Feminist organisations are often associated with collective organisation. One of the major themes of US research on the women’s anti-violence movement has been the relationship between the changing organisational form of women’s anti-violence organisations and the dilution of the movement’s radical aims. In general centres have moved from an ‘ideal form’ in terms of collective, non-hierarchical working to more formalised client-professional relationships and hierarchical structures. The changes that US centres have undergone have led to questions being raised as to whether comprehensive services for survivors of violence have been accompanied by the abandonment of social change goals and the original aim of a violence-free society. In this respect, the survival or modification of the ‘original form’ of organisation is seen to be a crucial indicator of the degree to which the movement has retained its radical ideology and autonomy.

This paper uses data from a new comparative case study of women’s refuges and crisis centres in Sweden and the UK. The research shows that the relationship between organisational form and feminist ideology is not theoretically powerful, nor is it observable in reality. Women’s anti-violence organisations range along a continuum with organisational structure and ideology not necessarily being consistent. Another key finding is that the terms ‘collective’ and ‘hierarchical’ are ambiguous; organisations clustered under the same heading will not necessarily have the same working practices and procedures. Nor is there necessarily a strong contrast between bureaucratic and collective organisations and their respective service provision, ethos and goals.

The paper shows that there is no inevitable movement trajectory. Formal structure may not equate well with formal practices and organisational ethos, therefore caution should be exercised when drawing conclusions on the radical or reformist nature of the women’s movement in a particular country from the internal structures of its organisations.