

# Activisms across Women's Lives: Rethinking the Politics of (Grand)Mothering

Preliminary Analysis of Activist Oral Histories, 2013-15



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides a preliminary analysis of research undertaken between 2013 and 2015 as part of a larger study on why and how older women across North America are organizing, networking, and working for social change. The study is led by Dr. May Chazan of Trent University. As an overview of certain emerging themes within this work, this report was written primarily to invite feedback from participants who have been directly involved in the study.

This research addresses a gap in scholarship on aging and activism and challenges ageist-sexist understandings of women's lives – particularly conventional assumptions about the political engagements (or lack thereof) of mothers and grandmothers. Throughout the report, we foreground the experiences of the women who participated in the research.

Throughout this early analysis, we highlight the following three key themes:

- Participants in this study have led full and diverse lives. The early part of the report highlights some of this diversity in terms of their geographies, ages, family lives, living arrangements, educational backgrounds, and work experience.
- Both patterns and areas of divergence emerge in the stories women shared about their histories with activism (or “activist herstories”). Through an examination of participants’ activisms across different stages in their lives (or lifecourses), we provide a nuanced look at how they came to activism, what their activisms have entailed, and what has sustained their social justice work over time. Overall, these women’s activisms have been shaped by a combination of personal circumstances and broader social, economic and political processes. Many revealed stories of living on the cusp of major change for women and families.
- These activist herstories challenge dominant assumptions about activisms during women’s childrearing years and later lives – stereotypes about mothering and grandmothering as incompatible with political engagement or radical action. We look closely at the ways women’s social change work shifts – but is sustained – over their lives, recognizing that their personal struggles are often part of wider struggles for structural change. We also acknowledge that, for these women, later-life is far from apolitical: instead, this is a period of new and renewed activism.



## PREAMBLE

Born in 1936, Jen grew up in London, England during World War II. Her father was a Conservative politician and, as a teen and young adult, she shared his political views. Before going to university, Jen spent a summer working with children living in “settlement houses” outside of London. This “opened [her] eyes to poverty” and started the process of transforming her worldview. She studied English literature at a London University. At 21 years old, she got married and had three children within two years.

In the 1960s, Jen and her husband moved their family across the Atlantic Ocean to one of Canada’s most economically-depressed provinces: Newfoundland. Her husband took a job at the university, while she taught and completed her Master’s degree. It was there that her left-leaning politics solidified: again, she witnessed widespread poverty and a lack of social safety nets. This experience, she reflected, propelled her long career working for social justice – advocating for women and youth on the margins, doing anti-poverty work, and engaging in formal politics.

When her husband was offered a job at Trent University in the late-1960s, they moved their family to Peterborough, Ontario. She pursued doctoral studies (in English literature), while simultaneously becoming an advocate for criminalized women and women in the prison system. She soon became the first woman probation officer in Peterborough. Her desire to work directly with and for marginalized women outweighed her interest in being a career-academic, particularly in the context of the kind of gender inequality she experienced in academe. In her words: “I don’t really want to go into the horrors of how faculty wives on one-year contracts were treated, but suffice it to say that I was dumped and a man with the right background but less teaching experience and fewer degrees than I was hired into the tenure track.” Later, she further reflected: “I changed careers dramatically in midstream. So that, by the time I had my oral for my PhD over in London, they kept saying ‘Now you must publish this and edit that,’ and I said, ‘Yes I’ve talked to people about editing those plays, but I won’t be doing it because I’m a probation officer now.’ They had a hard time with that. They couldn’t hear that somebody was going to leave the cloisters.”

She ran for both the federal and provincial election as the New Democratic Party (NDP) candidate in Peterborough, and she served as the Member of Provincial Parliament (MPP) in the mid-1970’s. As she reflected with amusement, “the conservatives, who had not put much effort into the provincial election, woke up the next morning and realized they had elected a limey, a woman and a socialist!” She leveraged her power as MPP in the feminist struggle for equality, telling the following story about working to change the context of women’s financial autonomy:

We went to one of the big banks in Toronto, and we took a Toronto Star reporter with us because they were doing a story about credit for women. I don’t know if you knew that women couldn’t get a credit card in their own names in the mid ‘70s. It had to be in their husband’s name. So along we went, and the Toronto Star watched me apply – me, who is grown up enough to be the MPP of Peterborough, but not grown up enough to have a credit card in my own name. They watched me being turned down and photographed us outside the bank.

She later became executive director of the Elizabeth Fry Society in Toronto and directed a youth services organization in Peterborough. In the early 1990’s, she returned to provincial politics as the Chief of Staff to the Minister of Education, followed by working in the Premier’s office. She was elected president of the Ontario NDP and then was on the federal executive of NDP, while also holding a teaching position at Trent University. Jen



continued her engagement with social change through work with the Federation of Women Teachers of Ontario and the United Steel Workers.

After formally retiring, Jen served on the leadership team of the Grandmothers Advocacy Network (GRAN) from 2011 to 2014, among her numerous other engagements. Her later-life activism is clearly a continuation of her long-time social justice work. She has remained married and her husband, who shares her political views, strongly supports her activism.

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Across the Atlantic, Ingrid was born in 1940 into what she described as a “patriarchal Roman Catholic family” in Acadian New Brunswick. Along with her 19 siblings, much of her childhood was shaped by experiences poverty, trauma, and abuse. Reflecting on these difficult early years, Ingrid explained that her difficult upbringing is what has led her to always be “for the underdog.” In her words:

So, in the first ten years of my life I was twice in an orphanage because both my parents were in the hospital.... [My father] was very old school, right wing, women were his property. When I was little (eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve), he was an alcoholic. He would invite his drinking buddies over and line us [my sisters and I] up, for them to choose one of us. Mother was in the bedroom crying – totally, totally victimized, helpless. But thank God they were old, they were drunk, we could outrun them.... School was horrible! [...] Every day I would get the strap and have to stand behind the piano in the classroom as punishment for having dirty hands or whatever, not combing my hair, maybe even dirty clothes, I imagine.... What can I say about that horrible experience in the orphanage? I remember being debugged – they did that to everybody. I think it was kerosene that they put in our hair to kill the lice and the nits, you know. I remember going through that process, it was terrible, and then they wrapped your head for a day. [...] Then being beaten up by [...] two nuns that were into heavy corporal punishment... At 15, I thought, ‘whatever is out on that street cannot be as bad as what I am experiencing in this house. I’ll take my chances.’

She escaped her home at 15 and hitched-hiked across Quebec, staying in Catholic boarding houses for girls along the way. But life did not improve significantly. A year later, she became pregnant and got married, and then she followed her husband to Elliot Lake, where he was offered a job in a mine. She had six children in eight years. As she described:

I would have been about 17, maybe 18 [when we got married]. Because I knew him for two years before I got married. I was four months pregnant when I got married, and then I had six children in eight years. [...] After the sixth, I knew I was going to have a nervous breakdown if I had another one, so that was it. I figured, ‘f\*\*\* the Pope, I am not going through this again.’ Then the next many years were like zombie-land, just trying to survive!... [My ex-husband] was, from a Polish community outside of Ottawa. Killaloe, Barry’s Bay, very traditional. His parents had 14 boys and four girls, so it was a very patriarchal environment. The attitude [was very familiar]. You know you kind of pick a man that’s like your father.

She focused her energy on caring for her children and navigating her relationship in the years when her children were young. Later, when the family moved to Ottawa and her children were in school, she took a job as a bus driver. In the context of extreme financial abuse, this allowed her to support her children. In those years, it would have been impossible for her to engage in any kind of activism. Her husband would not have supported it.



Ingrid's major turning point came when she was in her mid-40s and her children were mostly grown up: after 29 years of marriage, she began a very long process of divorce. Within two weeks of her husband leaving, she enrolled herself in a feminist counselling program at Ottawa University, paying her way by bus driving. She soon became passionately involved in feminist struggles: "when I went to university, I was being exposed to a whole lot of different ideas and views [...] I remember having the big feminist meltdown." Six years later, she received a sizeable settlement from her divorce, gave some of it to each of her children, and began working at a radical sexual assault centre.

She started up an NGO with some of her colleagues at the sexual assault centre, called Justice and Equality for Women Everywhere: Legally, Lawlessly, and Shamelessly, and she travelled to Beijing in 1995 as its representative at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women. Later, she travelled extensively, teaching across Asia through the Canadian University Service Overseas and the World University Service of Canada. She lived in China for a number of years, where she daringly smuggled books, films, and other censored materials across the border from Hong Kong – most of these materials were highly political, including a short film about the Tiananmen Square Massacre. Eventually she was caught and was not allowed to return to China.

After retiring from teaching abroad, at age 60, she moved to Vancouver. She tracked down a gaggle of Raging Grannies and joined up. The Grannies mesh perfectly with her feminist politics, rabble-rousing spirit, and desire for fun and laughter.

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Jen's and Ingrid's stories provide a glimpse into the diverse life stories shared with us as part of our five-year (2013-18) research project on why and how older women from across North America are working for social change in their later lives, and what has propelled and sustained them in this work across their lifecourses. Jen's story depicts a woman who engaged in activism and social change work her entire adult life. Her work with GRAN was an obvious extension of her longstanding commitment to social justice. The first woman parole officer in her city, a Member of Provincial Parliament in the 1970s in Canada, a university professor at a time when women were rarely afforded entrance into academia – Jen is certainly a trailblazer. In an entirely contrasting way, Ingrid's story is also about trailblazing, with different starting points and different trails traveled. Raised amidst some of the worst conditions imaginable in Canada in the 1940s, and then trapped for years in an abusive marriage, Ingrid *twice* found the courage to escape. She raised six children, putting each of them and herself through university with her job as a bus driver. She then took up feminist counselling, working with survivors of sexual abuse and assault. She came to her activism in her 40s, largely as a result of the personal battles she fought. These divergent stories reveal women becoming politicized and taking up social justice struggles differently at different times across their lives.

## INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH

This report provides a preliminary analysis of research carried out between 2013 and 2015, as part an ongoing study that examines why and how older women across North America are organizing, networking, and working for social change. It takes as its entry point women who are currently involved in (at least) one of two "granny activist" networks: the Grandmothers Advocacy Network (GRAN, <http://grandmothersadvocacy.org/>) and/or the Raging Grannies (see <http://raginggrannies.org/>). This report has two main objectives: to provide early feedback to the women who have been part of our research and to invite comments on our analyses.



Currently, there is very little scholarship on older women's activism or on women's activism across their lifecourses. Very few researchers have, for instance, recorded or analyzed older women's activist histories in any depth. We therefore know very little about what it means to age as an activist in different contexts and movements, what propels and sustains activism into later life, what conditions draw women into social change work, and what impacts older women are having in different societies.<sup>1</sup>

Examining the lives and activist practices of women involved in GRAN and/or the Raging Grannies offers insights into two activist movements that are different in their goals, activities, structures, and governance, but are both comprised predominantly of women over the age of 60. Because many of the women in these networks are (and have been) active in many social and environmental justice efforts extending well beyond their "granny activism," the research also delves into broader stories of working for change. It illustrates the diverse ways older women are working (and have worked) for social and environmental justice, examining their common and divergent motivations, perceptions, discourses, and practices. Between 2013 and 2015, the research entailed a number of activities, including the following:

1. Generating "activist herstories," by asking 32 women to reflect on their lives decade by decade, with a view to understanding what has drawn them into and sustained them in activism;<sup>2</sup>
2. Observing and documenting the central conversations, core practices, motivations, perceptions, and discourses among wider groups of granny activists (from both networks), through participation in a number of their national/ international events and more localized actions, and through review of their organizational materials, online fora, and archives;
3. Exploring, in a preliminary way, the Raging Grannies' solidarity-building efforts with contemporary Indigenous movements in Canada, by carrying out focus groups involving an additional 13 women; and
4. Collaborating with GRAN on building its community-based, activist archive, including documenting its archival process and exploring salient themes around feminist archiving and commemoration.

This report presents analyses from the first two of these activities.<sup>3</sup>

In her recent article, Naomi Richards aptly comments that "in the public imagination activism is often associated with youth" (2012, 8). Because this is the lens worn by so many, it becomes difficult for older women engaging in social change work to be seen and recognized. In other words, the misconception of activism as unequivocally associated with youth reinforces the invisibility that many older women activists feel and functions to erase their struggles from public view. As Maureen McHugh (2012) and others explain, the failure to view older women as activists also emerges from one-dimensional understandings of what activism looks like, how it is practiced, and what forms it takes. To some extent, the community-grounded, "quieter," less confrontational, less

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<sup>1</sup> For existing research on older women and activism, please see: Chazan 2015; Roy 2007, 2005; Chovanec, Cooley, & Diaz 2010; McGranahan; Charpentier et al. 2008; D. Sawchuk 2009; McHugh 2012; K. Sawchuk 2013. For scholarship pertaining to women's activism as mothers or during their childrearing years, please see: O'Reilly 2012, 2011; Green, F. J. 2009; Hager 2015, 2011; Logsdon-Conradsen, 2011; Reimer & Sahagian 2013.

<sup>2</sup> By "activist herstories" we are referring to participants' self-reported reflections on what drew them into working for social change, what shaped their commitments to, beliefs around, and experiences of this work, and what has sustained their efforts over time. We call these "herstories" instead of "histories" as a way of underlining that these are *women's* stories – they have been recounted by women about their own lives, recorded by women, interpreted and written about by women. The word "herstory" was first published in Robin Morgan's 1970 anthology, *Sisterhood is Powerful*, as a way of illuminating and resisting the dominance of male-centred and masculine records and stories in writings about the past. Given our objective of bringing visibility to older women's roles in social change work, we felt that this more feminized (and feminist) language was appropriate.

<sup>3</sup> See also Chazan (forthcoming); Chazan & Baldwin (forthcoming); Chazan et al. (2015).





masculine, “everyday” work involved in creating social change – the work beyond formal protest, or the behind-the-scenes, “slog” work that Angela Davis (2007) describes as required in working for change and typically carried out by women – is often not compatible with conventional understandings and depictions of activism. And because this is often the work undertaken by older women, their activism tends to be further marginalized.

Part of our contribution, then, is our focus on *older women’s activism*, through which we aim to challenge stereotypes of older women as frail and apolitical AND of activists as (necessarily) young and confrontational. Because of our focus on activist herstories – on women’s activism across their lifecourses – this work also offers a nuanced understanding of why and how their activism has developed the way they have. We open with an introduction to the women who participated in our research, emphasizing the diversity among participants, while also acknowledging the limitations of our sample. We then delve into participants’ activist herstories, illustrating both the patterns and the areas of contrast that we observed. In the final sections, we focus on some of our most compelling findings. We argue that the stories shared with us destabilize assumptions that women at certain life stages (namely the childrearing years and later life) tend to be apolitical or disengaged. Instead, we illustrate the ways in which personal struggles during these women’s childrearing years were often intricately intertwined with the structural changes underway, while later life was unanimously a time of new and renewed activism.

## INTRODUCING OUR PARTICIPANTS

Largely reflective of the broader GRAN and Raging Grannies communities, most of the women who participated in our research were of middle- or working-class, white, European backgrounds. We acknowledge that these women, as a group, appear to be quite homogeneous, and that we would likely tell different stories and draw different conclusions had we interviewed older women activists of colour, Indigenous elder activists, and older trans\* activists, among others. We understand – as do the amazing women we have interviewed – that, by virtue of skin colour (and, in many cases, because of other social and economic factors over which they had no control), our participants have been afforded certain unearned privileges throughout their lives, including in the various movements in which they have participated. We also understand that, because of who is and is not represented in this study, this research remains an unfinished project: the other, and continuously Othered, stories of the older women activists who are not included here clearly still need to be told. What we can and do tell in this report are some of the unique and impressive stories that have been shared with us, of older women working for change, often throughout their lives, and in all cases in later-life. We share their accomplishments, obstacles, family struggles, regrets, passions, and complex motivations. Yes, all of the women with whom we have spoken have been afforded certain privileges, but what they have revealed to us is how they have put their privilege to use: working to make conditions better not only for themselves but also for the most marginalized in society, and for future generations. And many of these women have not *always*, not in every way, been so very privileged. Many have survived domestic and/or sexual violence. Many have lived in deep poverty. Many have lived with physical and/or mental disabilities, or raised children with such. We present this preliminary analysis, then, with an acknowledgement of our study’s partiality but with no doubt of its importance.

Each of the 32 women who participated in this project reflected on her life, decade by decade, thereby constructing her “activist herstory” in conversation with us. Many crisscrossed the continent and the globe, raising children, going to school, negotiating relationships, building careers, and doing activism. Their long, winding, and varied paths reflect (and have, in part, shaped) the enormous experience these women possess. As





each story unfolded, much diversity – often unexpected forms of it – emerged among them. Here we introduce certain salient characteristics among our participants.

For example, Tables 1 and 2 (in Appendix A) locate the women geographically. Their stories often began with when and how they or their families migrated from Europe to North America. Some immigrated as first generation Canadians, some came from families who settled in North America three or four generations back. Some described how their families would have been given un-ceded Indigenous land as part of Canada's early nation-building project, others noted that their families came to North America as refugees fleeing persecution (and anti-Semitism) in Europe. Their stories also reflected diverse mobilities: some moved constantly, others only a few times in their lives. Some left their childhood homes and made their lives far away, others stayed or eventually returned "home."

In terms of their histories, it is significant that our participants were born across a span of almost 30 years, from 1922 to 1954. Most are among the "early baby boomer" cohort (in their 60s and 70s at the time of our interviews), with Raging Granny participants on average eight years older than GRAN participants. Table 3 (in Appendix A) shows mean, median and mode birth years for both GRAN and Raging Grannies participants.

We capture some aspects of their present-day living arrangements in Figure 1 (also in Appendix A). Of our 32 participants, 17 were living with spouses at the time of our interviews; among these, eight were with their spouses from their first marriages. Thirty-one participants – all except for one – had had children, while 26 reported that they also had grandchildren (and/ or step-grandchildren). Figure 2 (Appendix A) further shows participants' employment status at the time of our interviews: five women were working in paid employment, including part time or contract work, while 25 described themselves as "retired."

What was perhaps most striking about the particular group of women we interviewed was the cumulative wealth of expertise and experience they held. Participants were predominantly university-educated, career women: 30 of our 32 participants held postsecondary degrees or diplomas (and the other two held certificates), with a total of 65 postsecondary degrees, diplomas, and certificates held cumulatively. Tables A and B showcase each woman's educational background and career highlights. While teaching was clearly the most commonly cited job, participants highlighted a wide variety of careers, volunteer positions, and activisms in which they had engaged, with cumulative skills in the following (non-exhaustive) list of areas: health, human rights, community development, women's rights, reproductive health and rights, indigenous - non-indigenous relations, social movement and union organizing, social work, justice system, children and youth welfare, education (including arts education, early literacy), non-profit management, social services, languages, advertising/marketing, psychology, counselling, crisis intervention, poverty reduction, environmental protection, politics, public policy analysis and development, government operations, international cooperation/partnership, civil society - government partnerships, mental health, aging and gender, theatre, theology, program development and evaluation, writing, editing, public speaking, leadership, administration, and the list continues.



Table A: Educational Backgrounds and Career Highlights of GRAN Participants

"NAME"	EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUNDS	CAREER HIGHLIGHTS
<b>ALISON</b>	BA (English); B.Ed.	Special education teacher, actress, children's psychiatric hospital care worker
<b>ANNA</b>	BA, MA (French literature)	Civil servant in health and social services, advertising, marketing
<b>BETTY</b>	BSc (Nursing)	Nurse in progressive health clinics, reproductive health advocate (including Director of Planned Parenthood)
<b>CLAIRE</b>	BA, MA	Worked with several civil society organizations (ex. Project Ploughshares)
<b>DORI</b>	BA (Sociology & English), B.Ed., MA (Community Development)	Early literacy teacher, professor (education), child welfare investigator
<b>ELLA</b>	BA, MA, PhD (Canadian theatre)	Professor, teacher, university dean
<b>JEN</b>	BA, MA, PhD (English Lit)	Professor (English literature), probation officer, Member of Provincial Parliament, director of several non-profits (including Elizabeth Fry Society), Chief of Staff for Minister of Education
<b>JOANNE</b>	BA (English and German)	Teacher
<b>LAURA</b>	BA, M.Div. (Feminist theology)	Baptist minister, worked with Cancer Care Ontario
<b>LISA</b>	BA (Philosophy and Native studies), MBA	Worked in the federal department of Veteran Affairs and in Canada Post, owns a wedding business
<b>MARY</b>	Vocational business	Worked in sales, advertisement, and real estate, and started a giftware business
<b>PAIGE</b>	BA (Physical education)	Director of women's athletics at Carleton University, worked as a consultant with the World Health Organization and the federal government
<b>SAM</b>	BA, BSW, MSW, PhD (Feminist social work)	Professor (feminist social work), social worker, worked at a psychiatric hospital and a children's welfare organization
<b>SANDRA</b>	B.Ed., MA (Counseling)	Job training for disadvantaged women, involved in a program for Indigenous students in Ottawa, started a newspaper, ran leadership workshops for businesses and organizations



Table B: Educational Backgrounds and Career Highlights of Raging Granny Participants

<b>"NAME"</b>	<b>EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUNDS</b>	<b>CAREER HIGHLIGHTS</b>
<b>ALICE</b>	BA (Journalism)	Journalist, worked at the Hamilton Spectator and the Toronto Star, worked in communications in the health sector, writer, researcher
<b>AMANDA</b>	BA (Journalism), B.Ed., MA (English)	Secretary, journalist, professor
<b>BERNADETTE</b>	Design school	Designer
<b>CANDICE</b>	BSc (Nursing), MSc (psychiatric nursing), MA (English literature)	Psychiatric nurse and head nurse at Allen Memorial Institute, CEGEP College teacher, spoken word poet
<b>FELICIA</b>	BA (Zoology), B.Ed.	Lab technician, paramedic, psychotherapist
<b>FRANNY</b>	BA (Sociology), 2 MA (Social Work)	Social work (including community development, child welfare, mental health program, at-risk youth), university instructor
<b>INGRID</b>	BA (Feminist Counseling/Social Work)	Homemaker, bus driver, counselor in crisis centres for women and children, English teacher working abroad
<b>JANET</b>	Secretarial Degree	Worked at a youth emergency centre and the YMCA
<b>JO</b>	BA (Anthropology), MA (Community Development)	Community development with Indigenous communities, Alberta Status of Women, Women's representative in the Alberta NDP, program development at a community college
<b>JOSEPHINE</b>	BA (Textiles/ Psychology), B.ED., MA (Textiles)	Teacher, opened a daycare with programming for Indigenous mothers, was involved in starting an HIV clinic, worked with the Elizabeth Fry Society
<b>JUNE</b>	BFA, Studies in sculpture and jewelry	Counseling, administration, started a pottery business, artist and jewelry maker
<b>KIMBERLY</b>	BA (American Literature), MA (Literature), PhD (Literature)	Professor, started up one of the first women's studies programs
<b>LAURIE</b>	B.Ed., MA (English)	Teacher, worked in finance for Hudson's Bay Oil & Gas
<b>LUCY</b>	BA (English)	Teacher, managed a catering business, founded Kawartha World Issues Centre, worked with many community development organizations
<b>MAEVE</b>	BA (Speech Pathology), 2 MA	Speech pathologist and audiologist, family services
<b>MARIE</b>	BA (Nursing)	Nurse, worked at detox centres, writer, musician
<b>RITA</b>	BA, 2 MA (Child Development/Psychology)	Child psychologist, therapist with the Red Cross, Author/editor
<b>VIOLET</b>	BA (Psychology), B.Ed.	Teacher, established a co-operative preschool, "Head Start" programs, worked in Arts program administration, divorce mediator

These introductory pieces – participants' geographical locations, family backgrounds, ages, education, and career highlights – provide an important backdrop to thinking about their lives as activists and their activist herstories. As we turn now to some of the stories shared with us, we will aim to further elucidate both patterns and areas of difference.



## ACTIVIST HERSTORIES: PATTERNS AND DIVERSITY ACROSS PARTICIPANTS' LIVES

Examining participants' activist herstories reveals how their engagement in social change work has largely been shaped by their lifecourses and personal circumstances, in a dialogical relationship with larger social, economic, and political processes and events. While it would be impossible for us to tell every story shared with us, what follows are vignettes from a number of the interviews we conducted.

### Lifecourse Patterns

Sam's story illustrates some of the important lifecourse trends that were revealed in this research. At the time of our interview in 2013, Sam was one of the co-chairs of GRAN. She was born in 1944 and grew up in Chicago. With her father working as a professor of social work and her mother trained as a teacher, her family was socially engaged; she attributed some of her socially-minded upbringing to her family's involvement with the Catholic church, although in her late teenage years she moved away from any such association on the grounds that even the most liberal Catholicism was too deeply patriarchal for her emerging values. She recalled a family trip to the American South when she was 10 years old. There, in 1954, she witnessed racial segregation first hand and this stayed with her throughout her life. In the early 1960s, she became actively involved in civil rights protests. She described participating in the civil rights movement but did not view herself as a part of the women's movement at that time. She did, however, recall taking a strong stand against the Catholic Church's ban on contraception and birth control in those years; she was then attending a small Catholic college.

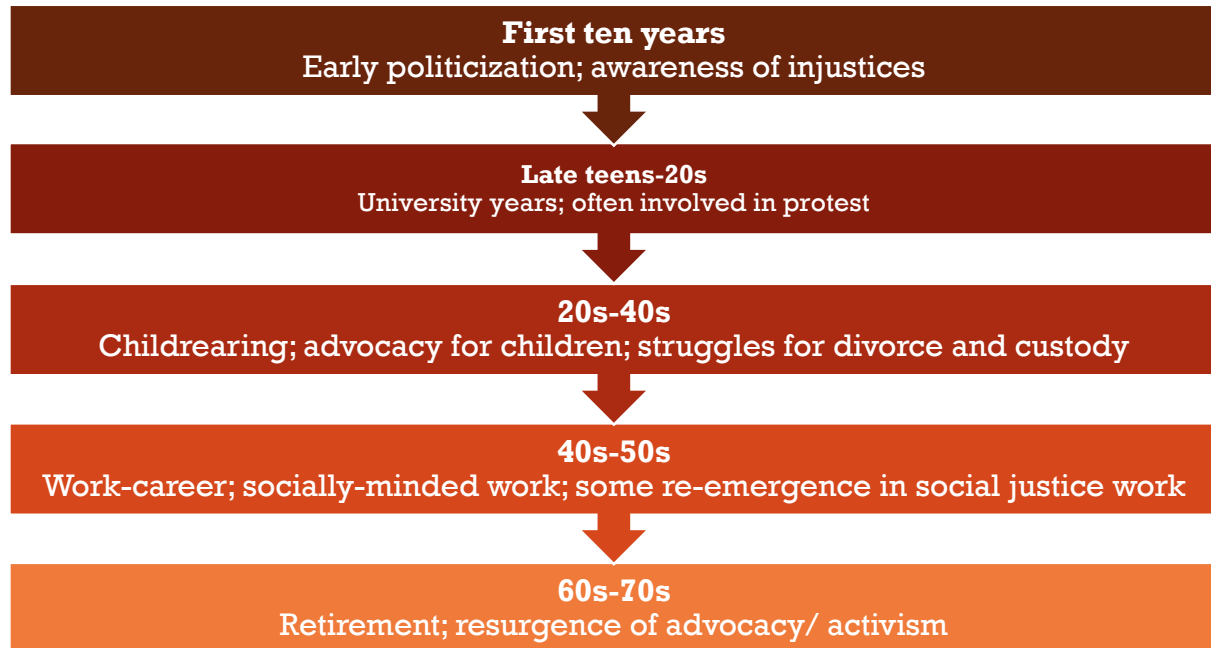
Upon graduating from college, Sam worked as a juvenile probation officer in Chicago. She met her husband in 1965 and they married the following year; she was 21 years old. Once married, they lived in the UK, where her husband completed a doctoral degree and lectured at a university. Sam put her own plans for graduate school on hold for the decade that followed. They had two children. The primary caregiver at home, Sam also worked part time in a psychiatric hospital and in the British equivalent of the Children's Aid Society, and she became involved in the hostel movement. Despite the fact that she was no longer involved in formal protest and her priority was caring for her young children, she remained engaged in politically- and socially-minded work, much of it strongly informed by feminist values.

In 1974, when Sam's children were five and two years old respectively, her family moved to Toronto. Once both children were in full-time school, she returned to school herself. Over the following decade, she completed bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees in social work, and she became a professor. Sam's academic work focused on women and poverty, looking at how different policies worked (or did not work) for women on the margins of society. In addition, she occasionally volunteered with organizations working with people who were systematically disadvantaged. She noted, however, that her busy home-life coupled with her busy work-life meant that she still had limited time for activism. While she described her volunteer work as "community service" as opposed to "active advocacy," she remained engaged in feminist work – both paid and unpaid – throughout these years. As she neared retirement in 2007, she turned her energies toward "active" advocacy, namely through her work with GRAN.

We have provided some detail into Sam's lifecourse in order to begin to portray a number of the broader patterns we observed in the activist herstories shared with us. Figure A summarizes and illustrates these patterns. For example, like Sam, many participants noted that their commitment to social justice began in their early lives, often connected to early experiences within their families. Many then discussed participation in the civil rights, peace and/or feminist movements of 1960s-70s – involvement in formal protest in their late teens or early twenties, often while in university. Several later described their child-rearing years as a less political (or even "apolitical") phase of life. Years with young children, followed by years with high work demands, simply did not



leave space to “actively” engage. Many were nevertheless still involved in activist/ advocacy-oriented work, through careers with strong social justice leanings, volunteer work, and/ or personal struggles (e.g., advocating for children in schools, fighting divorce and custody battles, and so on), as we discuss further in subsequent sections. Finally, our research revealed a strong pattern of later-life as an opportunity to engage more fully in the issues that motivated them in their youth.



*Figure A: Lifecourse Patterns among Participants' Activist Herstories*

### **Diverse Early Lives**

While the patterns illustrated in Figure A provide a powerful framework for thinking about activism across women's lives, divergences within this framework reveal the nuances of people's complex experiences. In reflecting on when and how participants came to be activists, most described their politicization as having taken place in their early lives – in their first 10 to 15 years. Many recalled how certain aspects of their early lives helped shape their politics and sense of working for justice. Some, like Claire from GRAN, felt they could not remember a time when they were not politicized, or like Paige (also from GRAN), joked that they were born with a feminist or activist “gene.”

While most of the women we interviewed could point to specific moments, events, experiences, or aspects of their upbringing that shaped their political views and their activism, the types of childhood experiences they described as playing a central role in their politicization were diverse. Sam, for instance, discussed her trip to the southern United States at age 10, where observing the segregated drinking fountains opened her eyes to racism. By contrast, Betty and Rita suggested that witnessing sexism and poverty, respectively, shaped their early views. Betty, who later went on to an impressive career in women's reproductive health, recollected her first encounter with feminist advocacy in her teenage years. As a “Canadian Girl in Training” (CGIT), the United Church of Canada's program for girls, she staged the following protest:

People ask me when I first started any kind of advocacy, I tell them the story about being in CGIT and I was in my early teens I guess, and the pool hall that was on the way to the church from my home had a big sign that said “No Women Allowed.” I thought, “that's not fair!” So I got a bunch of us to make placards and we put them on sticks – where this came from, I have no idea – and we went, on our way to



GCIT one night, we took these placards. We were all in our little middies, and we marched around the pool tables. It was a horrible place, it stunk of smoke, it was all these icky looking guys standing around, but we kept the march up. I can still remember these guys. They all went down and sat on the benches – there were benches all around the pool table – they just sat looking at us and we were walking around with these picket signs. I guess I had been watching Tommy Douglas on TV or something, or my father picketing, or something, I don't know. We came out and said, "Who would want to be in there?" That was kind of the end of it. But you know, I was that young when I knew that things weren't fair and I had to change them. It came from that early age. I remember [Claire] saying I was born with an advocacy gene and that's all I can say.

Rita, who later went on to become an influential developmental psychologist, similarly described her early politicization as tied to specific childhood memories. She recalled living in a wealthy home in New York during the Depression and witnessing the poverty and inequality around her:

I suppose the basis of my interest in activism was that I was in a wealthy home during the Depression in New York City, and it was tremendously disturbing to me to look out the window and see the people picking the garbage out of the garbage can to find an apple core or a cigarette and drive up along the Hudson River and see people in -10 degree weather sleeping along the banks of the Hudson River under newspapers. And the food lines and the like. I remember turning to my father and saying, "Daddy, why don't you go out and give those people some money?" He really scorned that issue, as you can imagine. That's where I began to realize that there was so much going on in this world that needed attention. That was back in the '30s, early, the crash of '29 and all that. So that's where it began, that's a long time ago.

Participants also discussed their own politics vis-à-vis their parents' political views, and again much variation was revealed. Many described their parents as progressives who instilled justice-oriented values, as having left-leaning politics (ranging from communist to social democratic), or as being socially-minded and socially-engaged (though perhaps more centrist when it came to voting). Dori, for instance, explained that coming from a socially-minded, feminist upbringing left her no choice but to adopt similar politics:

My father was an Anglican clergyman, and my mother was a social worker trained at the University of Toronto and Columbia University. So I think in terms of caring about the world, there wasn't much chance not to. My father died when I was 10. [...] One of the compelling things that [my mother] told me when she was telling me that my father had died that morning, she prefaced that whole thing by saying: "It's a very good thing that I am well-educated. Women are either a death or a divorce away from poverty, and your father died this morning and we're going to be okay." It was a kind of gracious, feminist message that I continued to receive one way or another from her all through my growing up years and my early years as a young adult. So that laid some groundwork.

Other participants described being raised by highly conservative, right-leaning parents and felt that their own politics developed in opposition to their parents' views. Felicia, for example, one of the original Raging Grannies from Victoria, British Columbia, expressed:

My dad was very Republican... At the dinner table, there was talk like that and I always overheard. My mom, being intelligent and interested in the world, was a good person for my dad to sound off his ideas on and I was just listening like crazy. It was always interesting too. My dad hated President Roosevelt. Very early on that didn't quite make sense to me because I knew that Roosevelt was doing things for people, kept giving people chances, and money that they didn't have otherwise. My dad felt that





businesses would go under if Labour had its way. He hated [...] the coal mines strikers – that was all terrible. But part of me thought “why is that bad?” [My family was] very right-wing. My dad didn’t speak to my mother for a week because she voted for Roosevelt in 1932. She could see that he had good qualities – that he was a strong person who could see more than the business section of the world. She was able to see a much broader grasp of things than my dad. His image of the world was fairly narrow.

Dori’s and Felicia’s reflections poignantly illustrate the contrast in upbringings described in our research and how having parents on either side of the political spectrum perhaps played a role in these women’s politicization. Still many others described their parents as “apolitical.” The early years were thus formative to many women’s activism, but how their experiences shaped their politicization varied significantly.

### **Activisms in Early Adulthood**

Following our lifecourse framework, the late teens and early 20s were years when many engaged in formal protest (to varying degrees), often during their “university years.” Given that most were part of the same age cohort – in their 60s and 70s during the time of our interviews – it makes sense that common reference points their activist herstories were the movements of the 1960s and 1970s: the feminist, peace, and civil rights movements that swept across North America in their youth. Our research did, however, also reveal examples in which these movements were not pivotal to their trajectories as activists.

This was the case, for instance, for certain participants who were significantly older – in their 80s or 90s at the time of our interview. These women would have come of age in the 1950s or earlier, well before feminist, civil rights, and anti-war protests had gained momentum, and they often remarked that they were socialized differently than their early-boomer counter-parts, with different influences and politics at play in their homes. Some were taken up with married life, careers, and childrearing – as opposed to being in the more open and experimental university or college environment – when the major social and political changes (and associated activism) of the 1960s and 1970s were underway. Bernadette, for instance, was born in 1931. Her activist herstory did not include the iconic 1960s-70s protests. Raised in Montreal by parents who she viewed as apolitical, she was married at 21, in 1952, and remained with her husband until he left her at age 42, in 1973. The 1960s and early 1970s were the most constricted years for her, while the later 1970s were preoccupied with becoming financially independent. As she described, “when I was married, I was very focused on my husband, his business, and the family, [but] when he left I had a new life.” It was only after her husband left, when her children were mostly grown, that her “world opened up.” She spent the next decade launching her independent career as a designer. In 1984, she attended an anti-nuclear demonstration in Montreal, at which protestors created a human chain between the Soviet and American consulates. This was the moment, at age 53, when she became politicized: the moment when she became forevermore committed to and entrenched in the peace movement. As she described, “it was through the anti-nuclear issues that I got into a whole new life.” Bernadette went on to be one of the most prolific song writers for the Raging Grannies, first with the Montreal gaggle and then with the Grannies in Vancouver.

In other instances, participants who were not politically engaged through the movements of the 1960s and 1970s discussed this in relation to when they got married – whether before or after completing postsecondary education – and to the nature of their relationships. Describing herself as a “late bloomer,” Laurie, for instance, “didn’t become political until practically the end of [her] career.” She was born in 1947 and therefore would have come of age, like many participants, amidst the 1960s-70s political context. Yet, coming from a conservative Catholic farming family in Prince Edward Island, at 19 years of age she opted not to attend university and instead to get married. This was a decision she regretted. In the two to three years – 19 to 21 years





of age – when many of the other women we interviewed were at university and first attending political protests, Laurie was starting into an extremely difficult decade: a decade of juggling a controlling and abusive marriage, taking care of a new baby, working, running a farm, starting a university education which she was unable to finish for several years, and taking care of her husband who was in a serious car accident. The stress pushed her mental and physical health to the brink of disaster. In 1974, when she was 27, she divorced her husband and moved to Calgary. The decision was not supported by her Catholic family. Struggles for affordable, child-friendly housing, work, and childcare then filled the following decade. She eventually secured a steady career, which she would pursue for the next 27 years, “in the oil patch” – with Hudson’s Bay Oil and Gas – while her own mental health and addiction challenges, and struggles with her daughter, continued for many years. Thus, although she felt that she was always “an activist at heart,” she had to push her desire to engage in activism to the side for many decades. Like Ingrid from the opening of this report, Laurie was taken up with surviving. She also noted that engaging in activism would have been impossible in her career – it would have meant speaking out against her employer. Joining the Raging Grannies in 2009 indeed “signaled the end of [her] career” and launched her into working fervently for social justice. Laurie’s lifecourse highlights how her sense of being a “late bloomer” and “missing out” on her generation’s movements had its roots in the pivotal coming-of-age years at the start of her second decade of life.

Thus, in examining participants’ early adult years in more detail, here too we observe diversity of experience, from the many who were actively engaged in formal protest in these years, to others, who, for a number of reasons connected to their life circumstances, were not yet politicized or did not have the space or opportunity to engage in social change work.

### **The “Apolitical Years”?**

Most commonly, participants described their 20s through 40s as years that were less active or even “apolitical,” with the most common reason being that they were taken up with their family lives and work. Many described the draws on their time – between children, other family commitments, work, and sometimes volunteering – as simply too high to also engage actively in social change work. As we will discuss further in the next section, many were the primary caregivers for their children, and some, like Laurie and Ingrid, spent these years “fighting the battles at home.” What becomes evident (and as we will argue in the subsequent section) is that, while often described as “apolitical years,” many in fact remained engaged but shifted how they were doing social change work in these years. Here, we wish to highlight the diversity we observed in this stage of life: stories where women felt they were, in fact, highly political and pursuing “active activism” in their 20s through 40s.

It is perhaps unsurprising that the one participant in our research who did not have children reflected on how this positioned her differently vis-à-vis her activist work. Jo, formerly one of the Vancouver Raging Grannies, grew up in Holland during World War II. Born in 1942, her earliest memories were of her parents working to help people of Jewish descent escape the Nazis. She moved to Canada at the age of 23 and quickly was swept up in a career of feminist activism and social change work. She worked with, among others, the Alberta Human Rights Commission, the Alberta Status of Women Action Committee, the Alberta NDP (as part of a small cohort of feminist members), the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Woman, and was the Alberta Representative for the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women. In reflecting on her own journey and her work in the women’s movement, she was acutely aware of how not having children freed her to do other political work: “I don’t have any kids. When I was about 16, I decided I wasn’t going to be any good to be a mother... because I wanted to do all kinds of other things, and kids would sort of be in the way. So I said ‘no



kids,’ and frankly I’ve never regretted it.” Unlike so many others in our research, she never described a “lull” in her mid-adulthood activism.

Among those who did have children, some were explicit that there was no “lull” in their activism during their childrearing years; they carried on with their social change work with their children in tow. Maeve, for instance, reflected back on her life and said confidently, “I’ve always been politically active.” She was born in Brooklyn in 1939 and raised in a tight-knit Jewish community. As a small child, she moved to Kentucky with her family. There, she was harshly confronted with racism and anti-Semitism for the first time. Because her father was the director of the Jewish Community Centre, she had to learn to navigate an anti-Semitic environment as someone from a high-profile Jewish family. As a teenager, she worked as part of one of the first groups to integrate a pool in the southern United States. She later worked in a Black school in Kentucky. A white woman dedicated to working with Black children in the South, she endured police harassment and incarceration. She later married a man who was an activist and a peace resister; they continued their activism through their 20s. In 1969, with two children, ages 1 and 2, they moved to Regina, Saskatchewan. Over the next decade, Maeve received two Masters degrees, started a support program for teenage mothers, became actively involved with the Voice of Women, was elected to her local school board, advocated for special education programs, and continued other peace activism with her husband. There was no hiatus in her story. In describing her activism in the years when her children were school-aged, she said the following:

[I was still involved with the] Voice of Women, very much Voice of Women. And because we had a house that was on a corner lot, and we had a dog, and we also had a basement room, it was a good place for us to have people who came from other countries. So we had women who were from South Africa, and that was the Voice of Women. We had women from Spain whose husbands were trade unionists, and we had women from North Vietnam. You know, somebody once said to me that they could see that our house was always under surveillance and they tapped our phones and they said, ‘well how do I feel about that?’ My statement was “safe” – nothing was going to happen where we had all these people watching our house all the time.

Thus, while the 20s through 40s were often described as the less political years, this was certainly not always the case. Jo’s and Maeve’s stories portray some of the diversity we observed among participants during this period.

### **Mid to Later Life Activisms**

Finally, in discussions of their mid- to later-life activisms, participants most frequently portrayed this as a time or activist resurgence: a time when, with calls on their time decreasing, they would pick up on the activism, engagement, and social change work around the issues that mattered most to them throughout their lives, taking these on with new intensity. We will discuss this resurgence in some detail in subsequent sections. Yet, it was not in every case that participants described their later-life activism as a *continuation* and intensification of their earlier activism. Some, indeed, only came to activism in later life. For instance, both Bernadette and Laurie describe their explicit engagement in activism as only coming into play after age 50, or even after retirement; some others had similar stories. So while the majority viewed their later life activism as an extension of earlier life activism and advocacy, this was certainly not always the case. As with the childrearing years, later life has often been assumed to be a period when people become less political and more disengaged. Our research clearly challenges these assumptions. In moving toward certain central findings and implications from this research, we therefore wish to turn now to a more focused discussion of these two lifecourse periods and of these assumptions of disengagement.



## RETHINKING ASSUMPTIONS OF DISENGAGEMENT

As noted, two periods within women's lifecourses are often described as or assumed to be "apolitical," or less inclined toward activism: the childrearing years and later life. Our research suggests that in both cases such assumptions are overly simplistic. While there is certainly evidence that women's activisms are shaped by their lifecourses, it was also evident that these periods required more detailed investigation in order to better understand the ways in which women's work for change shifted and changed as they aged.

### The Childrearing "Juggle": The Personal and the Political

At the opening of this report we emphasized the tremendous skills and experience among participants as a result of their lifetimes of work, volunteering, and activism. Yet, focusing only on their accomplishments outside of the home reveals just a portion of these women's impressive stories. Their activist herstories were intricately intertwined with their experiences of raising families. Far from being "inactive" or "apolitical" during their childrearing years, our research indeed suggests that these were often years when their social and political struggles became deeply personal. Their personal circumstances both *shaped* opportunities for social and political engagement and were *part of* the broader social and political change underway. It was evident that participants negotiated their lives and activist herstories on cusp of, and as actors in, some of the most significant social, economic, and political change of the last century, especially transformation pertaining to lives of women and families.

Many participants characterized their 20s through 40s as a spectacular "juggle" as they sought to keep all of their "balls" – children, married life, and work – in the air. Tables 4 and 5 (in Appendix B) provide a snapshot of participants' family lives and caregiving responsibilities: these highlight the age at which participants were first married, the number of times they were married, the age at which their first child was born, the number of children they had, and the caregiving arrangements in place in the years when their children were young. In summary, the average age for getting married was approximately 22 years old, while the average age of having a first child was 25.5. Almost all of the women in our research described themselves as the primary caregiver of their children; 22 out of our 32 participants felt that they raised children with very minimal support.

Many of the women we interviewed, furthermore, shared deeply personal recollections of "the battles being fought at home" during this time. For them, the pressures they felt were heightened by being in restrictive or abusive marriages, seeking divorces at a time when divorce remained stigmatized, long protracted custody battles, and having children for who required higher-than-average levels of support. As Tables 4 and 5 (in Appendix B) indicate, 9 out of 32 women in our research remained with their first spouses at the time of our interview. About one-third of the women in this study explicitly labelled their previous marriages as abusive; well more than half disclosed that they had been in very unhappy or unduly controlling marriages. Nine participants discussed the enormous challenges associated with exiting their marriages, obtaining a divorce, and keeping custody of their children. These conversations often came out toward the end of our lengthy interviews. It was clear that many had faced tremendous stigma surrounding these experiences.

What these numbers and the stories behind them tell us is that the iconic feminist slogan of the 1970s, "the personal is political," is embodied in this research: individual women's struggles cannot be understood as isolated from one another. They are not the fault of individual supposedly "weak" women or "bad apple" men. Rather, these struggles are rooted in systemic power structures that result in the widespread (though still uneven) oppression of women. In exploring the connections described by participants between "the personal" and "the political" in their lives, two dimensions of this interface were revealed. First, personal circumstances, such as



restrictive marriages or lack of access to childcare, often shaped women's abilities to participate in social change work. Second, in many instances, the personal "battles" that women were fighting, often in the context of divorce, custody issues, and advocating for their children, were also part of the larger struggle for societal transformation underway – these daily struggles collectively worked to propel broader changes for women and families in North America in the 1960s through 1990s.

Violet's story is illustrative. Violet was born in 1942 into a highly-politicized New York family. In her words: "I had parents who were both members of the American Communist Party, so I was born into a very activist family... I have been born into it and carried with me this mandate that I work to bring about peace and to defeat fascism wherever it rears its ugly head." Her mother was a trailblazer. She graduated from college in 1928, only 8 years after women could first vote in the United States, and then she went on to do a master's degree. Yet, through her teens, Violet often felt awkward and existentially conflicted. She believed in the values espoused by her parents and the community in which they raised her, but she also saw how these were incongruent with broader American society. She often felt that she did not fit in; she was unsure whether she wanted to.

In her late teens and early 20's, she went to college to do a degree in education. She explained: "My mother, for all her worldliness, was rather conventional in terms of thinking that a good job for a woman would be to teach because then she could have summers off with her children. At the same time that I was living this very I-don't-want-your-mainstream-American-life, there was a part of me that probably did want that." She got married at 22 to a man who was studying at Princeton to be a doctor: "He asked me out and I went. I didn't think I had that much in common with him, but he was a ticket into mainstream America – he was going to be the doctor – and I could get married and have a house with a picket fence and a dog and a station wagon. It was kind of surprising, but I think deep down it was something I longed for, or at least I thought I did. [...] I was 22 at the time – we had been dating for a while, and I think you tend to marry the guy you're dating at the time you think it's time to get married." The years that followed were busy, and tumultuous: "Between '66 when I left New York and '73 when my husband got a position on the faculty at the medical school in Rochester, I had lived in New York City; New Haven, Connecticut; Atlanta, Georgia; Durham, North Carolina; and Western Massachusetts." She had her two sons during this time, while teaching part-time, doing advocacy work, including starting HeadStart programs for disadvantaged preschoolers, working in voter registration in Black communities, and establishing a cooperative preschool.

Her marriage was extremely difficult. As she explained, "It was rocky from the beginning ... As a young woman with a lot of feelings of insecurity and a lack of a sense of safety in the world, I guess I was ripe for the picking in terms of an abusive relationship." Reflecting on her eventual divorce, she said that for a long time she "didn't have the courage or the resources to leave the marriage and [she] was afraid of losing the kids. [She] was being threatened constantly with that and with other things as well." Critically connecting her situation to the structural oppression of so many other women at that time, she went on: "And I had [the legal system] working against me. He was not only the man, but he was also a well-established pediatrician. He used that clout to say, 'If you give me any grief about this I'm going to get custody of the children. I can do that, I'm a pediatrician and I have the money so I can hire better lawyers.' So the next decade really had me embroiled in a whole new world of what women face. I was devastated and scared." She fought for her divorce and for custody of her children in New York State, which was the last state to adopt no-fault divorce laws – this did not happen until 2010. Although some reform to divorce laws were made in 1968, the situation for Violet in the mid-1970s was that she did not have the right to divorce her husband unless she could prove him to be at fault for breaking up the marriage. So it was only when she found out that he was having affairs that she could use this to leave the marriage. And still, he used his power and position against her: "He wanted to be able to continue his affairs and continue the marriage



and I said, ‘that’s not okay.’ So in his eyes I was the one to blame for the end of the marriage. He was out to get me and he was fierce.”

She was eventually able to extricate herself and keep her children, but she was left with no financial support whatsoever. (In New York, the Equitable Distribution Divorce Act was passed in 1980 – five years after Violet’s divorce. Until that point, it was rare for women to be afforded any assets upon divorce.) In her words: “I didn’t have the benefit of standardized child support laws or alimony. There were no formulas in place at that time, so I was totally at the mercy of my husband’s attorneys. He went through five attorneys until he found somebody who would fight for the outrageously inequitable agreement that I finally agreed to sign. As long as I could have my boys I didn’t care about the rest. When I signed that agreement my attorney said, ‘I want you to sign a waiver saying that I won’t be held liable for malfeasance for allowing such an agreement.’” After her divorce, she worked at a community college for 12 years in order to support herself and her sons.

Violet’s intense personal struggles were highly politicized to her, and indeed, like Ingrid, her struggles led her to eventually work for changes and justice for other women facing similarly inequitable conditions. For many years, she attended a support program for men and women going through separations, which was very validating for her. She soon became a facilitator of the group, and this then launched her second career: “As I was sitting there hearing over and over again these stories of how the legal system was chewing people up and spitting them out, I realized there had to be a better way. So I got my training as a divorce mediator.” In 1989, she started her private practice in divorce mediation. She did this successfully until she retired in 2004. In thinking about the personal-political interface for Violet, what emerges is that her personal struggles became part-and-parcel of her work for political, social, and legal changes.

Thus, for several participants, Violet and Ingrid among them, it makes sense to think of their activist and advocacy struggles of their mid-adult years not as absent but instead as deeply personal. Moreover, many of the women we interviewed came to view their own struggles as part of a wider women’s movement – to recognize their struggles as not isolated instances of gender inequality, but as perpetuated by patriarchal power relations, laws, policies, and norms. These conversations unveiled what feminist scholars and activists have long acknowledged: aging women in North America bring the perspective of having lived on the cusp of enormous (even unprecedented) changes for women and for families. Our participants were among the first (depending on where they lived) to be granted no-fault divorces, to have access to birth control, to be able to obtain their own credit cards, to enter previously restricted careers (like being university professors, for example, which many were) in large numbers, and so on. The women we interviewed routinely made reference to specific societal changes that impacted on their lives, especially to changing laws, policies, and norms around divorce and domestic abuse, reproductive rights and sexual health, women’s rights to financial autonomy, and support for working mothers. We have included Figure 3 (in Appendix C) to contextualize some of the specific historical changes that were mentioned by participants as the impacting most on their lives and their activism.

### **Later Life as a Period of New and Renewed Engagement**

The other period of life often deemed apolitical – and clearly not so for the women in our research – is later life. We close this report, then, by returning to our key questions about why and how older women are engaging in social change work in later life, and what it means for them to age as activists. One of the most important themes to emerge in this research is that later life, for these women, was not a period of social or political decline, but instead a time of resurgence – a time of new and renewed engagement. These women’s life stories make evident that later life, for many, provides unique opportunities for social change work, whether a continuation of lifelong activism or new way of contributing to the world. Four central findings emerged in relation to later-life activism.



First, in considering what about later-life has led to their new or renewed engagement with activism, many of the women in our research discussed this time in their lives as affording them more “time and space” than they previously had. With kids grown up and work demands abated, they described post-retirement life as being less encumbered. As Alison from GRAN noted:

We were raised to believe we could move mountains and, somehow or another, we intend to prove it. It’s partly the era we were raised in; we learned as young women that you don’t just sit back and let things happen, you dig in and get going to change things if they need to be changed. In my case, this didn’t carry through to the period of time when I was raising kids, but it certainly was something that I went back to fairly quickly after my kids were gone... You rejoice when you’re at the end of that [raising kids, career] and you can get to something that you really do want to do.

Some of the women we interviewed specifically noted that later life was a time of lower social risks for them – they felt assured that engaging in activism would not jeopardize their or their spouses’ jobs or put their children at any kind of risk. Some talked about the responsibility that comes with being older, precisely because of the lower social risks older people face. Others also remarked that law enforcement officers tend to be more lenient when they are dealing with older women.

Second, in considering what sustains their activism in later life, many participants talked about the perspective that comes with the passage of time and how this perspective strengthens their convictions. As one Raging Granny from Arizona said, “As I get older, I hold to my views more strongly. I am more convinced that things have to change and that I have to try to change them.” Some talked about the growing urgency they feel to leave the world a better place. As Anna from GRAN expressed:

I think this is a marvelous time of life. People say “I hate getting older” – no, it’s just so liberating. It’s marvelous. I want to play a role, and I feel energy, I feel a drive to do things that are going to make a difference. What’s the mark I’m going to leave on this world? Not necessarily individually, but what can I do to make things better?

For some participants, the realities of inhabiting aging bodies seemed to, in various ways, be propelling their advocacy. For instance, some discussed the emotions associated with coming to terms with health issues and with their own eventual mortality; with this more present than ever before, these women felt particularly strongly that “now is the time” to make a contribution. Some further connected their age to their ability to reflect on what has changed and, importantly, on what has not changed. They see unfinished business, especially around feminist struggles and securing the rights of women and children. Sam’s words reflect this well:

I think it is true that we see the world just a bit differently with the passage of so many years and it may be we’re motivated because we see how long it has been, and how some things have changed, but also how many things really haven’t changed, and how in some ways these can be the same things... it’s the unfinished business... I think the clearest case for me is when I think about how far women have come in some ways, and then I look at my daughters and I think: you know, life is crazy. How can we as a society expect families to have both parents working and provide so little, so really little? [...] I watch the stress in them trying to balance. And they do a wonderful job, as you do. But you have to think of the toll, and how can we be so inhumane? So... short sighted, so totally short sighted. I don’t say that it was a wonderful thing; I found it very frustrating during the time I was at home, but... We should approach the business of children’s development, of children thriving, as all of our responsibility, to make provision. And we don’t.





Third, the theme of “grandmotherhood” was raised in a number of ways in our conversations about later-life activism. Some discussed entry into grandmotherhood as shaping their engagement with GRAN and/ or the Raging Grannies, and, more broadly, as a turning point in their lives. Among these, several noted that this did not necessarily mean becoming a grandmother in a biological sense, but rather was about a life passage that involves returning to having young children that they care deeply about in their lives, while having the space that comes with not needing to be the primary caregiver. For others, their activism was sustained by their care for the future generations more broadly – all the world’s grandchildren. Here, Laurie’s, Felicia’s, and Sam’s words resonate:

Laurie: “I think having grandchildren changed my outlook as well, especially when it comes to environmental issues. [...] The fact that we’re destroying the environment, that there are fewer and fewer opportunities for kids.”

Felicia: “When my first grandchild was born] that’s when I decided I have to be very active here and tried to get people really active. That’s when I became really active, I was aware of it. [...] So these kids have a world to grow up in. That was it, the big fear. So the Raging Grannies, it’s not my grandchildren or ours, it’s the world’s grandchildren. You got to think globally really, really global, not just down your street or your city, it’s got to go way – it’s big stuff. [When she was born] I remember standing out there and thinking, this grandchild was going to be born and I didn’t think there was going to be a world for her to grow up in. It just killed my soul to think that. I couldn’t bear to have that happen, it just wasn’t fair. [...] That baby is so vulnerable, that to think that something that is unthinking and unfair could wipe that baby out. So it just happened that I was at the point of having grandchildren that that amount of awareness arrived in me.”

Sam: “Being a grandmother, and I don’t necessarily mean a biological grandmother [...] I think what happens is we come back to little children, and when we come back to little children, we think about what we want to do on behalf of little children – usually, but not always, our grandchildren. And you think about what the grandmothers in Africa are doing for their grandchildren, which we can’t imagine having to do, or even perhaps being able to do. The courage is just amazing... [For a period of time before becoming a grandmother], you are away from [small children], and then grandchildren bring back to you the wonder of life and the vulnerability. For our children and grandchildren, it’s lucky that the wonderment is perhaps larger than the vulnerability, but not so for others.

Finally, many participants talked about the ageism they experience in their lives as part of the impetus for their later-life activism. Many described a growing sense of invisibility as aging women, which compounds their desire to be seen and heard as activists. For them, advocacy was, in some part, a resistance to this invisibility and to the stereotypes of older women as marginalized, frail, and passive. In fact, many of the women we interviewed talked about their current activism as having a double purpose: to make change in the myriad of issues in which they are involved AND to resist sexist-ageist narratives and experiences of ageism and isolation. As Alison aptly described: “It’s the image of people surging to the forefront at a time in their lives when the public perception would have them fade into the background. It’s just so powerful... I’m not willing to be insignificant, and I’ve got the time and energy right now to make sure I won’t be. I’ve always felt strongly about leaving the world a better place and making what difference you can.”





## CLOSING THOUGHTS

This report provides a preliminary analysis of research undertaken between 2013 and 2015 to understand women's activism across their lives and in older age. To varying extents, it reflects on the activist herstories of 32 women, highlighting patterns we observed and areas of divergence among our participants. We have had the privilege of speaking with a group of women who are, in so many different ways, courageous, hard-working, talented, intelligent, skilled, compassionate, and caring. These are women who, in their later lives, are continuing the struggle to leave behind a world that is fair, free of violence, and sustainable for generations to come.

What has become evident is that why and how women become activists, and what sustains them over time in their activism, depends on some intricate dynamic between their own personal circumstances and the broader social, political, and ideological contexts in which they live and work. Of particular importance, our research has challenged conventional assumptions of motherhood and grandmotherhood (or perhaps old age) as incompatible with activism; as apolitical phases in women's lives. Instead, our participants recounted stories of struggle during childrearing years: personal struggles that must be understood not as isolated instances but as part of structural changes that were underway. Likewise, later life for these women, despite stereotypes to the contrary, was depicted as a time of new and renewed engagement – a time when space opened up for them to become politically active in overt ways, when the urgency to act became paramount, and when the wellbeing of future generations became a clear priority.

*“The old, having the benefit of life experience, the time to get things done, and the least to lose by sticking their necks out, are in a perfect position to serve as advocates for the larger public good”*

– Maggie Kuhn, founder of the Grey Panthers



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## APPENDIX A: SITUATING OUR PARTICIPANTS: SUPPORTING DATA

*Table 1: Life Geographies of GRAN Participants*

GRAN	WHERE ARE YOU FROM?	WHERE DO YOU LIVE NOW?
ALISON	Pickering, ON (born in England)	Toronto, ON
ANNA	Montreal, QB	Vancouver, BC
BETTY	Yorkton, SK	Ottawa, ON
CLAIRE	Vancouver, BC	Coquitlam, BC
DORI	Belleville, ON	Calgary, AB
ELLA	Lancashire, England	Calgary, AB
JEN	London, England	Peterborough, ON
JOANNE	Regina, SK	Roberts Creek, BC
LAURA	Regina, SK	Winnipeg, MB
LISA	Sudbury, ON	Ottawa, ON
MARY	Woodstock, ON	Boutillier's Point, NS
PAIGE	Ottawa, ON	Ottawa, ON
SAM	Chicago, IL, USA	Toronto, ON
SANDRA	Vancouver, BC	Kelowna, BC

*Table 2: Life Geographies of Raging Grannies Participants*

RAGING GRANNIES	WHERE ARE YOU FROM?	WHERE DO YOU LIVE NOW?
ALICE	England	Victoria, BC
AMANDA	London, England	Victoria, BC
BERNADETTE	Montreal, QC	Vancouver, BC
CANDICE	Michigan, USA	Montreal, QC
FELICIA	Cleveland, OH, USA	Victoria, BC
FRANNY	Saskatchewan	Vancouver, BC
INGRID	Saint John, NB	Vancouver, BC
JANET	Montreal, QB	Montreal, QB
JO	Holland	Vancouver, BC
JOSEPHINE	Maryland, USA	Vancouver, BC
JUNE	London, England	Montreal, QB
KIMBERLY	New York, USA	Rhode Island, USA
LAURIE	Prince Edward Island	Ottawa, ON
LUCY	Norwood, ON (from "out west")	Peterborough, ON
MAEVE	Brooklyn, NY, USA	Vancouver, BC
MARIE	Ottawa, ON	Montreal, QB
RITA	New York City, NY, USA	Oregon, USA
VIOLET	New York City, NY, USA	North Carolina, USA

*Table 3: Mean, Median, and Mode Birth Years of GRAN and Raging Granny Participants*

	BIRTH YEAR (AGE WHEN INTERVIEWED)		
	MEAN	MEDIAN	MODE
GRAN	1946 (67)	1946 (67)	1946 (65)
RAGING GRANNIES	1938 (76)	1939 (73)	1941 (73)



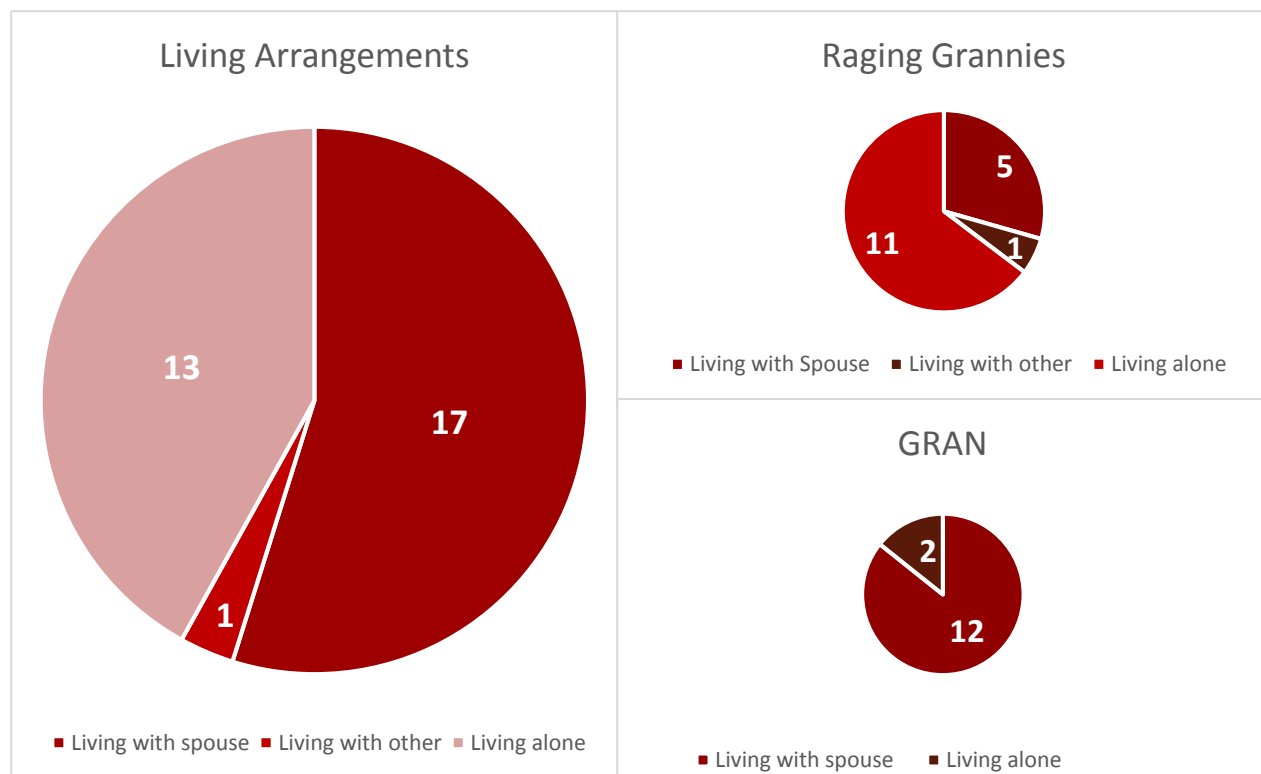


Figure 1: Living Arrangements

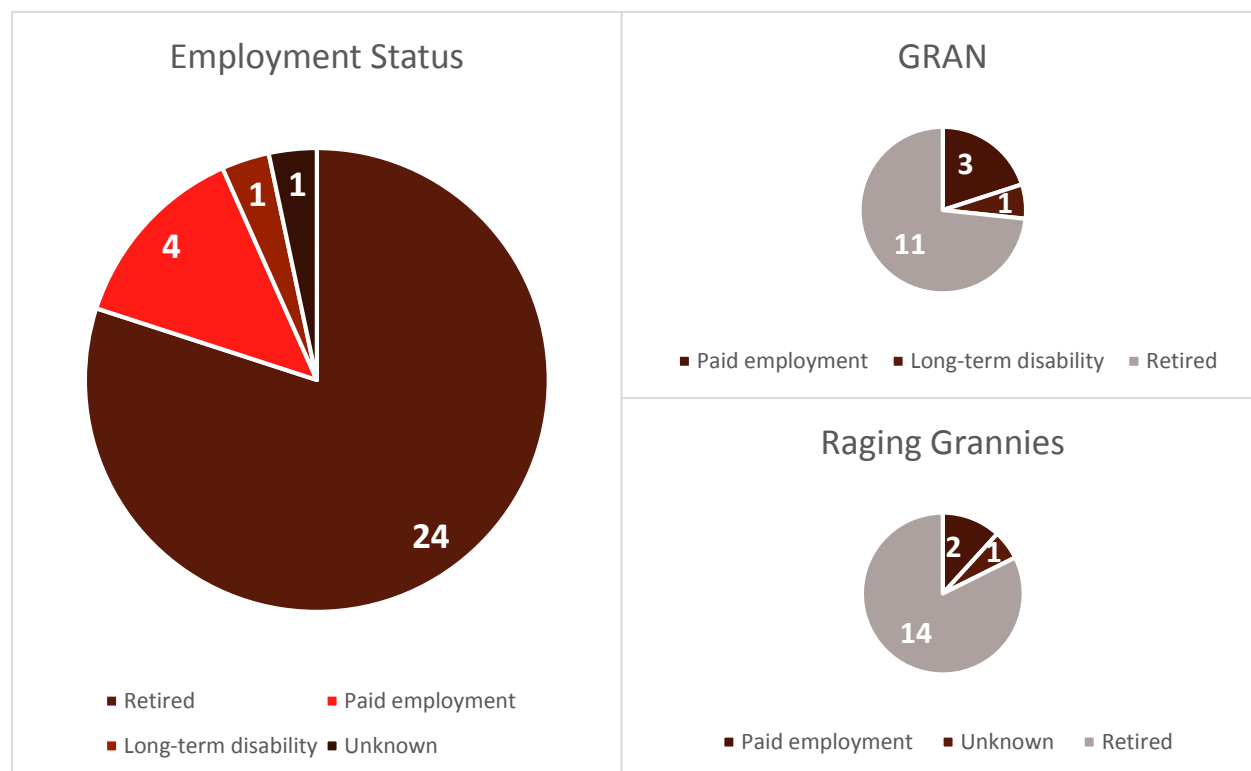


Figure 2: Employment Status



## APPENDIX B: THE CHILDREARING YEARS: DETAILED DATA

Table 1: GRAN Participants' Juggle

NAME	AGE WHEN FIRST MARRIED	# TIMES MARRIED	AGE WHEN FIRST CHILD BORN	# OF CHILDREN (STEP-CHILDREN)	CAREGIVING ARRANGEMENTS
ALISON	22	2	22	3 (3,3)	Single parent/Primary
ANNA	24	2	34	2	Shared
BETTY	22	1	22	2	Primary
CLAIRE	23	1	32	3	Primary
DORI	25	1	29	1	Shared
ELLA	23	1	28	2	Shared
JEN	21	1	22	3	Shared
JOANNA	22	1	25	3	Shared
LAURA	21	2	23	2	Shared
LISA	19	2	21	3 (5)	Single parent/ primary
MARY	21	2	24	1 (3)	Single parent/ Primary
PAIGE	22	2	23	4 (2)	Single parent/ primary
SAM	21	1	25	2	Shared
SANDRA	19	2	28	2 (2)	Shared
AVERAGE:	21.8	1.5	25.6	3.6	

Table 2: Raging Granny Participants' Juggle

NAME	AGE WHEN FIRST MARRIED	# TIMES MARRIED	AGE WHEN FIRST CHILD BORN	# OF CHILDREN (STEP-CHILDREN)	CAREGIVING ARRANGEMENTS
ALICE	19	2	20	1	Single parent/ primary
AMANDA	25	2	32	1	Primary
BERNADETTE	21	1	23	3	Primary
CANDICE	29	1	33	1	Single parent, primary
FELICIA	21	2	22	2	Primary
FRANNY	24	At least 2	27	2	Single parent/ primary
INGRID	17	1	18	6	Primary
JANET	18	1	24	4	Primary
JO	N/A	0	N/A	0	N/A
JOSEPHINE	22	2	36	2	Single parent/ primary
JUNE	18	1	19	3	Primary
KIMBERLY	22	1	23	2	Primary
LAURIE	19	1	24	1	Single parent/ primary
LUCY	22	1	28	2	Primary
MAEVE	22	1	27	2	n/a
MARIE	23	1	23	5	Primary
RITA	25	2	29	4	Primary
VIOLET	22	2	26	2	Single parent/ primary



<b>AVERAGE:</b>	21.7	1.3	25.5	2.3
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## APPENDIX C: POLITICAL AND POLICY CONTEXT

*Figure 3: Major policy changes in Canada referenced by participants*

*From "Some Facts and Dates in Canadian Women's History of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century," CRIAW Newsletter, 20(1), Winter 2000*

### A FEMINIST TIMELINE OF LEGAL CHANGES IN CANADA

<b>1947</b>	Canadian federal government implements law restricting married women from working in public service.
<b>1951</b>	Canada's first equal pay legislation passed by the Ontario Legislature.
<b>1955</b>	Federal law restricting married women from working in public service removed.
<b>1960</b>	Birth control pill becomes available in Canada, though only for "therapeutic reasons" since contraception remains illegal.
<b>1969</b>	Birth control and contraception become legal; abortion becomes legal under very restrictive circumstances.
<b>1971</b>	Canadian Labour Code amended to prohibit discrimination based on sex or marital status and to enforce a provision on 17 weeks of maternity leave.
<b>1972</b>	Federal government institutes first income tax deduction for child care expenses.
<b>1973</b>	First rape crisis centres open across Canada.
<b>1975</b>	Further legislation implemented to promote employment, wage, and pension equality.
<b>1978</b>	Canadian Labour Code amended; women may no longer be fired for pregnancy and employer discrimination on the basis of sex, disability, or race is prohibited.
<b>1980</b>	Matrimonial Property Act passes federally, which ensures that women be compensated for unpaid labour in divorce settlements. Previously, women often were not entitled to any assets upon divorce. This law was later amended, entitling women to half of all property acquired during marriage.
<b>1983</b>	Marital rape is criminalized and sexual harassment in the workplace is prohibited.
<b>1986</b>	Federal government amends and passes Divorce Act, which includes "no-fault divorce" and lists the sole cause for divorce as "marital breakdown."
<b>1988</b>	Restrictive abortion law struck down by Bertha Wilson, the first woman Justice in the Supreme Court of Canada, who deemed it unconstitutional.

