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Obituaries



Maureen Nicol National Women's Register founder keen to help 1960s housewives cope with their 'voluntary exile' at home

Maureen Nicol, who has died aged 94, was the founder of what became

the groundbreaking National Women's Register. She was a young mother with two children aged under five when she and her husband, Brian, moved to a Cheshire housing estate, a home provided by Brian's employer, the Atomic Energy Authority.

There was sparse public transport, and Maureen had little money and few friends when, in February 1960, she read an article in the Guardian by Betty Jerman, entitled *Squeezed in Like Sardines in Suburbia*, commissioned by Mary Stott, the then women's editor.

"The article was describing exactly how I felt," Maureen explained. For the first time in her life she wrote a letter to the paper, beginning a long relationship with the Guardian, Jerman and Stott.

Maureen suggested that those in "voluntary exile", "housebound

wives with liberal interests and a desire to remain individuals" who were missing the stimulation of work - "kindred spirits in the deserts of the suburbs" - might set up a national register to meet local, like-minded women.

Within a week, Maureen had received more than 400 letters. Many expressed relief that they were not alone, that others were also experiencing loneliness, missing their jobs as teachers, doctors and secretaries, among other professions. They all also assumed that it was Maureen who would be organising the register.

"I'm not a publicist and I'm not an organiser," Maureen said. Nonetheless, she borrowed a typewriter, and later a duplicator loaned by the Labour party. A month after her first letter to the Guardian, the paper published a second letter, in which Maureen asked women to write to her, at her home in Eastham, Cheshire, if they were interested in the register.

She was inundated with replies, and was soon forced to charge an annual subscription fee of a shilling a year, to cover postal costs.

Nicol in 1960, the year she established the NWR. She was inspired by a Guardian article by Betty Jerman entitled Squeezed in Like Sardines in Suburbia. 'It described exactly how I felt,' said Nicol

COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL WOMEN'S REGISTER

She also recruited volunteers who would take on the organisation of different parts of the country, and the Housebound Wives' Register was born. From 1966 it was the National Housewives' Register, and from 1987 the National Women's Register. In its first year, in 1960, it attracted more than 1,600 members, who would meet locally in each others' homes for discussion. Now there are 5,000 members in more than 300 groups.

Some years before the feminist Betty Friedan mused about why educated American women were bored as dutiful wives and mothers suffering "the problem that has no name", in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Maureen had discovered the existence of an army of wives who had conformed to the 1950s norm that they would give up work once they became mothers, but who were also resistant to surrendering their brains to domesticity.

"We all loved our children, of course, but there was a whole world out there," Maureen said.

Much to her surprise, the media interest was intense, with reporters on her doorstep in an era with fewer telephones and no internet, and the response was not always positive. One reporter asked her if the existence of the Register "would lead to the break up of the home".

The NWR's tenets have remained unchanged. Groups are open to all. No domestic chat, no culinary competitiveness in each other's homes; only coffee, tea and biscuits served, no campaigning, plenty of group activities, discussion, friendship and debate.

"Nowadays, people have views but they don't listen to each other," Maureen, who described herself as "left of centre", said in an interview, aged 90, for the NWR's

60th anniversary. "Leftwing, rightwing ... you appreciate the other person's point of view."

At its peak, in the 80s, NWR had 24,000 members spread over four continents. Although women were no longer expected to give up work on marriage, then as now, the pressure of jobs, family life and little free time, and divorce, retirement or a change of location meant that many sought the friendship and stimulation that an NWR group could provide.

Born in London, Maureen was the daughter of Alice (nee Simpson) and Arthur Johnson, who together ran a corner shop. She spent most of her early life in Dartford, Kent. She was evacuated to the north of England during the second world war and rescued by her mother after complaining that the childless couple with whom she was billeted worked her hard and fed her little.

Dartford schools were closed, so Maureen missed two years of education. In later life, she took a number of courses, including an A-level in English literature in her 50s. She also worked as a volunteer for the Citizens Advice Bureau for almost a decade, gaining a certificate in family law.

Leaving school at 16, Maureen went to technical college to acquire secretarial qualifications. She worked for several years at the London theatrical costumiers Nathans, a job she loved. She also became a lifelong theatregoer.

In 1952, in a pink wedding dress, she married Brian Nicol. Over the years, as he took on increasingly senior positions in education, the family moved several times in the UK, and to Uganda and Hong Kong. In most places, Maureen would join the local group of the National Women's Register.

She had handed on the role of national organiser in 1962, and became - along with Stott and Jerman - a trustee. In 1995, Maureen was appointed OBE. Her diary of the day of the investiture records that she was not impressed by the Queen, who was in "a plain silk dress without ornamentation and looked strained. She knew nothing about the NWR."

Maureen was self-effacing and disliked public speaking. When raising her hand at the NWR's AGM, she would give her name and group location like any other member. Her son, Simon, said that his mother was always "super keen" that he and his sister, Sally, achieved well in education: "We do wonder what she might have done if she had had greater opportunities."

As it is, Maureen was, in the words of Jerman, "an extraordinary woman who recognised a universal need and acted upon it".

She is survived by Brian, Simon and Sally, and two grandchildren.
Yvonne Roberts

Maureen Nicol, organiser and charity founder, born 21 December 1929; died 10 August 2024

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