

## Oral History Interview Transcript

Interviewee: Marion Foy

Date: 30/11/2016

Location: Edinburgh

Time: 00:29:24

Interviewer: Gill Glass

Time period: 1970s

Groups: Edinburgh Women's Aid, Edinburgh and Lothians Women's Aid

Roles: unpaid worker, Edinburgh and Lothian's Women's Aid Coordinator

*Can you describe what your connection to Women's Aid was and why did you get involved with Women's Aid?*

Ok, so when I was a student at Edinburgh University in the early '70s - in 1971 - I became involved with the Women's Movement and there was a Women's Liberation centre in Edinburgh at that time and I went there and I must have - I believe I saw an advert looking for volunteers to work with what was then Edinburgh Women's Aid and so I became a volunteer and then we got funding and extended the Edinburgh Women's Aid group into an Edinburgh and Lothian Women's Aid group and opened up refuges in Midlothian and East Lothian as well as the Edinburgh refuges which had increased in number as well and when we got funding from something like Job Creation Funding – one of these temporary funds giving money to voluntary organisations – I got a job and then for a while I was the coordinator of Edinburgh and Lothian Women's Aid.

**1:21** *What were the ideas connected to Women's Aid that were important to you at that time?*

Well, to have places that women could go to - to be safe from violent men obviously. I was also involved in getting the Matrimonial Homes Act up and running so that there were legal remedies for women who wanted to stay in their own homes and wanted to get their husbands put out of the house. I had done a law degree at Edinburgh but didn't finish qualifying – I worked instead for Edinburgh Women's Aid for a number of years and then about 1981 I did a trainee-ship and became a solicitor and it was in that capacity that I was

involved in the working group that formulated the Matrimonial Homes Act and then when I worked in private practice as a solicitor the vast majority of the work that I did was referrals from Women's Aid and word of mouth type referrals applying for exclusion orders and interdicts and that kind of work.

*So you were doing a law degree before you got involved with Women's Aid?*

Yes - I did a law degree from '71 – '75. So, I got involved as a student and when I finished in '75 I got a short-term temporary job with Edinburgh Women's Aid Group and then I became the coordinator of Edinburgh and Lothian Women's Aid. Then in 1981, then I started doing what was called then a 2 year apprenticeship to become a solicitor. When I was a solicitor the majority of the work I did was applying for exclusion orders and interdicts - acting for women in divorce actions who were the victims of domestic violence.

**3:20** *You were a volunteer to start with - can you describe a day in the life of that Women's Aid group?*

At the beginning?

Yes

It was very - I mean there was nobody paid - so it was all about doing everything in a sort of piecemeal way - there was a core of volunteer women at that time - there was one woman who had been a battered woman herself – called **[name anonymised]** - there was a group of other women – **[name anonymised]**, **[name anonymised]** , and to a lesser degree **[name anonymised]** and **[name anonymised]** - they were the Women's Aid group I joined - so there was already a core of women there who were doing this in addition to jobs or were retired or didn't have jobs and we just did as volunteers what we were asked to do – so you would visit refugees to see how people were doing - there were people we got into second stage housing at one point so you would visit people in second stage housing - take people to housing departments – to social security offices - help them get their stuff out of the house.

**4:34** *Second stage housing - that was moving on from the refuge?*

Yes - a charity gave us a flat for two families moved in - who didn't qualify for housing in Edinburgh - so they moved in and lived in that flat and I think we then got other second stage housing – where organisations with flats would offer them to Women's Aid for women who couldn't get a council house to move into - and we would support them in there. We would give talks, do fund raising - we did a lot of lobbying, a lot of political lobbying to try to get funding to try to get refuges in areas that didn't have them - we would go and sit in on debates at the city chambers, we would lobby local councillors to get more refuges.

**5:31** *So in the very early days you were all doing a bit of everything - how did that change over time?*

When we got funding we had 10 or 12 people – we had enough money to pay 10 or 12 people - so people then got designated jobs – so people were East Lothian workers or Midlothian workers or Edinburgh workers or children's workers or follow up workers for women who had moved on - support workers - so people had more specific roles and it was a full time commitment rather than something that people were doing on a voluntary basis in their own time.

**6:13** *Did you still have volunteers as well?*

Yes - and most famously Fiona McLean who came when we had an office in Albany Street - at one point and she came and she was doing a post graduate photography degree at the art college and she turned up and she had just come from Cannes and we just looked at her like she had come from a different planet and she had come to photograph battered wives and we just looked at her like she had come from another planet and we said ok - well they are battered women – and we would think about it if you volunteer and prove yourself first and she became an absolute star of Women's Aid - organised lots of campaigns - took lots of photos - she died a few years ago of cancer - she had a massive archive – I don't know if you know could ever find them – she had a fantastic archive of photographs - she left money to Women's Aid - she left money to some of the women she had met through Women's Aid - she had wonderful photos of us with placards.

**7.23** *During your time with Women's Aid did your group have links to Scottish Women's Aid and if so can you describe what the link was like?*

I am trying to remember what came first - I can't remember - **[name anonymised]** was coordinator of Scottish Women's Aid when I was with Edinburgh and Lothian Women's Aid – I can't remember when I was coordinator with Edinburgh Women's Aid if Scottish Women's Aid was there before Edinburgh Women's Aid - whether there were already links before with Scottish Women's Aid - so if I was at university '71–'75 and there was already a Edinburgh Women's Aid - I don't know when Scottish Women's Aid became established - but yes we had connections with Scottish Women's Aid.

*What sort of connections?*

I can't remember – I mean it was a different sort of job - ours was the more coal face obviously - running refuges whereas Scottish Women's Aid was more involved in lobbying at the higher level and doing policy type work - trying to change the law type of work and taking responsibility for overseeing what was going on in the local groups as they sprang up – but it was **[name anonymised]**, she was the coordinator I remember best.

**8:47** *Can you describe any interactions with external organisations – social workers, police?*

Yes, we had dealings with them – because we did a lot of hands on stuff with women, we would be going to social workers – to help them get the children out the house if they hadn't been able to take them with them - we did a lot of educational stuff - a lot of talking and getting ourselves invited to training sessions to try to educate other institutions about the issues of domestic violence. The Dobashes were involved – Becky and what was his name [Russell] - an American couple based at Stirling who were doing research into domestic violence and they were the first people to my knowledge who had an academic approach to changing people's attitudes towards domestic violence and explaining why people would stay - would find it difficult to leave - who would snap and kill after years of being abused - they were the Dobashes, they did lot of research - we had contacts with them. And they - we had a campaign to free June Greig - which we didn't succeed in doing - June Greig killed her husband - they were involved in trying to change the perception of her having set out to do that - as opposed to being driven to do that and the theory they came up with in relation to her is now a commonly held theory but that was in the 1970s.

**10:55** *What theory was that?*

That if you lived with somebody who terrifies and demoralises you - then if you then snap one day out of the blue it should be seen in the context of the years of humiliation and denigration - it should not just be seen in the snapshot in which she did the killing - not very popular I have to say when they were saying it but I do think that you would see Helena Kennedy saying that on the radio now and people wouldn't be saying - 'oh I don't think so Helena' - but when the Dobashes were saying it, it was more controversial.

**11:17** *And the police in those days?*

It was very much - I mean, there would be some sympathetic police officers as there always are some sympathetic people in any organisation - but the majority view then was what happened behind closed doors was nobody else's business - I mean I still see that but then that was the run of the mill approach then - which is why we had to campaign to get the Matrimonial Homes Act.

**12:07** *I was surprised to learn how late that Act was or so recent that legislation was brought in.*

And the first time I applied for an exclusion order - which I did as a solicitor - the sheriff couldn't believe what I was asking him to do - it was like 'you are asking me to put a man out of his own house!' - that is what he said to me - 'that is what you are asking me to do?' - and I said yes and here is the legislation that says you can.

*And did he?*

I can't remember.

*How long ago was that?*

I didn't stay in private practice for very long - I qualified in '82/'83 and I left private practice in '93 so I only worked as a solicitor for 10 years.

**13:00** *You mentioned children's workers - can you talk a bit your views about Women's Aid work with children?*

I think as part of getting funding and having the capacity to employ people we introduced children's workers - to work with children in refuges - to talk about what they had been

through - to deal with their trauma and to help them to understand the issues as they affected them - and also offered play opportunities and what would be the equivalent of play therapy probably now to help children move on from what they had been through. I think one of the sad things that I saw was that there were certainly women who - when they were given the opportunity to escape from violent marriages - their children then were not their priority - finding a life became the priority and not their children. We had people abandon their children in the refuges - put their children into care - walk away from their children - which I was dumfounded by.

*It is not what you expect.*

No.

**14:33** *Why do you think they did that?*

Because women are human beings - some are good human beings and some less good - and I saw exactly the same thing as a divorce family lawyer - I would fight very hard to get a good outcome for my women clients who would in turn not protect their children - not do the best by their children put their children in second place to the new man in their life and that was quite chastening.

**15:12** *Do you remember any media stories on domestic violence in the news from the time when you were involved?*

There was a lot about Erin Pizzey and the London refuges. I remember being involved in an awful case that kind of sums up the bad things that can go wrong - I can't remember if I was a solicitor then or whether it was when I was with Women's Aid - it was a woman who had started to suspect that her husband was sexually abusing their very young daughter and she went to the police and they said ok don't hand her over for contact until we investigate this - and he came to the house - he killed her in front of the child he then threw himself off Granton pier and then he persuaded a psychiatrist he had been driven to temporary madness by the withholding of contact with the child and got a very light sentence and I just felt that really showed how amateurish it was for the police to give that advice rather than do something more pro-active - it was the beginning of my understanding of how abuse of women often overlaps with sexual abuse of children - it made me feel really worried about

how effective the criminal justice assessment of criminals who are able to pull the wool over their eyes and pretend to have been temporarily insane is - in the years since then I have seen all of these things played out - people getting away with all of these sort of things to this day which is a bit worrying.

**17:29** *Do you think there been a change in the attitude of the police?*

I think the big thing that has made a difference was the Zero Tolerance campaign with 'domestic abuse there is no excuse' on buses - if you see that in your face you get a really clear message - I think it was very influential. I think the police started to employ – you know as there became fewer jobs - more graduates - and people who previously would not have wanted to be employed in the police now saw this could be a good way to earn a lot of money - get a responsible job - become a detective so I think there was a higher quality of person - my dad joined the police because he came from a mining community and there were no jobs and he had no qualifications and was paid very little - latterly I have a good friend - who is a police inspector, a woman, she has done really well – **[section removed at request of interviewee]** – so it became a really good career path for men and women – and I think that meant you had more insightful , intelligent, dedicated people in the police force - not everybody but more of them - and the fact that the law became tighter and the law became clearer and the fact that Women's Aid became a more credible organisation – I mean when I joined women's aid we had a refuge in Broomhouse - 3 families in a ground floor council flat and no office – we met in someone's living room - and now I look at this office and I go to refuges as part of the work I do now and I see self contained flats with Women's Aid accommodation on the ground floor - there was nothing like that when I was involved in the '70s and '80s and I think that makes the organisation look strong and credible.

**19:38** *Can you describe any significant turning points or times of change and how were these managed by the Women's Aid Group?*

I think I am too historical to be able to answer that – because at the point I left Women's Aid - so I stopped being involved really in the 1980s and the big changes happened since then. What I saw was more refuges in more areas and local groups having an office and local groups having paid employees as well as volunteers - these were the big changes that I saw

and the changes in the law - but I think the bigger campaigns and the bigger changes have all post-dated me.

**20:43** *What about the changes in Scottish politics in recent years – do you think that this had any impact on the work of Women's Aid or how domestic abuse is talked about? You mentioned Zero Tolerance.*

Well there are more women in positions of power in Scottish politics and whatever their political affiliations it would be very non PC for any of them to say anything other than we are a zero tolerance party - so you have that - you have laws - very clear law that says this will not be tolerated. I would say you now have things like Safer Families – like the Caledonian Project – there is now an acknowledgment that this is an issue that you need to address in a formal way - so the court will send men to programmes – will say I will suspend making a decision about whether to send you to jail or not to see how you engage with Safer Families or the Caledonian Project - and that is a big message – a big practical message.

**21:59** *What is the Caledonian Project?*

I don't know if it is just an Edinburgh and Lothian thing but it is working with violent offenders - so men guilty of domestic violence - the court can send them to work with that in the same way the court could send someone to work with a criminal justice social worker or send them to do a drug treatment and testing order. The court will send people to the Caledonian Project - project or programme I am not sure which – might be both - to do 1 to 1 work with a person – to talk to you about why you hit - why you humiliate - why you control - and try to make you change. So the fact that it is that basic I would say is huge progress – it is the opposite of saying what happens between 2 people in a relationship is nobody else's business. I am not sure if Safer Families has overtaken the Caledonian Project as I haven't seen anyone referred to the Caledonian project for a while but I have got several cases - because I still do legal cases but only about children - so I see parents of these children - men who have been referred to Safer Families – so it may have taken over from Caledonian Project or whether the 2 run side by side – because I only know what I come across – I don't have any reason to take an overview of the whole system.

**23:22** *So do you work in family law still?*



No, so what I did was - for a while before I gave up private practice I did adoption reports and freeing for adoption reports and then I was asked to be a safe-guarder and I did some child welfare reports - where people are in dispute about who should have the children - who should see the children - then in 1993 I left private practice - with the intention of going back – because I had young children and I continued to write reports as a safe-guarder and in adoptions and in what became permanence orders – and child welfare cases and that is all that I have done since 1993- I never went back into private practice.

**24:44** *What do you think the impact of Scottish Women's Aid was both on society in general and on you at a personal level?*

Well I think if there hadn't been the grass roots Women's Aid organisations which I was part of - there wouldn't be the very professional well respected institutions that there are now because everything starts in a small way and if it is worthwhile it becomes more significant and I think that is very much what happened and as I said I think the Zero Tolerance campaign played a really big part in that. And personally - it changed my life in loads of ways - I was a teenager and I became an activist and I became socially aware and I put myself into situations that were quite dangerous and mad – I made good friends - it was a way to be a feminist in a practical way as opposed to in a talking and reading books way - it was a very positive thing.

**26:00** *When you first got involved in Edinburgh Women's Aid- did it operate as a collective? That changed presumably when you got grants?*

Yes - because we got paid salaries and somebody was promoted to be the head of the organisation - we had lots of discussions about whether we should do that or not or whether we should just redistribute the section of extra payment – or redistribute all the money and pay the volunteers - we spent a lot of time having discussions about politics and ideology as well as about how to run a Women's Aid group and there were all kinds of strong personalities involved.

**26:52** *So quite a shift in ethos?*

Well when I got involved there were a handful of women - mainly middle class - women who didn't have to work or could link this to their work and one woman who was a self-described

battered woman and by the time I left there was Edinburgh and Lothian Women's Aid with an office with refuges, Midlothian Women's Aid with an office with refuges and East Lothian Women's Aid with an office with refuges and we had achieved that and a lot of very strong powerful people were involved in the mix.

**27:38** *What do you think the future holds? What would you like to see happen next?*

I don't really have much to do with Women's Aid now – I don't know what the plans are - all I have seen is the issue becoming more an acceptance that this is an issue that there should not be two sides to a debate about – the only 2 sides of the debate I ever see discussed now are about whether men are as likely to be battered or whether men should be running women's refuges type of stuff - which is a big shift from you know - do women ask for it or do they stay because they like it and all the nonsense that we used to have to talk about - so its a given now that domestic violence is a bad thing - it has a dreadful impact on children – no-one in a relationship should have to accept it - it has all kinds of implications for mental health, for the economy, for all kinds of things – I think any right thinking person now would just accept and assume that domestic violence is a bad and a dreadful thing to be eradicated - where Women's Aid is looking to do next I don't actually know.

*Anything else you want to share with us?*

No I don't think so – thanks.

**End interview**