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Introduction:

Why, more than a century after the suffragettes risked imprisonment, violence, and even their lives, are women still fighting for equality? How has the fight for women's rights, from the suffragette movement to modern feminism, shaped the portrayal and presence of women in today's society? These questions lie at the heart of this dissertation, which explores the intersection between historical feminist movements and their influence on the world. These women, many of whom faced violence, arrest, hunger strikes, and even death, were seen as pioneers of a long-overdue social revolution. However, over 100 years later, women across the world still find themselves battling inequality. This dissertation seeks to explore the persistent nature of gender inequality. Despite the legal and political advances made by feminist movements across the decades, inequalities remain embedded in structures and culture. The fight for equality is far from over.

I aim to examine the historical and sociopolitical context underpinning the ongoing struggle for women's equality. To begin, I will analyse the role of the suffragettes and the significant impact of early feminist movements. Then I will investigate the development of feminism through various waves and ideological shifts. I will also explore factors concerning gender equality, social conformity, and the influence of peer pressure in both reinforcing and challenging societal norms. Furthermore, I will investigate the psychological phenomenon of the 'bystander effect' and its relevance to both historical and contemporary movements, considering how collective inaction or silence can hinder progress.

These core themes form the foundation of my independent Project performance, 'The Rise', with the goal to interrogate and express these complex ideas through the medium of dance. Dance, as a non-verbal and emotionally resonant art form, offers a unique means of storytelling as a universal language. Its physicality allows for symbolic and abstract expression which I endeavour to enable audiences to engage with powerful narratives in a deeply personal way. By using movement to represent resistance, conformity,

empowerment, and silence, I hope to create a work that not only communicates these themes but invites reflection. The universality of dance provides a global language through which stories of inequality and activism can be told, resonating with diverse audiences and encouraging individual and emotional connection.

My goal through this dissertation is to connect past and present, using historical struggles to inform a modern response. By the end of this project, I hope that the final performance and the process behind it, speaks to the continued urgency of feminist action. I hope it highlights the power of storytelling and artistic collaboration in raising awareness. By blending academic research with personal and creative reflection, this dissertation not only seeks to answer the core question, but to contribute thoughtfully to the ongoing feminist conversation.

Literary Review:

The suffragette movement was a radical campaign for women's suffrage in the early 20th century United Kingdom. The term "suffragette" referred specifically to members of the ‘Women's Social and Political Union’ (WSPU) which was formed in 1903 by Emmeline Pankhurst. As she stated, “the condition of women was deplorable, and the means of redress long overdue” Pankhurst.E.S (1913). The WSPU broke from more peaceful suffragist organisations by embracing militant tactics. To do this, they used protest and disruption to draw attention to their cause. Suffragettes believed that traditional campaigning methods had failed, and they sought to “wake up the nation” Pankhurst.E.S (1913). Their tactics included smashing windows, setting postboxes on fire, chaining themselves to railings and disrupting political meetings. These acts were not without consequence as many women were arrested and imprisoned. “Time and again these brave women were sent to prison where they were treated with less consideration than the commonest and vilest criminal.” Boyd.E (1958).

Undoubtedly, the price of activism was detrimental. “From the start of the 20th century to the beginning of World War One, almost 1,000 suffragettes were imprisoned.” BBC Bitesize (2025). However, these actions, combined with years of dedicated campaigning, helped push forward major legislative change. “In 1918 the Representation of the People Act finally gave up to 8.4 million women over the age of 30 the right to vote and become Members of Parliament” London Museum (2025). Although this was seen as a landmark victory, it came with its limitations. Women still did not have equal voting rights to men. True equality at the ballot box did not arrive until the Equal Franchise Act of 1928. “After a decade of continued suffrage campaigning and pressure in parliament, the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act 1928 gave women the vote on the same terms as men, at age 21 years, with no age or any other restrictions” Takayanagi.M (2018).

While the suffragettes are often celebrated for their courage, their approach was significantly controversial and met with large-scale opposition. Critics at the time labelled them “hysterical and dangerous”, reflecting not only fears about their militant tactics but also twisting the stereotypical gender norms that expected women to be passive and submissive. Historian Marcie Kligman highlights that “these actions by the WSPU, while attracting huge amounts of publicity, had the opposite effect intended; the public began to disapprove of the suffragettes, as well as their cause. While most people, before the outbreak of rampant militancy, supported the cause of women's suffrage, once the new actions started, they began to disapprove. Opponents of women's suffrage in Parliament used the terrorist actions the women were using to their advantage in debate, citing the insane actions as a very good reason why women should not get the vote” Kligman.M (2018). This backlash demonstrates the complex relationship between radical activism and public opinion.

The achievement of women's suffrage in the United Kingdom marked a momentous milestone, but it did not signify the end of the struggle for gender equality. Following the Representation of the People Act 1928, which granted equal voting rights to women over the age of 21, feminist activism evolved to address broader issues encompassing social, economic, and political domains. The post-World War II era brought in the second wave of feminism, characterised by a focus on issues such as reproductive rights, workplace discrimination, and legal inequalities. The ‘Women's Liberation Movement’ (WLM) in the UK gained momentum in the late 1960s and 1970s and through this movement, they organised conferences and protests to demand systemic change. During this time “it was standard to educate girls to be conformist, helpful and to wipe the tables, while boys were encouraged to be independent, adventurous and unruly,” Jolly.M (2019). The movement's demands included "equal pay, equal education and job opportunities, free contraception and abortion on demand, free 24-hour nurseries, and legal and financial independence" Women's Liberation Movement in the United Kingdom (N.D). The second wave also fostered a rich body of feminist activism and cultural progress. Authors such as Germaine Greer and Betty

Friedan challenged patriarchal ideologies in both public discourse and academia. Friedan's seminal text 'The Feminine Mystique' (1963) used the term "the problem that has no name" to describe the dissatisfaction felt by many suburban housewives. She argued that this stemmed from the enforced limitations of domesticity.

Another major concern during this period was workplace discrimination. Although women were making substantial contributions to the workforce during WWII, many were pushed back into domestic roles post-war. Those who remained in employment often faced occupational segregation. The passing of the Equal Pay Act 1970 in the UK was a critical legal achievement of the second wave, though campaigners continued to point out that implementation was slow and systemic discrimination persisted. Women continued to face systemic barriers. Women were still having to battle for basic equal rights as shown in research conducted by author and acclaimed researcher Rachel Verdin who stated "To bring an equal pay claim a woman needed to identify a male comparator in the same employment, with whom they could be compared." Verdin.R (2024). This further demonstrates that women had to actively prove inequality and navigate a complex legal process compared to men who received fair wages without such barriers. Women were expected to gather evidence and justify their claims themselves, potentially resulting in putting their job security and workplace relationships at risk just for speaking up.

However, it is also important to recognise that traditional gender expectations placed pressure on men too. Men were often seen as the default income providers, which not only reinforced pay inequality but also discouraged broader structural change. "The organisation man of the 1950s to the 1980s was expected to be the sole provider, with little room for emotional expression or involvement in family life. After all, a man's profession and his ability to bring home a paycheck have traditionally defined who that man was." Kimmel.S (1993) These expectations limited men's ability to engage in caregiving roles or demand flexible working arrangements, therefore inadvertently stalling conversations about equalities in

income between genders. These societal norms made it more difficult for equal pay movements to gain momentum due to the concept that men “deserve” higher pay due to their role as providers created further resistance to change.

Regardless, over time it became clear that women did in fact deserve equal treatment and fair compensation irrespective of traditional roles. The movement for equal pay was not about undermining men, but about correcting a long-standing injustice. While women’s legal and societal progress was essential, there was an apparent need to challenge the restrictive systems that disadvantage men in different ways. Achieving true workplace equality means addressing inequalities across the gender spectrum, not just for women, but for everyone.

Modern-day feminism is characterised by its focus on intersectionality, digital activism, and the ongoing fight against gender discrimination. Movements such as ‘#MeToo’ have highlighted the widespread nature of sexual harassment and assault, especially in workplaces and institutions of power. As Tarana Burke, the original founder of the movement, stated, “it was never just about taking down powerful men, it was about uplifting the voices of survivors, especially those who are often ignored” Burke.T (2018). Despite the progress made since earlier waves of feminism, many barriers persist. Women continue to face wage gaps, underrepresentation in leadership roles, discrimination and online misogyny. “In 2020, women still earned only 84p for every £1 earned by men in the UK, with the gap even wider for women of colour” Office for National Statistics (2020).

Feminist organisations such as ‘The Fawcett Society’ and ‘Sisters Uncut’ continue to campaign for legislative and social change. They tackle issues from domestic violence to period poverty. “Sisters Uncut (SU), which is part of the wider anti-austerity movement in Britain, adopts prefiguration as a strategy and campaigns against cuts to domestic violence services. It was founded in 2014 by activists who had been involved in other anti-austerity groups, but who felt that a separate group was necessary to address the gendered and

intersectional impacts of austerity, which they believed were ignored by the wider anti-austerity movement" Ishkanian.A & Peña Saavedra.A (2019). This demonstrates that women are still facing systemic neglect. 'Sisters Uncut' highlights how mainstream political and economic movements can overlook the specific challenges women face. Their work shows that even in contemporary society, gender equality is far from being achieved and women must continue organising, protesting, and resisting to ensure their needs are not sidelined.

Digital platforms have also enabled a new wave of community-building, allowing and encouraging marginalised voices to be amplified. Authors Brooke Foucault Welles, Moya Bailey, and Sarah J. Jackson (2020) states, "Historically disenfranchised populations, including Black Americans, women, and transgender people, have used Twitter hashtags to advance counter narrative and build diverse networks of dissent." This illustrates how social media platforms have become vital tools for marginalised groups to share their experiences and challenge societal narratives. Hashtag movements like #MeToo and #SayHerName have brought attention to issues of sexual violence and gender predjudice. Facilitating these digital spaces allows modern feminism to continue to evolve by utilising technology to address systemic inequalities and ensuring that voices previously silenced are now heard, aligning with the ongoing struggle for gender equality.

However, modern feminism is not without criticism. Some argue that in some cases, online activism lacks the tangible impact of traditional organising. "Feminism today can sometimes feel performative, driven by hashtags and aesthetic branding rather than substantive change" Gill.R (2016). This highlights the concern that digital feminism may sometimes prioritise image over meaningful social or political change. Although social media has amplified feminist voices, it has also created space for what some perceive as superficial engagement. This tension between performative and practical activism reflects the ongoing complexities in achieving true gender equality in the modern era. Furthermore, anti-feminist

voices often claim that the movement exaggerates women's oppression or ignores male issues, with some critics labelling feminism as "outdated in a supposedly post-equality era" Hakim.C (2011). Critics like Hakim suggest that the current feminist agenda is no longer relevant, however this view fails to account for ongoing struggles, especially among marginalised groups of women. By framing feminism as 'outdated', these arguments risk silencing necessary conversations about continuing inequality, therefore highlighting the importance of sustained feminist engagement.

The evolution of women's rights movements in the UK shows just how much continuous effort has gone into challenging inequality. Although a lot has changed and each generation has carried the movement forward, ultimately there are still so many hurdles to overcome today. This is why activism hasn't stopped. Modern movements prove that this fight is still very real and very necessary.

Another key area I wanted to explore in more depth was how psychological factors influence individuals' engagement with activism. Peer pressure and the bystander effect are significant social phenomena that influence individual behavior. This is especially prominent in the context of advocating for women's rights and addressing gender-based injustices.

Peer pressure can serve as both a barrier and a catalyst within feminist movements. On one hand, societal norms and the desire for acceptance can discourage individuals from challenging sexist behaviors or supporting feminist causes. As noted by One Woman Project, "There is never a 'perfect time' to tell someone that they have made a comment that is offensive, insensitive, or hurtful" One Woman Project (N.D). This hesitation often stems from fear of social repercussions or disrupting group harmony. Alternatively, peer pressure can be harnessed positively to promote feminist ideals. When individuals observe their peers actively engaging in gender equality initiatives, they may feel compelled to align with these behaviors to maintain social cohesion. As highlighted, "Peer pressure is also responsible for

some astounding instances of social change" Farrell.B (2011). This shows that social dynamics often influence people's willingness to participate in activism or adopt progressive beliefs. If standing up for gender equality becomes the expected or admired norm within a peer group or community, individuals are more likely to join in, even if they were hesitant initially. Peer influence has historically been key in mobilising collective action as it helps movements gain momentum and visibility.

"The *bystander effect* describes the phenomenon in which such individuals are less likely to seek help or give assistance when others are present." Baumeister.R.F & Vohs.K.D (2007) This effect has profound implications in the context of gender-based violence and harassment. After reading an extract from 'An Encyclopedia of Social Psychology', I discovered that the bystander effect can stem from a variety of causes. The first being 'Social Inhibition'. Baumeister and Vohs state "individuals want to avoid attracting negative attention for misinterpreting the situation, overreacting, or doing the wrong thing. Individuals fear negative evaluation because they have a strong need to belong and be accepted." Baumeister.R.F & Vohs.K.D (2007) This could link directly back to feminist movement by connoting that even people who want to support feminist equality movements may hesitate to speak up or take action because they fear negative judgment or rejection by their peers. The strong need to belong can make individuals reluctant to challenge social norms or call out injustice in public settings. As a result, the bystander effect can hinder participation in activism which slows progress toward gender equality despite many people being aware of the issues.

Further readings from this book also stated "Research has demonstrated that the bystander effect is an extremely consistent phenomenon. Regardless of the nature of the situation requiring help, the type of assistance called for, the age or gender of the research participants, or the location in which the research is being conducted, people are less likely to help when part of a group than when alone." Baumeister.R.F & Vohs.K.D (2007). To

elaborate, in public or group settings where sexism or discrimination occurs, people may subconsciously avoid speaking out because they expect others to do so instead. Furthermore, since the feminist movement is large and widely recognised, some individuals may assume that enough voices are already speaking up, so they do not need to contribute themselves. This complacency can unintentionally undermine the urgency and severity of ongoing gender inequality.

To combat the bystander effect, educational awareness campaigns have been introduced. Programs that encourage individuals to recognise their responsibility can empower them to act. ‘Right To Be’ is one of many movements who are working to tackle the bystander effect and have many strategies to try and encourage people to be an active bystander rather than passive. They use a system called ‘The 5 D’s’ consisting of “Delay, Distract, Delegate, Direct & Document.” Right To Be (2015) which are all key words to aid those in acting when faced with injustice. Fostering environments where intervention is supported and expected it can promote that communities can challenge the norms that sustain silence.

To conclude, from the militant campaigns of the suffragettes in the early 20th century to the digital activism of today, the fight for gender equality has been continually evolving. The suffragette movement was a turning point in British history, for both securing women's right to vote and for challenging societal expectations and inspiring future generations of activists. While it was argued and debated that their methods were controversial, they undeniably forced the issue of women’s suffrage into the public consciousness and onto the political agenda. Achievements such as the Equal Pay Act highlight the progress made in dismantling structural inequalities. Modern feminism continues to confront issues like gender-based violence, discrimination, and digital misogyny, utilising online platforms to amplify marginalised voices. However, debates over the effectiveness of radical versus moderate strategies and the risks of performative activism reflect the ongoing complexity of the movement. Moreover, psychological and social barriers, such as peer pressure and the

bystander effect, continue to influence how individuals engage with advocacy and activism. Ultimately, this literature review underscores that despite over a century of activism, the goals of the suffragettes remain unfinished. The continued fight for equality highlights why, even today, women are still fighting for the rights and recognition that were first demanded so boldly by the suffragettes. They are still fighting for justice. They are still fighting for equality. Their legacy lives on in modern day efforts, reminding us that true gender equity requires persistent activism and a commitment to challenging systems of power that still resist change.

2736 words

Initial Ideas:

My original concept was rooted in a desire to focus on the experiences of women, both historically and in the present day. This direction was initially sparked by two things: firstly, the noticeable lack of male representation within the performing arts industry, and secondly, the influence of the empowered, resilient women in my personal, professional, and cultural settings.

Among these influences are my best friend, who has overcome challenging experiences with relationships, father figures, and workplace authority, and is now a successful business owner; my teachers and lecturers, who have consistently inspired me; and public figures who have spoken openly about empowerment, injustice, and perseverance. For example, Lady GaGa, a hugely successful singer has frequently made public speeches advocating for the feminist movement. A speech that inspired me was when she stated ‘We women in Hollywood, we are voices. We have deep thoughts and ideas and beliefs and values about the world and we have the power to speak and be heard and fight back when we are silenced.' Lady GaGa (2018). In my opinion, this reaches and is heard by all women facing injustice and it personally sparked inspiration in me. These women embody strength in the face of adversity and reminded me of the collective yet individualised struggle many women endure.

Imagery Stimulus:

As a visual learner, I often use images to spark narrative concepts. A series of powerful visuals helped shape the creative vision of my piece:



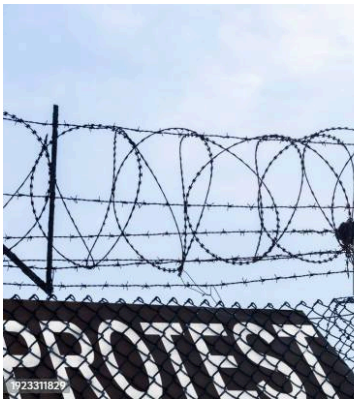
A broken watch: Symbolising the idea that women's struggles for equality are not confined to a single era, this is a timeless fight. - Photo by Doug Armand (2013)



Worn-out heels on cobblestones: Representing public scrutiny faced by women as they navigate societal expectations. - Photo by Romasolo (2013)



A woman holding up her middle finger behind her back: A discreet act of rebellion and a metaphor for suppressed resistance. - Photo by Delihayat (2023)



A banner entangled in barbed wire: Showing the pain and sacrifice endured in the pursuit of equality. - Photo by Gary Burfield-Wallis (2019)

Theme Development:

Initially, I planned to create a piece focused solely on the suffragette movement. However, after conducting the research for my literature review, it became clear that gender inequality is not a resolved issue and it's an evolving struggle within both history and present-day culture. I realised the potential of creating a piece that could transcend time. I wanted to blend past and present influences to highlight how these issues remain relevant today. From this, I developed six thematic pillars that would guide my narrative structure: Time, Ignorance, Destruction, Resurgence, Realisation and Overcoming. These themes mirror a journey, a woman's experience that could belong to any era while still resonating universally.

Time: The theme of time in the piece represents the long history and ongoing nature of the feminist struggle. Time illustrates that although significant progress has been made since the suffragette movement, the fight for gender equality is forever continuing. As feminist historian Sheila Rowbotham writes, *"*Women's history has been submerged for centuries, and the memory of past resistance is fragile and often distorted or lost." Rowbotham.S (1973). This sums up perfectly how time has not necessarily healed gender inequalities, it has often hidden or erased women's contributions and struggles. In the performance, time is portrayed in a non-linear way to reflect this uncertainty: is society moving forward or backward? This reflects ongoing debates in feminist histories and journies about how much real progress has been made.

Ignorance: Ignorance represents society's habits to overlook gender inequality. This theme criticises the silence that promotes systemic sexism. Tim Kaine observes, "Most evil in the world is only partly because of an evil person. Most of it is because of the complicity of bystanders." Kaine.T (2017). Individuals choosing to ignore injustices inadvertently allows such issues to persist and even escalate. This theme allows the narrative to critique societal apathy, pushing audiences to reflect on their role in either ignoring or challenging inequality.

Destruction: The theme of Destruction symbolises the emotional, physical, and social toll of misogyny and inaction. It shows the violent outcomes that can arise when women's voices are continually silenced. Further supporting this, Clara Kensie, award winning author, quoted "But outside the attic, everything changed, and so violently fast. Destruction and devastation for all of us, whether we were in the attic or out." Kensie.C (2016). Destruction, in this feminist context, isn't only literal, it refers to the destruction of identity, safety, community and dignity when women are ignored or harmed. In the performance, symbolising topics such as the death of Emily Davison and modern examples like #MeToo highlights how destruction stems from centuries of silencing and societal neglect. Destruction can be sudden and widespread and affects everyone regardless of their awareness or involvement.

Resurgence: Resurgence reflects the internal and communal awakening that often follows oppression, a reclamation of voice. It mirrors the revival of feminist movements and personal acts of resistance. Adrienne Rich articulates, "When a woman tells the truth she is creating the possibility for more truth around her." Rich.A (1979). Resurgence represents the moment of realisation when women decide to act, to speak out and to rise again. Resurgence breathes life into the feminist journey, showing that recovery from trauma or oppression is possible.

Overcoming:

The final theme, Overcoming, signifies feminist solidarity, resilience, unity and progress. It represents the collective journey toward empowerment and equality, celebrating persistence. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie writes, "We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller. We say to girls: 'You can have ambition, but not too much.'" Adichie.N (2014)**.** This quote encapsulates the barriers women face from a young age, and the systemic pressures to conform. Overcoming, is central in the unification of women, supporting one another to break cycles of oppression and redefine their futures.

Character Creation Development:

After establishing these key themes to drive my narrative, my focus shifted to how to portray this story with a cast, ultimately leading to the creation of the protagonist, Evelyn. Evelyn is not bound to a single identity, generation, or background. She embodies the spirit of many women, real or fictional, who have faced the battles of inequality. Through Evelyn, I aimed to convey a collective voice of resilience to challenge the audience to confront the continuous fight for equality. I was then tasked with creating characters to help convey the overall message of the piece and I needed to devise a way to frame Evelyn throughout these themes. I am fortunate enough to teach a variety of young dancers who volunteered to help me bring the story to life. I casted 5 of these dancers who would navigate Evelyn's Journey. These performers, by multi-rolling, represented a collection of perspectives and served as the voices of women from both past and present. They embodied Evelyn's inner thoughts, acting as passive bystanders and even portraying those who rejected or shunned feminist movements. This dynamic use of the ensemble allowed the piece to explore a wider spectrum of experiences and emotional responses surrounding the feminist struggle. Their shifting roles not only highlighted the isolation Evelyn often felt but also emphasised the collective weight of women's voices. I eventually wanted to showcase them as unified with Evelyn to symbolise solidarity and the ongoing fight for justice. I wanted to reinforce the message that empowerment is strongest when shared.

Music Choices:

As an ex-competitive dancer, current dance teacher, and aspiring choreographer, I felt confident in selecting music that would enhance and support the emotional and narrative of my piece. From the outset, I knew I wanted the work to sit within the realm of contemporary dance, so I began exploring music that could reflect this. One of the earliest musical selections was a cinematic version of Katy Perry's 'Rise'. The motivational lyrics, particularly lines such as "Victory is in your veins," deeply resonated with me and aligned perfectly with the theme of overcoming adversity. I knew early on that this track would be central to the closing section of the work, symbolising collective strength and empowerment.
Equally, Hans Zimmer's 'Time' quickly stood out as an ideal choice to underscore the opening section. The orchestration captures a sense of timelessness which suited perfectly with the theme of 'Time'. I wanted to provoke the audience to question whether the timeline of the narrative was moving forwards, backwards or not at all. This sense of disorientation mirrors the ongoing and unresolved nature of the fight for gender equality.

To further explore the idea of time and the layering of female voices across generations, I chose to overlay sections of the choreography with spoken-word quotations from a range of feminist figures. These included Emma Watson, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Hillary Clinton, Beyoncé and a recreation of Emmeline Pankhurst's 1913 speech "Freedom or Death." Each quote was chosen to embody a different tone and era of the feminist struggle to reinforce the central motif and concept that this is a universal, continuous fight. These sources, listed in my reference list, allowed me to develop a sense of historical continuity and portray the evolution of feminist thought.

The greatest challenge I faced was in selecting musical tracks for the themes of Ignorance, Destruction, and Resurgence. I spent considerable time trialling different pieces before an idea came to me unexpectedly, it was one of those moments that sort of came to me in a dream: what if the structure of the soundtrack itself reflected the silencing and resurgence of

women's voices? The piece could begin with prominent spoken quotations layered over Time, symbolising the power and clarity of women's voices. As the narrative transformed and descended into destruction, the voiceovers would fall away and be replaced by instrumental music to symbolise the loss and suppression of female voices. Finally, as the piece reached its climax and developed into Overcoming, Rise would play with the lyrics, symbolising the reclaiming of voice, strength, and unity.

After speaking with my mentor, Lee McCallion after this idea emerged, he advised using an online music catalogue. Through this I was able to discover tracks that supported this and pull inspirations. For the "Ignorance and Destruction" section, I selected 'The Final Hour' by Audiomachine. The track evokes an eerie "calm before the storm" type feeling and gradually builds into an intense crescendo, echoing the rising tension and emotional strain. This was followed by *Tamarack Pines* by George Winston, which to me resembled the sounds of rain which linked well with the idea of the aftermath of a storm. This piece conveyed a sense of the emotional fallout of destructive choices and societal silence.

For the "Resurgence" section, I experimented with an instrumental version of 'Wild Hearts Can't Be Broken' by P!nk. I found myself struggling to decide whether to choose the music with lyrics or not for this section but eventually I chose to convey the message and lyrics through choreography alone to the instrumental version. The instrumental track features repetitive motifs and musical loops which I incorporated into the choreography to represent the internal conflict and never ending cycle of thoughts within Evelyn's mind. These movements expressed her mental spiralling, her attempts to rebuild herself and the tension between emotional chaos and the desire for clarity. This music then naturally transitioned seamlessly into 'Rise', which acted as a resolution and final act of unity and triumph.

Choreography Process:

My approach to choreography was influenced by a range of dance practitioners and choreographers. These influences use dance to align with themes of emotional expression and storytelling which I deeply appreciate. Martha Graham, known for her groundbreaking use of the body to convey psychological depth, inspired my use of contraction and release to communicate emotional struggle. “Graham’s choice of movement vocabulary derived from a new, nonclassical conception of the relationship between emotion and kinesthetic form as one that cultivated the body’s dynamic responsiveness to human feeling. Her recent work, however, privileges the visual appearance of movement, its shape and line, over these tensile connections between movement and the psyche. Where before there was a dancer suspended in torment between earth and air, now the dancer contracts with an anguished gesture, twists, falls to the ground, rises to perform a series of bourrées on the knees, steps into an arabesque turn, and so forth. In the same way, her much-acclaimed Acts of Light (1981) presents an inventory of the now well-established Graham lexicon, from simple articulations of the spine to dazzling jumps and leaps across the floor.” Foster.S.L (1986) Graham’s techniques have always been an important aspect of my dance journey and after studying her in detail, I was drawn to the idea that movement didn’t always need to be decorative or purely aesthetic, but could instead be charged with emotional intention, allowing the dancer’s physicality to communicate unspoken truths. I also watched clips of Graham’s work prior to choreographing to refresh myself on examples of her work. I noticed particularly her use of spirals and wanted to explore this technique through my choreography.

Pina Bausch’s integration of human nature into dance played a significant role in how I framed gesture and space. “She motivated her dancers to discover gestures, bodily practices and everyday rhythms in different cultures, to find and artistically transform the claviature of the human in everyday life.” Klein.G (2020).

Contemporary figures such as Ricky Jinks and Kaycee Rice influenced the more modern, fluid elements of my piece, specifically the use of grounded movement and emotional improvisation. I have admired both choreographers for a long time and I have also had the privilege to take classes with Ricky Jinks. When participating in these classes and watching their work online, I have always been mesmerised by their ability to story tell and show deep meanings in every step they make and in every inch of their bodies.

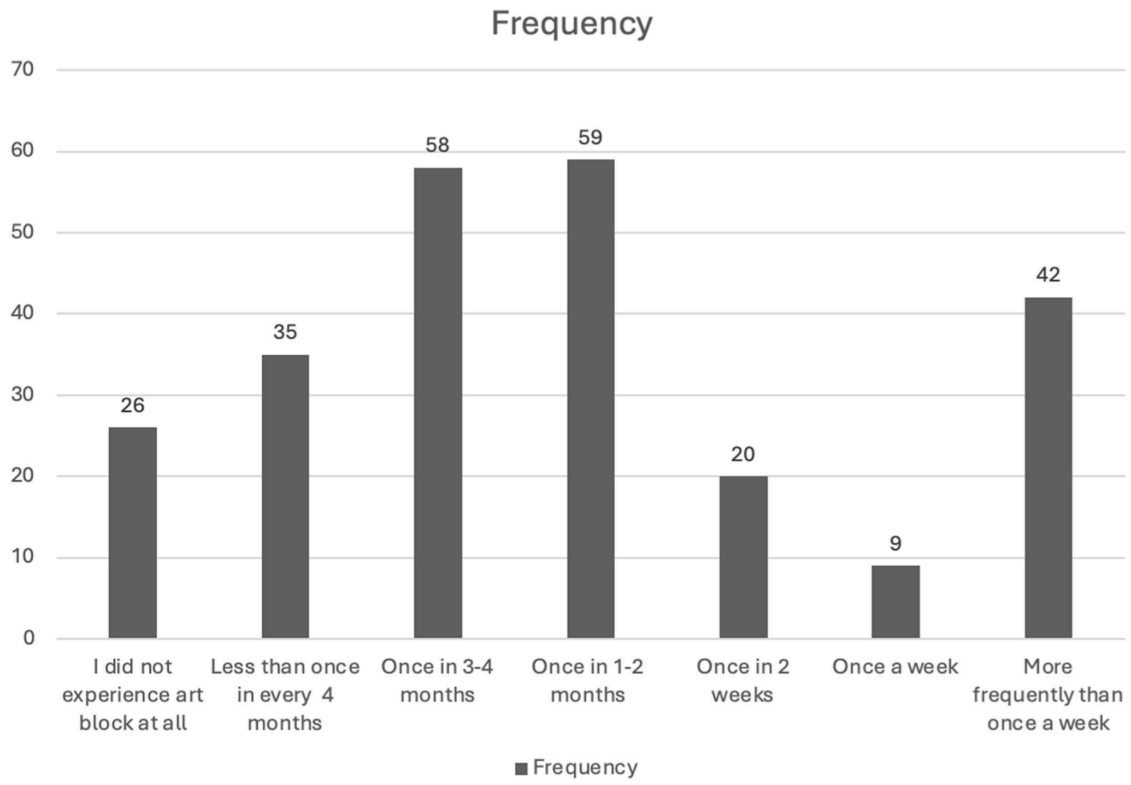
Throughout my choreography, I implemented several choreographic devices, including motif development, canon, unison, and spatial formations to reflect the evolving emotional and thematic content. For example, a recurring gesture of reaching, first subtle, then expansive, was used as a motif representing the ongoing struggle for empowerment. “Motifs act as the thread that binds a dance together. Through repetition, variation, and development, a motif can evolve across a piece, offering the audience a symbolic or emotional anchor that enhances the narrative and thematic coherence of the choreography.” Smith-Autard. J.M (2010). Additionally, I used canon to represent disconnection and delay in societal change and then unison later symbolised unity and collective action. The positioning of dancers in circular, linear, and scattered formations served both symbolic and aesthetic functions. “Formations in dance are not merely spatial arrangements but serve to reflect relationships, social hierarchies, and emotional states. Changes in formation can convey unity, isolation, power dynamics, or transformation, supporting the choreographer’s narrative intentions.” Butterworth.J (2009). When developing choreography, I noticed I leaned more towards circular inspired movements and formations and found various new ways to incorporate the shape into my piece. After reflecting, I realise that this was probably influenced by the idea of timelessness that engraved my subconscious.

As I began to shape the work, I found myself experimenting and adapting constantly. I also drew upon my training in acting, particularly labeling and gesturing. These two techniques are often used to explore subtext and internal emotion. Translating these methods into

choreography allowed me to physicalise internal thought patterns and emotional journeys. Incorporating the use of ‘Gesturing’ and ‘Psycho-physicality,' that I learned in previous acting modules, severely benefitted my choreography as it emphasised the connection between physicality and emotion to elevate the movements and allow simplicity to evolve into meaningful dance journeys. I decided to study this further by reading ‘The Complete Stanislavsky Toolkit’ which stated ‘Because your body is the interface between your inner landscape and the world-at-large, the more expressive your body can be, the more variations of character you can portray.’ Merlin.B (2014).

There were some challenges throughout the choreography process that I had to conquer. Originally, my choreography leaned too heavily into competitive dance styling, with overly clean lines and placed movements. I also struggled with the fine line between lyrical and contemporary. Furthermore, I fell into the mindset of fearing that repeating movements would become boring, so I avoided it. Again, I believe this stemmed from my dance competition background as repetition in choreography in that environment is often seen as ‘lazy’ or ‘ammature’. However, after working with my peer Llio for her individual project, I noticed she embraced the use of repetition and my perspective shifted as I realised the value of it when used effectively. After conducting research I found that repetition is not boring and can actually help an audience to engage with the choreography. As stated by Boris Willis, an artistic director, “Repetition helps the audience understand that what they see is purposeful and intentional. It gives the audience a way to read the patterns and connect them together.” Willis.B (2014).

Additionally, I experienced choreographic blocks which were often triggered when I was overwhelmed with external factors such as work commitments and university work. This made me feel like my brain was at full capacity and couldn't fully engage creatively. While researching, I discovered a data chart which displayed how frequently creative artists across all industries faced creative blocks and I found great comfort in knowing that experiencing this was normal and common.



Taken from a study by Karolina Głaziewicz (2024)

Furthermore, I researched tactics on how to overcome these blocks and found these strategies: "embracing creative rest, starting a reflective practice, challenging your choreography skills, developing a choreography plan, practicing movement manipulation, collaborating with others, and reviewing and refining the choreography you've already created." Dooling.S (2022) Most of these tactics I tried which helped me to fight the choreographer block.

Some parts of the choreography process worked particularly well. One successful approach was choreographing the voiceovers, starting with a gesture that physically embodied a phrase or a word and then gradually evolving it into a full movement sequence. This allowed me to ground the choreography in meaning before expanding it into dance. I also found moments to step back and watch the work as an outsider in sections which helped me reflect objectively on what was effective. I also found that writing down choreography and voicing it aloud proved to be useful memory tools so that I could keep the creativity flowing whilst also being able to recall previous ideas. I also used improvisation. To do this, I filmed myself responding to music in the moment, then extracting movement phrases that felt instinctively connected to the themes.

Directing & Choreographer Process:

Choreographing and directing my work to my cast was extremely rewarding and insightful. The first thing I wanted to work on was a timetable to share with the cast about rehearsals. This, from the get go, was difficult as the ensemble dancers were all of school age and based in Bridgend whereas Llio who played Evelyn is a WAVDA student living in Cardiff. I therefore knew that to work as productively as possible, I'd have to initially work with them separately. I actually found this quite beneficial because working with Llio independently allowed me to focus on building Evelyn's characterisation before introducing her to the ensemble. This separation also mirrored her character's narrative journey and helped reinforce her identity as a symbolic figure. Planning rehearsals across Bridgend and WAVDA required significant logistical coordination and organisation. With the use of social media, I was able to share video clips of each rehearsal with the cast to keep everyone up to date and in the loop of the progress we were making. The cast were also very proactive and would rehearse independently from these videos. Introducing Llio to a pre-formed ensemble posed a unique challenge. To encourage group cohesion, I used warm-up games and collaborative improvisation tasks. These helped create a sense of ensemble trust and unity, which was crucial given the emotional weight of the piece. I also organised a trip to Nandos with the whole cast as a bonding experience that wasn't in a creative space so that the cast could relax and bond with each other. *(Video from Nandos restaurant can be found in the video links at the end of this dissertation)*

I believed it was essential for the cast to fully understand the context and significance of the messages in the piece before engaging in any character development. As the piece is rooted in themes of women's empowerment and the historical and ongoing fight for gender equality, I carefully and thoughtfully educated the dancers on the feminist messages underpinning the choreography. I curated a range of materials including feminist quotes, protest footage, and readings from prominent activists to foster discussion and reflection. Establishing this shared knowledge early on was crucial for the dancers' connection to the material. According to

Adshead-Lansdale (1999), dance is “not only a physical but also a cognitive and emotional process” and I found that encouraging the dancers to understand the motivations behind the work allowed for deeper embodiment of character and meaning. I also cautioned myself to not push any agenda on the cast and actively encouraged them to share their own views and carry out their own independent research.This framing was key to preparing the cast for the nuanced characterisation work that followed, particularly as they transitioned between their different roles. I also regularly opened discussions with the cast about how the work made them feel and what they thought to allow them to bring their own interpretations to the work. I reflected on the directors I’ve previously worked with and what made them effective such as fostering open dialogue, prioritising emotional integrity, and giving constructive, honest feedback.

Moving into the character development phase of the process, I aimed to utilise techniques we had explored during Independent Project preparation classes with our lecturer, Elen, particularly those I had personally found impactful. One of the key approaches I introduced was Uta Hagen’s character questions, which encourage performers to explore fundamental aspects of their character such as: “Who am I?”, “What do I want?”, and “What is my relationship to others?” Hagen.U (2008). These questions aim to ground performance in truthful, motivated action and emotional clarity. Llio, who played Evelyn, had previous experience working with Hagen’s method and engaged with the process with ease and effectively. Together, Llio and I created bullet point answers to these questions pulling on research from my literature review and also personal beliefs that could translate into the message behind the piece.

Uta Hagen Question Responses:

t margin

Who am I?

- **Name**: Evelyn (no surname provided to emphasise timelessness).
- **Age**: Early to mid-20s (old enough to understand societal pressures and young enough to challenge them).
- **Physical traits**: Slight frame, piercing eyes that show determination, simple but practical clothing that allows freedom of movement, minimalistic appearance, suggesting her focus is on action over vanity.
- **Education**: Informally educated through experience, observation, and curiosity. In the suffragette period, her formal schooling may have been limited due to her gender. In the present, she might have pursued higher education but found traditional institutions rigid or disappointing.
- **Personal opinions**: Evelyn is fiercely against oppression and inequality. She values fairness, collaboration, and the power of collective action, but she wrestles with the morality of extreme measures.
- **Likes**: Nature's balance and simplicity, written works on philosophy and politics, quiet moments of reflection, music, creativity and evidence of human resilience in the face of hardship.
- **Dislikes**: Rigid traditions, apathy, KFC and spaces where she feels silenced.
- **Fears**: Failing in her cause, unintentionally alienating others, and causing harm in the pursuit of justice.
- **Ethics and beliefs**: Evelyn believes in equality, non-conformity, and the idea that people are inherently capable of change. She is conflicted with whether radical action is ever justified and strives to live authentically while inspiring others.

What time is it?

- **Year**: Interchangeable between the early 1900s (suffragette period) and the present day, bringing together elements of both eras to suggest that the fight for equality is timeless.
- **Season**: Autumn or winter, symbolising both change and endurance. Falling leaves or cold, crisp air reflect her resilience and the harshness of the fight.
- **Day**: The time of day changes as the piece unfolds. Dawn represents hope and beginnings. Twilight or night symbolises fear, uncertainty, and introspection.
- **Significance of time**: Time is fluid in the piece, blending past and present to show how the struggles of one era echo into the next. The indistinct time periods remind the audience that societal change is an ongoing battle, not confined to history.

Where am I?

- **Weather**: Overcast skies with occasional rays of light breaking through, symbolising both the weight of oppression and moments of hope. In some moments, rain could symbolise cleansing or renewal, while in others, it emphasizes hardship.
- **Landscape**: Forests where Evelyn feels free. Domestic spaces where she feels trapped.
- **People**: Suffragette allies and contemporary activists, each showing varying degrees of commitment and moral struggle. Opposers, representing the complexity of resistance to change.
- **Objects**: Protest banners, a voting ballot, a corset she's cast aside, a pen she uses to write letters or speeches, and symbolic natural elements like leaves and feathers.

What are the given circumstances?

- **Past**: Evelyn has witnessed injustice, perhaps the loss of a loved one due to inequality, or the suffocating constraints of a traditional upbringing. These moments sparked her desire for change.
- **Present**: She is at a critical juncture in her activism. She is questioning whether her actions are making an impact and wrestling with the ethical implications of pushing boundaries.
- **Future**: Evelyn's journey is uncertain. She dreams of a society where equality is achieved, but the outcome of her actions, whether success or failure is unknown, leaving the audience to consider their own role in shaping the future.

What are my relationships?

- **To people**:

Fellow suffragettes/activists: A mix of camaraderie and tension as they debate the best methods to achieve their goals.

Opposers: Frustration with those who resist change, but also an underlying desire to understand them to better communicate her cause.

Family: If Evelyn comes from a traditional household, she may feel alienated or betrayed by their unwillingness to support her fight.

- **To objects**:

She values items with personal or symbolic meaning more than flashy items.

- **To events**:

Evelyn feels deeply connected to the suffragette movement or its modern equivalent. Every protest, every act of defiance, and every setback feels personal to her, fueling her passion.

What do I want?

Evelyn wants to create a world where all individuals—regardless of gender—can live freely, equally, and authentically. She seeks not just systemic change but also personal liberation for herself and others.

What is in my way?

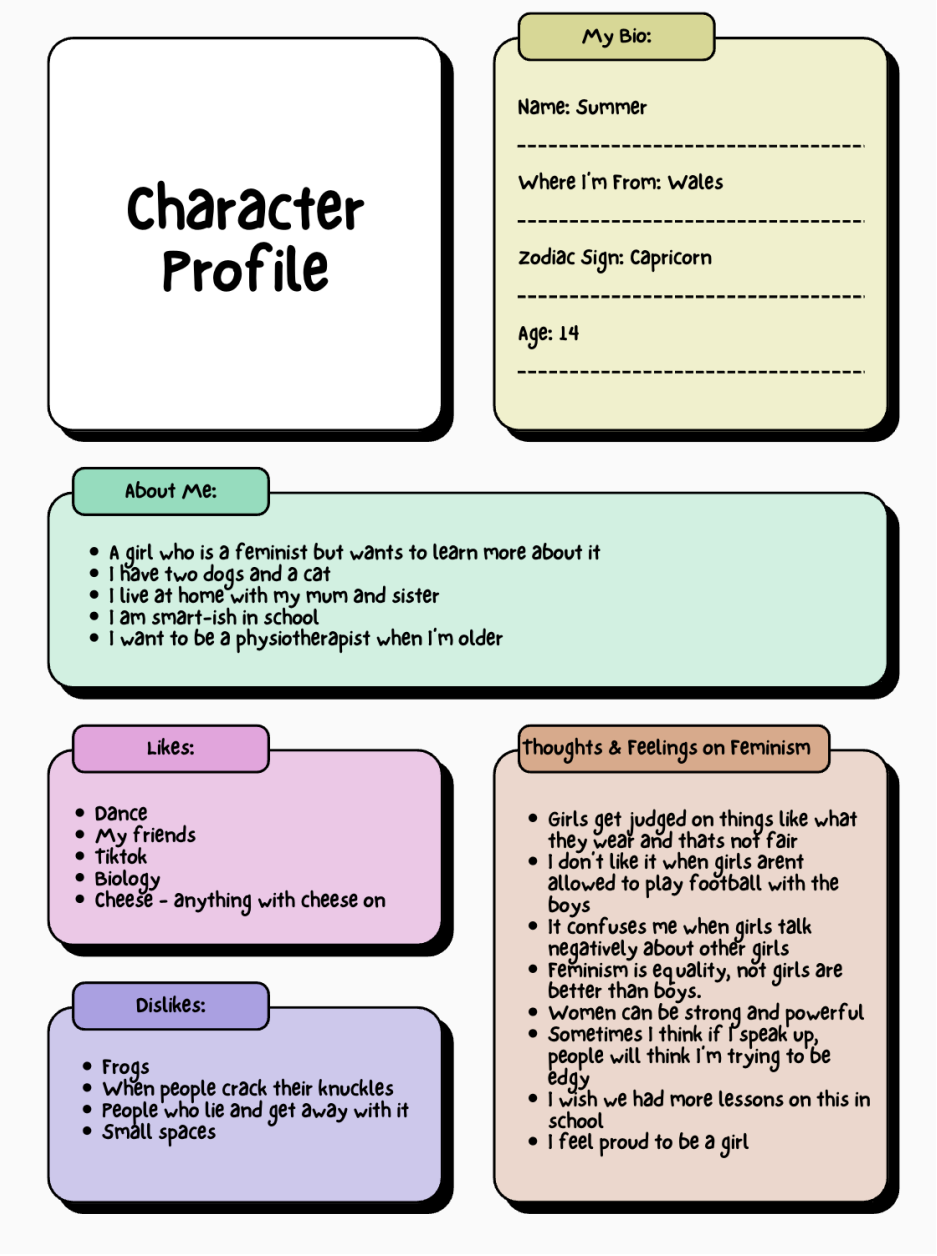
- Societal structures that resist change.
- The fear and apathy of people unwilling to step out of their comfort zones.
- Her own doubts about whether the cost of activism is worth it.
- The judgment of others, both supporters and opposers, who question her methods or motives.

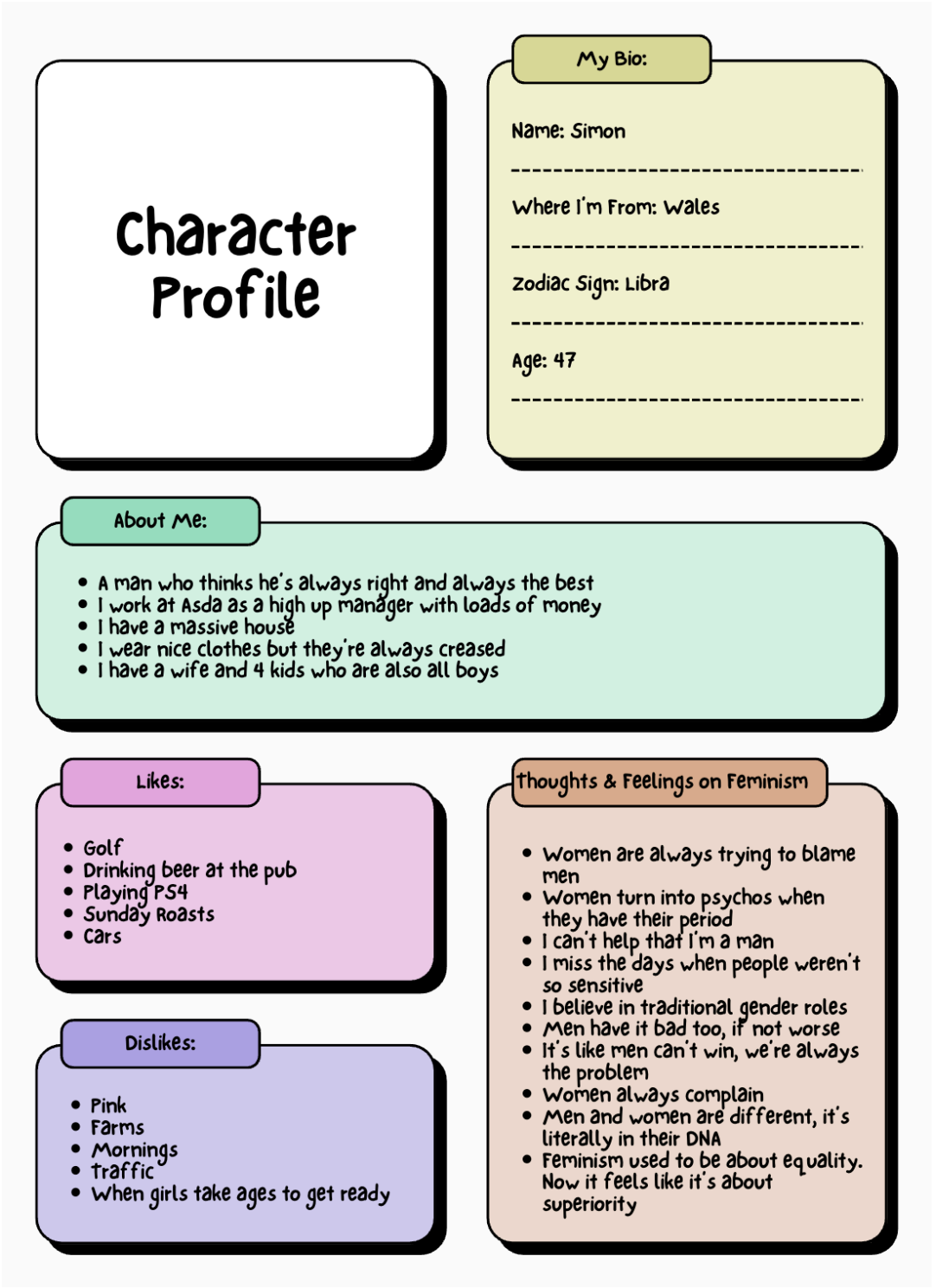
What actions and tactics do I take to achieve what I want?

- **Physically**: Participating in protests, creating banners, writing speeches or letters, and encouraging others to join her cause. She might also engage in acts of defiance (chaining herself to a railing, for instance) that challenge societal norms.
- **Verbally**: Using persuasive arguments, heartfelt appeals, and impassioned speeches. Evelyn listens to others' perspectives to build bridges but is unafraid to confront hypocrisy or indifference.
- **Emotionally**: She relies on her resilience and conviction, even in the face of setbacks, channeling her fears and frustrations into action rather than despair.

However, many of the ensemble dancers had limited acting experience, so I adapted these techniques into more accessible methods which they could understand. We created simplified character profiles to help them visualise and emotionally connect with the narrative. I asked the dancers to create 2 character profiles, one which could be a representation of themselves or someone they knew that appreciated the feminist movement and one which depicted an anti-feminist. This was insightful to gain their perspectives but also proved successful in bridging the gap between movement and character embodiment.

Character Profile Examples:




Character Profile
My Bio:
Name: Simon
Where I'm From: Wales
Zodiac Sign: Libra
Age: 47
About Me:
A man who thinks he's always right and always the best
I work at Asda as a high up manager with loads of money
I have a massive house
I wear nice clothes but they're always creased
I have a wife and 4 kids who are also all boys
Likes:
Golf
Drinking beer at the pub
Playing PS4
Sunday Roasts
Cars
Dislikes:
Pink
Farms
Mornings
Traffic
When girls take ages to get ready
Thoughts & Feelings on Feminism
Women are always trying to blame men
Women turn into psychos when they have their period
I can't help that I'm a man
I miss the days when people weren't so sensitive
I believe in traditional gender roles
Men have it bad too, if not worse
It's like men can't win, we're always the problem
Women always complain
Men and women are different, it's literally in their DNA
Feminism used to be about equality. Now it feels like it's about superiority

Additionally, all cast members responded particularly well to the use of Stanislavski's objectives-based approach to character work. Stanislavski emphasises that "an objective is what a character wants; their goal. All action is driven by this purpose" Benedetti.J (2004). Applying this technique gave dancers a clear sense of purpose and direction within scenes. It allowed them to make more intentional choices in their physicality and expressions to support both the narrative and emotional layers of the work. For ensemble dancers unfamiliar with acting, this clarity provided a valuable structure to build their confidence in storytelling and performance.

While choreographing, I quickly realised that certain planned sequences did not suit the physicality, technical ability, or just general vibe of specific dancers within the ensemble. Rather than rigidly adhering to the original material, I adapted the choreography in response to the cast's strengths. I didn't completely disregard choreography but we found ways to explore it differently and tried to adapt so the dancers could feel fully connected to their movements. When choreographing, ensuring the dancer feels secure in the movement is a moral I stand by. I was able to maintain the integrity of the work's message by reworking phrases to highlight individual skills, while fostering performer confidence and cohesion. Ultimately, this adaptability reinforced my own growth as a director. I learned to listen more attentively to the cast's feedback and physical responses, rather than becoming overly attached to predetermined plans. This reminded me of when I worked with director Richard Tunley, who introduced me to the phrase 'Kill your darlings.' I later discovered that this term originated from William Faulkner who stated: "Whenever you feel an impulse to perpetrate a piece of exceptionally fine writing, obey it whole-heartedly and delete it before sending your manuscript to press. Murder your darlings." Faulkner.W (1914). Richard explained the meaning behind this and he elaborated that when creating work, you have to be prepared to let go of ideas even if you feel an immense connection to them. If the idea isn't working, don't force it and the solution will emerge in time.

As we moved towards performance, I developed a structured cleaning process to ensure cohesion. While some may find cleaning tedious and like a chore, I actually thoroughly enjoy the experience as both a dancer and a choreographer and tried to influence this in my cast. This involved breaking down the choreography into sections, refining transitions, and running repetition drills to tighten timing. Video analysis became a valuable tool for both me and the dancers. It allowed us to visually assess group synchronisation and spatial awareness and as technology is so advanced in today's day and age, we would film sections and even watch them back in slow motion to ensure accuracy through dance and intention. I used a "stop, watch, and discuss" format, encouraging performers to self-reflect and identify areas for improvement, rather than relying solely on external critique.

However, I was cautious not to over-polish the material. In cleaning contemporary work, “there is a risk of stripping away spontaneity and emotional depth in pursuit of technical perfection.” Butterworth.J & Wildschut.L (2009). I prioritised integrity over precision, particularly in moments where rawness and vulnerability were essential to the narrative. This tension between form and feeling is echoed by theatre director and author Eugenio Barba (2001), who emphasises that "form must be burned by the performer's intention or it becomes dead form.” Rehearsal cleaning strategies that integrate performers' emotional recall are especially relevant in physical and dance theatre contexts. As Grau (2015) notes, “embodied memory and emotional access are just as crucial in rehearsal processes as spatial unison or choreographic accuracy, particularly when working with non-professional or emerging performers.” I found the most effective approach was a balance of technical clarity and performative honesty. Dancers were encouraged to offer feedback and ask for clarification, creating a collaborative and responsive environment where the material could grow organically.

Rehearsal Photos:













(*Rehearsal video footage can be found in the videos linked at the end of this dissertation.)*

Design:

Costume:

Costume plays a vital role in visual storytelling. As stated by the V&A Museum, “Costume is the first impression an audience receives about a character. It reveals personality, status and key aspects of the story” Victoria and Albert Museum (2020). With this in mind, I made deliberate choices to use costume as a narrative tool in my piece. The ensemble wore all-black clothing, including plain black shirts. This choice was made with the intention for the costume to serve multiple purposes. Visually, the formality of the shirts represented the conformity imposed by patriarchal structures, a key theme explored throughout the work. Shirts, rather than dresses are also stereotypically associated with male items of clothing to further push the representation of patriarchal ideologies. I chose the colour black because “many use the color black to symbolise all things negative. Throughout history, this somber color has been tied to death and all things evil and bad. It evokes strong feelings of anger, aggression, fear, and sadness.” Cherry.K (2025), which could aid in reflecting the silenced voices of women across generations.

In contrast, Llio wore white throughout the performance. This opposition in costume separated her visually and symbolically from the group. White traditionally suggests purity or peace but in this context it also represented visibility, vulnerability, and the burden of standing out or speaking up in a system designed to suppress. Her white costume allowed the audience to follow her journey more clearly and again reinforced her role as a symbolic figure. This contrasting use of costume colours became a simple but powerful tool for communicating underlying messages without the need for additional text or dialogue. The combination of black and white colours also reminded me of an english saying “It’s there in black and white” which means that something is concretely proven, similarly to how the matter of injustice throughout men and women is concretely proven, so why are we still having to fight so hard to erase the inequality.

Props:

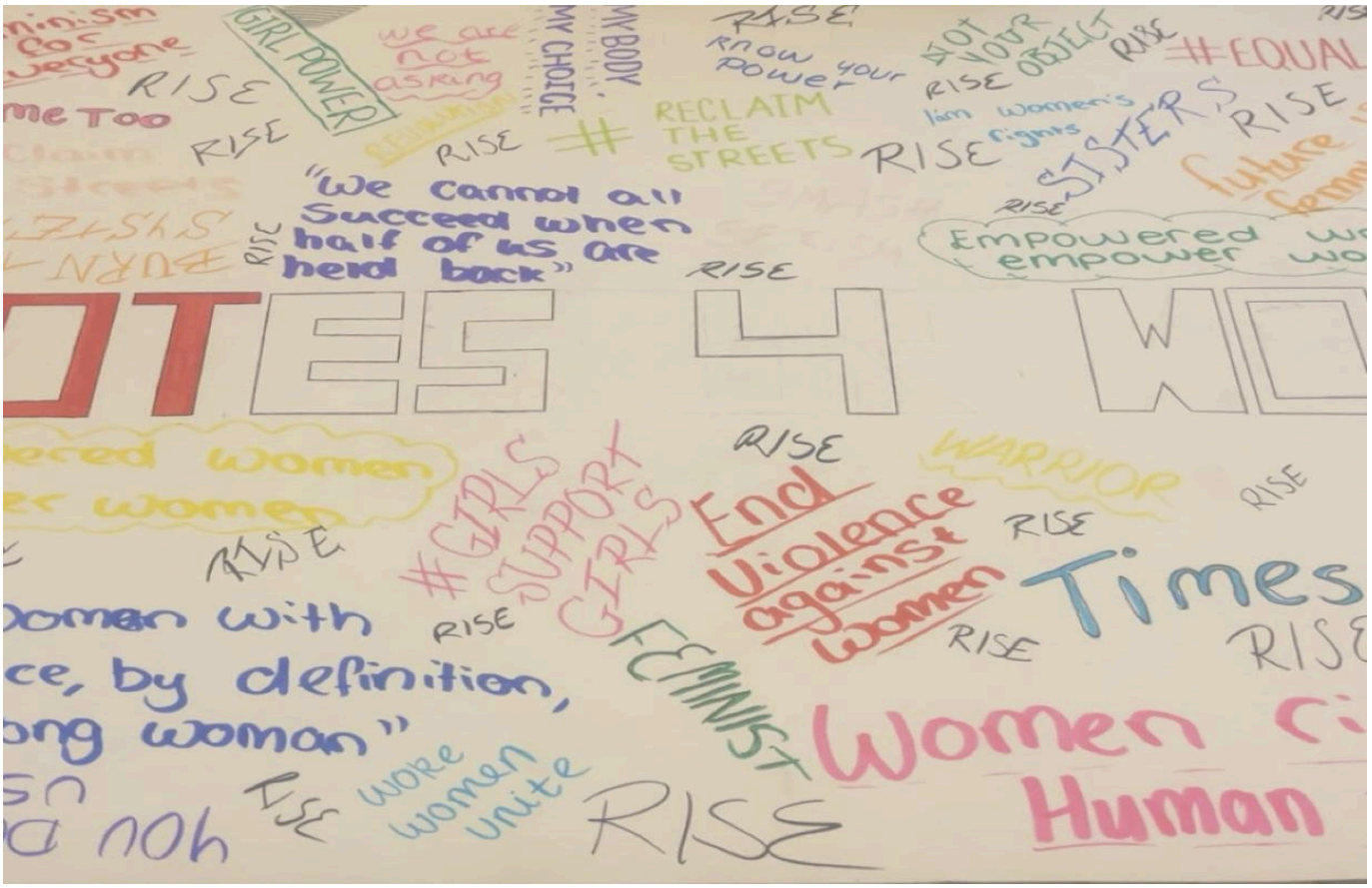
Props in my piece were used sparingly but intentionally. I created newspapers that featured a mock front page about the suffragette movement on one side and contemporary imagery and headlines surrounding women's rights today on the other. The purpose of these were not just as aesthetic props but as narrative devices that bridged time periods. According to Purcell (2013), "props can function as both symbolic and literal objects that reinforce thematic depth and support audience understanding of narrative structure." By physically handling these newspapers, the dancers actively engaged with the generational connections the piece aimed to highlight.

Additionally, I co-created a large protest-style sign with the cast, which we designed together in a graffiti banner style. This process involved collaboratively researching historical quotes, feminist hashtags and slogans, blending activist imagery from the early 20th century and the modern digital age. The banner symbolised a collective voice and its creation process reinforced the collaborative process that aligned with my directing style.

Photos of Props:






GIRL POWER
We are not asking
MY BODY MY CHOICE
RISE
know your power
RECLAIM THE STREETS
#EQUAL
SISTERS
Future
Empowered women empower women
"We cannot all succeed when half of us are held back"
#GIRLS SUPPORT GIRLS
End Violence against Women
WARRIOR
Times
FEMINIST
Women
Human
woke women unite

Lighting:

Lighting played a crucial role in shaping the emotional tone and symbolism of the piece. As White (2015) states, “lighting is not merely a functional tool but an expressive language that can underscore mood, intention, and transformation within performance.” This was especially important in a dance production where lighting could act as an unspoken narrator to enhance shifts in narrative and emotional dynamics. We had very limited tech time, so I made a conscious decision to keep the lighting design simple yet meaningful.
I focused on three core colours: red, white, and blue, symbolically referencing the UK flag to connect the work with the political history. However, each colour also held deeper connotations. Red evoked urgency, anger, despair and revolution. Blue suggested control, suppression, coldness and melancholy. Finally, white signified hope, resilience, new beginnings and clarity. “Coloured lighting can carry cultural and emotional significance, especially when layered against an emotionally or politically charged performance context.” Palmer.H (2021).

I used surging lighting states that gradually intensified in brightness to create a sense of rising urgency throughout the piece. To contrast, I used darkened red and blue states highlighting oppression and emotional weight in scenes exploring destruction and ignorance. In ‘Resurgence’, I designed a white lighting state enhanced by a flashing effect that I manually triggered in time with the music to represent a heartbeat. This heartbeat symbolised renewal and the persistent pulse of resistance as well as portraying the meaning that Evelyn's heart beats with such passion for equality, almost like it’s part of her anatomy. Finally, in ‘Rise’, I blended all three colours and transitioned between them slowly, creating a sense of unity and forward momentum visually tying together past, present, and future.

Final Performance:

Watching the piece come to life in front of an audience, I felt an overwhelming sense of pride in the performers and in the journey we had taken together to create something so charged with meaning. Despite the small audience, the atmosphere in the room felt intimate and powerful and performing in front of new faces brought a new layer of authenticity to the work. The dancers responded well to the energy in the space which made the emotional nuances of the piece more palpable. If I were to undertake this process again, I would allow more time for audience-facing rehearsals and experiment further with audience interaction or proximity, as the presence of viewers clearly shifted the dynamic in meaningful ways and I would like to see how a larger audience would respond.

Conclusion:

In addressing the question, *Why, more than a century after the suffragettes risked imprisonment, violence, and even their lives, are women still fighting for equality?*, this dissertation has examined the historical foundations of the women's rights movement alongside ongoing social, political, and cultural inequalities. Through a combination of academic research, creative practice, and performance analysis, it has explored how contemporary female empowerment continues to be shaped by the legacies of the past. The devised work sought to highlight the persistence of gender-based struggles and to communicate these themes through physical, visual, and emotional means. This inquiry reinforces the notion that, despite progress, the fight for equality remains relevant and necessary, with creative expression offering a potent means of challenging and reimagining systemic structures.

(8546 Words)

The Rise - Written, Choreographed & Directed by Liv Owen

Cast (Listed left to right): Seren Williams, Lois Deihl, Llio Cynwal Williams, Summer Wright-Rees, Amber Nathwani, Imogen Bishop



https://youtu.be/VVrLyyQ7Zco

Video Links:

Llio's first choreography draft rehearsal:

- https://youtu.be/qNGQdig0BqA

Solo developed choreography draft for 'Resurgence':

- https://youtu.be/7tP06S4cc9c

First ensemble choreography draft rehearsal:

- https://youtu.be/tgGUNMYx3XU

First 'Time' rehearsal draft choreography:

- https://youtu.be/LaPdFha0ayo

First rehearsals with Llio & Ensemble together:

- https://youtu.be/G6VZZw-3XkA
- https://youtu.be/JyJhpI5lljk

Nandos Trip:

- https://youtube.com/shorts/0srQVigSGn8?feature=share
- https://youtube.com/shorts/LqTLazFLMNY?feature=share

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