

The History of Women's Labour Activism in Manitoba During the 70s-80s

Winnipeg Women's Liberation (WWL)

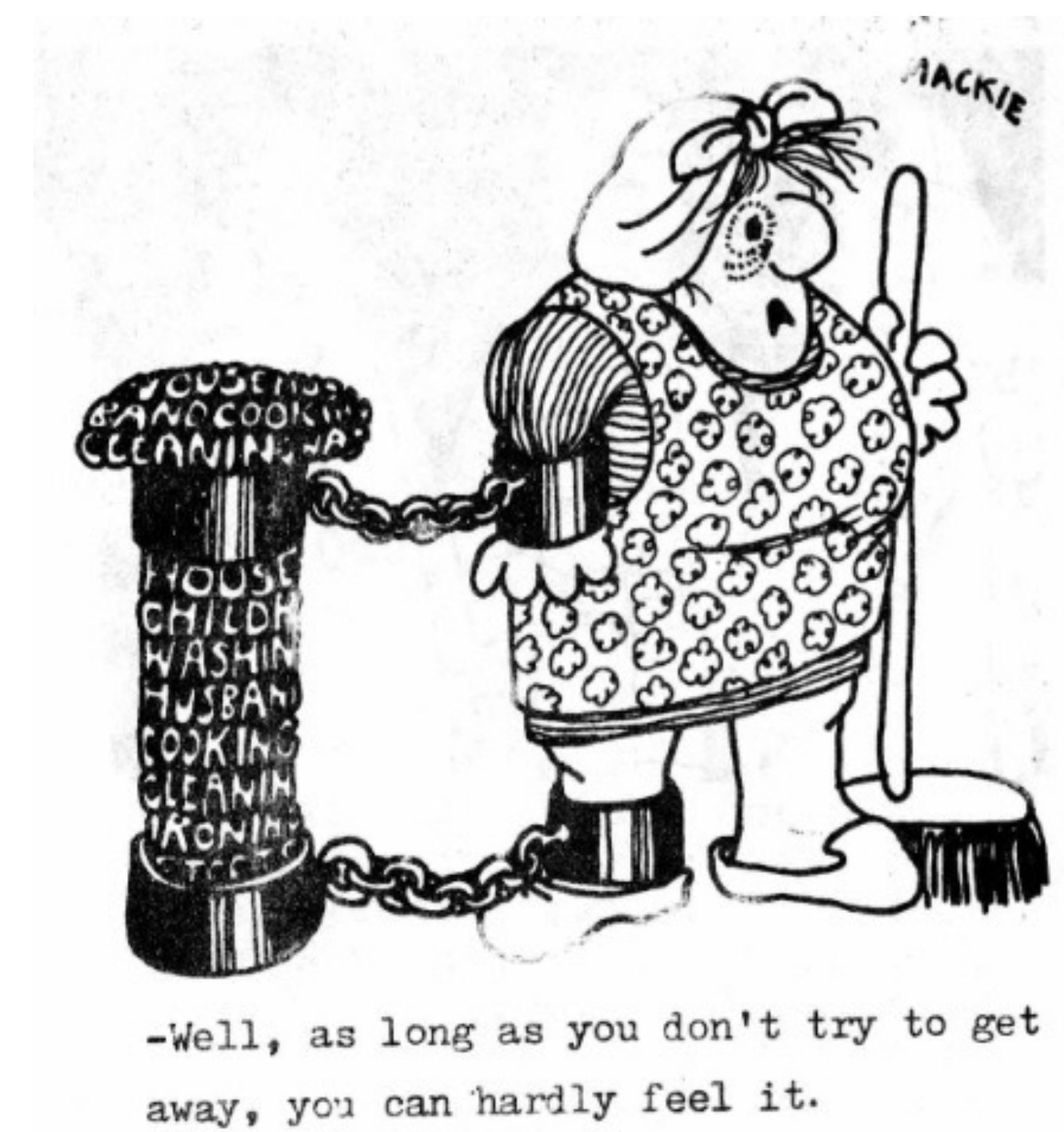


Image from riseupfeministarchive.ca

WWL was formed in the early 1970s by a small group of mostly young university activists who wanted to mobilize around feminist issues.

- The women had been meeting for a few years in the living room of Millie Lamb, a local high school teacher and feminist activist, to discuss feminism and left politics, and some had also been organizing at the University of Manitoba.
- WWL set itself apart from other parts of the women's movement in Manitoba at the time, such as the Manitoba Action Committee on the Status of Women. The latter received government funding and took a liberal feminist approach, primarily focusing on advancing gender equality through political and legal changes. In contrast, WWL adopted a socialist feminist perspective and sought to avoid becoming "dependent on government funding."
- The group relied on community-based organization, volunteers, donations from supporters, collective decision-making, and socialist feminist theory.
- In 1973 they opened a physical location in Winnipeg, A Women's Place, to help facilitate organization and provide support as a drop-in centre

Kruger and Taylor, "Winnipeg Women's Liberation."



Cartoon from *WWLN* (January–February 1977): 5.]

The Relationship Between Women and Unions

At the time, women across Canada faced obstacles to joining and participating in the labour movement. Many unions were male dominated and resistant to tackling feminist issues. The *WWLN* called attention to obstacles, such as the lack of women in union leadership and membership. Women's labour organizing was done through feminist unions and labour organizations and women's caucuses within unions.

WWLN (July 1976): 4.
WWLN (January–February 1977): 11.



Winnipeg Women's Liberation Newsletter (July 1976): cover

The Importance of Newsletters

A key source for studying feminist labour activism in Manitoba has been the newsletters several groups produced to communicate with their members and the broader community. A closer look at the *Winnipeg Women's Liberation Newsletter* (*WWLN*) demonstrates the value of newsletters as artifacts of feminist activism in the Prairies. It helps us identify some of the key issues and ideas that feminist labour activists engaged with and organized around in Manitoba during this period, including socialist feminism, the relationship between women and unions, and gender inequality in and outside the workplace. The *WWLN* was written from a socialist feminist perspective as it spoke to the overlapping forms of oppression experienced by women due to economic and social factors, such as class and sexuality. Particular attention was paid to capitalism and how the system benefits from women's unpaid and low-paid labour.

Many issues of the *Winnipeg Women's Liberation Newsletter* (hereafter *WWLN*) are available online at Rise Up! A Digital Archive of Feminist Activism, <https://riseupfeministarchive.ca/publications/winnipeg-womens-liberation-newsletter/winnipegwomensliberation-november-1976/>.

For a helpful overview of feminist activism in Manitoba during this period, see Üstün Reinart, "Three Major Strands in the Women's Movement in Manitoba, 1965–1985," in *The Political Economy of Manitoba*, eds. Jim Silver and Jeremy Hull (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, University of Regina, 1990), 151–168.