

Visit to The Women's Library, 19th September 2012

I had always had it in mind to visit The Women's Library but never seemed to be able to find the time. Luckily, I was able to book myself for a visit on the 19th of September, 2012 via LondonLinks. This visit was organized by the London Health Libraries. The nine attendees were met at reception by the Information Librarian, Dianne Shepherd who led the tour. The Women's Library is situated in East London on Old Castle Street tucked next to London Metropolitan University's Calcutta House. It is a cultural centre housing the most extensive collection of women's history in the UK. It incorporates the reception; a reading room, archive and museum collections, a vibrant exhibitions and events programme, education resources and event facilities.

Upon arrival, we were captivated by The Museum of Motherhood on display in the reception hall. The pop-up museum displayed stories based on interviews conducted from November 2011 until April 2012 with the aim of painting authentic and diverse portraits of motherhood. It tells 20 unique stories of faith, culture and sexuality, provoking questions and providing answers on what it means to be a mother.

Dianne described the history and background of the Women's Library and its collection with examples of rare books including first editions. The Library was originally established in 1926 as the Library of the London National Society for Women's Service (now the Fawcett Society) led by Millicent Garret Fawcett, a pioneer of the women's suffrage movement. In 1953 both the Society and the Library were named after her. The Women's Library was then renamed in 2002 and the London Metropolitan University is its current custodian. Dianne indicated that the Library is open to all and entrance is free. First time users are however required to complete a registration form which allows them to be issued with a card that allows them access to the Reading Room.

The entire collection of this library is a Designated Collection of national importance, documenting women's lives through the ages. It includes printed materials (books, periodicals, press cuttings, ephemera and also audio-visual) which date back to the 16th century, archives (personal or organisational papers and oral histories) and museum collections (objects, textiles and visual materials) with date back to the 18th century covering a variety of topics including women's rights, suffrage, sexuality, health, education etc.

The Library also acquires collections through donations such as the closed Josephine Butler Society Library collection and the Cavendish-Bentinck Library collection. The collections are fully accessible but regarded as closed because new printed material are no longer added to it. Dianne showed us an example of finding aids such as source notes which are used to highlight the wide range of resources on specific topics represented in the collections. Source notes are intended as an introduction to material held at The Women's Library by subject, to provide users with a starting point for exploring the collections further.

Periodicals remain largely unweeded with back copies kept in the vault available upon request. The Library carries out standard enquiries using a template with users referred to the online catalogue for in-depth research work basically due to low staffing levels. Users can request for materials in advance using a collections order slip and they will be set aside for them at the Reading Room desk. Photocopies and pictures can be taken but need to be checked. There are also books on open access arranged in Dewey Decimal and there are three digital reader-printers available in the Reading Room.

The Women's Library also participates in a number of collaborative projects for museums, libraries and archives to help researchers identify relevant materials located in institutions throughout the UK e.g. COPAC,

Cornucopia, FRAGEN etc. This helps users expand their search for library materials.

As can be expected, the conversation was steered to the threat to the collection and the Library's uncertain future. Dianne mentioned that the London Metropolitan University announced that the Women's Library would need to find a new custodian as the Library doesn't fit in with its current learning strategy. This has resulted in the loss of staff with current staffing down to two Information Librarians, two Library Assistants, an Archivist and a Curator who puts up the exhibitions. There are also volunteers who assist in cataloguing the Library's materials and the London Metropolitan University also assists with the cataloguing of new books.

A selection criterion for bidding for custodianship is that the entire collection needs to be retained unsplit. Despite seven formal bids being tendered initially and statements of support, the London School of Economics is now the only bidder. Dianne emphasised that until a final decision is made at the end of September, there was no certainty about whether the collection stay together or who the new custodian will be.

Despite the sense of imminent closure, the visit was a success. It was very informative and the attending librarians were able to network. This outstanding library of women's history is definitely worth saving. The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) has since been approved as The Women's Library's new custodian. The expert staff will be retained and the collections will transfer to LSE's Lionel Robbins building in Central London where it will be open to the public from 2013. Many thanks to Elisabeth Chalmers for organizing the event and to the staff of The Women's Library.