

inists extended the campaign against male violence in several ways. Recognising that women often failed to report cases of rape, they opened the first rape crisis centre in London in 1976, and the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act of that year helped to make it less traumatic for victims to approach the police in order to bring charges. This in turn highlighted the unsympathetic attitude of the courts, hence the campaigns run by Women Against Rape to expose examples in which guilty men were let off or lightly treated on the grounds that their careers ought not to be damaged by their actions. Finally, feminists identified pornography as effectively responsible for encouraging violence against women and argued that it was a form of violence in itself; this led to the organisation of street protests in Soho, Leeds, Manchester, Bristol and elsewhere to expose the commercial exploitation of sex by shops and cinemas.

For many feminists the major single advance in this period was the greater availability and acceptance of contraception in the form of the contraceptive pill which was on sale from 1961 onwards; it could be obtained on the National Health Service from 1963. In 1969 the Family Planning Act allowed local authorities to give women advice on birth control and contraceptive supplies, and the Family Planning Association went further in 1970 when it began to offer contraceptive advice to anyone over sixteen years regardless of marital status. As a result, by the end of the 1960s birth control had become the general practice among younger couples. There are, however, two qualifications

Table 11.2 Contraceptive Methods in Current Use Among Ever-Married Women Aged 16-40 Years 1970-1983 (percentage)

	1970	1975	1976	1983
Pill	19	30	32	29
IUD	4	6	8	9
Condom	28	18	16	15
Cap	4	2	2	2
Withdrawal	14	5	5	4
Safe period	5	1	1	1
Abstinence	3	1	0	1
Total at least one	75	76	77	81
Not using any	25	24	23	19

Source: A.H. Halsey, *British Social Trends* (1988), p. 59.

Table 11.3 Birth Rates per 1000 Population in England and Wales 1960-1977

1960-65	18.1
1966-70	16.9
1971-75	14.0
1976	11.9
1977	11.6

Source: A.H. Halsey, *British Social Trends* (1988), p. 40

to be made here. As Table 11.2 shows, women still used a wide variety of methods, among which the pill, though the most common, was far from being typical. Fears about its effects upon health after 1977 also diminished its use slightly. It may well be that the availability of the pill during the 1960s had the effect of promoting the use of all forms of contraception in the long term, especially condoms.

The trend towards contraception had important implications. Initially it seems to have checked the birth rate, which had been buoyant in the 1950s but fell steadily down to the late 1970s before rising slightly again (Table 11.3). More fundamentally the use of contraception was widely regarded as the most significant form of empowerment for women in that it gave them the control of their own bodies that feminists desired. Pregnancy was not the inevitable consequence of marriage; it could be postponed until later in a woman's life; and pre-marital sex was now seen as desirable because it would enhance sex within marriage. Not surprisingly many feminists celebrated the new freedom from passivity and subordination which this gave them. On the other hand, sexual permissiveness reawakened misgivings among those who felt that freedom imposed new pressures upon women to conform to a heterosexual feminism. Was female sexuality, after all, not fundamentally different from that of men?¹³ If it was, then greater freedom for women could not be a solution for everyone. This encouraged feminists to consider whether satisfying emotional relationships were not more easily attainable with other women. This line of thought was complemented by the growth of the Gay Liberation Front after 1971 and by the increasing acceptance of same-sex relations among men. As a result, in 1974 women's liberation agreed to incorporate a sixth demand in the original programme, seeking an end to discrimination against lesbians and the right to define one's own sexuality. In the process many lesbians were drawn into the women's movement, but heterosexual

feminists expressed strong reservations about their prominence which they believed would alienate many women from the cause. Tactics pointed to a separation of the economic-political campaigns from questions involving sexual orientation. Nonetheless, it proved impossible to exclude lesbian issues from the agenda of the movement.

Despite the wide acceptance of contraception, feminists continued to believe that the control of women's bodies would remain incomplete without access to abortion. Ever since 1936 an Abortion Law Reform Association (ALRS) had existed in Britain, but the legalisation of abortion enjoyed little public support from women's pressure groups apart from the Women's Co-operative Guild. Despite this, abortion was so widely practised that by the 1960s public concern over the dangers to the health of women who resorted to illegal backstreet abortionists paved the way for reform. Eventually David Steel introduced a back-bench bill in 1967 with the tacit support of the Home Secretary, Roy Jenkins, which allowed women to have abortions under the NHS within twenty-eight days of conception and with the consent of two doctors. There was no question at this time of conceding abortion on demand, partly for fear of undermining parliamentary support for the bill and partly because the scheme depended upon the co-operation of the medical profession which could not be taken for granted. As a result, in 1967, 9,700 NHS abortions took place, in addition to 10,000 private ones and an unknown number of illegal operations. The total rose to 22,000 in 1968, 75,000 in 1970 and 128,000 by 1980. However, the steep rise cannot be seen simply as an increase since thousands of abortions which hitherto took place illegally now came under the NHS.

The abortion law is an example of a reform which effectively predated women's liberation; consequently the chief task for feminists subsequently was to *defend* the status quo rather than extend it. Hence in 1972 the old ALRS gave way to the National Women's Abortion and Contraception Campaign which in turn became the National Abortion Campaign (NAC) in 1975; it organised public demonstrations under the slogan 'A Woman's Right To Choose'. The campaign also highlighted the uneven implementation of the legislation; it was, for example, more difficult to get an abortion in the north than in the south of England. Above all the NAC had to fight off hostile bills in 1976, 1977, 1978, 1980 and 1982 introduced in order to undermine the 1967 Act. By the late 1970s the number of abortions had stabilised, and opinion polls showed that a large majority accepted the new status quo, though only 18 per cent of people supported abortion on demand. The defence of the law against the backlash from a vocal minority of anti-abortionists,

especially after a change in the political climate, was one of the lasting achievements of women's liberation.

By contrast, the results of campaigns over economic issues were less dramatic in the short term, though here feminists were undoubtedly working with the grain of events and opinion. Significantly, when Benjamin Spock revised his manual on baby and child care in 1973 he removed the original bias against working mothers – a good illustration of the tendency for influential books to reflect changing attitudes rather than to initiate them. Feminists adopted a wide range of tactics including direct action, strikes, co-operation with trade unions and legislation. At this stage they were beginning to take advantage of the opportunities created by structural changes in the British economy; this is best illustrated by female participation in the labour force which increased from 37.5 per cent of women in 1961 to 42.6 per cent in 1971 and to 45.5 per cent by the 1981 census.

However, feminists were largely absorbed by the terms and conditions of women's employment rather than by its extent. The enactment of the Equal Pay Act in 1970, which was implemented from 1975 onwards, proved to be disillusioning. In the first three years the wages of female workers rose from 50 to only 52 per cent of men's. Some feminists drew the conclusion that they were unlikely to achieve much through a trade union movement still dominated by men and lacking interest in women's grievances and aspirations. They found an alternative in focussing on the remuneration of women who worked unpaid in the home, arguably the most exploited and numerous group. This line of argument echoed the campaign waged for the 'endowment of motherhood' in the 1920s by Eleanor Rathbone who had also regarded equal pay as a very distant and elusive goal. During the 1970s the Campaign for Wages for Housework attracted great enthusiasm and also the support of the press; however, it was rejected by Socialist and Radical feminists who considered that it pandered to traditional notions of women as essentially domestic. As a result, Wages for Housework remained a rather separate and marginal part of the movement.

However, this issue forced Socialist feminists to address the charge that it was futile for women to rely upon trade unions to promote their interests. In fact these years were marked by a series of attempts to engineer greater co-operation between female workers and the unions. During 1970–2 Socialist and Marxist groups promoted campaigns to improve the wages of very low-paid women and to encourage them to join unions. At first this was undermined by the hostility of union officials and hampered by the inability of manual workers to share the