

Suffragette march near the offices of
the Women's Social and Political Union
in an area now part of the LSE campus



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The Women's Library @ LSE

When the news came through that London Metropolitan University could no longer support the world-famous Women's Library, **Elizabeth Chapman** leapt into action. Here she explains why she was so keen to bring this remarkable collection to LSE and what its acquisition will mean for the future.

For a librarian, the news that any collection is in danger is a rallying cry to action – and what a collection this is. It developed from the suffrage movement and now includes over 60,000 books and pamphlets and more than 3,500 periodicals, as well as press cuttings. In addition it includes 500 personal and organisational archives, as well as over 5,000 objects such as posters, photographs, badges and banners.

To have lost such a valuable collection of women's struggle would have been unthinkable.

For much of the last year I have worked tirelessly with colleagues at LSE to put in a strong bid to save the

collection and was delighted when it was announced in late September that LSE had been successful. In many ways, bringing the Women's Library collection to LSE is bringing it home. The archives in both libraries are largely from the late 19th century onwards. Campaigning archives at the Women's Library, like those from the Greenham Common Women and Women in Black, complement those already at LSE from CND. The joint collection of campaign badges will be superb. LSE also has the remaining records of the founding at LSE of the Gay Liberation Front (see 'LSE icons', page 27). And it has the Feminist Review Collective from the 1970s, as

well as the largest UK archive of lesbian and gay activism. So the synergy is clear: this really will make a collection greater than the sum of its parts. Finally, we can reunite the papers of Baroness Seear, former chair of the Fawcett Society, currently split between our two collections.

As work progressed on the bid, I was overwhelmed by the support from academics to act. For the Department of Economics, the new material will support work on gender, employment and pay; for Law it will mean even better resources for their legal biography project (the Women's Library has the shoe buckles belonging to the first woman KC). For Sociology, there will be support for



Architect's drawing of proposed entrance to the Women's Library @ LSE

their new graduate course on contemporary families; for the Government Department, resources for their work on London and, of course, elections. For Management it will assist their work on Equal Opportunities and the struggle for women to gain greater rights at work. For the Gender Institute it will illuminate all their projects.

Sadly, we were unable to save the building in which the collection was housed and I understood the frustration at this. However, we can now ensure that the collection is accessible to scholars and the public. As former students of LSE you will know that the LSE Library is open to the public, seven days a week during term time and five days a week in the holidays. However, this often comes as a surprise to those outside the School, and we have been keen to stress just how accessible we are. This was always the vision behind the LSE Library: to preserve one of the greatest collections of social science material in the world – for everyone.

As a result of our successful bid, the Women's Library now has a central London site, and we are in the process of creating a newly made dedicated reading room with adjacent exhibition space. We will provide another room suitable for using primary documents with students from universities and schools. We also plan exhibitions in our School atrium and I can see this forming part of the now well-established LSE Literary Festival.

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We will also work to digitise the collection. This is hugely important for colleagues across the world keen to understand the extraordinary women's movement as pioneered and nurtured in the UK.

I look forward to welcoming visitors to the collection and to sharing the excitement with alumni in future years. ■



Elizabeth Chapman
is director of LSE Library Services.



Covent Garden Flower Women, photograph by John Thomson from *Street Life in London*, 1877, from LSE's rare book collection