system in which they had been socialised, and the workplaces and intimate relationships in which they were embroiled and explored. These explorations opened new ways of understanding the ways that women's lives were defined and limited; the ways that they were denied power and choice; the ways

---

[1] 'Life on the Treadmill for Britain's Working Mothers', *Daily Mirror,* 21 November 1991, p. 6.
[1] 'Sociology Comes in from the Cold', *The Times,* 26 March 1991, 12.
[1] Mica Nava, *Changing Cultures: Feminism, Youth and Consumerism* (London: Sage, 1992), 14.
[1] Sue Bruley, 'Consciousness-Raising in Clapham; Women's Liberation as 'Lived Experience' in South London in the 1970s', *Women's History Review*, 22(5), 2013, pp. 717–38, p. 718.

that they were denied opportunities and a voice. But they also invited new ways of reflecting on the question: what do I want?

Yet the answers that feminists decided upon about what they, as a collective, *wanted* were not individualist. When the movement met at its first national conference at Ruskin College, Oxford, in 1970, four demands were formulated: equal pay; equal educational and job opportunities; free contraception and abortion on demand; and free 24-hour nurseries. By the close of the 1970s, three more were added: legal and financial independence for all women (1974); the right to self-defined sexuality and an end to discrimination against lesbians (1974); and freedom for all women from intimidation by the threat or use of violence or sexual coercion regardless of marital status, and an end to the laws assumptions and institutions that perpetuate male dominance (1978). What feminists in the 1970s wanted – what they *demanded* – was social, cultural and political change.

And society in the 1970s was changing, albeit at an unsatisfying rate. Despite the number of women in paid work rising by around 120,000 a year in the early 1970s, women's value remained under recognised in the workforce as represented by that most basic metric: pay. With the nudge of the passage of the Equal Pay Act 1970, women's pay, which was just 65.8 per cent of men's in 1970, rose to 75.7 per cent in 1977. As Sheila Rowbotham observed, though, this rise was short-lived: it started to decline the following year.[1] In demanding equal pay, then, the movement was not just demanding fair renumeration, but also respect, freedom, and economic justice; values reflected across all the demands. As Rowbotham says, though, these demands 'never expressed the actual range of its politics', which were far more expansive and contested than these neatly articulated demands expressed.[1]

Importantly, though, wanting – demanding, even – invokes a futurity. This futurity was not a given at the conference in which the demands were formulated. It was, Rowbotham remembers, 'apprehension, excitement and relief [that] were the predominant emotions of the time, rather than any notion of the future.' She quotes Sally Alexander, who similarly remembered that 'it felt like the culmination of something. It didn't feel like the absolute beginning.'[1] As it turned out, the conference was both a culmination and a beginning. The following year the first Women's Liberation demonstration was held in London, drawing thousands onto the streets despite the snow, and grassroots consciousness-raising groups proliferated, with many agitating around specific issues, not least childcare, support for single mothers, contraception, abortion, and more.[1] In the 1970s feminism allowed women to *demand,* but it also created new and local activist spaces across Britain, as well as to organise in ways that allowed them to meet (sometimes imperfectly) their own demands. Collectively organised feminist playgroups, for example, and childcare co-operatives, went some way towards meeting the need for reprieve from some of the monotony and isolation engendered by unsupported childcare. The women's liberation movement, then, was both a means of establishing and articulating shared desires for change and also a mechanism to achieve them.

But not all women in the 1970s were involved in women's liberation. Some were too preoccupied with daily life – with work, childrearing, with mere survival; some women were apathetic or vaguely resistant; others were antagonistic. What did these women who were

---

[1] Sheila Rowbotham, *A Century of Women* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 413.
[1] Ibid,. 402.
[1] Ibid, p. 401.
[1] Ibid, p. 402.

antagonistic to feminism want? Some, like journalist Joanna Bogle, saw feminists as crotchety bureaucrats seeking to police her pleasures. 'No, we don't want women's liberation,' she wrote. Instead, 'we long to be able to offer our own daughters a vision of hope': a hope that for her, rested on the exaltation of feminine domesticity and of gender difference.[1]

Just do it: women and power in the 1980s

By the 1980s there were signs that Bogle's conceptualisation of rigid gender roles was becoming less common. This is reflected in rates of labour force participation – in 1981 women comprised 40 per cent of the total labour force – and also what they told pollsters about their lives and desires.[1] In 1980, just 33 per cent of women surveyed in the Women and Employment Survey disagreed with the statement that the 'wife's job is to look after home and family'– the domesticity Bogle celebrated – but by the end of the decade, when the question was repeated in the British Social Attitudes survey, this figure had risen to 69 per cent. Women increasingly *wanted* a role beyond the domestic, too: in 1980 34 per cent disagreed with the statement that 'job is all right but what women really want is home and children', rising to 61 per cent by 1989.[1] Responses were shaped by age, though, with older women more likely (nearly 70 per cent agreed) to believe that what women *really want* was to be home with children, whereas 71 per cent of 18 to 21 year olds disagreed.[1] Neither was marriage aspired to at all costs: just 2 per cent of respondents in 1989 thought that a bad marriage was better than no marriage.[1] Yet people were optimistic that their marriage would be one of the good ones: 254,000 first marriages took place in 1986 (down from the postwar high of 357,000 in 1971).[1] Attitudes to childrearing remained positive despite the work of feminists in the preceding decade in troubling the overly-romanticised cultural image of motherhood; in the late 1980s 86 per cent of female respondents to the British Social Attitudes survey thought that having children was worth the trouble, with 81 per cent agreeing that watching children grow up was 'life's greatest joy'.[1] Marriage, children, and the family retained a strong hold on women's desires, but they increasingly sat alongside a recognition of paid work as a part of the fabric of their lives.

During the 1980s the women's movement was fragmented. As a set of ideas, values, and modes of thinking, though, feminism remained alive. Indeed, we can look to this decade as the period in which feminists gained a foothold across a multiplicity of institutions, and in which some of its ideas became mainstream. As Sheila Rowbotham has observed, in the 1980s 'ideas of basic "rights" became partially embedded within everyday culture.'[1] Within universities, Women's Studies and Sociology degrees provided intellectual spaces for feminists, as did adult education courses; other women who had cut their teeth in the movement entered into or worked productively with local government (perhaps most

---

[1] Joanna Bogle, in *Women Who Do & Women Who Don't Join the Women's Movement*, ed. Robyn Rowland (London: Routledge, 1984), 198-203.

[1] Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (Ed.) 'Housewifery,' *Women in Twentieth Century Britain* (Essex: Pearson, 2001), pp. 149-164, p. 157.

[1] Jacqueline Scott, 'Women and the Family', *British Social Attitudes the 7th Report, 1990/91 edition*, Eds. Roger Jowell, Sharon Witherspoon and Lindsay Brook (Aldershot, Gower, 1990), pp.51-76, p. 53.

[1] Ibid., p. 54.

[1] Scott, 'Women and the family', p. 53.

[1] Jane Lewis, *Women in Britain Since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 44.

[1] Scott, 'Women and the family', p. 64-5.

[1] Sheila Rowbotham, *Daring to Hope: My Life in the 1970s* (London: Verso, 2021), p. 291.

prominently with the GLC, which in 1984 funded local women's groups and projects to the tune of £8 million); yet more worked with or alongside the Trade Unions to enact change; women drew global attention to the peace movement at Greenham Peace Camp.[1] Moreover, activism by women of colour and Black women took on a new importance in the 1980s, a period in which the Black Women's Movement 'marked a radical period of sustained political dissent in Thatcher's Britain', writes Jade Bentil. As Bentil observes, and as Claudia Tomlinson affirms in this volume, the decade saw Black communities – in many cases led by Black women – organise to resist racist immigration policies, discrimination in education, and violence in healthcare and law enforcement.[1] The 1980s more widely saw a resurgence of conservative values around sexuality – prompting the *Daily Express,* based on its reading of the British Social Attitudes survey, to declare that 'permissive Britain returns to old values' – particularly during the HIV/AIDs crisis.[1] The 1980s, then, were not marked by a lack of wanting (or a lack of demanding) but by an adjustment to a new political context, in which activists found new allies, took up new platforms, and fought new battles.

      Once again, though, what feminist and other left-wing activists wanted in the 1980s (as expressed through a diverse range of campaigns which stood at odds with the values that comprised Thatcherism) did not speak for what all women wanted, at least, as they expressed it at the ballot box. Women, and particularly older and middle-aged women, preferred the Conservatives to Labour in greater numbers than their male peers. As historians have observed, Thatcherism and Thatcher's well-cultivated image as a 'powerful housewife' appealed to female voters.[1] In light of this conservatism, it is less surprising that at the close of the decade there was a wide social consensus that a feminist movement was obsolete. A woman had been prime minister since 1979; women were employed in a wide range of professions; women could – albeit with considerable juggling – be both workers and mothers if they wanted. *Just Do It,* the Nike campaign slogan formulated in 1988 that was recognisable across the world, captured the posture of the era: nothing held women back unless they let it; what was left to be demanded?

I'll tell you what I want, what I really really want: women in the 1990s
By the 1990s, though, the question of *wanting* was firmly on the cultural agenda. At this time, though, it was not framed in the language of demands, but was instead circulated in more diffuse, less political terms. Feminist cultural commentators reflected that this was generational: the daughters of 1970s feminists were rejecting their mothers' movement, even while they wanted what it had demanded, suggested Erica Jong in her 1999 collection of essays *What Do Women Want?*[1] The activist politics of the 1970s had fallen out of vogue

---

[1] Stephen Brooke, *Sexual Politics: Sexuality, Family Planning, and the British Left from the 1880s to the Present Day* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012); Silke Roth and Katherine Dashper, 'Sociology in the 1980s: The Rise of Gender (and Intersectionality)', *Sociology*, 50, 6, 2016, NP1-NP12; Joyce Gelb, *Feminism and Politics: a Comparative Perspective* (England and California, USA: University of California Press, 1990), p. 86.

[1] Jade Bentil, '"We Were Firefighting against Thatcher and the System she was Putting Forward": The Black Women's Movement and the Boundaries of Nationhood in Thatcher's Britain', *Resist, Organize, Build: Feminist and Queer Activism in Britain and the United States During the Long 1980s* eds. Sarah Crook and Charlie Jeffries (New York: SUNY, 2022), pp. 75-116, p. 76.

[1] 'Now Permissive Britain Returns to Old Values', *Daily Express*, 3 November 1988, p. 13.

[1] Laura Beers, 'Thatcher and the Women's Vote', *Making Thatcher's Britain* eds. Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 113-31, p. 131.

with the younger women, even while inequalities remained. Rather than being a postfeminist society – a 'set of assumptions, widely disseminated within popular media forms,' Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra write, 'having to do with the "pastness" of feminism' – the 1990s were a decade in which feminism adapted to the centrist rhetoric of the moment.[1]

As I have argued elsewhere, in the late-1990s efforts were made by a younger generation to formulate a 'new' feminism, echoing the language of New Labour.[1] Natasha Walter, one of its leading proponents, hailed the emergence of a 'new' feminism that was a 'celebratory and optimistic movement'.[1] Walter was critical of the postcard survey and the What Women Want festival of 1995, seeing it as a part of the over-personalisation of the political set in motion by the women's movement of the 1970s. She observed to the survey organiser, Bernadette Vallely, that without the application of a coherent analytical framework, the sheer range of responses 'might be difficult to turn into political demands.' According to Walter, Vallely was nonplussed. [1] For her part, Walter formulated some of the 'new' feminism's agenda in her 1998 book, setting its sight on material issues that she framed as commonsense: the reorganisation of work; a new strategy for childcare; increased male involvement in home life; a reduction in poverty; support for female survivors of violence. But, in keeping with the more mainstream framing of the era, these were largely framed as 'goals' and 'ideals' rather than demands.[1]

Was Walter right that, without an analytical framework, the 'what women want' postcard survey was simply too broad to cohere into something that could be mobilised to secure women what they demanded? Certainly, women's responses spanned from the intensely particular to the global and existential. Vallely was not deterred, and identified common themes in women's wants in the resulting book: to be seen, heard, and represented in politics, industry, and wider society; economic justice; better representation in the media and sport; a better NHS; environmental justice; improved transport systems; broader curricula; better communication with men; respect and equality.[1] What emerges from the responses is a riotous, nearly overwhelming range of desires – but not a sense that women felt their needs had been met, with nothing left to demand.[1] Numerous responses reflect, for example, the enduring struggles of working mothers. Yet in 1995 female employees were commonplace, and women reported to surveys that they did so because of its meanings beyond income. In 1995/96 the British Social Attitudes survey found that just 29 per cent of women with children under 12 in full time work saw their job merely as a way of earning a living; 71 percent agreed that it 'means much more than that' (figures were similar for mothers in part time work). Over 7 in 10 of mothers of under-12s in part time work would still prefer to have a paid work if they did not need the income, and over 6 in 10 of the mothers in full time work would do the same. 'Working mothers work because they believe

---

[1] Erica Jong, *What do Women Want?: Power, Sex, Bread & Roses* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), p. xviii.

[1] Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (eds), 'Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture', *Interrogating Postfeminism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 1-26, p. 1.

[1] Sarah Crook, 'The political ecology of the 'New' feminism in late-1990s Britain', *Gender & History*, forthcoming.

[1] Natasha Walter, *The New Feminism* (London: Little Brown, 1998), p. 7.

[1] Ibid, p. 63.

[1] Ibid, pp. 221-53.

[1] Bernadette Vallely (ed.) 'Introduction', *What Women Want* (London: Virago, 1996), pp. xv-xxx, p. xvii-xviii.

[1] LSE Women's Library Archive, *What Women Want,* 8WWW.

in the intrinsic *value* of working', the survey team concluded. Indeed, working mothers had 'an unusually high level of work commitment.'[1] In the mid-1990s, then, women had firmly moved out of the household – in part, because they wanted to.

Still, some contested that this was what women wanted. In 2010 sociologist Geoff Dench used the British Social Attitudes surveys to argue that women were turning away from paid work and towards the 'traditional' domesticity as a source of fulfilment:

> For most women, paid work is still something that is taken on for the benefit of their families, and to be fitted around their needs... The happiest women are those who have part-time jobs with plenty of time to be housewives and mothers too. There is no great appetite for competing with men in the job market; indeed women's rediscovered interest in home life and community shows that most of them do want men to be the *main* breadwinners.[1]

Recent work by historians would, no doubt, nuance Dench's claims about women's overriding motivations for doing paid work, and other sociological work might challenge his interpretations of women's 'appetite' for their lives. What is interesting for our purposes here, though, is that Dench's conservative intervention in *What Women Want* was published by the charity the Hera Trust (subsequently renamed Men For Tomorrow). This project was supported by the Robert Gavron Charitable Trust. Gavron, a businessman and Labour peer, was married to Hannah Gavron (nee Fyvel), who in the 1960s researched and posthumously published *The Captive Wife: Conflicts of Housebound Mothers* (1966).[1] This widely read book was transformational in rendering housewives' distress, isolation, and boredom visible in 1960s Britain. There is a strange irony in the fact that pioneering sociology by Hannah Gavron exposed women's dissatisfaction with housewifery in the 1960s, and that her husband's charity supported sociological work that encouraged a return to it in the 2010s.

Conclusion

Ten years after Edwina Curry's edited collection – and five years after the 1995 social survey – another (significantly more famous) cultural enterprise asked what women wanted. The high-grossing film, *What Women Want* (2000), was fronted by Mel Gibson as a confident and chauvinistic advertising executive suddenly endowed with the ability to hear women's thoughts. This does not gift the audience with the answer to the question of what women want but ultimately led to a redemptive arc for the male lead: he finds, to his surprise, that the women find him sleazy rather than charming; he reconciles with his teenage daughter; is unexpectedly full of remorse and is forced to own up when, having stolen an idea from his love interest – his female boss – she is pushed out of the workplace. It turns out that what women want in *What Women Want* is, in fact, for Mel Gibson to be a slightly less obnoxious advertising executive. And outside their thoughts about him, Gibson found women to be preoccupied with thoughts about make up, avoiding sex, and unresponsive men. According

---

[1] Katarina Thomson, 'Working Mothers: Choice or Circumstance?', *British Social Attitudes, the 12th Report.* Ed. Roger Jowell et al. (London: Social & Community Planning Research, 1995), pp. 61-90, p. 78-9. Italics in original.

[1] Geoff Dench, *What Women Want: Evidence from British Social Attitudes* (London: Hera Trust, 2010), p. xi.

[1] Hannah Gavron, *The Captive Wife: Conflicts of Housebound Mothers* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966).

to one of the most popular films of the start of the new millennium, women were not concerned with world peace or economic justice, like the women who opened this essay, but with personal relationships. But in other ways, the film gestures to some of the more significant social changes of the late-twentieth century, not least around women's paid work and changing conceptions of masculinity: Gibson's boss is a woman (who he eventually concedes is better than him at her job); Gibson becomes a more emotionally attuned and communicative father; he learns the value of listening to women, and reigns in some of his more objectionable chauvinistic traits. Some guiding feminist ideas had become mainstream; women's activism had quietly moved culture towards them.

At the close of the century, then, social researchers and Hollywood executives saw the value in provoking conversations about what women wanted. Posing such questions, of course, homogenises and flattens women: as if women could all want the same thing, or as if their wants are fixed and immutable, not as expansive as their full humanity allows. At its most capacious, the question *what do women want* was as impossible to answer in 2000 as it was in 1900 – although, in 2000, most British women's lives looked very different to their great great grandmother's. They had fewer children; married later; divorced with less difficulty; were less likely to die in childbirth or due to any number of diseases; could dedicate more of these healthy years to paid work, to educational opportunities, and to politics, and had the platforms and right to do so. Women in 2000 had opportunities and spaces to articulate and demand what they wanted. They could express it in social surveys, at the ballot box, as political candidates, as campaigners and as activists. As many 1990's 'new' feminists pointed out, women – and girls – were more powerful than ever before.[1] Yet women were acutely attuned to the remaining disparities. As Sally, from Bristol, responded to the 1995 survey, 'How is it that men get the world and I get this poxy little postcard?'[1]

Bibliography

---

[1] See, for example, Natasha Walter, *The New Feminism* (London: Little Brown, 1998).
[1] Sally, *What Women Want*, ed. Bernadette Vallely, p. 119.

Abrams, Lynn, 'Liberating the Female Self: Epiphanies, Conflict and Coherence in the Life Stories of Post-War British Women', *Social History*, 39:1 (2014), pp. 14–35.

Andrews, Maggie, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism: The Women's Institute as a Social Movement* (Oxford: Lawrence & Wishart, 1997).

Beaumont, Caitriona, *Housewives and Citizens: Domesticity and the Women's Movement in England, 1928–64* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

Beers, Laura, 'Thatcher and the Women's Vote', in Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders (eds), *Making Thatcher's Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 113–131.

Bentil, Jade, '"We Were Firefighting against Thatcher and the System She Was Putting Forward": The Black Women's Movement and the Boundaries of Nationhood in Thatcher's Britain', in Sarah Crook and Charlie Jeffries (eds), *Resist, Organize, Build: Feminist and Queer Activism in Britain and the United States During the Long 1980s* (New York: SUNY, 2022), pp. 75–116.

Bogle, Joanna, 'Women Who Do & Women Who Don't Join the Women's Movement', in Robyn Rowland (ed.), *Women Who Do & Women Who Don't Join the Women's Movement* (London: Routledge, 1984), pp. 198–203.

Brooke, Stephen, *Sexual Politics: Sexuality, Family Planning, and the British Left from the 1880s to the Present Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Bruley, Sue, 'Consciousness-Raising in Clapham: Women's Liberation as "Lived Experience" in South London in the 1970s', *Women's History Review*, 22:5 (2013), pp. 717–738.

———, 'Women's Liberation at the Grass Roots: A View from Some English Towns, c.1968–1990', *Women's History Review*, 25:5 (2016), pp. 723–740.

Crook, Sarah, *Unhappy Mothers: Women, Motherhood and Social Change in Postwar Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2025).

———, 'The Political Ecology of the "New" Feminism in Late-1990s Britain', *Gender & History* (forthcoming).

Curry, Edwina (ed.), 'The Demographic Timebomb', in *What Women Want* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1990), pp. 1–23.

Dench, Geoff, *What Women Want: Evidence from British Social Attitudes* (London: Hera Trust, 2010).

Egginton, Heidi and Zoë Thomas (eds), *Precarious Professionals: Gender, Identities and Social Change in Modern Britain* (London: University of London Press, 2021).

Gavron, Hannah, *The Captive Wife: Conflicts of Housebound Mothers* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966).

Gelb, Joyce, *Feminism and Politics: A Comparative Perspective* (England and California: University of California Press, 1990).

Jolly, Margaretta, *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the UK Women's Liberation Movement, 1968–Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

Jong, Erica, *What Do Women Want?: Power, Sex, Bread & Roses* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999).

Langhamer, Claire, 'Love, Selfhood and Authenticity in Post-War Britain', *Cultural and Social History*, 9:2 (2012), pp. 277–297.

Lewis, Jane, *Women in Britain Since 1945: Women, Family, Work and the State in the Post-War Years* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

McCarthy, Helen, 'Feminism, Selfhood and Social Research: Professional Women's Organizations in 1960s Britain', in Egginton and Thomas (eds), *Precarious Professionals*, pp. 287–304.

———, *Double Lives: A History of Working Motherhood* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

———, 'Social Science and Married Women's Employment in Post-War Britain', *Past & Present*, 233:1 (2016), pp. 269–305.

McCloskey, Deirdre, 'Paid Work', in Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (ed.), *Women in Twentieth Century Britain* (Essex: Pearson, 2001), pp. 165–179.

Murphy, Colm, *Futures of Socialism: "Modernisation", the Labour Party, and the British Left, 1973–1997* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

———, 'The "Rainbow Alliance" or the Focus Group? Sexuality and Race in the Labour Party's Electoral Strategy, 1985–7', *Twentieth Century British History*, 31:3 (2020), pp. 291–315.

Nava, Mica, *Changing Cultures: Feminism, Youth and Consumerism* (London: Sage, 1992).

Paterson, Laura, '"I Didn't Feel Like My Own Person": Paid Work in Women's Narratives of Self and Working Motherhood, 1950–1980', *Contemporary British History*, 33:3 (2019), pp. 405–426.

Riley, Charlotte Lydia et al., 'Labour Pains: Mothers and Motherhood on the British Left in the Twentieth Century', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 3 (2025), pp. 405–426.

Roth, Silke and Katherine Dashper, 'Sociology in the 1980s: The Rise of Gender (and Intersectionality)', *Sociology*, 50:6 (2016), NP1–NP12.

Rowbotham, Sheila, *A Century of Women* (London: Penguin, 1999).

———, *Daring to Hope: My Life in the 1970s* (London: Verso, 2021).

Scott, Gillian, *Feminism, Femininity and the Politics of Working Women: The Women's Co-Operative Guild, 1880s to the Second World War* (London: Routledge, 2005).

Scott, Jacqueline, 'Women and the Family', in Roger Jowell, Sharon Witherspoon and Lindsay Brook (eds), *British Social Attitudes: The 7th Report* (Aldershot: Gower, 1990), pp. 51–76.

Stevenson, George, *The Women's Liberation Movement and the Politics of Class in Britain* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

Stott, Mary (ed.), *Women Talking: An Anthology from the Guardian Women's Page 1922–35, 1957–71* (London: Pandora, 1987).

Summerfield, Penny, *Women Workers in the Second World War: Production and Patriarchy in Conflict* (London: Croom Helm, 1984).

Tasker, Yvonne and Diane Negra (eds), 'Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture', in *Interrogating Postfeminism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 1–26.

Thomlinson, Natalie, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement in England, 1968–1993* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

Thomson, Katarina, 'Working Mothers: Choice or Circumstance?', in Roger Jowell et al. (eds), *British Social Attitudes: The 12th Report* (London: Social & Community Planning Research, 1995), pp. 61–90.

Vallely, Bernadette, *What Women Want: The Campaign for Social and Political Change* (London: Virago, 1996).

——— (ed.), 'Introduction', in *What Women Want* (London: Virago, 1996), pp. xv–xxx.

Walter, Natasha, *The New Feminism* (London: Little Brown, 1998).

Worth, Eve and Laura Paterson, 'How Is She Going to Manage with the Children? Organizational Labour, Working and Mothering in Britain, c.1960–1990', *Past & Present*, 246 (Supplement 15, 2020), pp. 318–343.

Zweiniger-Bargielowska, Ina (ed.), 'Housewifery', in *Women in Twentieth Century Britain* (Essex: Pearson, 2001), pp. 149–164.