WOMEN IN BRITISH PUBLIC LIFE, 1914–1950
WOMEN AND MEN IN HISTORY

This series, published for students, scholars and interested general readers, will tackle themes in gender history from the early medieval period through to the present day. Gender issues are now an integral part of all history courses and yet many traditional texts do not reflect this change. Much exciting work is now being done to redress the gender imbalances of the past, and we hope that these books will make their own substantial contribution to that process. We hope that these will both synthesize and shape future developments in gender studies.

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<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AAM</td>
<td>Association of Assistant Mistresses</td>
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<td>AHM</td>
<td>Association of Head Mistresses</td>
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<td>ALP</td>
<td>Australian Labor Party</td>
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<td>AMSH</td>
<td>Association for Moral and Social Hygiene</td>
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<tr>
<td>ATS</td>
<td>Auxiliary Territorial Service</td>
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<tr>
<td>BFBPW</td>
<td>British Federation of Business and Professional Women</td>
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<tr>
<td>BMA</td>
<td>British Medical Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>BDF</td>
<td>Bund Deutscher Frauenvereine (Federation of German Women’s Associations)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCG</td>
<td>Control Commission for Germany</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCWE</td>
<td>Central Committee on Women’s Employment</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCWTE</td>
<td>Central Committee on Women’s Training and Employment</td>
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<tr>
<td>CMC</td>
<td>Children’s Minimum Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>COS</td>
<td>Charity Organisation Society</td>
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<tr>
<td>CWA</td>
<td>Country Women’s Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>DBE</td>
<td>Dame of the British Empire</td>
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<tr>
<td>DFW</td>
<td>Deutsches Frauenwerk</td>
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<tr>
<td>DORA</td>
<td>Defence of the Realm Act</td>
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<td>DP</td>
<td>displaced person</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECCCC</td>
<td>Equal Compensation Campaign Committee</td>
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<td>EPCC</td>
<td>Equal Pay Campaign Committee</td>
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<td>ETS</td>
<td>Emergency Training Scheme</td>
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<td>FANY</td>
<td>First Aid Nursing Yeomanry</td>
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<td>FES</td>
<td>Family Endowment Society</td>
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<tr>
<td>FRG</td>
<td>Federal Republic of Germany</td>
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<td>GDR</td>
<td>German Democratic Republic</td>
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<td>GNC</td>
<td>General Nursing Council</td>
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<td>GPO</td>
<td>General Post Office</td>
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<table>
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<td>HC Deb</td>
<td>Hansard Parliamentary debates</td>
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<td>HMI</td>
<td>His Majesty's Inspector</td>
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<td>HMWC</td>
<td>Health of Munition Workers' Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICW</td>
<td>International Council of Women</td>
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<td>ILP</td>
<td>Independent Labour Party</td>
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<td>IMR</td>
<td>infant mortality rate</td>
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<td>IRO</td>
<td>International Relief Organisation</td>
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<td>IWM</td>
<td>Imperial War Museum</td>
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<td>LCC</td>
<td>London County Council</td>
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<td>LEA</td>
<td>Local Education Authority</td>
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<td>LGB</td>
<td>Local Government Board</td>
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<td>MMC</td>
<td>Maternal Mortality Committee</td>
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<td>MMR</td>
<td>maternal mortality rate</td>
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<td>MP</td>
<td>Member of Parliament</td>
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<td>MWF</td>
<td>Medical Women's Federation</td>
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<td>NBCA</td>
<td>National Birth Control Association</td>
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<td>NCW</td>
<td>National Council of Women</td>
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<td>NFVVW</td>
<td>National Federation of Women Workers</td>
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<td>NHS</td>
<td>National Health Service</td>
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<td>NRF</td>
<td>National Relief Fund</td>
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<td>NSA</td>
<td>Nursery Schools Association</td>
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<td>NSAA</td>
<td>National Sound Archive</td>
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<tr>
<td>NSD</td>
<td>National Service Department</td>
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<tr>
<td>NSF</td>
<td>Nationalsozialiste Frauenschaft (Nazi Women’s Section)</td>
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<tr>
<td>NSPCC</td>
<td>National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children</td>
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<td>NUSEC</td>
<td>National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship</td>
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<td>NUWSS</td>
<td>National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies</td>
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<td>NUT</td>
<td>National Union of Teachers</td>
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<tr>
<td>NUWT</td>
<td>National Union of Women Teachers</td>
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<tr>
<td>NUSC</td>
<td>National Union of Women Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NUTA</td>
<td>National Union of Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ODC</td>
<td>Open Door Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ONMI</td>
<td>Opera Nazionale per la Maternità ed Infanzia (National Agency for Maternity and Infancy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBC</td>
<td>Pass the Bill Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>PMB</td>
<td>private member’s bill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POW</td>
<td>prisoner of war</td>
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</table>
PPS  parliamentary private secretary
PPU  Peace Pledge Union
PRO  Public Records Office

RAMC  Royal Army Medical Corps
RCN  Royal College of Nursing

SCF  Save the Children Fund
SF  Society of Friends
SSFA  Soldiers' and Sailors' Families Association

TG  Townswomen's Guild
TUC  Trades Union Congress

UAB  Unemployment Assistance Board
UAP  United Australia Party
UN  United Nations
UFCS  Union Féminine Civique et Sociale
UNRRA  United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration

VAD  Voluntary Aid Detachment
VD  venereal disease

WAAC  Women's Auxiliary Army Corps
WCG  Women's Cooperative Guild
WFL  Women's Freedom League
WGPW  Women's Group on Public Welfare
WI  Women's Institute
WILPF  Women's International League for Peace and Freedom
WPC  Woman Power Committee
WPPA  Women's Publicity and Planning Association
WRAF  Women's Royal Air Force
WRC  War Relief Committee
WRNS  Women's Royal Naval Service
WSPU  Women's Social and Political Union
WTUL  Women's Trade Union League
WVS  Women's Voluntary Service

YWCA  Young Women's Christian Association
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The current position of women in politics

Twenty years after Britain's first woman Prime Minister took office senior women politicians are still hot news. In the mid-1990s women's role in national politics was again thrust centre stage with the controversy over women-only short lists for constituencies to select Labour Party candidates. Following the 1997 general election women MPs remained in the limelight. There were 120 women MPs elected of whom 101 were Labour, 14 Conservative and 6 from other parties. Women now comprised 18 per cent of MPs, a big leap up from the previous parliament. The dramatic increase in women MPs came largely on the Labour benches, due to Labour's women-only short lists, already outlawed by the time of the election, coupled with Labour's landslide victory.

As well as more women MPs, the number of women in government was greater than in the past, but not impressive. Tony Blair, the Prime Minister, appointed 5 women to his Cabinet; this figure, although not all the faces, remained unchanged after his first Cabinet reshuffle a year later. The arrival of increasing numbers of women in top jobs can be seen in many sections of society. In the professions women are catching up with men numerically but the more prestigious professions – and top positions within all professions – are systematically, although not exclusively, filled with men.

Following the 1997 general election serious analysis of Westminster gender politics was camouflaged under the popular press's image of 'Blair's babes'. There has been a mushrooming of press coverage of women in politics, but little reflective analysis. Newspaper articles in the broadsheets on women in politics still refer to the women's clothes and hair. The focus
of media attention has been on the impact of more women MPs on the working of the House of Commons, and whether the structures are being put in place for more women-friendly policies to emerge across government. When in opposition, Labour had promised a Minister for Women with a seat in the Cabinet. In office, Blair tacked the responsibility on to another portfolio; it was an appendage to Harriet Harman’s role as Secretary of State for Social Security, 1997–98, and then, after her sacking, to that of Baroness Jay, Leader of the House of Lords, who eschews the label ‘feminist’. Blair also created a Women’s Unit, serviced by a small team of civil servants, to coordinate and promote women-friendly policies across Whitehall. All policy proposals should now carry an explanation of their implications for women. The Women’s Unit’s launch and now its workings are much more low-key than the Social Exclusion Unit, established on the same principles.

Harriet Harman, in her first major speech after the 1997 general election, claimed that it had been a turning point in women’s history. She went on to say that one of her principal concerns was to make sure that public policy recognised women’s changing roles and particularly their need to combine work and home responsibilities. Later, in February 1998, while still in the Cabinet, she claimed that the government was committed to ‘building and sustaining a new habit of governance that has women’s voices and women’s interests at its very heart’. A number of commentators have, however, asserted that gender politics are not fashionable under New Labour and that the coterie of ministers and advisors at the heart of government have created a ‘laddish’ culture. As a result of women’s campaigns many women’s issues have become mainstream, but in the process they have lost their radical edge and have been incorporated into a non-feminist agenda.

The question has been raised as to whether women MPs pursue women-friendly policies, as distinct from demanding more convenient working conditions for themselves. While the press has judged back-bench women largely by their commitment to women’s issues, they judge women Cabinet ministers more on perceptions of their general competence. It is too soon to make assessments of the current clutch of women politicians, and generalisations about them and policies for women are fraught with difficulties. Clear differences between women MPs are obvious. Not only do policy differences and strategies vary between women in the different parties, but there are also differences between the attitudes and policies of backbenchers and ministers, and long-serving MPs and new ones. It is difficult, too, to demarcate particular policies as being ‘women’s policies’; what may be ‘woman-friendly’ for one woman or group of women, may not be so for other women.

These debates over women’s role in national politics and policy making continue despite more than 70 years of women’s enfranchisement, entry into
INTRODUCTION

Parliament and presence in the civil service. Overcoming the enfranchisement hurdle (in part in 1918 and in full in 1928) was a huge achievement, but barriers to women's full and equal participation in national politics and policy making remained in place. The extent of their entrenchment is evidenced by women's continuing struggles at the turn of the twenty-first century. The main aim of this book is to examine women's social policy priorities and strategies in the first flush of enfranchisement and in a period of extensive restructuring and extension of state welfare. It analyses the role of women in policy making and the mechanisms of discrimination which operated against them. It is a study of gender, power and social policy making.

Definitions of gender, power and social policy making

Gender refers to the social construction of differences between women and men. As it is socially created it is possible to change it, and for it to change over time, both between and within societies.

Political scientists argue at length over definitions of power. In the context of social policy making it is the ability to make appointments and to determine aspects of policy. It involves having the right, and the resources, to take advantage of opportunities to participate in full in the decision-making process. Ham and Hill have emphasised the dynamic nature of decision making for policies. Thus, they have argued that policy making involves a course of action, or a web of decisions, rather than one single decision at one particular time. They argue that a decision network of great complexity may be involved over a long period. Policies can, of course, be as much about resisting as facilitating change.1 As policy making is a process, often long-drawn-out, it was (and still is) important for women to be a part of the on-going process. It was (and is) not enough to offer opinions which may or may not be taken into account, or to be consulted on an arbitrary basis. It is important to be a consistent part, by right, of the policy process. One of the issues, therefore, with which this book is concerned is the role of women in policy making as politicians, civil servants or as experts in the fields of health and education.

It cannot be assumed that a member of any group, whether it be 'women' or civil servants, has a pre-determined set of attitudes and assumptions

which is brought to bear on policy making. It is necessary to tease these out. The methodology for investigating the ideas behind policies is not straightforward. This book draws on written sources, both unpublished and published. There is always a problem of how far those committing their views to paper are willing, or indeed able, to express them in writing, and how far the process of committing thoughts to paper actually changes them. Civil servants may be working in a shared political and cultural environment where it is not considered necessary or desirable to state explicitly their assumptions; thoughts committed to paper may be only the tip of the ideological iceberg, or expressed in a culturally coded language.

The debate

Historians' interest in governance during the period from 1914 to 1950 has focused on the way in which trade unions and employers' organisations arguably became part of the central government decision-making machinery. This shared decision making grew, according to Middlemas, from access for consultation during the First World War to full-blown shared responsibility for policy making in the Second World War.² Both Middlemas and his critics argue about the nature, speed and consistency of the process which he has identified. They do not attack the study for its lack of a gender analysis of policy making. Yet, employers' organisations and the labour movement were both male-dominated and largely reflected an industrial male power base. At a time when there was increased, albeit uneven, male pressure group influence on government, women's pressure group influence and role in policy making remained marginal.

Koven and Michel have shown how women, in a number of western countries, focused on influencing governments' maternal and child welfare policies. They rightly argue that maternalist policies were not only concerned with the welfare and rights of women and children, but also with critiquing the wider state and society. They claim that women transformed motherhood from women's primary private responsibility into public policy. While Koven and Michel maintain that women were a powerful influence in defining the needs of mothers and children, and in shaping institutions to meet these needs, a number of the chapters in their book consider the constraints on women in shaping policies and institutions. Although it is true, as Koven

and Michel assert, that male bureaucracies, politicians and propaganda often encouraged women in their welfare work, nevertheless, they discouraged them when the women appeared to challenge either government policies or the processes and institutions which maintained male authority.3

A number of historians, who have looked at the influence of women on the emerging system of state welfare, have focused on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They argue that women had substantial influence on the development of the welfare state through voluntary organisations. Koven and Michel, Thane, Skocpol and Rutter, look at the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, yet it was in the 1940s that the main increases in state welfare took place.4

Here the focus is on the years of both world wars (1914–18 and 1939–45) and the years leading up to (1920s and 1930s), and including, the main period (1940s) of increased state welfare and restructuring of welfare provision. The aim is to provide an analysis of British women's direct role in central government social policy making in an era of major social upheaval and restructuring of welfare provision.

Themes and arguments

During the Victorian and Edwardian years women had challenged the educational, employment and welfare systems. They had operated, for the most part, around the periphery of state power. Women had exercised considerable power in local charitable work and in local government. Developments in welfare provision then shifted from the local to the national stage, and for this reason the focus here is on national politics.

As the new century dawned women had successfully opened up for themselves a role in public life and had organised numerous pressure groups which lobbied governments for change. For a number of years governments had offered women ad hoc appointments as civil servants or places on government enquiries. The limitations of a temporary, outsider's role in

policy making have already been mentioned. This book looks at the opportunities for, and barriers to, women taking a full role in policy making at a time when Britain was moving towards greater political rights through enfranchisement and more social rights through a state welfare system. It will be explained how and why, despite these developments, and women’s manifest expertise and interest in social welfare, in areas such as health and education, women as a group were systematically discriminated against and excluded from the policy-making process. Women did not have the insiders’ ability to network informally but had to rely on more cumbersome, formal and less effective lobbying. Women’s role in policy making continued to be primarily as campaigners, not policy makers. Women’s campaigns often ran counter to government economic policy and entrenched attitudes, hostile both to policies advocated by women’s groups and to the women’s groups themselves.

Women campaigners attempted to stamp their ideas on domestic social policy making and to inject a social policy dimension into international affairs. They tried to play a part in the policy-making process through the civil service; through Parliament; through lobbying government; through teaching, nursing, medicine and social work, and through promoting charitable services, which it was hoped government would imitate.

Government departments’ targeting of resources and prioritising services often worked against women’s demands. Women’s whole approach was often more integrated and less compartmentalised than government organisation and attitudes could, or would, accommodate. Despite divisions between women, all the major welfare campaigns of the period recognised the unequal distribution of resources in families. The priority of women campaigners was poor working-class women and children in Britain, and middle-class women and children fallen on hard times on the Continent. From the First World War, British women were involved to an unprecedented extent with the welfare of continental Europeans. The gendered impact of poverty was the intellectual tree from which their campaigns and policies sprouted. The unemployment and fascism of the 1930s did not eclipse a gendered analysis of poverty, but contributed to one and gave it an added urgency.

The ability of women to contribute to policy in both world wars was strictly limited, even though they undertook responsible work in, and for, the government. Women were, for the most part, implementing decisions already taken. In both wars women were brought into government after certain key decisions affecting women had been reached. Women’s role was, nevertheless, greater in war than in peace, and greater in the Second World War than in the First World War. Both wars created opportunities for women, but fewer for them than for men. In the Second World War,
especially, the close relationship between women’s organisations and government was vital to the effective pursuit of the war on the home front.

In both war and peace, few women played a direct part in policy making, and because there were so few women their work had no trickle-down effect on the power of women in general. There were too few well-placed women to create a network which could effectively challenge and dislodge structures and cultures which operated to women’s disadvantage. In Parliament there were never more than 15 women at any one time, there were no women in the House of Lords and only a handful in the administrative grade of the civil service. Men, not women, had the power of appointment and promotion. Individual women exercised power, but not groups of women. As the numbers of women were small they were unrepresentative of the vast array of interests and circumstances of women, and this again limited the collective and feminist powers of women. Those women with influence, moreover, did not necessarily use it to enhance other women’s policy-making powers.

Among women politicians, civil servants and women employed in health and education, their ability to exercise power related to the extent of the hierarchy in which they operated, the degree of flexibility and discipline, the homogeneity of the environment and the extent of an established male culture. Although there were women mounting attacks on governments across a range of domestic and foreign policy issues, and often linking the two through their analysis of welfare, there is little evidence that women in health and education, despite their expertise and experience, were able to contribute directly to decision making for welfare policies.

The most radical campaigns of women were not, moreover, wholeheartedly pursued by women through the political parties, which all sidelined women’s issues. Women politicians displayed a mixed attitude towards women’s specific needs. Not all women MPs believed in speaking on women’s issues. They were, in any case, greatly constrained by the culture and practices of Parliament, and divided – like so many other women – over what they regarded as being in women’s interests.

The effects of political culture permeated all areas, and its importance is underlined by reference to the fortunes of women in a number of other countries – France, Germany, Italy, Australia and the USA. When governments, whether in Britain or abroad, adopted policies advocated by women, it was to shore up existing gender relations, not to bring them tumbling down. 5

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5. It is recognised that there are certain differences in selection and presentation of the secondary comparative material which is utilised here but, at a general level, there is a value in this comparative enquiry.
During the first half of the twentieth century many changes sought by women in their lives depended on governmental social reforms. In the nineteenth century, starting from a lower base line, middle-class women were able to bring about changes in their lives without such heavy reliance on central government. Changes which women achieved in the nineteenth century in the fields of employment, local politics and education were the starting point and foundation for women’s campaigns in the twentieth century.

In the early part of the nineteenth century most middle-class girls received their education at home; some attended private day schools. The aim of this education was to fit girls for their future role as wives and mothers, a role which middle-class convention dictated would exclude them from the paid labour force. When social disaster struck and young women failed to marry, male relatives were expected to look after them. Paid work for ‘respectable’ middle-class women was not an option. The hostility of male professionals, middle-class culture and the lack of suitable education all excluded women from training for professional employment. In the second half of the nineteenth century women began to provide suitable education by setting up girls’ schools with academic curricula, and this in turn started to erode middle-class employment conventions. From the early 1870s the Girls’ Public Day School Company (later Trust) established 38 schools; from the early 1880s the Church Schools Company opened 33 high schools. In the last three decades of the nineteenth century over 90 girls’ grammar schools were founded.

The new girls’ schools were not without their critics. Medical arguments were deployed against educating girls beyond puberty for fear of inducing insanity or diverting energy from the reproductive organs to the brain. Not all women approved of academically oriented schools, and the growing number of girls’ schools consequently offered a diverse curriculum. Some women argued that schools should offer a curriculum designed to enhance girls’ feminine qualities. Other women believed that girls should receive the same education as boys, so that girls would be equipped to compete in the boys’ world.

Middle-class girls’ education expanded to give an increasing number of young women the skills they required for economic independence, should a husband not materialise. The drive to raise academic standards and draw more girls into schools formed part of the overall strategy of those women
who were trying to open up the public world to women. They perceived education as the *sine qua non* for wider opportunities. Women who ran schools with an academically challenging curriculum kept one eye on the labour market.

At the same time as women were establishing academic schools they were also campaigning for access to higher education. In the 1860s women gained admission to classes run by the university extension movement. In 1878 the University of London opened its doors to women on the same basis as men. It was followed in 1892 by Scottish universities, and in 1895 by the University of Durham. While women were gradually gaining entry to the universities, many had to run the gauntlet of prejudice from family, friends, and male members of the universities. Even so, by 1900 women comprised 16 per cent of university students. (The percentage of women students rose to 24 per cent in 1920, 27 per cent in 1930, dipping on the outbreak of the Second World War to 23 per cent.) Expanding educational opportunities meant greater employment opportunities, although it was not easy for women to step outside nineteenth-century middle-class culture with its artificially devised ideal public and paid world of men, and private and unpaid world of women.

Unpaid voluntary work with the local poor was an acceptable extension of middle-class women’s home-based caring role. Voluntary work enabled women to contribute to the local community – usually poor women and children – through the skills they supposedly possessed as a result of their innate feminine qualities. When middle-class women broke into paid work it was a variation on the voluntary and caring theme. Teaching, nursing and social work all fitted the bill. There are no accurate figures for the number of women in paid work on the eve of the First World War. According to the 1911 census, which underestimated the number of women because some had refused to cooperate with it on account of their exclusion from the parliamentary franchise, there were 187,283 women teachers; 477 surgeons and general practitioners; 19,437 Poor Law, municipal, and parish officers and 31,538 civil servants.

By visiting the poor in their homes, workhouses and prisons, women gained a foothold in the running of local institutions dealing with the poor. This was all work, whether paid or unpaid, which was more or less respectable, reflecting the supposedly caring, sharing side of women’s characters. In 1869 single, rate-paying women gained the municipal franchise; in 1870 they were permitted to sit on school boards; and in 1875 they could become Poor Law Guardians. In 1894 the same rights were extended to married women. By the dawn of the twentieth century there were roughly 1,000 Poor Law Guardians, 200 women members of school boards and 200 women
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parish councillors. Although there were relatively few women on school boards and women Poor Law Guardians, there were enough of them to influence local provision and policies. They could network effectively, and offer a distinctive contribution to the public, although still local, world.

Every step middle-class women took into the local public world of policy making and policy implementation was ideologically and organically linked to the previous one. As each step was justified and accepted with reference to the previous step, the process was slow and gradual. Not only was women's local public role portrayed as unconnected to national politics, but their role in local politics was also used as an additional justification for their exclusion from national politics. Anti-suffragists argued that women and men should play a complementary role in politics, as in other aspects of life; women had a place in local politics, while men ran the country and empire. Yet, throughout the nineteenth century, middle-class and working-class women had participated in national pressure group politics, such as the campaign against the 1834 Poor Law, Chartism, the Anti-Corn Law League, the temperance movement, divorce law reform, the campaign against slavery, the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, changes to the Factory Acts, and access to educational and employment opportunities. The campaign for the suffrage, joined by women of all classes, is the best remembered of women's campaigns, and provided women with the opportunity to develop their powers of leadership and organisational skills. Women demonstrated their interest in national politics throughout the century, but there were serious social and economic constraints on their political leadership.

Women who before the First World War were cutting their teeth in local politics and women's campaigns, later took their place, by right, on the national stage. Eleanor Rathbone, Susan Lawrence, Marion Phillips and Ethel Bentham were all involved in local politics, and later entered Parliament. In the 1890s Margaret McMillan sat on a Bradford school board; by the First World War she was a national campaigner for nursery schools. These women were, however, the exception to the rule. It was difficult for women to obtain nomination to stand in local elections, and even more difficult to win them. Male party bosses regarded women as an electoral liability, and a waste of a seat because men often saw local politics as a stepping stone to national politics, from which women were banned. Until 1918 Westminster excluded women; a few were to be found in the corridors of Whitehall, but rarely behind desks where they could contribute to policy making.

By 1914 women had permeated many government departments outside Westminster, beginning with the General Post Office (GPO), where female telegraph operators were appointed in 1870. From the 1870s the GPO, and from 1899 the Board of Education, employed women as clerks. Other
departments followed. The women were often better educated and from a higher class background than their male colleagues, from whom many received a good deal of hostility. Even women graduates found it extremely hard to gain government work of a senior or responsible nature.

Women who were appointed to senior posts were usually *ad hoc* appointments, so no precedent was set for employing other women. In 1873 Mrs Nassau Senior became a woman inspector at the Local Government Board (LGB) to inspect and advise on workhouse schools; in 1886 Miss M.H. Mason was appointed an inspector of boarded-out children. She was followed in 1898 and 1901 by two other women. In 1897 Miss Stansfield became an Assistant Poor Law Inspector along with four nurses who were appointed as inspectors at the LGB, but working as assistants to men. In 1883 the first woman was appointed as an inspector to the Board of Education, and other women followed. In 1893 the first two women Factory Inspectors were appointed; by 1914 their number had reached 21. In 1904 Mrs H.E. Harrison became an inspector of girls' reformatory and industrial schools, and in 1908 the first woman was appointed an inspector of prisons. Other breakthroughs came in 1891 when four women were appointed assistant commissioners to the Royal Commission on Labour and other university-educated women were appointed clerks to the Commission. In 1893 Clara Collet was appointed to the labour department of the Board of Trade. The first appointments of an administrative character came in 1910 when labour exchanges were set up around the country in which women, mainly graduates, were employed. The 1911 National Insurance Act involved the appointment of Insurance Commissioners to run the system. Four women Insurance Commissioners were appointed, along with women at all other grades.

On the eve of the First World War women's future in the civil service was unclear. For years women had campaigned for equal access to the civil service, but women were still banned from sitting the examinations for entry to the administrative grades. Evidence to the Royal Commission on the Civil Service, 1912–15, was generally favourable about women's past contribution, but witnesses were diffident and divided over women's future role.

By the First World War a number of factors facilitated women's participation in the public sphere and suggested that they were on the verge of a breakthrough in terms of national politics and social policy making. By the early twentieth century the dominant nineteenth-century ideology of separate spheres for women and men, and the accompanying assumption that women's proper place was in the home was no longer applied so vigorously to single women or to women without children. There was still a strong social expectation, however, that wives and mothers would be at home for their husbands and children.
The middle class increasingly limited the size of their families so that middle-class women were healthier, less worn down by childbearing, and with more time on their hands to devote to non-household matters. As middle-class women’s reproductive role changed, there was the potential for their role in the family to change as well.

Women had demonstrated their competence in local government and women pioneers in education, the civil service and local politics had all displayed women’s abilities and desire to contribute to politics and the policy process. The demands for replacement labour and the growth of government with its accompanying insatiable demand for labour in the First World War would suggest that women were well placed to exploit their education, experience and desire for a role in the governance of the country.
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