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Women Are Taking to the Streets to Save London's Beloved Feminist Library

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Feb 26 2016 2:55 PM



All images by Mari Shibata

One of the UK's most significant archives of women's history is facing eviction after landlords doubled its rent. We went down to a protest on Wednesday to speak to distraught volunteers and visitors about the potential closure of the landmark.

Around a hundred women gathered in London on Wednesday to protest the possible eviction of the Feminist Library, one of the most beloved and culturally significant archives of women's history in the UK. Armed with books written by women and banners to save the library and 'herstory,' the protesters took the solitary activity of reading to the streets.

According to historians, the Library is essentially irreplaceable. Opened in 1975 in Southwark, south London, the historic archive focuses its efforts on preserving rare materials of the second-wave movement from the late 1960s to the 1990s, with an aim to bridge the gap from the Suffragettes to contemporary feminism.

"I used the Feminist Library for research my PhD, which has resulted in my recently published book, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement in England*," said Dr. Natalie Thompson, a historian at the University of Wolverhampton. "Without a doubt, I would not have been able to write my book without using the unique archival resources of the Feminist Library. Its loss would represent an unimaginable blow to future generations of historians."

The 'read-in' was staged outside the building where Southwark Council's annual budget meeting was taking place. The council is threatening to close the Library down unless it agrees to a hike in its annual rent from £12,000 to £30,000. Volunteers are now scrambling to save the non-profit library and are looking to raise £40,000 in emergency funding to secure a new home. Almost [15,000 people](#) have signed a petition calling on Southwark to withdraw its eviction notice, and authors like [Margaret Atwood](#) have [tweeted in support](#) of the Library.

"We spent over forty years building this precious archive of stories from the women's liberation movement and its survival is now under threat," said library volunteers, who used a creaking megaphone as they led the protest. "The council have issued a rent hike—almost double of what we pay now—just two weeks ago, asking us to move out two weeks later by March 1, the start of Women's History Month.."

One by one, women read lines from books they had brought with them to the protest, their voices amplified to council employees walking out of the building at the end of their working day.

A protester even carried a small shelf of books on her back throughout the read-in. "These have all been purchased second hand from the library to help fund its work," Ninna Haukka said, adding that she had been inspired by the [walking libraries](#) of the 30s and 40s. With her 11-year-old daughter beside her, she added: "I'm devastated by the news as a local resident and volunteer at the library. I'm originally from Finland, where gender equality is very important.

"Although I've been living in London for 17 years, this library helped me keep in touch with these roots of mine. The library has become a special place, where I not only read great literature, but also meet other like-minded people meet to discuss issues that are important to us."

"Many women's organizations that serve the community have been forced to close in the current climate of austerity, including the Lambeth Women's Project and Peckham Black Women's Center," volunteer library manager Emma Jennings told Broadly. "Forcing the Feminist Library Library to pay market rent immediately is another symptom of this. We also have paperwork that says our building is not fit for purpose and that it needs renovation for it to be on the market, hence why we are shocked by the sudden increase."





Throughout the evening, women come forward to describe how the eviction would affect them. "It's particularly important we save the Feminist Library as a venue for Irish women to discuss issues around abortion, which is still a taboo as it's illegal back in Ireland," said Marianne Larray of London Irish Women's Network. "Without it, groups like ours and Speaking of Imelda won't have a safe space to discuss how we can make England the legal destination for abortion."

The founder of feminist zine [Road Femme](#) said that the Feminist Library had inspired her to start her publication. "Without the Feminist Library, my work would not exist," Zahra Swanzy declared. "Discovering the original texts of women who pursued DIY culture from the 80s such as *Spare Rib* helped me appreciate the physical value of the words that inspire us. If we can't save this library, not only will the presence of my work disappear with it, there won't be a space for like-minded peers to be emotional and to heal just like I did."

With news that the petition to the council had been submitted and the case was to be discussed at a cabinet meeting next month, the protest ended with a small glimpse of hope. Protesters welcomed a [supportive blogpost](#) by Southwark MP Neil Colyne and events expected to take place at the library past the eviction deadline were advertised.

"I'm from [Iran](#), where women were arrested to save their libraries in Tehran," says Maryam, another protester at the event. "We must save the archives that document the history of women here in London, on behalf of women who couldn't realize that elsewhere in the world."