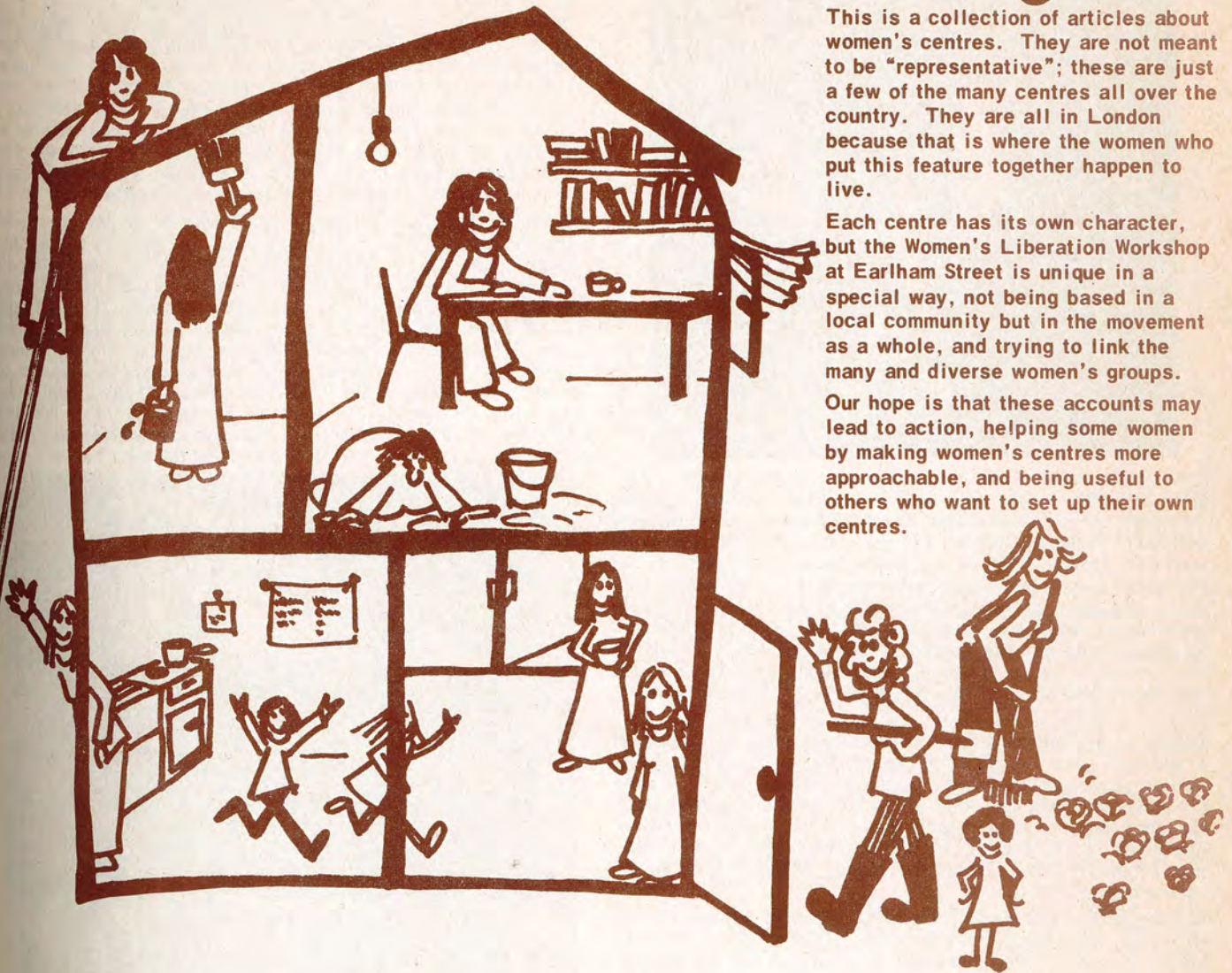


this is the house that Jill is building...

This is a collection of articles about women's centres. They are not meant to be "representative"; these are just a few of the many centres all over the country. They are all in London because that is where the women who put this feature together happen to live.

Each centre has its own character, but the Women's Liberation Workshop at Earham Street is unique in a special way, not being based in a local community but in the movement as a whole, and trying to link the many and diverse women's groups.

Our hope is that these accounts may lead to action, helping some women by making women's centres more approachable, and being useful to others who want to set up their own centres.



one particular place to go

Who wants to take their children to live on a squat?

To share a small room with two other women and their children? To share one stove, one cold tap and one toilet (when it works) with 20 others? with almost no electricity, almost no heating, boarded up windows, a hole in the front door instead of a letterbox? threatening phone calls, terrifying nights of repeated break-ins by men who are violent? No pipe-dream it seems, and yet the house is always full. Some have to be turned away. Only those who are desperate are always taken in.

Women come from all over the country, even the far North, to live crowded together in this large, cold house, with its faceless, boarded exterior and uncollected rubbish lying in stinking heaps by the door. The children share one big room, and go to the local school or play-group. The mothers share two or three to a room and when the kids come home there may be eight or nine people in a room, washing, changing nappies, preparing food, seeing friends, playing around, trying to get to sleep. "Slumber drops" are dosed out to the kids when it gets too much. The house is damp and bare, with a few naked light bulbs, peeling walls, improvised curtains hung on lines across the windows. It was squatted last September, but the council refused even basic help with hot water and electricity. As a result what equipment the women have got—e.g. the fridge—cannot be used on the already overloaded circuit.

Women come to the house because they are desperate to get themselves and their children away from the violence of their husbands, and have nowhere else to go. Injuries include broken bones, teeth, black eyes, deep gashes, miscarriages. Rape (not illegal with a wife) often adds an unwanted pregnancy to the list, and there are worse stories of premeditated violence. Most of the children seem very disturbed. Some wander around alone in silence, others become hysterical if their mother so much as leaves the room. Nevertheless they obviously feel a relief of tension in the relatively safe environment, once they get used to each other, though they all seem scared at the mention of men.

The women too seem to benefit from a certain sense of security, not to be had staying with a friend or relative who might not relish the constant risk of a husband turning up and the police failing to. Police reluctance to take action in what they regard as "domestic problems" is based on the fear that by the time the matter goes to court there will have been a reconciliation and the woman will not give evidence. It's a circular problem, because women who know they are unlikely to get protection from police and magistrates are unwilling to testify against a man who is violent and with whom they will probably have to continue to share a home, a man whom a short prison sentence will do little to mollify.

continued over



Even in the relative safety of the house the women have had great difficulty to get the police to respond to calls for help. One man set his alsatian on the children until they and his wife were returned to him. Chiswick Women's Aid had £200 worth of damage done to the house by one husband before the police came. Since a recent complaint to Scotland Yard, the police have at least been prepared to come, but often leave again when the man runs off. The women described handing round carving knives and keeping watch all night, not daring to go to sleep. All fear their husbands finding out where they are, and this can often be a reason for moving on.

Money, though scarcely much in evidence, was not so much of a problem, once the SS could be got to pay up. Though the weekly payments are hardly grandiose—about £12-15 + rent for a woman with two kids—for many it was the first time that they had had a dependable income. One woman's husband had given her £5 a week for herself and three children. She was probably lucky. When the money didn't go round, he accused her of stealing it.

Women stay at the house for anything from two hours (those who find the conditions there, on balance, worse than at home) to two or three months. The stronger ones are usually those who have been there longest. New arrivals are often suffering from shock. Many come as they are, without even a change of clothes, and may have to remain in the same ones until others can be found, or other women help them collect things from home. They usually want to be alone with their children, something that is impossible because of lack of space. For most it is their first experience of community life and problems begin immediately, with lack of privacy and basic facilities. Some women see coming to the house as a rare chance to get out, and dump their kids on the others, sometimes for days at a time. Things inevitably get ripped



off, especially by women who only stay a day or two, and one when she finally left took all the light bulbs with her. The worst problem is probably the alienation of women who are unable to talk about their experiences. One woman, who arrived with her arms slashed by her husband, drew more and more into herself, until one night she developed deep hysteria and was taken off.

Problems are thrashed out at weekly meetings of women now resident in the house and those closely connected in setting it up and keeping it going. Recently house meetings have been largely concerned with setting up a new house in the area. At last the local council (whose own social services are responsible for referring many of the women to the house for want of anywhere else) have recognised the problem and agreed to provide two empty houses with a "four year life" to be knocked together, giving bathrooms etc, conversions to be paid by rent. They should be ready in three months and conditions will be much better, though the women will have to fight council attempts to impose various controls.

However, the council, together with the law, is much to blame for the women having to leave home in the first place. One family, one unit, one rent book, usually in the husband's name, means if anyone leaves it has to be the wife who has to take her children if she does not want to risk losing them. Julia Mainwaring has recently started a campaign to pressure the council to give joint tenancies (see *Peace News*, April 26). At the moment every encouragement is given to women appealing to the council to return to their husbands. Splitting of families is seen as exacerbating the housing problem. But the "problem" of rehousing women and their children could be solved if it was the man who had to leave



when he maltreated his family rather than the family. Some local authorities do actually transfer the tenancy to the wife, though even after divorce they are under no compulsion to do so, and this almost never happens with unmarried couples. So getting re-housed once they feel ready to go can be very hard for the women. Though some boroughs respond well, most don't. One woman arrived at the house six months pregnant, and had still not been re-housed by the time her baby was born. He caught scarlet fever, and the probation officer took her in until something could be done. There is a similar problem at the moment with a baby who caught pneumonia at the house and has had to return there from hospital.

The first Women's Aid was started at Chiswick. Since then many others have started up or are in planning stages. Though they are doing a good job in providing a refuge from which to piece life together again and helping women to realise the strength they have in fighting together, a much more basic change in laws and attitudes is necessary. Both private and council landlords must be made to recognise a woman's right to her own home. The police should recognise the right of a wife to protection as at least equal to that of any other citizen. Thirdly, it should not be necessary for married women to start divorce proceedings in order to obtain protection from the courts. (In practice, neither an injunction keeping a husband out of the home, nor emergency legal aid, are available unless divorce proceedings are started at the same time.)