

## The Role of Women in Community Activism

This leaflet looks at the role of women in community activism Midlothian.

### Early days

Some of the earliest formal recorded community activism was when working men set up trade guilds and mutual benefit societies or “friendly societies” to support themselves and protect their interests. There are generally fewer records of early activities involving women.

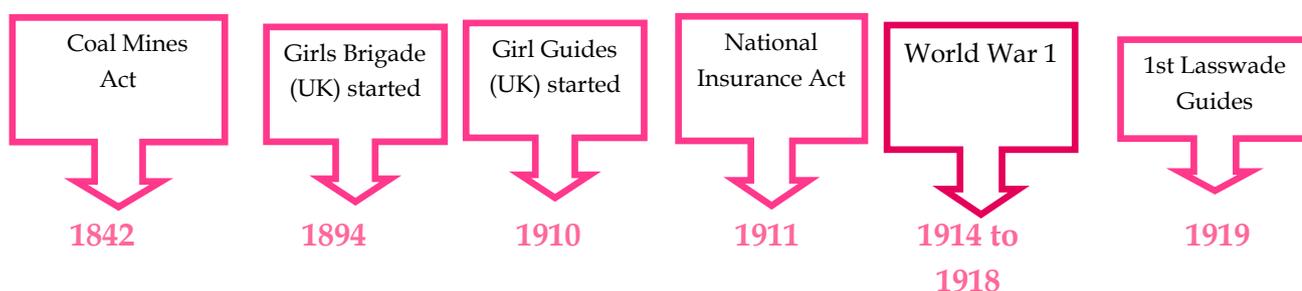
Although many women, particularly working class women, were probably less involved than the men in organised activism, many would be very involved informally, for example, helping other women with births, illnesses and deaths (before the National Health Service (NHS)); and caring for other people’s children (sometimes informal adoption). In Midlothian many women (and children) are likely to have worked down the mines until at least the 1842 Coal Mines Act. – and may have continued illegally after that date.

### Women’s suffrage (Right to Vote)

Nowadays most people in the UK take it for granted that they can vote, and not all do. However, this was not always the case.

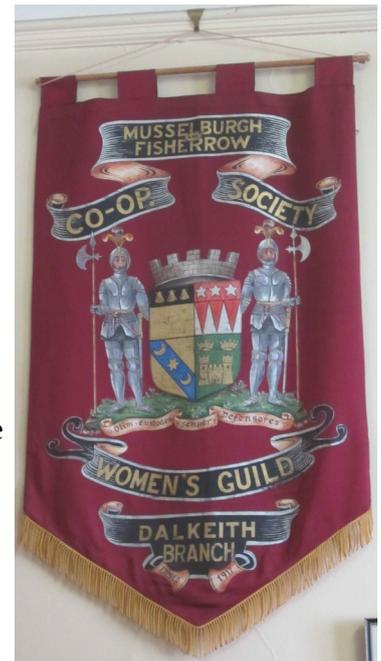
Women in Scotland could not vote in national elections (only council ones) until 1918, and even then that was only women over 30 who met a property qualification. This was extended to women over the age of 21 in 1928. The fight to vote for Members of Parliament took a long time with the first Scottish suffrage groups appearing in the late 1860s. In 1897 the National Union of Women’s Suffrage (NUWS) was formed and were known as the Suffragists. They campaigned peacefully but relatively unsuccessfully. In 1903 the more militant Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) was formed – they became known as the Suffragettes. Both the Suffragists and Suffragettes were mostly made up of middle class women. The NUWS Scotland had a campaign office in Dalkeith for the Dalkeith by-election supporting the Labour candidate (who supported women voting) against the Liberals (who did not).

The WSPU recruited Scottish women to their cause of civil disobedience. In Midlothian, militant suffragettes tried to blow up St Mary’s Church in Dalkeith in 1913 (which was the chapel of the Buccleuch family who were against women voting) and Rosslyn Chapel in 1914 – both attempts were unsuccessful.



## Co-operative societies

The first Co-operative societies in Midlothian were set up in the 1860s to provide members with affordable good quality food and other goods. In the late 19th century women wanted more involvement and began to form Co-operative women's guilds. There were guilds in a number of Midlothian towns including Dalkeith, Penicuik, Loanhead, Bonnyrigg and Gorebridge (and Musselburgh which was part of Midlothian at that time). They gradually merged. The women's guilds discussed a wide range of issues including votes for women, old age pensions etc. The UK-wide organisation campaigned successfully for maternity benefits to be included in the 1911 National Insurance Act and for infant welfare facilities.



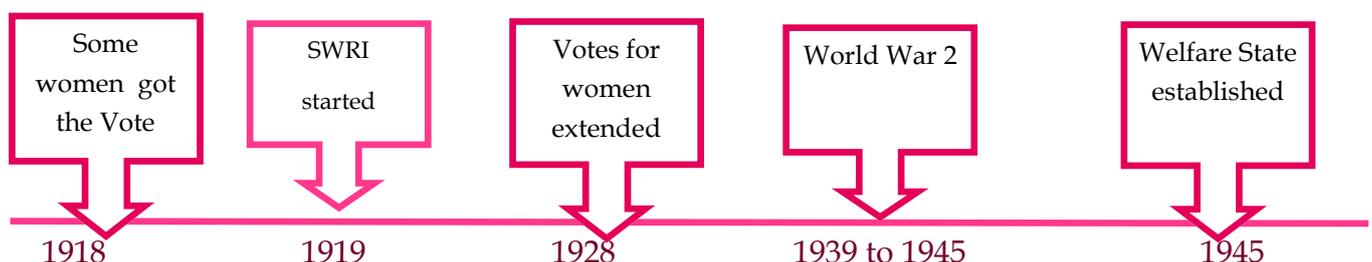
@ Dalkeith History Society

## Becoming involved

Often many women got involved in social activism through their local churches, for example helping with the Sunday school; as a member of the Lady's Guild; fundraising for "the poor" or other causes and setting up or helping youth groups. Many women in Midlothian would have got involved in the Scottish Women's Rural Institute (see below) and some may have been involved in the Royal Voluntary Service (formerly the Women's Royal Voluntary Service – WRVS) which was originally founded in 1938 as the Women's Voluntary Services for Air Raid Precautions. They assisted civilians during and after air raids and other war time activities.

## Scottish Women's Rural Institute (SWRI) – the "Rural"

The first Scottish Institute was formed at Longniddry, East Lothian, in 1917 as a society for women such as farmers' wives in rural areas. There are still several branches in Midlothian: Bonnyrigg, Borthwick, Cousland, Cranstoun, Dalkeith, Howgate, Loanhead, Mayfield, Newton, Pathhead, Pentlands (Penicuik), Rosewell, Roslin, and Sherwood (Bonnyrigg). Activities have always included crafts, baking, cooking and other rural activities, but in addition during the Second World War they got involved with the war effort. Many will serve as an important social function for women that live in isolated areas, particularly older women and widows.

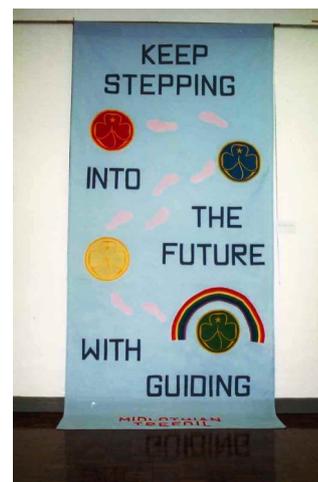


## Women in the two World Wars

With many men heading abroad to fight between 1914 and 1918, more women entered the work force than ever before, doing all types of work. Following the end of the war the employment of women decreased. However, more women continued to work than had previously and in a wider range of jobs. During the 1939-45 war, women again were expected to take the place of men fighting overseas. The wars gave many women more freedom than they had before.

## Girl Guiding

The Girl Guides Association was formed in 1910. The first Guide Company officially registered in Midlothian was the 1st Lasswade Guides in February 1919. In 2014 a census showed that Midlothian had 266 Rainbows, 444 Brownies, 271 Guides, 8 Senior Section and over 100 adult leaders and volunteers. Girls develop skills for life and learn to become responsible citizens through team and small group activities. They contribute to campaigns as they consider issues such as mental health, bullying, keeping safe, political awareness and images of women portrayed in the press.



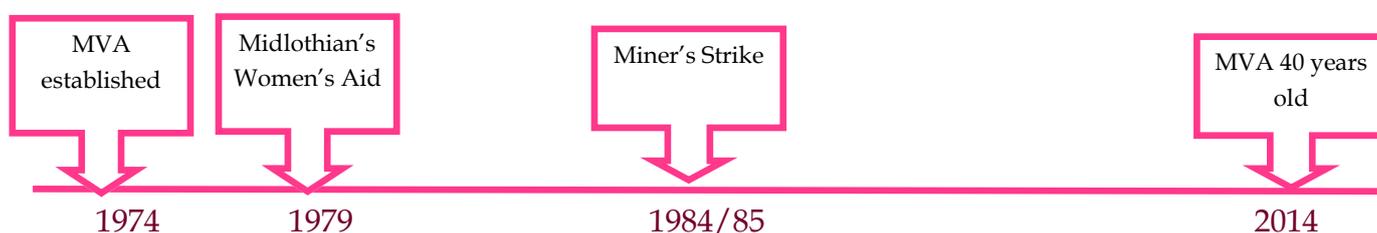
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## Campaigning

Women in Midlothian have been involved in many campaigns over the years for local, regional, national and international campaigns. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries they campaigned for votes for women; and in the 1984/85 Miner's Strike they campaigned against the closure of the pits. More recently they have been involved in campaigns against the closure of local schools, libraries and leisure centres; campaigns for new/more facilities, e.g. skate parks for young people; opposing violence against women; and on many other issues. Very recently many women became active on both sides of the Referendum campaign – for some it would be their first experience of social activism whilst for others it would be the result of many years campaigning.

## Women's Role in the 1984/85 Miner's Strike

Women first got involved through working in the kitchens providing food. Later on they started to set up women's strike committees. They gradually got further involved in joining picket lines and attending meetings alongside the men. Some went on to get involved in politics.



## Present Day

Women are the backbone of many organisations and groups in Midlothian. Women in Midlothian, of all social backgrounds, have been/are involved in setting up new organisations and running older ones by being on management committees or boards. Women do a huge range of volunteering activities in the voluntary sector and for statutory agencies and campaign for improved services and opportunities for themselves, their families, and their communities. Women serve on community councils throughout Midlothian and, although still under-represented, serve as Councillors on Midlothian Council. Most Councillors will have started as activists in their communities.

There are many organisations run by women for women, for example, Women's Aid East and Midlothian who provide services to women and families effected by domestic violence, but who also campaign against violence against women. Most playgroups and after school clubs are also run by committees made up of mostly or entirely of women, as are many groups set up for older people and people with disabilities.

Women activists in Midlothian today are involved in the running of youth clubs and lunch clubs and lots of different types of campaigning. Without women community activists the communities of Midlothian would be much poorer.

## References

- Dalkeith History Society – [www.dalkeithhistorysociety.org/](http://www.dalkeithhistorysociety.org/)
- Mary Frances Smart, Girlguiding Midlothian – [www.girlguidingmidlothian.org.uk/](http://www.girlguidingmidlothian.org.uk/)
- BBC Schools website – [www.bbc.co.uk/schools/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/)
- National Library of Scotland website – [www.nls.uk/](http://www.nls.uk/)
- SCRAN website – [www.scran.ac.uk/](http://www.scran.ac.uk/)
- History Shelf – [www.historyshelf.org/](http://www.historyshelf.org/)
- SWRI website – [www.swri.org.uk](http://www.swri.org.uk)
- UK Parliament website – [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk)
- SCAN Education – [www.scan.org.uk](http://www.scan.org.uk)
- Resources for Learning in Scotland (RLS) - <http://rls.org.uk/>
- WRVS website – [www.royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk](http://www.royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk)

## Funding

Funding for this project was provided by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

It is proposed that when the project is complete, all the materials are donated to the new Dalkeith Museum located in the Corn Exchange.

