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Abstract:

Based on qualitative interviews conducted with local guilds, charities and community groups in England, this article highlights the public service older women provide for their communities by volunteering their labour to local textile craft groups. Driven by an ethics of care, they make up for a lack of services formerly provided by the welfare state, such as public transport and mental health support. We mobilise existing literature on 'quiet activism' to argue that their community work constitutes a form of political activism, albeit one that stops short of overtly challenging the political system. While highlighting the ways in which older women quietly go about helping their communities, we argue that by being 'louder' about the public service they provide, they could help disrupt the narrative of a system that has failed their communities and exploits their free labour.

Activism to Make and Do: The (Quiet) Politics of Textile Community Groups

Lap blankets for dementia patients, quilts for bereaved mums, teddies for NICU wards, trauma tents, drainage bags for cancer wards, heart cushions for breast cancer patients; all essential items provided by volunteers from local textile craft groups. Scores of typically retired women make a significant contribution to their communities by providing the above (and more) to public services, yet their labour often goes unrecognised, and the organisations that coordinate these activities are dismissed in the public imagination as benign 'knit and natter' groups, lacking in 'political commitment' (Greenhalgh 1997: 37).

Drawing on empirical research conducted with local guilds, charities and community groups in England, we examine their role within society. Our research sheds light on the ways in which members of local textile craft groups characterise their activities and the core values that structure each of their specific organisations. In doing so, we complicate the notion that these groups are apolitical, and more importantly, consider what is at stake for members in claiming or rejecting a political subjectivity.

Building on the emerging body of work on 'craftivism' and 'quiet activism', we consider how the activities undertaken by these women might qualify as 'activism', even if they themselves do not recognise it as such. In doing so, we stand in tradition with literature that argues for a broader definition of what might be considered political. However, we seek to advance this discussion by considering what is at stake in the process of

naming an activity as political/apolitical. We ask why it might matter if these women understand their work as political and why they may wish to distance themselves from such a label. Many of the women in our sample interpreted their contributions to public life differently to us. While we see their work as 'political', many did not and seemed more comfortable being associated with charitable work, wishing to view the two as completely separate.ⁱ In this article we therefore consider the right we have as researchers to reject our participants' understanding of their own activities

Thus, this article offers three original contributions to the field. First, our empirical data renders visible the labour of these women and their hitherto unrecognised contribution to public life. Second, it makes an analytical contribution by theorising this labour through the lens of the 'the political'. Finally, we make a contribution on a methodological level by applying a feminist research ethic to the analysis of our data. Given its attentiveness to power dynamics and self-reflection, a feminist approach requires that we consider the implications of naming such work as political, particularly when participants would distance themselves from the term. Such an approach marks a departure from much of the work in the area which does not take into account the thoughts of participants when fixing a label to a practice.

Literature Review

Women's domestic crafts and hobby craft groups rarely figure in British craft histories. At best they are relegated to a footnote, at worst they are chastised as frivolous leisure pursuits designed to distract members from important political work. Such is the case in Paul Greenhalgh's (1997: 37) history of craft, in which the activities of the Women's

Institute (WI) are characterised as ‘a rarefied form of household husbandry [...] a vision of craft void of the original political commitment.’ Organisations, such as the WI, are often imagined as either non-political or deeply conservative hobby craft groups, and the making that takes place within them rarely enjoys the cultural legitimacy afforded other (masculine) forms of handicraft. The domestic crafts (knitting, sewing, crochet) have historically been disregarded due to their perceived status as ‘feminine’ and ‘amateur’, existing in almost binary opposition to the ‘masculine’/‘professional’ crafts (carpentry, metal work etc). Greenhalgh’s assessment of the WI shores up this distinction, but more importantly denies any association with the political project of the Arts and Crafts movement, despite the fact that May Morris (William Morris’ youngest daughter and secretary of her local organisation) campaigned for textile guilds and trade unions.

The relationship between women’s hobbycraft groups and political participation has a long and varied history to be sure, but it is certainly not the case that these spaces exist outside of politics. Rather, the kinds of politics enacted within these groups and by their members ranges from more traditional forms of political engagement (i.e. that which seeks policy reform), to what might be termed now as a ‘quieter’ kind of politics (in which attempts to challenge systems of power can take place in everyday contexts).ⁱⁱ The following synthesis of the existing literature regarding women’s domestic craft demonstrates the ways in which different conceptions of the political/ways of *doing* politics have been mobilised in these accounts, in order to explain how we have come to apply the term (or not, as the case may be) in our empirical research.

To return briefly to Greenhalgh's claim, the assumption the handicrafts of the WI were devoid of any political ambition, not only misrepresents the organisation, but also fails to account for the varied ways in which politics can be done. The WI is a space in which different kinds of politics can operate, and different political identities can be accommodated. To suggest that the political agenda of the Arts and Crafts movement is absent from the WI, fails to acknowledge a significant number of members for whom the organisation represents a 'Morris-style socialism' (Andrews 1997: 59). Moreover, it erases from its history, its involvement with a number of (cross-party) social justice campaigns over the last hundred years. Lobbying for better housing, equal pay, climate change reform, the WI has made a number of demands of government over the last hundred years and engages in a kind of political participation, that even the narrowest definition of the term would have to include (see Andrews 1997). The WI is not unique in this regard, indeed, craft groups outside of the UK have also provided spaces in which women can politically organise. As feminist scholars have noted, quilting groups in the US, for example, were crucial in creating and sustaining momentum for the women's suffrage movement. (see Torsney & Elsley 1994). The very nature of the organisations as spaces in which women could congregate and talk, share and heal means that they operated as de-facto consciousness raising groups. However, it was not just the infrastructure that these networks provided that was useful to the women's movement but also the crafting skills they acquired within them. In her canonical book, *The Subversive Stitch*, Rozsika Parker (1984) details how non-militant Suffragists marched with embroidered banners and parasols, while members of the Women's Social and Political Union would embroider handkerchiefs with their signatures as a form of petition signing while imprisoned and on hunger strike.ⁱⁱⁱ

Given the centrality of the domestic crafts to achieving the goals of political movements, we might consider the examples above as a form of 'craftivism'; a term coined by Betsy Greer in 2003, which is currently enjoying hypervisibility (thanks in part to social media).^{iv} For Greer, craftivism (a portmanteau of craft and activism) represents a movement in which craft is used to tackle social justice causes and promote anti-capitalist, anti-war, environmentalist and feminist ideologies. As Tal Fitzpatrick writes in their article 'Craftivism as DIY Citizenship, '[c]ontemporary craftivist practices are largely understood and evaluated in relation to their efficacy at achieving the macrogoals of activism – behavioural, policy and systemic change' (2019: 179). Such a reading of craftivism would therefore discount a range of activities on the grounds that they are both smaller in scale, and perhaps not overtly 'political'. This, Fitzpatrick argues, leads to 'a bias that favours large-scale and politically overt craftivist actions' at the expense of the everyday, smaller acts of resistance (179). Yet, there is a body of emerging work which seeks to expand definitions of what might be termed activism.

In the field of cultural geography, the term 'quiet activism' has gained traction to describe a set of 'everyday', small-scale practices that can bring about social change. The term has been applied to a number of practices including knitting and other domestic crafts, but also seed sharing and creating cross-cultural friendships in local communities. Such disparate activities are linked in their associations with the private and the personal, but also for centralising the act of making and doing. For Laura Pottinger, who has applied the term to gardening, 'Quiet Activism' is 'a form of engagement that emphasises embodied, practical, tactile and creative ways of acting,

resisting, reworking and subverting' (2016: 217). For Kye Askins 'Quiet politics' is 'an unassuming praxis of engaging with others, in which new social relations are built in/through everyday places, relationally connected across a range of geographies' (2014: 354). Thus, for Askins and Pottinger these 'quiet' acts represent a counter to traditional definitions of activism/politics as demonstrative and confrontational.

Much of the contemporary work on 'quiet activism' owes a debt to feminist scholarship which has provided (either implicitly or explicitly) the conceptual foundations for our current understanding. Martin, Hanson and Fontaine (2007), for example, put forward a theory of feminist activism which has provided a fertile ground for troubling assumptions about activism as both an intentional and wilful act. In their article, 'What Counts as Activism?', they suggest a definition of activism that considers the 'everyday actions by individuals that foster new social networks' (2007: 79) and indeed argue that the social location of women places them to best recognise issues that need addressing in society. In so doing, they imply that the very act of living as a woman in the world requires a gradual and persistent activism in order to manoeuvre through patriarchal society. They write: 'Women, attentive to and aware of social relations and dynamics within their communities, seek in small and sometimes larger- ways to transform these power relations' (90). The women interviewed in Martin et al's study did not participate in acts which might be instantly recognisable as 'political', and indeed, they did not themselves claim an activist identity. Their participants included a number of women who were small business owners who, as part of their day to day working lives, viewed a crucial part of their role as providing 'a listening ear and strong shoulder' (83) within their respective communities. One participant, a female diner owner, believed it was her duty to ensure that her establishment provided a safe space

for single women. Such acts, Martin et al. argue, can and should be considered an example of feminist activism insofar as they contribute to the progress of society in meaningful, if not fully measurable, ways. To be sure, they might be seen at odds with the kinds of direct action associated with other more militant feminist movements, such as that of the suffragettes, however, one might also acknowledge that while the more disruptive and violent acts of organisations like the WSPU gained most public attention, the vast majority of members engaged primarily in non-confrontational acts, including selling newspapers, organising fundraising events such as bake and jumble sales, and networking (see Cowman 2007) – all of which were crucial to the movement's success. However, the distinction that must be drawn between the organisers in the WSPU and the women in Martin et al.'s study has to do with question of 'intent' or rather, the claiming of one's work as political work/activist. For Martin et al., their participants spoke about this additional civic labour but did not acknowledge or recognise it as political. Such is the case with much of the work on quiet activism. Often, those individuals and practices identified as activist, did not claim the label.

Drawing inspiration from the work of Martin et al. John Horton and Peter Kraftl (2009: 22) propose a theory of 'implicit activism' which has also been taken up in work on 'quiet' activism/politics. They identify seven features of implicit activism which mark a departure from our more traditional understandings. First, the practices are 'modest' not glamorous; second, they 'leave little trace' – there is no concrete impact, no measurable manifestation of their efforts; third, they are 'non-totemic' insofar as they do not revolve around a particular organiser or leader; fourth, they are not explicitly related to a philosophy (such as feminism, environmentalism etc); fifth, 'they do *not* often constitute an identity', meaning implicit activists rarely recognise

themselves as such; sixth, they 'scramble power relations' - those involved in 'implicit activism' rarely seek to challenge existing power structures or seek structural change, rather they engage in piecemeal pragmatic steps to facilitate a particular goal (such as fundraising in an attempt to keep a particular public service). Finally, implicit activism is 'conditional' as opposed to 'intentional'.

Work on 'quiet' activism/politics borrows from the concepts of 'implicit' and 'feminist' activism proposed above. The issue of 'intent' or 'will' is not important, nor the ability to necessarily measure the impact of an action. Small, piecemeal change/ways of resisting are understood as political whether or not they are perceived as such by the agents themselves. However, if the political is not defined in terms of intent or impact, what does define the term? Is it enough that these actions have the capacity or potential to affect change even if change is neither achieved nor desired? In broadening our definition to capture the spirit of these practices, do we risk emptying the term of meaning, or mischaracterising these activities? Our intention within this article is to avoid both which leads us to ask a different kind of question: why does it matter if we label something as political? A cursory examination of the existing literature on the subject, such as the one above, certainly suggests that the activities undertaken by our participants could be defined as political or a kind of quiet activism, yet we wish to consider the implications of labelling them as such when our participants may choose to reject the term. In defining an act as political, even when the actor does not express political intent, or, as in some cases, expressly refuses the label, we run the risk of disempowering the actor, and perhaps fail to understand what is at stake in the fixing of a label to a practice. Moreover, the ability to opt-in or out to political participation is a privilege reserved for those within society who benefit from

existing structures of oppression (white, cis, able-bodied, middle class, heterosexual) and therefore are not invested in the need for radical change. Much of the work on 'implicit', 'quiet' and 'feminist' activism does not attend to the ways in which their participants may or may not experience inequality/political exclusion on account of identity markers like race, sexuality, disability, age and so on. Consequently, it is not always clear whether participants rejected an 'activist' label (for whatever reason) or indeed, if more traditional forms of political participation were even available to them on account of their (potential) minoritized status.

Chris Bobel's (2007) empirical research on the reluctance of some social movement actors to identify as activist, suggests that the label requires a level of commitment that most of her participants could not meet. She suggests that the 'esteemed identity activist' is out of reach for many social movement actors who deem themselves 'unworthy'. However, our findings suggest that this might not be the case for our participants, since many do not recognise the work they undertake as political in the first place. Moreover, participants had a number of reasons for choosing not to identify with the term 'activist'. For some, they seemed quite conservative and unwilling to challenge the systems from which they benefitted, for others, their reluctance stemmed from a concern that the term (and its associations with 'disruption') would be detrimental to their projects and derail their attempts to affect change.

Methodology

This article draws on empirical research conducted in 2018 with textile craft groups local to the region of Norwich, Norfolk. The participants were volunteers involved in

delivering craft workshops as part of a four-week craft festival (Maker's Month) organised by registered charity, The Forum Trust. The Forum Trust is an independent, self-financing educational charity, with a commitment to the local community, diversity and the promotion of life-long learning in the Eastern region of the UK. Maker's Month, unlike other craft festivals, is not a commercial endeavour. It does not operate as a market and volunteers do not sell their wares. Rather, the festival is designed to provide educational opportunities for the local community. In 2018, the event offered a broad spectrum of craft experiences, suitable for different skill levels. There were free activities, where visitors worked on small scale projects such as pompom making or knitting squares, but also bookable workshops on felt making and lacemaking, for example. In addition, there were two free exhibitions, one of stitched postcards from around the world (organised by the Embroidery Guild in celebration of the 2012 London Olympics) and the other showcasing the Radio 4 Woman's Hour Craft Prize.

Our empirical research was undertaken as part of a larger project designed to evaluate the festival and consider its role in facilitating social change^v. The event organisers developed the project design with us and acted as gatekeepers, supporting participant recruitment.^{vi} The findings presented here are those which emerged organically from discussions with lead organisers of regional textile craft groups. This article focusses solely on the material gathered from interviews with those who hold an administrative role within their organisation and have decision making powers. This allowed us to get a sense of the collective identities of the groups and the core values that inform their activities and practices from those who have the power to shape them. The organisations include the East of England branches of two national guilds, two

charities, and four other community groups. Each organisation is dedicated to a particular textile craft (weaving, spinning and dyeing, embroidery, lacemaking, knitting, stitching and quilting). They represent the largest voluntary textile organisations in Norfolk responsible for facilitating approximately 200 local groups with a collective membership of over 3000 local makers. Consequently, our sample provides insight into a much larger network of makers, and the values they stand for. Participants were offered the choice of participating in one-to-one interviews or group interviews, if either more than one member wished to be involved, or if it would make the participant more comfortable. Consequently, 7 one-to-one semi-structured interviews and 1 group interview with four participants were conducted over a period of four weeks.^{vii} The one-to-one interviews took place 'on site' during the festival. The group interview took place 20 miles outside of Norwich, in a coffee shop, situated next door to an unoccupied retail space where this particular textile craft group were based. Some interviews were conducted in the lead up to, others during the event, which meant some interviewees focused on their plans, while others could already reflect on whether these had been successful.

Before each interview, we asked participants to complete a short survey. We used closed questions to help us gather an overview of participants' age, gender, ethnicity and educational background. All participants self-identified as white, female and over-60. Their educational and socio-economic background varied. We used open questions to invite participants to reflect on the meaning of crafts in their lives and their reasons for participating in Makers' Month 2018. The last two questions provided a springboard for in-depth interviews, which were designed to elicit in-depth, reflective accounts of the role of crafts in makers' everyday lives, their involvement with the local

crafts community and their thoughts on Makers' Month 2018. We conducted, transcribed and analysed interviews and coded the data inductively; independently of each other, we immersed ourselves into the interview material and identified recurring themes, which we then discussed and refined. We then applied our list of agreed themes to the whole data set, in the process checking the suitability of our definitions and exploring relationships between themes.^{viii} The selection of demonstrative quotes below may at times appear 'superficial', but as feminist researchers, we would argue for their importance as neglected voices within debates regarding political participation, and also note that if these responses feel somewhat predictable, they speak to broader societal expectations that participants felt obliged to perform that must themselves be interrogated.

Findings

The Politics of Doing

The following section identifies the series of ways in which our participants' activities *could* be considered political. To be clear, we do not wish to discount the participants' own characterisation of their activities for, as we explain in the second part of our findings, there are consequences for adopting/rejecting labels. Nevertheless, this first section discusses the ways in which the groups are engaging in politics in the terms outlined in the literature review. That is to say, the activities described by the participants can be understood as either directly attempting to influence policy, or activities which might be understood as small everyday acts of resistance. In so doing, we argue that far from benign 'knit and natter' leisure groups, they operate much more along the lines of traditional Civil Society Organisations

(CSO). While it is perfectly possible to engage in craft as a private leisure activity, our participants belonged to groups that were constituted by, and constitutive of, the community. Moreover, our participants exist in a network of makers that often stretches beyond local neighbourhoods and reached many corners of the globe. The work they undertake is public, social and global.

The kinds of activities groups engaged in could ultimately be characterised as: providing relief and resource for the public sector, advocacy, and education. Such activities are often synonymous with activism as it operates in the charity sector (Corbett 2017). Often the activities were a combination of the three. The guilds, in particular, tended to participate in advocacy and education work to ensure the survival of their craft, and indeed this is often written into their constitutions. For example, a member of the Weavers Spinners and Dyers guild explained that one of their aims is 'to share our knowledge and skill with the general public' (Participant 7). Participating in Makers' Month therefore provided a way for a number of the groups to meet their constitutional aims. However, this is just one event in the calendar. Groups ran after school clubs, provided classes for SEN students at local FE colleges, and one group had been approached to teach 'lififers' at the local prison. Many provided demonstrations at local festivals designed to celebrate traditional crafts and while, on the surface, events such as these might appear 'quaint', rural, non-political events, it was clear from our discussions that they were in fact important opportunities for visibility and, for some, were steeped in the political history and legacy of the Arts and Crafts movement. In one exchange with a member of the Weavers, Spinners, and Dyers guild, a participant, drew a direct line between the

weavers' revolt and demonstrating as part of the 'National Wildflower Meadow' day celebrations:

Participant 7: The weavers rebelled in several countries. In England as well. Yeah, it was against mechanisation. I mean, you sit there spinning about your wheel thinking [...] the other thing I've done is... I really enjoyed demonstrating, and my mum lives in [xxx] and she's got a friend who is a farmer [...] wildflower meadows, were being drastically reduced by mechanisation of agriculture, and it actually came to the attention of Prince Charles. And he set up the Coronation Meadows. So it was in recognition of his mum being 60 years on the throne, he decided that he would have 60 different places with wildflowers. And my mum's friend, the farmer, was one of the first, and every summer on the 1st of July, it's National Wildflower Meadow day and they have a little celebration on their farm. And I go and spin.

(Interview 7)

The act of spinning during a National Wildflower Meadow celebration is perhaps an example of a quieter kind of activism, designed to provoke reflection on the environmental impact of mechanised farming, in a non-confrontational way. However, other organisations engaged in more direct-action type approaches. For example, a participant from the Embroiderers' Guild (11) explained that following a 'moan' at a board meeting about the lack of textile education in schools, the guild created a 'Campaign for Creativity' where guild members stitched their signatures into a long banner which they plan to take to 'walk to Downing Street' upon its completion.

The informal knitting and stitching community groups engaged in a kind of activism associated with providing relief and resource for the public sector; though this was often combined with educational endeavours. One member of a local knitting group detailed their ongoing projects:

Participant 4: We make Morsbags...it's making bags out of absolutely anything, and everything, to give to people- not to sell – they must be given away, and they are to replace plastic bags...it takes on the Blue Planet type scenario...I'm currently supplying a charity shop[...] At the moment we are working on lap blankets for the hospital [...] people living with dementia will find it difficult to recognise things so if they've got a personal...a nice bright colourful blanket, or whatever, on their chair, they know that that's their chair or they know that that's their bed [...] other things we're doing...I'm working on a quilt for [xxx] hospital . It's going onto a bed for bereaved mums [...] they've got a special room [...] we do get people ask us for commissions, but we don't do commissions at all... everything we do is for a charity.

(Interview 4)

When asked about the administrative labour, the participant replied necessary to produce these outputs they replied: 'we don't have a committee. Committees don't get anything done. We have an action group.' Their decision to dispense with a formal committee was indicative of the ways in which some of groups associated politics with a kind of governance that would hamper their ability to get things done. This particular

community group coordinates over 2000 local knitters to supply approximately 40 different charities in 52 countries with textile-based resources. In addition, they facilitate over 140 local knitting groups, often held in libraries ('that keeps the libraries open'). These activities were not always recognised as political, or talked about in these terms, by the organisations themselves. And yet, in the testimony above, there is an acknowledgment of environmental justice, and a deliberate act of taking up space to prevent the withdrawal of public resources (using public libraries to hold community groups). Instead, the women we interviewed highlighted how the act of making, and the pleasure derived from it, was of fundamental importance to their organisations, and informed their activities. When we began our discussions by asking participants 'what craft meant to them' or how they discovered craft, they often viewed it as a pleasurable leisure activity, one that was in opposition to 'productive' paid labour; a number of participants explained how they only gave themselves permission to craft once they'd retired, as illustrated by the following quote.

Participant 2A: Now I'm retired, I have more time. So you can sit and do this as a pastime really... it's just creating something out of...I don't really know the words actually.

Interviewer: And that's important? Making and creating something?

Participant 2A: That's it, yeah. I think so, because you know, rather than sit with your nose in a book or watch telly you feel like you're doing something positive [...] it's just made me feel a bit useful again.

(Interview 2: Group Interview)

However, as the comments from participant 2A make clear, pleasure was taken when the activity was viewed as (re)productive, providing some public good in the form of relief or resource. Consequently, it would not be useful to draw a distinction between pleasure and politics as though they exist on separate planes. Indeed, the intermingling of making, politics and pleasure was the bedrock of the Arts and Crafts movement. However, we might draw a gendered distinction from the kinds of pleasures associated with the Arts and Crafts movement (whereby the pleasure obtained from making something beautiful was justified in and of itself). For many of the group members, it was the act of making *for* someone or something that generated pleasure. In a discussion with a local knitting group, one participant explained: 'they had nobody to knit for. We've given them a reason to knit'. The desire to knit for a reason or purpose was certainly the key driver and increased the pleasure that participants took in their making. A number of our participants explained that their decision to join or start a group was that it gave them something to 'do':

Participant 2B: Something to do and it's rewarding because you're doing some good for people.

(Interview 2: Group Interview)

Participant 2A It's just made me feel a bit useful again. Rather than just sitting at home and feel useless.

(Interview 2: Group Interview)

On the one hand the comments above demonstrate that engaging in craft activities performs some kind of identity work. However, it was clear from our discussions that

the self-fulfilment afforded these women from craft, came from the knowledge that they had created a positive impact in their communities, rather than the act of creating. All the participants mentioned, unprompted, the social benefit of running/participating in a group for the local community:

Participant 2D: I was 73 when I learnt to knit. I had cancer and it was the only thing I could manage to do when going through chemo was pick up a bit of knitting or bit of crochet. And my knitting group supported me tremendously. They came and picked me up. Drove me to the library, because I couldn't walk... Because I knew how much the knitting group had helped me, I wanted to start one, so that other people in my position, who'd been through illness, or trauma, or bereavement could have somewhere to go...and support each other.

(Interview 2: Group Interview)

Participant 4: We got a big lottery grant...and we did *not* get that grant for the knitting. We got it because of the community work we did. Bringing people in [...] We had one lady who was a 24/7 carer who lost her husband. She was lost. She wouldn't dare come through the door but now she loves it. It's brought her back into the community

(Interview 4)

Participant 12: We have people referred to us from social services for mental health. If they've suffered from depression, the best thing you can do is make

lace. You're enjoying what you're doing and you're in a group. You don't have to talk to them.

(Interview 12)

While many of our participants seemed to view this activity as part of their charitable remit, and therefore not a political endeavour, we would adopt Rebecca Anne Allahyari's position, that 'charitable work [...] requires engagement with the ethical and emotional consequences of political ideologies and about the right ordering of the welfare state.' (2001: 196) Recent work by the Care Collective reminds us that the act of caring for others, and organising as a community, can be understood as a disruptive act in a world which encourages individualism and competition (Chatzidakis et al. 2020). As Joan Tronto (1995: 141) writes in her seminal work on care and politics, 'care provides the basis for the most important form of contemporary radical political thinking.' The women we interviewed certainly prioritised care (for themselves, for the community, for the planet) and this shaped the kind of activities they participated in. However, there was still a reluctance among many to understand this work as political. The following section, examines why this might have been the case, and the consequences of not adopting this label.

Doing Politics

Across interviews, participants described their work in ways that mapped onto those markers of political engagement that we see in the literature on quiet activism and craftivism. However, while some, such as the Spinners and Weavers Guild member, celebrated their guild's political activism in the past, participants seemed less keen

than us for their *current* work to be perceived as 'political'. When we described the Embroiderers' Guild's 'Campaign for Creativity' as a 'public political demonstration', the guild member we interviewed explained that 'as a charity, you have to be a bit careful where you are aligning yourself':

Interviewer: And is this the first time that you've done such, you know, kind of, public political demonstration if you like, or?

Participant 11: I suppose it's the first time we've done anything overly political...And, as a charity, you have to be a bit careful where you are aligning yourself.

(Interview 11)

Participant 11 did initially agree with our description of the campaign as 'political'. However, she quickly followed this up with a reminder of the guild's charitable status and the limits which this status places on its political activism, or rather, political activism which opposes government policy. Since the late 1970s, successive British governments have increasingly outsourced public services and have invited voluntary organisations to engage in the delivery of these services. A discourse of volunteerism as civic duty and as local empowerment emerged, masking the ways in which volunteering is expected to deliver services that are no longer provided for by the increasingly retracting state. As they picked up this work, however, voluntary organisations have come under the control of public management and lost their independence:

While the rhetoric continues to be one of 'empowerment,' 'participation,' 'localism' and 'democratic renewal,' the reality is often one of shifting responsibility for services to citizens and employees in pursuit of efficiency savings and, ultimately, a shrinking state. Thus, taken together, these developments tend toward instrumentalizing volunteer roles as a form of necessary (or even compulsory) unpaid work and away from an expression of voice in the civic sphere. For third sector organizations engaged in contractual markets, the tendency is toward encouraging engagement in delivering services and discouraging advocacy for citizen rights. (Aiken and Taylor 2019: 22)

Participant 11, briefly acknowledged the political nature of some of her guild's work, yet she did not want to be associated with overt, non-consensual political activism; a nervousness which has been noted by observers of British voluntary work (ibid.). More common across interviews than Participant 11's clear distancing from non-consensual political activism, was participants making clear statements regarding the public service their craft group was providing but without questioning why these services should be provided by them. An example of this is Participant 13. Like the majority of participants we interviewed she and her group are based in a small village in rural Norfolk. Participant 13 identified insufficient public transport and loneliness as important community issues:

Participant 13: We do try and get as many people as we can involved in this. Sometimes it's difficult. [...] So transport would be an enormous help. You know, remembering that we live in, in a rural community and some of the

villages have very few people only [...] three of the villages have schools [...] you know, six villages. There's only one shop. In all those six villages and there's few pubs. No doctors, very few buses. And so you know it's a real struggle for people to get out.

(Interview 13)

Participant 13 was clear on what her community needed, but rather than tackling the lack of public services at the level of formal politics, for example by starting a political campaign, she has taken it upon herself to provide those public services herself, at considerable personal cost:

Participant 13: You know, this, I mean, to set this up for one festival seems like a hard lot of, hard work.[...] But you know it's three years out of my life. [...] And so then you start to think well it's another two years [...] and I'm getting older. [...] I had this conversation with my husband actually. Who said 'Are you ever going to stop?' Well, I said 'The honest answer is no'. Until I have to. With my health or, you know. Or anything else. Because it just means too much to me. And, yeah, I just think it's such a benefit to people.

(Interview 13)

The women we interviewed identified with particular issues of public concern. The underfunding of public services, loneliness and the isolation of rural communities. They take up public space and demonstrate the important role older women play for

the education of future generations. They engage each other in talk about these issues of public affairs and take what we would define as political action. Yet our participants were reluctant to describe their work as political.

Their reluctance may be rooted in dominant gender discourses. Mainstream ideals of women still construct women as compassionate rather than confrontational. As Blackstone observes (2014: 352): 'mainstream ideals seem to purport that it is all right for women to care. These same ideals, however, also make clear that it is not all right for women to care in a way that might disrupt existing social institutions and social organization.' Several of the craft groups we observed clearly displayed their conformity with dominant conservative discourses, as illustrated in the centerpiece chosen for the event, an almost life-size model of the Queen.^{ix} This conservatism differentiates them from women who explicitly use their craft for feminist politics and challenges to conservative public policy (cp. Schuiling and Winge 2019; Ey 2019). Femininities and political agency are performed differently across craft communities (Harrison and Odgen 2018) and the ability to pick and choose particular causes may speak to the racial and class privilege that most our participants enjoyed. Unlike women who use their craft to make public feminist statements and disrupt dominant narratives, a number of the women in our study did not seem inclined to rock the boat. However, some gave the impression that it was easier to achieve their aims of providing relief and resource by being less confrontational.

We do not want to create a hierarchy of femininities that elevates the self-aware feminist politics of craftivsts over other, more traditional and quieter forms

of activism. However, we do believe that the women who participated in our study have something to gain by being 'louder' about their contributions to public life. Successive British governments have pushed charitable organisations and volunteering out of the arena of formal politics, while at the same time outsourcing the delivery of public services. In 2014 the (then) Civil Societies Minister Brooks Newmark declared that charities should stick 'to their knitting and doing the best they can to promote their agenda, which should be about helping others' (Charity Times 2014; see also Aiken and Taylor 2019). Our participants' free labour helps to patch up crumbling public services, often at considerable personal cost. By being 'louder' about the vital public service they provide, they could start disrupting the narrative that secures a system which exploits them.

It was evident that they wished for public recognition of their work, yet none of them suggested a switch to more radical action though they acknowledged that this was the way to gain visibility. As Participant 13 told us: : 'You know, people come and say 'Why isn't the television here? [...] Where is the television?' You know, it takes somebody to get decapitated you know to get on the television!' (Interview 13). However, for many participants financial resources and declining health placed limits on their ability to perform a 'louder' kind of politics.

One participant who had received a certain level of media attention and had been invited to take her exhibition 'on the road' and continue to raise awareness for their cause (raising money for a hospice). However, it was clear that this attention, and the subsequent labour associated with raising awareness had taken its toll on the participant, as her daughter explained:

Participant 2C: It does cost a lot of money to stay over in a hotel, and to get there on the train. And because of my mum, last year we went to Edinburgh, we ended up flying and that's quite expensive, but mum couldn't...at mum's age, she couldn't deal with a long journey.

(Interview 2: Group interview)

Conclusion

This article set out to make three contributions. First, to use original empirical data to make visible the extensive labour undertaken by these women. Our findings made clear not only the considerable relief and resource provided by these women to public services, but also the administrative burden associated with coordinating networks of volunteers. Our hope is that by recognising the significant contributions of these women to public life, we challenge discourses that serve to undermine these groups as trivial and inconsequential. Second, we made an intellectual contribution by examining their activities through a political lens. By examining the ways in which these groups operated, it was clear that each engaged in politics in myriad ways; at times, directly challenging government decisions to remove arts and craft from the curriculum, while on other occasions, enacting a kind of quiet politics associated with charitable action. Our analysis of the groups' activities captured the complexities of their practices and led us to believe that, like Allahyari (2001), charitable action and social movement activism do not exist as separate spheres of activity, but rather both require an engagement with the state and governmental politics, encouraging a

collective response. It was clear from our findings that, at the centre of all of the groups, was an ethics of care which drove their political participation (Tronto 1995).

While we felt that the work on quiet activism provided a useful framework to understand the kind of activities our participants engaged in, we found ourselves uneasy with the idea that activities could be considered political, without the consent of the actor. To do so seemed to both disempower our participants, and potentially overlook the complicated relationship many of our participants had with politics. Consequently, our final contribution was made on a methodological level, as we sought to employ a feminist agenda when approaching our data. This required us to ask what is at stake in the process of adopting or rejecting an 'activist' label. Did rejecting the label of 'activist', or refusing to identify work as political, mean that the labour these women provided was taken for granted in some way? There seemed to us, to be a danger of being too 'quiet' when it came to activism. Engaging in a 'quieter' kind of politics potentially leads to a silencing that feels compliant/complicit. While these women provided significant amounts of support and resource to their local community, they were often out of pocket, and exhausted. Indeed, what emerged from our findings was that, contrary to Bobel's (2007) work, there was an reluctance to adopt the label, not because it implied a perfect standard, but rather because it could hamper their efforts to achieve their aims. The participants we interviewed identified a number of needs within their community and their efforts were geared towards meeting those needs as quickly as possible. For a number of participants, expanding their aims to encourage more meaningful, sustained change required additional labour that they felt could be better spent elsewhere. To be sure, work within the field of quiet activism seeks to expand our understanding of what counts as politics,

and in so doing, ensure that the everyday activities that citizens engage in to affect change on a day to day basis is recognised as important. Such a project can helpfully explore the ways in which the practices undertaken by our participants (often coded as 'feminine'/'women's work') has not always been welcome in activist spaces as legitimate methods of political participation. We certainly stand in solidarity with this project, but it is also the case, that a little more noise is required for these practices to achieve the recognition they deserve. We write this article in the midst of a global pandemic in which the UK government's reliance on local communities to provide aid has been brought into sharp focus. Our concern as we negotiate the economic and social impact of the pandemic is that, without a little more shouting, those who already provide so much with so little recognition will bear the enormous cost.

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ⁱ Indeed, the Charity Commission for England and Wales issues guidance regarding the kinds of political activities charity groups can engage in suggesting that there must be some separation: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/610137/CC9.pdf (accessed 16/12/20).

ⁱⁱ We do not rehearse the debates regarding the cultural turn in the definition of the politics in detail here as others have done so elsewhere. For an expanded discussion see Hay 2007; Street, Inthorn and Scott 2013.

ⁱⁱⁱ Several of these handkerchiefs signed by inmates in Royal Holloway survived and are on display at the Museum of London

^{iv} <http://craftivism.com/> (accessed 29/11/20)

^v This involved over 200 surveys with service users, participant observation of 7 workshops, and 17 interviews with workshop facilitators.

^{vi} As we worked in collaboration with the event organisers we were able to ensure that that all requirements regarding the health, safety and wellbeing of attendees were met. All participants were briefed about the research and able to leave the project at any time. Data has been fully anonymised and stored securely. The project received ethical approval from the University of East Anglia.

^{vii} The sample size is comparable to other studies exploring the role of quiet activism within specific regional settings: Askins (2014) examines findings from two participants within a larger network of residents and asylum seekers in the North East of England. Hall (2018) draws on empirical findings from 6 families affected by austerity measures in Greater Manchester.

^{viii} Themes which emerged organically across all interviews included activism, wellbeing, care, community and issues around labour.

^{ix} This conformity continued in 2020 with a knitted version of the Queen’s Sandringham estate.