

# 'Young people today insist on having their freedom': The YWCA Scotland's responses to shifting cultural attitudes and behaviours, 1949-1987

## Introductory overview

The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) Archive 11906, held at the National Library of Scotland (NLS), consists of 176 folders dating from 1902 to 1989, although the majority of material relates to the period between 1960s and the 1980s. This report focuses on a selection of eleven folders covering the years from 1949 to 1987.

The YWCA was founded in 1855 and, following disagreements over constitutional changes, YWCA Scotland separated from its British counterpart in 1924. In 2023, the organisation was rebranded as the Young Women's Movement (YWM), a secular organisation, as it is known today. Historically, the YWCA Scotland provided a wide range of services, including hostels for women seeking work in cities and towns, prayer groups, sports clubs, missionary activities, field trips and leadership training. These initiatives sought to achieve the organisations explicit goals, 'To proclaim and promote a standard of Christian living is still sought amongst the women and girls of our city' and 'To help young women mentally, physically and spiritually take their place in the modern world.'<sup>1</sup> The records that have been retained vary significantly, including both internal and external documentation such as annual reports, financial material, correspondence, magazines, newsletters, minutes of meetings, leaflets, posters, newspaper clippings and organisational documents from across Scotland. Consequently, a range of issues relating to religiosity in this period is covered

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<sup>1</sup>Acc.11906/111 - 119 General Correspondence: Acc. 11906/11 General Annual Meetings

in these sources, as well as the ways the YWCA Scotland worked to support the spiritual, intellectual, social and physical welfare of young Christian women. Although there are opportunities for numerous routes of research within the archive, this report focuses on four key themes: secularisation, protests, alcoholism and hostel conflicts.

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Archive material and a brief summary of contents:

**Acc. 11906/7 National Annual Reports 1960-1987 (1968-1971 missing):**

Annual Reports and Statement of Accounts provide an overview of important events that took place, concerns for the world and how they seek to resolve them, 'Glimpses from clubs', building maintenance that took place, YWCA successes, membership prices and financial matters.

**Acc. 11906/9: Edinburgh Annual Reports 1966-1985:**

Annual Reports: provides an overview of what has happened that year, issues they faced, prayers, missionary work completed (mostly in South Africa), hostel experiences, club successes.

**Acc. 11906/10: Glasgow Annual Reports 1972-1978, 1881-1982**

Annual Reports: discusses concerns of the modern world, provides an overview of difficulties and successes in different clubs around Glasgow; list of members of general committee financial reports; expression of thanks; selling, buying and maintenance of buildings.

**Acc. 11906/11 General Annual Meetings: 11 Annual meetings materials, Annual reports, Invitations, programs, 1950 - 1979:**

A range of leaflets, handbills, hymns, invitations to annual meetings and conferences. Annual reports (Excluding Glasgow and Edinburgh), organisational goals.

**Acc. 11906/19 - 22 National General and Executive Committee: 20 Minutes of Executive Committee, February 1966- February 1983:**

Meeting minutes: discussion of repairs, resignations, vacancies in roles, interviews, organisational documents about events, financial paperwork, and invitations to executive meetings.

**Acc. 11906/28: Minutes of General Executive Committee of Edinburgh, Dec 1964-1981:**

Meeting Minutes: discussions relating to hostels and clubs, conflicts between residence and hostel owners, process of acceptance into hostels.

**Acc. 11906/33: YWCA of Scotland Youth Committee Minutes and related papers 1970-1972:**

Meeting minutes containing interaction with the Scottish Education Department, 'Real Life Magazine' religious free paper, proposed certificate scheme for ages 9-11/12-15, 'Young Peoples Page' which advertises ways young can raise money for clubs such as creating Jewellery boxes, 'Youth Sheet' by the Prestonpans club: how to make easter eggs and overview of two guest talks they had, organisational documentation including a list of clubs available with YWCA alongside their associated leaders and dates of meeting.

**Acc. 11906/34 Minutes and related papers outreach Committee (1976-81):**

Newspaper clippings: fit for life' scheme, advertisement for clubs, 'tea hour' the YWCA provided. Alcoholism reports, rally leaflets, comic strips warning people of the dangers of drinking. Letters and newsletters relating to the Scottish Adult Literacy agency. Meeting minutes, leaflet about Britain losing its values, posters for events such as film club and 'vacation Bible school.'

**Acc. 11906/111 - 119 General Correspondence: 111 Secretary's Correspondence folder, 1957 - 1980:**

Newspaper clippings of advertisements for YWCA with pictures, articles about YWCA's concern that media was impacting negatively on youth,

Letters between hostel and residence relating to conflict in meeting minutes  
Acc. 11906/28. An annual report for Edinburgh 1958, a letter of declaration  
membership to YWCA.

**Acc. 11906/168: YWCA Magazine 1949-1952:**

YWCA of Scotland Magazines: Discussion of their missionary work, conflict  
between faith and work for women, resignations, religious inspirational  
stories, entertainment.

**Acc. 11906/170 YWCA Newsletter 1974-1987:**

Monthly Newsletter: outlines what is happening in each branch of YWCA  
Scotland that month, 'requests for prayer' for branches who are facing  
difficulty, discussion of important meetings and dates, issues within hostels  
and subsequent resolutions. Alongside is correspondence from each branch  
that is then rewritten within the newsletters.

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## Thematic sections:

### Response to secularisation

Between the 1950s and the 1970s Britain experienced a process of mass secularisation, this was marked by religion losing power and influence in everyday life, culture, and identity.<sup>2</sup> Women played a significant role in this shift, with many rejecting traditional expectations surrounding domesticity, such as marriage and motherhood, which were upheld within scripture.<sup>3</sup> Expanding opportunities in employment, further education, reproductive health and the changing trends in marriage all correlated with declining levels of religiosity.<sup>4</sup> These developments were connected to the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM), which campaigned for social freedoms and contributed to important legislative changes during this period.<sup>5</sup> Youth culture also had a considerable impact on secularisation through changing attitudes towards premarital sex, recreational drug use and the increasing availability of non-religious entertainment.<sup>6</sup> This resulted in a growth of distrust between young people and religious institutions.<sup>7</sup>

The involvement of young people and women in these cultural shifts made the YWCA's goals of providing spiritual guidance increasingly difficult. Folders 9,10 and 11 in Acc. 11906 contain annual reports that outline the organisation's concerns about secularism, describes their goals, and a

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<sup>2</sup> Steve Bruce, 'The secularisation of Scotland' in the *Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* vol.14 (2014) p.193, Brown, *Humanism*, p.2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6.

<sup>4</sup> Callum G Brown, ., 'The Battle for Christian Britain: Sex, Humanists and Secularisation, 1945-1980', (Cambridge University Press, 2019) p.21, Eleanor, Bell, and Linda Gunn. , '*The Scottish Sixties: Reading, Rebellion, Revolution?*', (Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2013), p.25.

<sup>5</sup> Sarah F. Browne, *The women's liberation movement in Scotland*, Gender in history (Manchester University Press, 2014) p.2.

<sup>6</sup> Charlie Lynch, 'Moral Panic in the Industrial Town: Teenage 'Deviancy' and Religious Crisis in Central Scotland c. 1968–9', *20th Century British History*, 32..3 (2021) p.372.

<sup>7</sup> Brown, Callum G, *Battle* p.26.

summary of how they sought to prevent the spread of 'anti-Christian' behaviours. The 1966 annual report which states 'Everywhere, the impact of secularism tends to make religion more irrelevant to the masses'<sup>8</sup> highlights their worries about declining religiosity. This concern persisted, and by 1973-74 the annual reports comment on youth culture stating 'Many young people today are mixed up and disturbed' in reference to drugs, drinking, violence, and vandalism.<sup>9</sup> As late as 1978, the reports continue to express anxiety about the strain of modern life, referring to these challenges as a 'New mode of living among the girls.'<sup>10</sup>

Situating the YWCA within this wider context of secularisation, helps to highlight how these broader social changes shaped the organisation's reactions and responses documented within the archive, particularly in relation to protests, alcoholism and conflict within hostels.

### Protests and resistance to the sexual Liberation

In a religious context, secularisation was seen as a direct threat to 'British values', which were rooted in religious behavioural standards and defined by a code of sexual decency within scripture.<sup>11</sup> In response, many Christian conservatives began acting as 'moral vigilantes', actively seeking out incidents of perceived sexual misdemeanour and reporting them to relevant state authorities.<sup>12</sup> The moral policing extended to the regulation of sex shops and of recreational drug use,<sup>13</sup> both recurring themes within the YWCA archive as seen through their protests and campaigns.

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<sup>8</sup> Acc. 11906/9 Edinburgh Annual Reports.

<sup>9</sup> Acc. 11906/10 Glasgow Annual Reports.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10.

<sup>11</sup> Brown., *Battle* pp.3, 8.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.8,15.

A significant example of Christian moral policing of sexual misconduct appears in folder 34, which contains letters and newspaper clippings concerning protests against a sex shop in Leith. A letter dated the 5th of March 1981, written by the YWCA's National Secretary to Edinburgh Council, registered a 'strong protest against' the recently opened sex shop in Leith. Stating 'As a Christian organisation, committed to fostering the moral welfare of young people, we are gravely concerned that such a shop should exist in this district.'<sup>14</sup> The YWCA then asked the council to have the premises closed down as soon as possible. This reiterates a rising concern about secularisation and the desire to protect young people from what YWCA considered unspiritual material. A subsequent reply from Edinburgh council acknowledges that the goods sold may be undesirable to some but 'Accordingly there are no powers under the above legislation to intervene in this matter.'<sup>15</sup> Among the material is a letter written by the feminist group 'The Edinburgh Women's Centre', titled 'Why I object to the sex shop in Leith Walk.'<sup>16</sup> Their protest argued that the shop promoted violence against women, stating 'It is not about sex. It is about selling degrading, dehumanising images of women to men... Men's sexuality seems to be built of brutality and power.'<sup>17</sup> Although the YWCA at this point in time worked on the periphery of feminist activism and had objections concerning secularisation, these sources show an overlapping responsibility of protecting women.

Public opposition to sex shops was not uncommon during this period, which saw an active public debate surrounding the development of The Indecent

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<sup>14</sup> Acc. 11906/34 Outreach Committee.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p.34.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p.34.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*,p.34.

Display (Control) Act 1981. This Act introduced a new criminal offence consisting of '...making, causing, or presenting the public display of any indecent matter.'<sup>18</sup> Growing concern was not about the indecent displays themselves but their increasing accessibility. This Act sought to target public nuisance, such as posters, sex shop window displays and adult magazines in shops.<sup>19</sup> Within folder 34, there is a newspaper clipping featuring one of the shop's owners James Sharp, titled 'In defence of sex shops.' Sharp acknowledges the backlash against the sex industry and how it has been fuelled by the Indecent Display Bill, listing multiple reasons why his shop did not deserve the negative reactions.<sup>20</sup> It is likely that the YWCA viewed this sex shop as a symbol of the increasing availability of indecent images for young people. So, in protesting they reflected and reinforced anti sex shop rhetoric that was circulating at the time, as well as responding to secularisation through Christian policing.

### Combating alcoholism in youth

The YWCA supported a range of initiatives, from the Scottish Adult Literacy agency to the 'Fit for Life' scheme. However, a recurring theme within the archive is the organisation's concern about alcohol and drug consumption, particularly among teenagers. This anxiety likely reflects the relaxed attitudes of young people towards alcohol and recreational drugs.<sup>21</sup> These consumption patterns were interpreted as a breakdown of discipline and often caused 'moral panic' within communities.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> R. T. H. Stone Out of Sight, out of Mind? The Indecent Displays (Control) Act 1981, *The Modern Law Review*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (Jan., 1982), p.62.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.64, 66.

<sup>20</sup> Acc. 11906/34 Outreach Committee.

<sup>21</sup> Lynch, Moral, p.372.

<sup>22</sup> Fossey, E, Loretto W, Alcohol and youth, M Plant - Alcohol problems in the community, (Routledge, 2002).

Folders 33 and 34 contain documents that express these anxieties surrounding adolescent drinking and drug use. Within these folders are magazines, rally leaflets, reports and comic strips that demonstrate the YWCA's concern and their subsequent reactions. Folder 33 contains 'Real Life Magazine' (Edinburgh 1972) which contains religious messages, imagery and stories, but most notably a source titled 'It Could Blow Out All the Circuits, Suicide's Note Warns of Mescaline.'<sup>23</sup> This article tells the narrative of Andy Anderson from Gainesville, Florida, who took his own life following mental health difficulties caused by his use of the psychedelic drug Mescaline.<sup>24</sup> The letter ends with a warning, 'To those of my fitness who might also think about learning about themselves with mind expanding drugs - don't.'<sup>25</sup> It is clear that the YWCA used this material to try to deter young people from drug use by expressing its dangers.

This theme of deterrence continues into folder 34, which contains a comic strip titled 'It's your round!' by Longman Thinkstrips. The narrative follows an underage girl who is drinking alcohol, this results in her getting in an argument with her friend and a subsequent motorbike accident.<sup>26</sup> This strip acts as a warning of the dangers of alcohol, drink driving as well as the strain excessive drinking can have on relationships. One line within the source reinforces this message, 'That was the drink talking, too much can make you do things you regret later.'<sup>27</sup> The comic strip, traditionally aimed at young people, can be seen to be promoting the importance of alcohol only in moderation, reinforcing the YWCA's moral views at the time.

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<sup>23</sup> Acc. 11906/33 Youth Committee.

<sup>24</sup> Acc. 11906/33 Youth Committee.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.33.

<sup>26</sup> Acc. 11906/34 Outreach Committee.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p.34.

Another source within folder 34 is a Rally booklet by the Scottish Total Abstiners Rally in Edinburgh 1978, featuring Rev. J. Cameron who appeared as a guest speaker. The rhetorical questions printed on the back reflect concerns of the time 'Are you concerned about our young people and their drinking habits???' The source then directs readers to their rally as a source of resolution.<sup>28</sup> Although the YWCA did not necessarily produce these materials themselves, they shared this concern for young people's relationship with alcohol. By seeking out material that issued warnings and promoted abstinence, there was a clear attempt to counteract these cultural shifts.

### **Evolving social freedoms within Hostels**

The YWCA actively supported the expansion of work opportunities for women, this is shown through the establishment of hostels designed to accommodate working women. However, the archive also reveals the limitations of the YWCA's support for broader cultural shifts affecting women's lives. By looking at internal documentation in folder 28, specifically looking at hostels, we can see how during a period of rising secularisation, the YWCA either embraced or resisted increasing social freedoms for women.

Meeting minutes from August 1974, found in folder 28, exemplify the extent to which women's social lives were monitored, as well as which elements of social change were tolerated or discouraged. The meeting minutes state 'Owing to an unpleasant incident in the hostel, Mrs Brown asked if the hostel could be closed at 12 midnight instead of leaving the door unbolted all night. It was agreed that this should be done.'<sup>29</sup> The vague

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.,p.34.

<sup>29</sup> Acc.11906/28 Executive Committee.

nature of the term 'Unpleasant incident's' suggests a moral or religious misdemeanour involving one of the residents. In response, restrictions were placed on who could enter or exit the hostel. The introduction of new restrictions shows that when residents acted in ways considered incompatible with the YWCA's religious values, their freedom would be restricted. However, meeting minutes and correspondence from August and September show that residents of the hostel objected to the closing of the door at midnight. Arguing the reasons someone may be home late such as a dance, festival, show, late public transport or taxi. This protest illustrates that the women were allowed to socialise in secular spaces and expected to be able to exercise autonomy within the hostel. In response the committee stated, 'It is agreed that the door would not be bolted at 12 midnight and the girls would come in with their keys, but this would be a trial period.'<sup>30</sup> This was under the premise that the women were asked to try to be in by midnight. This source highlights how increasing social freedoms for women were permitted until they went beyond the moral judgement of YWCA, at which point they were revoked. The subsequent conflict resolution reveals how the YWCA tried to adapt to cultural changes.

Further documents in folder 28 also reveal additional restrictions surrounding who was allowed to stay at the hostels. In one case, a divorcee was denied admission. In another, a woman requested permission for her girlfriend to stay in her room, but she was refused, in response to her letter of complaint, the YWCA stated that this decision is up to the discretion of the warden.<sup>31</sup> The archive reveals the boundaries of YWCA's tolerance for cultural shifts in areas such as divorce, sexuality and other 'unfortunate

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p.28.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p.28.

incidents' which were seen to transgress the organisation's moral and religious limits.

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## Conclusion

This report analyses a selection of materials located in the National Library of Scotland archive (archive number Acc. 11906). The materials selected include; annual Reports, newspaper articles, correspondence, leaflets, strips, Magazines, meeting minutes. Together, these sources reveal how YWCA'S religious aims influenced their varying tolerance for cultural change, which are expressed in both internal and external documentation.

The period selected, from the 1960s to the 1980s, was marked by huge social and cultural change. This report focuses on debates surrounding secularisation, the Women's Liberation Movement, and the Sexual Liberation Movement. Alongside these broader changes an increasing sense of anxiety emerged within Christian organisations such as the YWCA, particularly concerning declining religiosity among young people and women. The archive material from this period reflects these concerns and provides examples of YWCA's responses to secularisation and wider social change. For example, the protests against a sex shop in Leith, along with the organisation's subsequent interactions with the Edinburgh women's group, illustrates the YWCA's position on the fringes of the Women's Liberation Movement and its engagement with debates surrounding the Indecent Displays Act. The range of media produced to deter youth drinking demonstrates their attempts to counteract increasingly relaxed attitudes towards alcohol and drugs. Finally, their changing hostel restrictions, introduced in response to increasing social freedoms for women, shows how the organisation sought to adapt or resist cultural change that did not align with their Christian values. The materials examined in this report demonstrate how the YWCA continually adapted and resisted cultural shifts such as sexual liberation, youth culture, and feminist activism during the period (1949 -1987). The YWCA'S response at the time can be argued to be shaped by the

organisations' concern regarding secularisation and the decline of religiosity, concerns which are highlighted regularly in the YWCA's annual reports.

This archive report provides an insight into the key issues impacting the YWCA during the years (c. 1949-1987), a period which contrasts greatly with the organisation today, which exists as the Young Women's Movement, a secular organisation that promotes and protects the leadership and rights of young women and girls in Scotland. The YWM provides a platform for young women to amplify their voices, effect meaningful change and build confidence. Through these resources, the YWM aims to collectively challenge inequalities and support social shifts towards a more equal society. As the movement continues to grow and develop, one hundred years on from its inception, this report provides an insight into some of the key social changes which impacted the organisation's history and have shaped the movement it is today.

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