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WOMEN AND CITIZENSHIP:
A STUDY OF NON-FEMINIST WOMEN'S SOCIETIES AND
THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN ENGLAND, 1928-1950

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Submitted in fulfilment for the
degree of Ph.D.
Centre For Social History
University of Warwick

April 1996

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis is dedicated to my parents

I would like to thank everyone who helped me at the various stages of research for this thesis. In particular I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr. Tony Mason and Dr. James Obelkevitch, for their wise counsel, support and criticism. I am grateful for assistance given by the staff at the Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, the University of Warwick Library, the British Library, Lambeth Palace Library, Birmingham City Library and Senate House Library, University of London. I owe a special debt to David Doughan and Rachel Emmett of the Fawcett Library for their expert help and interest over the years.

I would like to express my thanks to the Mothers' Union and the staff at Mary Sumner House who gave me permission to consult the Mothers' Union Archive and who made my visits to Mary Sumner House such a pleasant experience. Thanks also to Daphne Glick for access to the records of the National Council of Women and to Valerie Noble for invaluable information on the history of the Catholic Women's League.

I am grateful to the Economic and Social Research Council, the University of Warwick Graduate Award and the Michael Postan Award for their financial assistance during the research of this thesis. I would also like to thank the staff and students at the Centre For

Social History, University of Warwick for the advice and friendship they have extended to me since I joined the Centre.

I am indebted to Piaras Beaumont, Patrick McDonnell and Mide Beaumont for their proof reading skills and helpful suggestions during the preparation of the final draft. Special thanks also to Patrick for help with the printing and everything else. Finally, I should like to thank my family and friends for their constant encouragement and moral support over the last number of years. I hope they know it has been greatly appreciated.

ABBREVIATIONS

AOS	Agricultural Organisation Society.
ALRA	Abortion Law Reform Society.
CWL	The Catholic Women's League.
ECCC	Equal Compensation Campaign Committee.
EPCC	Equal Pay Campaign Committee.
NCEC	National Council For Equal Citizenship.
NCW	National Council of Women.
NUSEC	National Union of Societies For Equal Citizenship.
NUTG	Nation Union of Townswomen's Guilds.
NUWSS	National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies.
NUWW	National Union of Women Workers.
NWCA	National Women's Citizens' Association.
SJCWWO	Standing Joint Committee of Working Women's Organisations.
SCWO	Standing Conference of Women's Organisations.
WCA	Women's Citizens Association.
WGPW	Women's Group on Public Welfare.
WI	The National Federation of Women's Institutes.
WVS	Women's Voluntary Service.
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association.
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association.

INTRODUCTION

The decline of feminism in England during the 1930s and 1940s has been the subject of numerous historical investigations. Jane Lewis (1980), Olive Banks (1986), Johanna Alberti (1989) and Martin Pugh (1990), have all considered the activities of women's societies which demanded equal rights for women, including equal pay, equal opportunities and an equal moral standard for men and women. These studies suggest that the feminist movement, understood to represent political feminist groups, was unable to capitalise on the triumph of the suffrage campaign. Although legislation enacted during the 1920s did improve the position of women in society, it was clear by the 1930s that the struggle for women's equality was far from over. As a result, the 1930s and 1940s have often been characterised as a period which witnessed 'one of feminism's deepest troughs, the era as a whole assumed as having an "anti-progressive and reactionary character"'.¹

Various reasons have been put forward by historians as to why the feminist movement suffered a decline during these years. The principal explanations appear to be the emphasis placed on domesticity for women after the First World War, as well as fears about male employment opportunities following the onset of the economic depression. These overriding concerns

¹ Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (1991), p. 9.

meant that the hopes of feminists for further egalitarian reforms remained largely unfulfilled. Added to this was the steady decline in membership of overtly feminist societies. Some former suffragists felt the need for women-only pressure groups had passed, and moved on to join established political parties or the peace campaign. Martin Pugh (1992) has suggested that younger women were more willing to show their newly won emancipation through employment, and not political work.

The emergence of new feminist thinking during the late 1920s has also been the subject of considerable historical debate. New feminist ideas manifested themselves in demands for social welfare reforms, such as family allowances and birth control information, which identified the specific needs of wives and mothers. Jane Lewis (1978) and Martin Pugh (1992), for example, have both discussed the inclusion of new feminist demands in the programme of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC), the largest and most influential feminist society throughout this period. However, neither the social feminism endorsed by the NUSEC or the more traditional egalitarian objectives of societies such as the Six Point Group (1921) and the Open Door Council (1926), attracted popular support during the 1930s and 1940s. It has therefore been suggested by Banks (1986), and again by Pugh (1990), that the feminist movement had 'suffered an inexorable decline' by the end of the 1950s.

More recently, historians have looked beyond the activities of overtly feminist societies and considered the feminist principles of other organisations for women. Pat Thane (1990), has argued that the Women Sections of the Labour Party made a significant contribution to the campaign for women's political and welfare rights during the 1930s. Similarly, Gillian Scott (1994) has considered the role of the Women's Co-operative Guild (1883), in demanding legislative reforms on behalf of working-class wives and mothers. Martin Pugh (1992) includes both these groups, as well as other political organisations for women, in his history of the women's movement in Britain.

The result is a broader and more accurate picture of the political and social activities of women during the 1930s and 1940s. However, the role of non-feminist women's societies in local and national affairs is frequently underestimated, and often ignored. Margaret Morgan's recent doctoral thesis on the Women's Institute Movement (University of Sussex, 1992), and Caroline Merz's history of the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds (1988), are two notable exceptions. Both studies not only reveal the degree of common membership which existed between these two mainstream women's organisations and the feminist movement, but discuss their involvement in campaigns for improved social services such as housing and education.

The aim of this thesis is to explore in some detail the campaigning activities of six non-feminist

women's groups throughout the 1930s and 1940s. The six organisations included in this study are: the Mothers' Union, the Young Women's Christian Association, the Catholic Women's League, the National Council of Women as well as the Women's Institute Movement and the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds. These six were chosen as the largest and most popular voluntary organisations for women at this time. Unlike feminist societies, they did not include traditional egalitarian reforms amongst their principal aims and objectives. Instead, each embraced the prevailing ideology of domesticity and acknowledged that women had an important obligation to care for their husbands and children. They supported women in their domestic role by providing classes and instruction in traditional skills such as handicrafts and cookery.

Having a strong commitment to motherhood did not mean that non-feminist women's societies saw women as dependents devoted to family life. On the contrary, they were determined that women should seize every opportunity possible to get involved in local and national affairs. In doing so, women were able to make a meaningful contribution to the life of their community and highlight the welfare needs of women and children. All six groups considered in this study also recognised that women had important social rights as citizens. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, they were involved in a number of crucial campaigns to secure

social welfare reforms which would do much to improve the quality of women's lives.

The origins and objectives of the Mothers' Union, the Catholic Women's League, the YWCA, the National Council of Women, the Women's Institute Movement and the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds are discussed in Chapter One. The intention here is not to provide a detailed organisational history but to draw attention to the various activities of each group and to consider the membership at both the local and national level. The Mothers' Union, the Catholic Women's League and the YWCA, were religious organisations whilst the other three welcomed women from every faith and were careful not to compromise the beliefs of any individual member.

All six societies were strictly non-party political and did not adopt a traditional feminist agenda. Indeed, they regarded egalitarian feminist groups as both partisan and propagandist, representing the views of only a small minority of middle-class women. However, it would be wrong to suggest that non-feminist and feminist women's organisations did not share some similar goals. Although careful to avoid any strong association with the feminist movement, non-feminist women's societies were at times willing to co-operate with feminist groups on questions of common concern. For example, the provision of family allowances and the employment of women police. As Morgan and Merz have suggested, the membership of feminist and non-feminist women's organisations,

particularly at the highest level, often over-lapped, thereby increasing the opportunity for mutual co-operation and support.

Non-feminist women's societies were unwilling to discuss party political issues. But they were interested in politics and the political process. Organisations such as the National Council of Women and the Women's Institutes hoped that membership of a voluntary society would encourage women, especially housewives and mothers, to play an active part in public life. Membership of a voluntary society, which involved attending regular meetings, passing policy resolutions and electing officials, was seen as an ideal way to provide women with the experience necessary to participate in local and national government.

The emphasis that non-feminist women's societies placed on the rights and duties of citizenship for women is discussed in Chapter Two. Although organisations such as the Mothers' Union and the Catholic Women's League rejected feminism, they were in no doubt that women had rights and duties as citizens, and were determined that all women, including housewives and mothers, would benefit from the rights of democratic citizenship. The next four chapters will then consider the involvement of these groups in a wide range of national campaigns. These campaigns included: access to birth control information, free health and maternity services, the inter-war peace movement and

the right of all citizens to a good standard of public housing. All of these issues had a direct (affect on the lives of women and therefore attracted considerable attention from feminist, political and non-feminist women's groups.

This research has been confined to England as most of these groups had separate administrative bodies for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Although reference is made to the work of local branches throughout the thesis, the principal objective is to focus on the work and policy decisions of the six as national organisations representing the interests of hundreds of thousands of women. Yet the activities and concerns of these societies have often been overlooked because they are thought to have represented traditional and conservative values which had no part in the history of the women's movement.

Alison Light has suggested that the ideology of domesticity which prevailed during the 1930s and 1940s was 'one which could be conservative in effect and yet was often modern in form'.² Non-feminist women's societies may have embraced domesticity, but they were also active in securing citizenship rights for women and representing women as responsible members of the community. It is now time to consider a broader interpretation of the history of the women's movement. Feminist, political and non-feminist women's societies

² Ibid., p. 11.

must be included as all were intent on enhancing the status and welfare of women in society.

CHAPTER ONE

ORIGINS AND ASPIRATIONS: AN INTRODUCTION TO SIX NON-FEMINIST WOMEN'S SOCIETIES

Part of the whole pattern of society, and its most precious part, is the voluntary society, the voluntary grouping of people for all kinds of purposes, social, political, economic, education, every kind of purpose.. they play an enormously important part in the shaping of the world we live in.¹

Membership of non-political and non-feminist women's societies during the first half of the twentieth century was undoubtedly an attractive proposition for hundreds of thousands of women. At the local level these organisations gave women, the vast majority of whom were wives and mothers, the opportunity to meet and spend time with other women who shared their domestic and social concerns. Handicrafts, dressmaking, cookery, music and drama were among the most popular pastimes at weekly meetings and remained so throughout the 1930s and 1940s.

Non-feminist women's societies also facilitated the philanthropic work of many upper and middle-class women. Since the mid nineteenth century, involvement in charitable causes, especially in the field of moral welfare, had allowed middle-class women to engage in

¹ *The Blue Triangle Gazette* Vol. 63, Nos. 8 & 9, August 1945, p. 8.

public work outside the home.² As members and officials of voluntary women's societies these women could at the same time campaign for legislative reforms which would not only improve their own social, economic and political position but 'secure the same advantages for their daughters'.³

The six women's organisations considered in this study endorsed the traditional domestic role of women. They did not espouse equality between the sexes and often refused to be associated with egalitarian feminist groups. Yet in spite of this apparent rejection of feminist ideology, non-feminist women's societies highlighted the important contribution that women as wives, mothers and citizens could, and were already making, to society. This chapter will explore the origins and early activities of six of these societies and also offer a profile of their membership, which by the inter-war period amounted to nearly one million women.

THE MOTHERS' UNION

Mothers' meetings, first established in Britain in the 1850s, were set up to provide support and information for mothers on matters relating to public health and the care of their children. These meetings were of a distinctly religious nature and were run by middle-

² See Frank Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth Century England* (1980) and David Owen, *English Philanthropy 1660-1960* (1964).

³ *Home and Country* Vol. 18, No. 7, July 1936, p. 369.

class women from the Anglican and Nonconformist traditions who hoped to improve the moral fibre of society by instructing working-class women in religious and domestic subjects.⁴

Frank Prochaska has written that by the end of the nineteenth century as many as a million women and children were attending mothers' meetings which he describes as 'the most pervasive female agency for bringing women together...outside the home in British history'.⁵ It was in the midst of this trend for mothers' meetings that the Mothers' Union was founded by Mary Sumner, a rector's wife living in Hampshire.

Following the birth of her first child in the late 1840s, Mary Sumner recalled 'the awful sense of responsibility which seemed to overwhelm me as I took her in my arms, and realised that God had given an immortal soul into our keeping.'⁶ Some thirty years later in 1876, when her own children had grown up, Mary Sumner set up a mothers' meeting in the parish of Old Alresford where her husband was the local rector. Mary Sumner firmly believed that motherhood was one of 'the greatest and most important professions in the

⁴ See Frank Prochaska, 'A Mother's Country: Mothers' Meetings and Family Welfare in Britain, 1850-1950', *History* 74, (1989) and Anna Davin, 'Imperialism and Motherhood', *History Workshop Journal* 5, (Spring, 1978).

⁵ Frank Prochaska, 'A Mother's Country: Mothers' Meetings and Family Welfare in Britain, 1850-1950', p. 381.

⁶ Olive Parker, *For The Family's Sake: A History of the Mothers' Union 1876-1976* (Folkestone, 1975), p. 5.

world' but one which had the poorest 'training for its supreme duties'.⁷

In order to provide women with some support and guidance in their role as wives and mothers and to encourage women in their Christian faith, Mary Sumner began to hold mothers' meetings at the rectory in Old Alresford, Hampshire. These meetings for local mothers who were members of the Church of England soon became a regular feature of church work within the parish. Mary Sumner also hoped that former members of the Girls' Friendly Society (1874) would join mothers' meetings following the birth of their first child.⁸

The idea of establishing a nationwide network of mothers' meetings for Anglican women was first proposed by Mary Sumner in 1885 when she addressed a meeting of clergymen's wives attending the Church of England Congress. In her speech Mary Sumner suggested that women as wives and mothers had

great work to do for our husbands,
our children, our homes and our country,
and I am convinced that it would greatly
help if we could start a Mothers' Union,

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Mary Sumner was an associate member of the Girls' Friendly Society set up to train young women in 'religious principles and domestic duty'. Following the establishment of the Mothers' Union, good relations were maintained between the two groups which led to co-operation in the anti-divorce campaign. Brian Harrison, 'For Church, Queen and Family: The Girls' Friendly Society 1874-1920', *Past and Present* 61, (November, 1973), pp. 109-11.

wherein all classes could unite in faith and prayer, to try to do this work for God.⁹

The following day the first Diocesan Section of the Mothers' Union, with Mary Sumner as President, was established in Winchester. Within two years fifty-seven branches of the Mothers' Union had been established and the Mothers' Union had become the recognised women's society within the Church of England.

The spread of the Mothers' Union throughout the British Isles was rapid.¹⁰ By 1890 it was reported that branches had been established 'in practically every English diocese' as well as in the colonies where members of the Church of England had settled.¹¹ In 1896 a Central Council was set up to co-ordinate the Union's work. These meetings, which took place in London every June and December, were attended by representatives from the various Diocesan Sections. It was here that decisions regarding the policy and administration of the Mothers' Union were discussed and voted upon and every three years elections for the Central President and Executive Committee took place.

Although the Mothers' Union was set up as an independent Church of England society, Union meetings

⁹ Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁰ In July 1889 the Mothers' Union had attracted an estimated 157,668 members and associates. Cited in Brian Harrison, 'For Church, Queen and Family: The Girls' Friendly Society 1874-1920', p. 109.

¹¹ Olive Parker, *For The Family's Sake* p. 15.

could only be held with the approval of the local vicar who also had the power to disband the branch in his parish even if this meant going against the wishes of the members.¹² The Union was dependent on the vicar to allow weekly meetings to take place in the Church Hall and it would appear to have been customary practice for Union meetings to begin with a short service conducted by the vicar or rector.

Co-operation between the Mothers' Union and the Church of England extended to the highest ranks of the hierarchy with Bishops and Archbishops invited to become patrons of the Diocesan Sections. The Central President consulted the Archbishop of Canterbury over matters of Union policy, most notably on the divisive issues of divorce and birth control. The Mothers' Union also assisted the Church in organising large gatherings, including the Lambeth Conference, when members offered to provide accommodation for visiting delegates and volunteered their services as caterers and tea-makers for the duration of the Conference.

Membership of the Union was open to women who belonged either to the Church of England or to a Church in accord with the Church of England. These women were eligible to become official workers for the Union and

¹² In 1940 the Holy Cross St. Pancras branch of the Mothers' Union in London was disbanded by the local vicar because of its small membership in spite of protests from the members. (Holy Cross St. Pancras Minute Book, 1931-1940), Mary Sumner House Archive Collection.

could therefore stand for election to the Central Council and the Executive Committee. Ordinary membership was open to married women who were baptised and who undertook to have their children baptised. Unmarried women who supported the work of the Union were allowed to join as associate members. It is significant though perhaps not surprising that unmarried mothers were not eligible to join the Mothers' Union, on the grounds that these women represented 'an infringement of the duties and ideals of Christian Motherhood.'¹³

This decision reflects the conservative and uncompromising nature of the society when it came to questions of moral behaviour. The Mothers' Union saw itself as the guardian of traditional family life and any deviation from Christian principles was not tolerated. The Union worked within the confines of the three objects, drawn up by the Executive Council during the late 1890s, which defined the moral character and the ultimate aims of the organisation. These principal objectives were

to uphold the sanctity of marriage, to awaken in all mothers a sense of their great responsibility in the training of their boys and girls, the fathers and mothers of the future and to organise in every place a band of

¹³ Minutes of the Mothers' Union Central Council, December 1930, (Central Council Minutes, Vol. IX, 1930-1932), p. 58. Mary Sumner House Archive Collection.

mothers who will unite in prayer and will seek by their own example to lead their families in purity and holiness of life.¹⁴

Defending the first object of the Mothers' Union, which confirmed the organisation's belief in the indissolubility of marriage, dominated much of the national work of the Mothers' Union during the 1920s and 1930s. Adherence to the principle of indissolubility and participation in national campaigns against the introduction of divorce legislation created controversy within the organisation itself and, for a short time at least, soured relations between the Union and some members of the Church of England hierarchy.¹⁵

The Union's belief in the sanctity of marriage and its opposition to divorce meant that divorced women were ineligible for membership of the Mothers' Union. Any woman found to have been unfaithful to her husband ceased '*ipso facto* to be a member of the Mothers' Union'.¹⁶ The Union took a slightly less uncompromising position when it came to birth control. A resolution passed in 1919 expressed the official view:

the Central Council of the Mothers' Union holds that, as for all normal married persons, it is a duty, and an honour, to

¹⁴ *The Mothers' Union Journal* January 1926, p. 1.

¹⁵ The Mothers' Union campaign against divorce will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

¹⁶ Minutes of the Mothers' Union Central Council, June 1934, (Central Council Minutes, Vol. X, 1932-1937), p. 160.

accept God's gift of a family; a selfish limitation of children is wrong, and that all artificial checks to conception are against the laws of Nature.¹⁷

In practice, however, the leadership of the Mothers' Union accepted that family limitation was a private matter for married couples and the rejection of birth control was not made a condition of membership.

Moral issues such as divorce and birth control may have preoccupied the leadership of the Mothers' Union but at the local level Union meetings gave women the opportunity to meet one afternoon a week and spend some time with other women who shared their religious beliefs and domestic concerns. In 1916 the Union had 8,266 branches with 415,354 members.¹⁸ By 1930 half a million women had joined the Mothers' Union, making it the second largest organisation for women in Britain during the inter-war period.¹⁹

Religious instruction was always a priority for the Mothers' Union and members were expected to obey the moral and social teaching of the Church of England. Union meetings began and ended in prayer and speakers

¹⁷ Olive Parker, *For The Family's Sake* p. 91.

¹⁸ Frank Prochaska, 'A Mother's Country: Mothers' Meetings and Family Welfare in Britain, 1850-1950', p. 383.

¹⁹ *The Mothers' Union Workers' Paper* No. 204, December 1930, p. 18. The only women's organisation with a greater number of members was the Women's Unionist Association which had a membership of 940,000 women in 1934. Beatrix Campbell, *The Iron Ladies: Why do Women Vote Tory?* (1987), p. 62.

were often invited to local dioceses to give lectures on topics ranging from the importance of temperance and religious education in the home, to the dangers of betting and gambling.²⁰ During the 1930s, local branches set up prayer groups for members who wished to devote more time to Christian observance.²¹

As an organisation for mothers, the Mothers' Union meeting offered practical advice to women about child-care, cookery, dress-making and other domestic skills as well as encouraging women to set up knitting and sewing circles within the parish.²² The meetings also gave women the chance to relax and enjoy each others company with 'tea and a gossip', although leaders were warned to ensure that the religious and educational activities were not neglected.²³

There is some evidence that working-class women found the tone of Mothers' Union meetings patronizing. In 1930, a woman who left the Mothers' Union to join the Women's Co-operative Guild recalled that she

was not used to working-women managing

²⁰ Minutes of the Mothers' Union Central Council, December 1935, (Central Council Minutes, Vol. X, 1932-1937), p. 314.

²¹ Minutes of the Mothers' Union Central Council, June 1934, (Central Council Minutes, Vol. X, 1932-1937), p. 136.

²² During the First World War Mothers' Union knitting circles knitted thousands of items of warm clothing which were sent to troops serving at the front. Frank Prochaska, 'A Mother's Country: Mothers' Meetings and Family Welfare in Britain, 1850-1950', p. 397.

²³ *The Mothers' Union Workers' Paper* No. 420, January 1949, p. 4.

their own meetings. I had attended Mothers' Meetings, where ladies came and lectured on the domestic affairs in the workers' homes that it was impossible for them to understand.²⁴

Although the membership of the Mothers' Union included both working-class and middle-class women there is no doubt that the organisation was very class conscious. *The Mothers' Union Journal* was first published in 1880 and was aimed specifically at 'cottage mothers', giving them advice on how best to care for their children and encouraging them to lead virtuous lives. Two years later the journal *Mothers in Council* was set up to cater for ladies and 'mothers of the high classes', with tips on hiring domestic servants and articles on education and social work.²⁵ Whilst working-class women tended to be regarded as compliant members who were happy just attending the weekly meetings, middle-class women were encouraged to become official workers and play a more active role in the running of the organisation.²⁶

Involvement in the administration of the Mothers' Union was often regarded as part of the normal

²⁴ Patricia Hollis, *Women in Public Life: The Women's Movement 1850-1900, Documents of the Victorian Women's Movement* (1979), p. 277.

²⁵ Olive Parker, *For The Family's Sake* p. 15.

²⁶ Olive Parker writes that in the early days of the Union, 'lady mothers' were invited to drawing room meetings were they were encouraged to become future leaders of the society. *Ibid*, p. 16.

parochial duties of a clergyman's wife. This was certainly the case amongst the highest ranking members of the Mothers' Union. Nina Woods, for example, who served as Central President of the Union throughout the 1930s, was the widow of Theodore Woods, a former Bishop of Winchester. Frances Temple, elected Vice-President of the Union in 1942, was the wife of the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple. The close link with Canterbury continued in 1944 when Rosamond Fisher became Central President. Her husband, Geoffry Fisher, was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury in 1945.

Membership of the Mothers' Union Executive, however, did not depend on marriage to a high-ranking clergyman but women elected to the Central Council were known for their interest in public welfare and their involvement in philanthropic work. Dame Beatrix Lyall D.B.E., Vice-President of the Mothers' Union during the late 1920s and 1930s, was a well-known public speaker on national, social and religious questions. Trained as a social worker, she had a special interest in the welfare of women which she incorporated into her work for the Mothers' Union.²⁷

As an organisation which represented the interests of married women working within the home, the desire to

²⁷ Beatrix Lyall, the wife of an R.A.F. captain, was a Conservative who in 1932 was elected vice-chairman of London County Council. She also served on the Ladies Grand Council of the Primrose League and was an Executive member of numerous organisations for women including the National Council of Women. *Mothers in Council* No. 232, September 1948, p. 116.

protect the welfare rights of women and children was always an important consideration. In 1912 a special committee was established to gather information and advise the Council on legislative proposals which affected the lives of Union members.²⁸ The Union was also an affiliated member of the National Council of Women²⁹ and throughout the inter-war period was actively involved in campaigning for the introduction of family allowances, improved housing conditions and better maternity services for all women. The Union argued that women were entitled to social welfare benefits which would enhance the quality of their lives.

The Mothers' Union was not a feminist organisation but it did recognise that women had an important role to fulfil as wives and mothers. The Union also believed that women had a worthwhile contribution to make to society as intelligent and responsible citizens. In 1934 *The Mothers' Union Journal* proclaimed that

A mother's first place is in the home- not the only place, but the first. The mother is now a citizen of her country: she has a vote

²⁸ *The Mothers' Union Workers' Paper* No. 342, June 1942, p. 128. In 1927 the Mothers' Union joined a deputation to the Home Secretary, organised by the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship calling for the legal age of marriage to be raised to sixteen.

²⁹ The National Council of Women, formerly known as the National Union of Women Workers (1895) was a secular organisation for women interested in the social and moral welfare of women.

and with it a great responsibility.³⁰

The following chapters will consider the work of the Mothers' Union in informing members about their rights and duties as citizens. It will be argued that in spite of its conservative doctrine and leadership, as well as its glorification of women's domestic role, the Mothers' Union defended the citizenship rights of mothers and should therefore be included in any history of the women's movement in England.

THE YOUNG WOMEN'S CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION

The origins of the YWCA of Great Britain date back to 1877 when two Nonconformist women's societies, a prayer union and a network of hostels for working girls, merged to 'establish under Christian influences, institutes for respectable young women to rest in, seek advice, and enjoy "genial gatherings of various kinds"'.³¹ The leading protagonist in the early development of the YWCA, the Nonconformist Lady Mary Kinnaird, was a member of an influential circle of Victorian Evangelical philanthropists which also

³⁰ *The Mothers' Union Journal* No. 158, September 1934, p. 11.

³¹ *The Times*, 3 April 1878. In 1855 Lady Mary Kinnaird opened a home for nurses and working girls in London. In the same year Emma Roberts set up a women's prayer union called the YWCA. Following the death of Emma Roberts in 1877, these two societies, which had worked closely together over the years, joined forces and set up a national organisation which became the YWCA of Great Britain. Clyde Binfield, *George Williams and the Y.M.C.A.: A study in Victorian social attitudes* (1973), pp. 328-29 and J. Duguid, *The Blue Triangle* (1955).

included George Williams, Lord Shaftesbury, Samuel Morley and Lord Kinnaird.³²

These men were patrons of the Young Men's Christian Association, a society set up in 1844 by George Williams for 'the improvement of the spiritual and mental condition of young men'.³³ When the YWCA was established in 1877, it was Lady Kinnaird's intention to give young women the same opportunities afforded to members of the YMCA. This meant providing educational and recreational activities for young working women uniting them 'together in prayer, mutual help, sympathy, and Bible study..to seek to win the knowledge of Christ.'³⁴

Maintaining the close connection between the YMCA and the YWCA, the Conservative Churchman Lord Shaftesbury became the first President of the Association and Lord Kinnaird, Mary Kinnaird's husband was appointed Treasurer. But it was Mary Kinnaird herself, along with the wives and daughters of other leading Nonconformists, many of whom were involved in the YMCA, who were the leading activists in the Association. Mary Morley, daughter of mill-owner and Congregationalist Samuel Morley, was Secretary of the

³² For a full account of the work of Victorian Evangelical philanthropists see Clyde Binfield, *George Williams and the Y.M.C.A.*

³³ R.J. Morris, 'Clubs, Societies and Associations' in F.M.L. Thompson (ed), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950* (Cambridge, 1990) p. 421.

³⁴ 'Formation of United Council', (1885), (Typed document, YWCA Archive, MSS 243/13/3/78), Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick.

London YWCA during the 1880s and went on to become President of the Association in 1892. Mary Kinnaird's daughter Emily also served as Secretary of the London branch, a post she held for twenty-five years.³⁵

By the end of 1878, fifteen branches of the YWCA had been established and in 1885 a United Central Council was formed to co-ordinate the work of the organisation on a world-wide basis. Under the terms of the YWCA's Constitution, the organisation was separated into six divisions: London, England and Wales, Scotland, Ireland, the Colonies and the Continent, each with its own Executive Council. Membership of the YWCA was open to young women of any class who agreed to unite in prayer and place themselves under Christian influence.³⁶

Two other categories of membership were made up of 'ladies in sympathy with the YWCA and willing to help in Association work' and honorary associates who were 'ladies..expected to take a personal interest in the affairs of the Association'.³⁷ This division of membership signified that the organisation was to be run by educated middle-class women interested in philanthropy who would offer practical advice and moral guidance to the younger, predominantly working-class, girls. As Jane Lewis has suggested, philanthropy for

³⁵ Clyde Binfield, *George Williams and the Y.M.C.A.*, pp. 230, 240.

³⁶ The Constitution of the YWCA (1885), (Typed document, YWCA Archive, MSS 243/13/3/79).

³⁷ *Ibid.*

middle-class women in the nineteenth century was 'an acceptable bridge to the public world of work and citizenship'.³⁸

From its inception the YWCA was an interdenominational and evangelical society set up to establish a 'union, in prayer and work, of those who desire to extend God's Kingdom among Young Women by all means in accordance with the Word of God'.³⁹ The Association also wished to draw together young women for mutual help; friendship, sympathy and instruction as well as promoting moral, social and intellectual well-being. To this end, YWCA centres and hostels were set up in cities and towns all over the country where young working girls could stay or meet every Saturday evening to attend Bible study classes and engage in social activities including music, drama and dance.⁴⁰

By 1900 the YWCA had set up 1,700 branches in Britain with a membership of some 94,000 women.⁴¹ As a society for young working women, the majority of whom were factory workers or domestic servants, the YWCA quickly developed an interest in the terms and employment conditions of women workers. In 1886 the

³⁸ Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950: Sexual Divisions and Social Change* (1984), p. 92.

³⁹ 'Formation of United Council', (1885).

⁴⁰ By 1897, for example, twenty-five YWCA homes had been opened in London plus one hundred in the provinces which offered moral protection and shelter to young women. Jan Rutter, 'The YWCA of Great Britain 1900-1925: An Organisation of Change', (M.A. Thesis, University of Warwick, 1986), p. 15.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Association had set up a Factory Helpers Union with YWCA leaders visiting local factories to ensure that the female employees were not subjected to either physical or moral abuse.⁴² During the early 1900s it campaigned against the practice of sweated labour and the exploitation of home workers, calling for the introduction of a minimum wage for all women workers.⁴³

The YWCA Social Service Council was convened in 1910 to monitor employment and welfare legislation affecting women as well as formulating national policy on industrial and social questions. As part of this work the YWCA co-operated with the trade union movement and women's societies interested in welfare issues including the National Union of Women Workers (NUWW) and the Women's Co-operative Guild. In 1911 the Association, along with the National Union of Women Workers, was invited to meet the Prime Minister Lloyd George to discuss the position of domestic servants under the terms of the new National Insurance Act.⁴⁴

Following the outbreak of the First World War, the YWCA joined the NUWW in setting up Women Patrols to safeguard the moral welfare of young women living near army camps and working in the wartime munitions

⁴² Ibid., p. 21.

⁴³ In 1909 a minimum wage was established for some trades including tailoring and boxmaking. For an account of women's position in the work-force during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century see Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950*, pp. 58-9, 162-205.

⁴⁴ Jan Rutter, 'The YWCA of Great Britain', p. 45.

factories.⁴⁵ The YWCA also opened huts and hostels during the war to provide recreational activities and accommodation for servicewomen and men in England and Europe where they could relax during their time on leave. Yet in spite of this involvement in emergency war-work, the central objective of the Association remained 'to cultivate a corporate spirit among girls as citizens and to train them for future usefulness'.⁴⁶

When the Representation of the People Act (1918) extended the franchise to women over thirty, the YWCA welcomed this as a victory for the suffrage movement and the official recognition of women's right to political citizenship. In 1921 the YWCA backed a resolution passed by the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC), the leading inter-war feminist society, demanding that the parliamentary franchise should be granted to women on equal terms with men. Although the YWCA continued to press for the vote to be granted to women over twenty-one during the 1920s, it was unwilling to co-operate with overtly feminist groups, for example the Six Point Group (1921), on the grounds that they were too political.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950*, p. 185. See also Angela Woollacott, '"Khaki Fever" and its Control: Gender, Class, Age and Sexual Morality on the British Homefront in the First World War', *Journal of Contemporary History* 29, (1994).

⁴⁶ Cited in Jan Rutter 'The Y.W.C.A. of Great Britain' p. 88.

⁴⁷ Jan Rutter, *Ibid*, p. 82. For a detailed account of the suffrage campaign during the 1920s see Martin Pugh, *Women's Suffrage in Britain 1867-1928* (1980) and Cheryl

The YWCA's growing interest in the political and industrial rights of women and its willingness to campaign on their behalf was not approved of by all members. The Irish Division believed that the religious aspect of the Association's work had been neglected and in May 1917 withdrew from the British Association to concentrate on evangelical work. A second split occurred in 1924 when the Scottish Division broke away to form the autonomous YWCA of Scotland.⁴⁸ As a result of these internal divisions and the disruption caused by the war, membership of the YWCA of Great Britain fell from 80,000 women in 1918 to 33,800 in 1926.⁴⁹

In an effort to attract members during the 1920s, the rules of membership were changed to allow all Christian women over the age of sixteen to join. At the same time local branches expanded their programmes to include more varied religious, educational and social activities. Music, drama and classes in handicrafts were regarded as suitable occupations for young women to pursue at the end of their working day. Sports and games for young women were also organised through local YWCA centres.

Law, 'The Women's Cause: Feminist Campaigns 1918-1928', (Ph.D. Thesis, Institute of Education, 1993), p. 379 ff.

⁴⁸ In 1920, the Christian Alliance of Women and Girls was founded by former YWCA members who wished to concentrate on evangelical mission work among women and girls. *ibid.*, p. 108.

⁴⁹ Jan Rutter, 'The YWCA of Great Britain', p. 124.

In 1930 it was reported that the Association had succeeded in attracting over 1,000 new members, many of whom worked in business and the professions and 'a small but keen element of leisured women and girls'.⁵⁰ Physical education classes, singing, handicrafts and dramatics were listed as the most popular subjects taught at YWCA centres, but it was also noted that classes in literature, history, economics and citizenship were becoming more popular.

Religious education remained an important element of YWCA work during the inter-war years. Bible study classes, Sunday services, retreats and prayer circles were held regularly at the local centres to encourage members to follow Christian teaching. The YWCA is perhaps best known for its network of residential hostels and by the end of 1939 the organisation had opened ninety-eight hostels and holiday homes for women in England and Wales.⁵¹

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the YWCA continued to take an active interest in issues which affected the health and welfare of working women. In 1921 the YWCA Industrial Law Bureau was set up to explain, enforce and extend social and industrial legislation relating to women workers. The Bureau investigated complaints from women about poor working conditions and health

⁵⁰ *YWCA Annual Report 1930* (1930), p. 3, (YWCA Archive, MSS 243/2/1/15).

⁵¹ *YWCA Annual Report 1938-39* (1939), p. 4, (YWCA Archive, MSS 243/2/1/21).

insurance claims and made representations on their behalf to the relevant authorities.

One example of the Industrial Law Bureau's work was Case 643, in which a firm of french polishers had been reported by the YWCA to factory inspectors for compelling women to work eight hours on Saturdays without a break. Following a factory inspection the workers were given a half-an-hour break for tea.⁵² The Bureau also supplied lecturers to various women's organisations, including Labour Party Women's Sections and the Women's Co-operative Guild, to discuss labour law and how it affected female workers.

Membership of the YWCA during the inter-war period included a number of well known trade unionists, social workers and feminists. Edith Picton Tubervill O.B.E., Vice-President of the YWCA during the 1920s, was a suffragist and feminist who had worked as a missionary with the YWCA in India before the First World War. She was involved in a wide-range of women's organisations and served on the Executive of the National Council of Women, the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds and the feminist National Council for Equal Citizenship.⁵³ Having joined the Labour Party in 1919, Picton Tubervill was elected to Parliament ten years later and in 1931 introduced the successful parliamentary Bill to abolish the death penalty for expectant mothers.

⁵² Minutes of the Industrial Law Bureau 1928-1933, 30 January 1928, (YWCA Archive, MSS 243/139/6).

⁵³ A former member of the NUSEC, Edith Picton Tubervill succeeded Eva Hubback as President of the NCEC in 1938.

Gertrude Tuckwell JP, Vice-President of the Industrial Law Bureau, was a former President of the Women's Trade Union League and Honorary Secretary of the influential Maternal Mortality Committee.⁵⁴ Another leading member was Dame Elizabeth Cadbury O.B.E., Chairman of the Midland Division of the YWCA, who in 1925 had been appointed the first woman President of the National Council of Evangelical Free Churches. A Liberal and a feminist, she was elected to Birmingham City Council in 1919 and throughout the 1930s served as Vice-President of both the National Council for Equal Citizenship and the National Council of Women.

This cross-over in membership between the leadership of the YWCA and other influential women's groups is significant. It helps explain the close co-operation which existed between organisations such as the YWCA and the National Council of Women in demanding social and economic legislative reforms which would enhance the status of women in the workplace and in the home. Yet in spite of its involvement in these campaigns and the role played by trade unionists and feminists in the organisation, the YWCA did not consider itself to be an egalitarian feminist society. Instead the Association offered girls and women 'places to live, opportunities for making friends and for creative interests, ways of working for better social

⁵⁴ The Maternal Mortality Committee was set up in December 1927 by Gertrude Tuckwell and May Tennant in response to the increase in the number of maternal deaths during the 1920s.

conditions and a living faith in Christ.'⁵⁵ In doing so the YWCA represented women as responsible and intelligent citizens who had an important contribution to make to society.

THE CATHOLIC WOMEN'S LEAGUE

The increasing number of middle-class women participating in philanthropic and educational work during the late nineteenth century had resulted in the proliferation of mothers' meetings and organisations for young women including the Y.W.C.A. and the Girls' Friendly Society. The vast majority of these groups represented the dominant Protestant tradition and it was partly to redress the balance and raise the profile of Catholic women living in England that the Catholic Women's League was established.

The League was also founded in response to the spread of secular organisations for women during this period.⁵⁶ Indeed, it was the news that a society for Catholic women in Germany had been set up by the Church hierarchy, as an alternative to the non-spiritual National Council of Women⁵⁷, which prompted Margaret

⁵⁵ *The National General Secretary's Report to the 22 Biennial Conference of the YWCA 1946* (1946) (YWCA Archive, Box No. 27), p. 24.

⁵⁶ For example, the National Union of Women Workers (1895), later renamed the National Council of Women.

⁵⁷ The German National Council of Women was affiliated to the International Council of Women (1888) which represented associations of women working for the common welfare of the community.

Fletcher to make public her plans for an association of Catholic women in England.⁵⁸

Addressing a meeting of the Catholic Ladies Conference in July 1906, Fletcher outlined her intention to develop a national organisation which would encourage philanthropic work amongst Catholic laywomen.⁵⁹ Valerie Noble, in her study of the Catholic Women's League, has suggested that the initial reaction of the Catholic clergy to the new organisation was one of suspicion. At a time when women's suffrage societies were demanding the parliamentary vote for women, parish priests expressed their disapproval and even horror at the thought of an association for educated Catholic women.⁶⁰ The bishops, however, are credited with taking a wider view in welcoming a new organisation for women which the hierarchy would be able to monitor and indeed control.⁶¹

⁵⁸ The League's president and founder Margaret Fletcher was the daughter of an Anglican vicar who in 1897 had converted to Catholicism. She was the editor of *The Crucible* a journal which stressed the importance of education for Catholic women and advocated greater participation in social work amongst middle-class Catholics. Marjorie Ryan, *Yesterday Recalled: A Jubilee History of the Catholic Women's League 1906-1981* (1981), pp. 2-3.

⁵⁹ Valerie Noble, 'A Mission for Women: A Reflection on the History of Women's Organisations in the Catholic Church and their relevance within the Contemporary Church', (Diploma dissertation, University of London, 1991), p. 5.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

The approval of the Catholic hierarchy was confirmed in December 1907, when the Archbishop of Westminster presided over the first general meeting of the League, and it was announced that Pope Pius X had given the organisation his blessing.⁶² From the outset it was clear that the Catholic Women's League was prepared to work under the strict guidance of the Catholic Church. The League's constitution dictated that all policy decisions would be referred to the Cardinal for approval and that the work of the League would be carried out in a 'spirit of absolute and constant submission to the direction of ecclesiastical authority'.⁶³

In January 1908, the first branch of the League was set up in Salford, followed by branches in Bournemouth and Leicester. Two years later Catholic Women's League meetings were being held in Birmingham, Leeds and Preston. By the end of 1913 twenty branches, with individual local sections, had been set up with a total membership of 8,500 Catholic women.⁶⁴ The League appears to have been most successful in the Midlands and Northern England with Liverpool, Leeds and

⁶² *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 251, September 1932, p. 15.

⁶³ Valerie Noble, 'A Mission For Women', p. 11.

⁶⁴ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 251, September 1932, p. 15.

Birmingham attracting the greatest number of members throughout the inter-war period.⁶⁵

Afternoon meetings consisted of debates, lectures and discussions on matters of Catholic and public interest as well as literary and historical subjects. Amongst the topics discussed during 1927 were: 'The Early Training of Children' (Slough Section), 'Catholic Marriage' (West Riding Branch) and 'The Work of the League of Nations' (London Section).⁶⁶ Social evenings were organised to foster a sense of community spirit amongst Catholics and were doubtless welcomed by members as a pleasant night out. The Catholic Women's League also encouraged its members to get involved in local community work. These activities included hospital and prison visits, setting up clubs and hostels for working girls and raising funds for rescue homes to care for unmarried mothers.⁶⁷

Although membership of the Catholic Women's League was open to all Catholic women, it is clear that these social and philanthropic activities appealed most of all to educated middle-class women. It was in an effort to persuade a greater number of working-class women to join the Catholic Women's League that in 1914

⁶⁵ In 1937 the Liverpool Archdiocesan Branch had 2,184 members, West Riding Branch (Leeds Diocese) 1,761 and the Birmingham Archdiocesan Branch 1, 676 members.

⁶⁶ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 195, January 1928, p. 11.

⁶⁷ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 252, October 1932, p. 21. During the 1920s, hostels for unmarried women were established by the League in Leeds, Liverpool and Woolwich.

the Union of Catholic Mothers was established to cater for the needs of working-class mothers.⁶⁸ Mothers' meetings organised by the Union were intended to reinforce the traditional image of the Catholic mother who was by her nature fitted to home work..which is best adapted to preserve her modesty and promote the good upbringing of children and the well being of the family.⁶⁹

Branches of the Union of Catholic Mothers were set up in the larger towns and cities, including Birmingham and Liverpool, to attract the greatest number of working-class mothers. Weekly meetings were held in the afternoon and gave local women the opportunity to meet other mothers and knit or sew whilst they were given advice on child-care and domestic subjects. Mothers were also encouraged to ensure that their children received a Catholic education, which would 'guard them from immoral companions, amusements and literature.'⁷⁰ Local branches of the Union also joined with the Catholic Women's League to protest against

⁶⁸ Valerie Noble, 'A Mission for Women', p. 41. By 1932, the Union of Catholic Mothers had set up ninety-five branches with a total membership of 9,000 mothers. Of this figure 3,125 lived in Birmingham and 2,897 in Salford. *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 243, November 1932, p. 36.

⁶⁹ Pope Pius XIII, *Rerum Novarum: The Condition of the Working Classes* (1891), p. 58.

⁷⁰ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 321, July 1938, p. 19.

divorce and the use of birth control, both of which were forbidden by the Catholic Church.⁷¹

By the end of 1936, 18,000 mothers were members of the Union of Catholic Mothers and it was decided that the Union should become a separate society for Catholic mothers. As a result, the Union of Catholic Mothers split from the Catholic Women's League the following year and, as an independent organisation, affiliated to the National Board of Catholic Women.⁷² Although this division signified a major loss in membership for the Catholic Women's League, the organisation survived and continued to represent the social and educational interests of over 22,000 Catholic women.⁷³

The women elected to serve on the National Executive of the League were usually prominent and wealthy members of the Catholic community known for their interest in religious and philanthropic work.⁷⁴ Three of the League's National Presidents during the 1930s were recipients of the Papal Cross. Lady Petre (1930-32) was a former Divisional President of the

⁷¹ The Catholic Women's League campaign against divorce and birth control during the 1920s and 1930s will be discussed in Chapter 3.

⁷² The National Board of Catholic Women (1937) acted as an umbrella organisation for catholic women's groups. The Catholic Women's League and the Junior Catholic Women's League also affiliated to the National Board in 1937.

⁷³ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 306, April 1937, p. 7.

⁷⁴ The Council of Members, made up of representatives from each of the regional branches, elected the National Executive Committee and met twice a year to discuss and ratify League policy.

League of Mercy and the Women's National Union Association. Mildred Hewitt (1933-35) a music critic and journalist, was a member of Chelsea Borough Council and Lady Winefride Elwes (1939-44) was a Committee member of the National Adoption Society and a former President of the Lambeth Conservative Women's Association.⁷⁵

One of the national objectives of the Catholic Women's League was to raise the profile of Catholic women and encourage its members to participate in social welfare work. During the First World War, the League provided huts and hostels at Army camps in England and France for Catholic servicemen and women as well as sending a nurses volunteer corps to Belgium.⁷⁶ At home the League assisted the National Union of Women Workers and the YWCA in setting up the Women Patrols.⁷⁷ The League was also concerned about the health and welfare of mothers and their children during wartime and in 1915 opened a School for Mothers and Infant Welfare Clinic on the Old Kent Road in London.

At the end of the war the Catholic Women's League, aware that women over thirty were about to be granted the parliamentary franchise, considered the

⁷⁵ *The Hutchinson Woman's Who's Who* (1934).

⁷⁶ The League also set up a Clothing Depot to collect knitted garments which were then sent to the soldiers serving at the Front. *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 251, September 1932, p. 15.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* For an account of Women Patrols during the First World War see Angela Woollacott, '"Khaki Fever" and its Control'.

implications of citizenship for women. In order to educate and inform Catholic women about their duties and entitlements as citizens, the League launched a citizens' campaign and published six citizenship leaflets dealing with questions of civil, social and moral responsibility.⁷⁸ It was also reported that twenty-seven study groups had been formed by the regional branches of the League to promote discussion on the importance of the vote for women.⁷⁹

By 1924, the objectives of the League had expanded to reflect the growing political responsibility of women. The League now regarded itself as

a national organisation for the formation and collective expression of Catholic public opinion among women, for securing the representation of Catholic interests upon all important public bodies and, for considering all civic and social responsibilities and duties of women in the light of Catholic principles.⁸⁰

Although the League was anxious that women would make good use of their voting powers there is no evidence that the organisation was active in the suffrage campaign. Careful to avoid any political or

⁷⁸ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 90, April 1919, p. 21.

⁷⁹ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 252, October 1932, p. 23.

⁸⁰ *The Catholic Women's Outlook* Vol. 1, No. 1, April 1924, p. 1.

controversial issue which may have offended the Catholic hierarchy, egalitarian feminist demands did not feature in the programme of the Catholic Women's League. Instead, Catholic women interested in equal rights issues joined the Catholic Women's Suffrage Society (1911)⁸¹, renamed the St. Joan's Social and Political Alliance in 1928, whose aim it was to 'secure the political, social and economic equality between men and women, and to further the work and usefulness of Catholic women as citizens'.⁸²

In spite of the Catholic Women's League's rejection of feminism, the organisation was willing to defend the welfare rights of women and mothers. In 1908 the Public Service Committee had been formed to liaise with other women's societies and consider questions affecting the health and welfare of women and children. As a result of this co-operation the Catholic Women's League became an affiliated member of the National Union of Women Workers and worked with that organisation in campaigning for improved social services for women. Better housing, family allowances and adequate maternity services were amongst the

⁸¹ See Francis M. Mason, 'The Newer Eve: The Catholic Women's Suffrage Society in England, 1911-1923', *Catholic History Review* 4, (October, 1986) and Deirdre Moran, 'The Roman Catholic Church and the Women's Suffrage Movement 1911-1928: With Particular Reference to the Catholic Women's Suffrage Society', (M.A. Thesis, University College Dublin, 1985).

⁸² *The Catholic Citizen* Vol. XIV, No. 10, 15 November 1928, p. 97.

legislative demands supported by the Catholic Women's League during the 1920s and 1930s.

The League was never in any doubt that a woman's primary role was that of a wife and mother. In October 1936 Mrs. Kemball, chairman of the Northern Province Public Service Committee, expressed this view when she stated that although it was

no longer fashionable to believe that a woman's place is in the home..I am old fashioned enough still to believe that the best work a woman can do is in the home..and women who have the necessary time and training should come forward and take part in protecting it.⁸³

In campaigning for the introduction of social welfare benefits, including family allowances and health insurance for married women, the intention of the League was to safeguard the traditional role of women as wives and mothers. But at the same time, it acknowledged that women were responsible citizens who had the right to demand these services from the state. In the following chapters it will be argued that the Catholic Women's League, in spite of its endorsement of woman's domestic role, campaigned for the citizenship rights of the hundreds of thousands of women who worked within the home.

⁸³ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 302, December 1936. p. 102.

THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF WOMEN

The National Council of Women, unlike the Mothers' Union, the YWCA and the Catholic Women's League was a secular society, but it shared with these groups the desire to 'promote the social, civil, moral and religious welfare of the community'.⁸⁴ The origins of the National Council of Women date back to 1895 when a number of women involved in the Ladies Associations for the Care of Friendless Girls, formed a national organisation to co-ordinate their philanthropic work amongst young working girls.⁸⁵ As a result the National Union of Women Workers, renamed the National Council of Women in 1918, was established to 'provide a federation of women interested or engaged in philanthropy, in educational work, in industrial questions and social reforms'.⁸⁶

The organisation succeeded in attracting middle-class women, some of whom were already involved in community work as Poor Law Guardians, lady visitors or

⁸⁴ *Handbook of the National Council of Women of Great Britain 1931-32* (1932), p. 61. (Pamphlet Collection), The Fawcett Library.

⁸⁵ In 1895 there were 125 Associations for the Care of Friendless Girls which were made up of educated middle-class women involved in social reform work. See National Council of Women, *The First Sixty Years, 1895-1955* (1955), p. 5. (Pamphlet Collection), The Fawcett Library.

⁸⁶ Alfred, M. *During Six Reigns-Landmarks in the History of the National Council of Women of Great Britain* (1955), p. 13.

as elected members of local councils.⁸⁷ Early members of the National Union of Women Workers included Bertha Mason and Millicent Fawcett, both of whom were leading campaigners for women's suffrage.⁸⁸ Although the NUWW supported the extension of the parliamentary franchise to women, the organisation did not wish to limit itself to one objective and remained committed to a diverse programme of charitable, educational and social welfare work.

At its first Annual Conference held in 1895, the NUWW passed a resolution urging the Government to repeal the 'reasonable cause to believe' clause in Criminal Law which allowed a man accused of assaulting a young girl to claim he believed she was over sixteen and had given her consent.⁸⁹ This decision marked the beginning of the society's involvement in extensive and wide-ranging campaigns for legislative reforms, the majority of which were intended to improve the social and economic status of women in society.

⁸⁷ See Patricia Hollis, *Ladies Elect: Women in English Local Government 1865-1914* (Oxford, 1987) and Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950*, pp. 92-97.

⁸⁸ In 1897 Millicent Fawcett set up the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, the leading non-militant suffrage society, and in 1902 Bertha Mason was appointed Treasurer. See Leslie P. Hume *The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies* (1982) and Martin Pugh, *Women's Suffrage in Britain 1867-1928* (1980).

⁸⁹ The offending clause was finally removed with the introduction of the 1922 Criminal Law Amendment Act signifying the end of a long campaign on the part of the National Council of Women.

Questions relating to the moral well-being of women and children preoccupied many of the women involved in the formation of the NUWW and within a year a Moral Welfare Committee had been established. This Committee's objective was to investigate the international traffic in women and children, assaults on young women and children and the provision of 'rescue' homes for young prostitutes.⁹⁰ Education was also a high priority and in 1895 an Education Committee was set up to promote the teaching of domestic science in schools and to ensure good standards of training for women teachers.⁹¹

By 1900 the National Union of Women Workers had set up twenty-eight branches in cities and towns around the country including Birmingham, Bristol, Oldham and Croydon.⁹² As well as recruiting individual members, the NUWW hoped to unite a wide variety of women's groups with an interest in social welfare in order to form a national council of women. The ability of the National Union to create alliances between societies with diverse political, social and religious beliefs depended on its commitment to remain a non-political, non-sectarian and, perhaps most significantly, a non-feminist organisation. As a result the Mothers' Union,

⁹⁰ Pearl Adam, *Women in Council: The Jubilee Book of The National Council of Women of Great Britain* (Oxford, 1945), p. 58.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² The branches were made up of individual members and representatives of local societies which supported the work of the Union.

the YWCA and the Catholic Women's League had all affiliated to the National Union before the outbreak of the First World War.⁹³

Affiliated societies were represented on the various Sectional Committees as well as the Representative Council and had the power to dissociate themselves from any resolution passed by the National Union. This proviso was important as it allowed resolutions on controversial subjects, for example those in favour of divorce and birth control, to be discussed without alienating groups opposed to these reforms.⁹⁴ The affiliated societies could also submit resolutions to the Annual Conference and were represented on the National Executive Committee which met in London.

On the eve of the First World War the NUWW had over one hundred affiliated societies and the Sectional Committees had expanded to include Legislation, Public Health, Insurance and Public Service. Following the outbreak of war, the Union co-operated with Government Ministries on projects such as the Food Economy Campaign, and the President of the Union, Dame Ogilvie Gordon, was a regular speaker at public meetings on

⁹³ Members of the National Federation of Women's Institutes were free to represent their Institute at local branch meetings of the National Council of Women.

⁹⁴ This system proved successful until 1938 when the Mothers' Union withdrew from the National Council of Women because of a resolution calling for the legalisation of abortion. It should be noted, however, that the Union reaffiliated in 1944.

matters such as food reform and the welfare of women and children.⁹⁵ Another aspect of the Union's contribution to the war-effort was the recruitment, training and organisation of voluntary Women Patrols. As was mentioned earlier, the purpose of these patrols was to supervise the behaviour of young women in public parks and streets to ensure that 'khaki fever', the attraction of a man in uniform, did not lead young women astray.⁹⁶ Involvement in the Women Patrols also gave the NUWW the opportunity to press for the employment of women police officers which marked the beginning of a dynamic campaign lasting over thirty years.

Close co-operation between the Government and the Union during the war years presented an image of the National Union of Women Workers as a patriotic and responsible organisation willing to contribute to the war effort. This was important at a time when societies campaigning for women's equality were often regarded with suspicion and even hostility. The increased participation of women in public life during the war years, in the work-force and the armed services, also stimulated interest in the activities of the NUWW. By the end of the war 126 branches had been set up and 156 societies had affiliated to the National Union.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Pearl Adam, *Women in Council*, p. 24.

⁹⁶ Angela Woollacott, '"Khaki Fever" and its Control', *Journal Contemp. History*, 29, (1994).

⁹⁷ Pearl Adam, *Women in Council*, p. 70.

In 1918 the NUWW joined the International Council of Women and changed its name to the National Council of Women of Great Britain and Ireland.⁹⁸ Having supported the suffrage campaign, the National Council of Women welcomed the extension of the franchise to women over thirty and continued to work with a number of other women's societies to secure the vote for women on equal terms with men. For example, the Birmingham branch, which had a membership of 600 women, co-operated with the NUSEC in organising Equal Franchise Meetings and sending letters to local MPs calling on them to support the equal suffrage campaign.⁹⁹

Throughout the 1920s the National Council of Women also campaigned 'for the removal of all disabilities of women, whether legal, economic or social'.¹⁰⁰ The Council stopped short of demanding dead-level equality for women, focusing instead on the contribution that women could make to national and local life. In 1929, Dame Ethel Shakespeare, President of the Birmingham branch of the National Council of Women, reiterated this view when she said that

while disclaiming a feminist attitude...

women with their different points of view

⁹⁸ In 1924, the Irish branches of the National Council of Women broke away to form the National Council of Women of Ireland.

⁹⁹ Minutes of the Birmingham Branch of the National Council of Women, February 2 1928, (Birmingham Branch Records, May 1925-January 1931, MSS 841 B/31), Birmingham City Library.

¹⁰⁰ *Handbook of the National Council of Women of Great Britain 1931-32* (1932), p. 61.

and functions have a special contribution to make towards the solution of public problems.¹⁰¹

By the late 1920s, 145 societies had affiliated to the National Council of Women, including egalitarian feminist groups such as the Open Door Council (1926) and the Women's Freedom League (1907). It is significant that working-class women's societies were not members of the Council, preferring to join the Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women's Organisations. The unwillingness of the Women's Co-operative Guild and other working-class women's groups to work with the Council confirmed the fact that the National Council of Women essentially represented the views of educated middle-class women.¹⁰²

In 1928 individual membership of the Council in England and Wales was estimated at 14,289 and this remained fairly consistent throughout the 1930s¹⁰³ In common with the Mothers' Union and the Catholic Women's League, the leadership of the Council during this

¹⁰¹ Minutes of the Birmingham Branch of the National Council of Women, April 20 1929, p. 129. (Birmingham Branch Records, May 1925-January 1931, MSS 841 B/4).

¹⁰² Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959*, p. 69. It is interesting to note that in 1929 a leaflet produced by the Birmingham branch of the NCW described the Council as an organisation which hoped to create 'a well informed public opinion among thinking women'. (Birmingham Branch Records, MSS 841 B/4).

¹⁰³ Yearly membership figures are listed in the official handbooks of the National Council of Women which are held in the Fawcett Library.

period included a large number of distinguished women who were well known in political and social circles. The Hon. Mrs. Henrietta Franklin, President of the Council during the years 1925-27, was a former suffragist who in the 1930s served on the Executive of the National Council for Equal Citizenship. A member of the Board of Management of the Liberal Jewish Synagogue, Mrs. Franklin was also active in the League of Nations Union.

In 1929, Florence Keynes, former chairman of Cambridge Board of Guardians, was elected President of the Council. A graduate of Newnham College Cambridge, Mrs. Keynes became Mayor of Cambridge in 1932. In 1935 another graduate of Cambridge, Eva Hartree J.P. was elected Council President. Having worked as a Town Councillor for many years, Mrs. Hartree was elected Mayor of Cambridge in 1924, the first woman to hold that position. She was also an Executive member of the National Federation of Women's Institutes and the Open Door Council.¹⁰⁴

Women MPs of all parties were invited to become honorary members of the Council. In 1934 Lady Astor, Thelma Cazalet, Florence Horsbrugh, Eleanor Rathbone, Megan Lloyd George, Mavis Tate and Irene Ward all served on the Executive Committee, establishing a useful link between the Council and the House of Commons. During the 1930s and 1940s, the National

¹⁰⁴ Pearl Adam, *Women in Council* pp. 32-4.

Council of Women had two principal objectives to increase the representation of women in local and national government and to campaign for legislative reforms which would protect and improve the status of women in society.

Martin Pugh has suggested that the National Council of Women was 'too widely drawn to be really coherent'.¹⁰⁵ Yet the Council played a major part in the campaign for equal pay, the employment of women police and the introduction of more liberal divorce legislation. These activities and the Council's determination to ensure that women enjoyed 'a freer life with wider opportunities'¹⁰⁶ need to be further explored to demonstrate that the National Council of Women contributed in a meaningful way to the continuing struggle for women's equality.

THE NATIONAL FEDERATION OF WOMEN'S INSTITUTES

One of the principal objectives of the Women's Institute Movement, an organisation for women living in rural areas, was to ensure that

countrywomen need no longer lead lives of utter loneliness. They can form an Institute, they can meet and make friends, they can enjoy acting and dancing and singing, they can study the past and consider

¹⁰⁵ Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959*, p. 69.

¹⁰⁶ *Women in Council* No. 68, May 1946, p. 2.

the present questions of the day.¹⁰⁷

Modelled on the successful Canadian Rural Women's Institutes¹⁰⁸, the National Federation of Women's Institutes was undoubtedly one of the most dynamic organisations for women during the 1930s and 1940s.¹⁰⁹

Women's Institutes came to Britain in 1915 when Mrs. Alfred Watt, a Canadian woman involved with the Village Institutes in British Columbia, persuaded the Agricultural Organisation Society¹¹⁰ to set up a similar network of Women's Institutes in England and Wales. As a result the first Women's Institute was founded in Anglesey on 25 September 1915.¹¹¹ The original purpose of the Women's Institute was to give women in rural

¹⁰⁷ 'Chairman's Address to the 1928 Annual General Meeting', *National Federation of Women's Institutes 12th Annual Report 1928* (1928). (Pamphlet Collection), The Fawcett Library.

¹⁰⁸ Rural Women's Institutes were first established in Canada in 1897 at Stoney Creek, Ontario. The official history relates that the farmers' wives of Stoney Creek, aware of the hardship and isolation of their lives came together to 'sow the unlovely soil with the seeds of fellowship.' J. W. Robertson Scott, *The Story of The Women's Institute Movement* (Kingham, 1925) p. 8.

¹⁰⁹ For a detailed account of the history of the Women's Institutes see: Margaret Morgan, 'The Acceptable Face of Feminism - The Women's Institute Movement 1915-1950' (D. Phil. Thesis, University of Sussex, 1992), Inez Jenkins, *The History of the Women's Institute Movement of England and Wales* (Oxford, 1953) and Simon Goodenough, *Jam and Jerusalem* (1977).

¹¹⁰ The Agricultural Organisation Society was set up in 1901, following the union of the British Agricultural Society and the National Agricultural Union. See J.W. Robertson Scott, *The Story of the Women's Institute Movement* p. 17.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 20-32.

areas the opportunity to study home economies and to stimulate their interest in agriculture and agricultural industries. Local Institutes also provided centres for education and social intercourse, giving the hundreds of thousands of women living in relatively isolated communities the opportunity to meet with other women and spend some time away from the responsibilities of their homes and families.¹¹²

By the end of 1916 forty Women's Institutes had been established and the AOS appointed Lady Gertrude Denman¹¹³ to chair a Committee set up to oversee the future development of the Institute Movement. Lady Denman, who was Chairman of the National Federation of Women's Institutes for thirty years, played a major role in protecting the democratic nature of the organisation and highlighting the needs of rural women through the work of the Women's Institutes. It soon became clear that there was a huge demand amongst women for local Women's Institutes and by the end of the war 760 had been started up with an estimated membership of some 50,000 women.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Ibid., p. 51.

¹¹³ Lady Denman was the daughter of Viscount Cowdray, a liberal who supported women's suffrage, from whom she inherited an interest in feminism and a considerable fortune. During the First World War, Lady Denman was Chairman of the Smokes for Wounded Soldiers Committee and the Poultry Association. Simon Goodenough, *Jam and Jerusalem* p. 27.

¹¹⁴ Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959* (1992), p. 227.

Throughout this period of rapid expansion, the Women's Institute Committee received financial backing from the Ministry of Agriculture. The Ministry regarded the work of local Institutes as an ideal way to stimulate wartime food production in rural areas. By 1917, however, it had become clear that the Ministry hoped to incorporate the Women's Institutes into its Food Production Department, thereby assuming control of the organisation. To avoid this certain loss of independence, Lady Denman called a meeting of representatives from 137 Women's Institutes and it was agreed to set up the National Federation of Women's Institutes.¹¹⁵

The organisation was to be non-party and non-sectarian with its administration set up on clear democratic principles. A postal ballot gave every member the opportunity to elect the National Executive Committee whose duty it was 'to provide an organisation with the object of enabling women to take an effective part in rural life and development'.¹¹⁶ Women's Institutes appointed their own officials and were represented on the County Federation which in turn appointed representatives to the National Consultative Council. This body advised the Executive Committee and selected which resolutions would be discussed at the Annual General Meeting.

¹¹⁵ Margaret Morgan, 'The Acceptable Face of Feminism', p. 38.

¹¹⁶ *National Federation of Women's Institutes Procedure at Meetings* (1949), p. 26.

With the extension of the parliamentary franchise to women at the end of the war, it was hoped that the democratic structure of the National Federation would prepare women for responsible citizenship and give them the opportunity to become familiar with the trappings of democracy. Inez Jenkins, in her history of the WI, wrote that members were always encouraged to

understand the meaning and importance of resolutions and amendments, accurate minutes, correct accounts, secret ballots.. and generally settle the affairs of the Institute to suit the wishes of the greatest number.¹¹⁷

At the local level the primary objective of Women's Institutes was to cater for the interests and needs of women living in the countryside.¹¹⁸ Membership was open to all women, subject to a two shilling annual subscription, but it soon became clear that the majority of members were married housewives and mothers who appreciated the recognition given to their work by the Institute Movement.¹¹⁹ The National Federation of

¹¹⁷ Inez Jenkins, *The History of the Women's Institute Movement* p. 46.

¹¹⁸ To protect the rural character of the organisation, it had been decided that Women's Institutes should only be set up in villages with a population of less than 4,000.

¹¹⁹ Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain*, p. 228. In 1933, the Warwickshire Federation suggested mixed-ballroom dancing and group sports would attract younger women but there is no evidence of these ideas being taken up. *National Federation of Women's*

Women's Institutes was successful in its aim to attract both working-class and middle-class members although the leadership of the organisation remained in the hands of educated middle-class women.¹²⁰

Women's Institute meetings were held monthly and usually took place in the local village or community hall. The activities which most appealed to members and which had dominated Institute programmes since the outset were handicrafts, music, drama and agricultural pursuits, including bee keeping and fruit preservation. A typical Institute meeting, which lasted about two hours, dealt first of all with business outstanding followed by a lecture or demonstration and concluded with the 'social half hour' of tea, music and conversation.

During the 1920s, Women's Institutes began to organise classes for their members which allowed women to follow up particular interests that they had picked up at the local Institute meeting. As Inez Jenkins observed, 'having learned to meet together, work together and talk freely together, Institute members

Institutes Annual Report 1933 (1933), p. 16, (Pamphlet Collection), The Fawcett Library.

¹²⁰ Margaret Morgan writes that the majority of Institute officials were middle-class women due to traditional class hegemony and because many working-class women who managed without the help of domestic servants had neither the time nor the energy to undertake administrative work for the Institute Movement. Margaret Morgan, 'The Acceptable Face of Feminism', p. 92.

now wanted to learn more about many things.'¹²¹ Classes in arts and crafts, domestic subjects such as cooking and dressmaking as well as dancing and singing became increasingly popular throughout the inter-war period. Adult education classes also became a feature of village life as a result of the association between Women's Institutes, the Workers Educational Association and the Adult Education Federation.¹²²

Margaret Morgan, in her recent study of the Women's Institute Movement, has argued that the provision of classes in handicrafts, cookery and sewing not only gave some recognition to the work performed by women in the home but demonstrated that their work was of value to the community. She suggests that Institute classes, complete with graded examinations, exhibitions and competitions, acknowledged women's work as a worthwhile occupation and did much to raise the status of housework during this period. The National Federation of Women's Institutes did not challenge the traditional role of women working within the home because it represented women who accepted and embraced their domestic role.

¹²¹ Inez Jenkins, *The History of the Women's Institute Movement* p. 50.

¹²² In 1933 it was reported that 15 Institutes in the Bedfordshire Federation were associated with the Workers Educational Association and adult education classes had been set up in twenty-seven villages. *National Federation of Women's Institutes Annual Report 1933 (1933)*, p. 80.

It should be noted, however, that throughout the 1930s and 1940s the Women's Institute Movement always sought to promote the image of the housewife as a skilled and responsible member of society. This was particularly so during the Second World War when women were expected to contribute to the national war effort by enlisting for war work. An article published in *Home and Country* in June 1942 stated that

women doing their traditional and specific job of running a household and bringing up a family should be considered as important, as responsible and as much worthy of respect as women doing the kind of job...done equally well by either sex...their work is just as vital if not more so.¹²³

It is clear from this statement that the Women's Institute Movement defended the work performed by women within the home and equated housework with all other professional occupations. However, this endorsement of women's domestic work did not mean that Women's Institute members were expected to devote themselves exclusively to the affairs of home and family. Encouraging members to contribute to the life of their local communities in their role as housewives, mothers and citizens and instilling a 'richer sense of citizenship' amongst women was another important aspect of the work of the Women's Institutes.¹²⁴

¹²³ *Home and Country* Vol. 24, No. 6, June 1942, p. 114.

¹²⁴ *Home and Country* Vol. X, No. 8, August 1928, p. 1.

In February 1928 *Home and Country*, the official journal of the National Federation of Women's Institutes, celebrated the fact that 4,000 Institutes had been established, representing over 240,000 women. The editor observed that the Movement was now a national organisation and that the 'educated opinion of 4,000 Women's Institutes can be the deciding factor in questions of far reaching importance'.¹²⁵ During the 1930s and 1940s, the Women's Institute Movement used its influence to campaign for a number of important legislative reforms, including the introduction of equal pay, the provision of adequate public housing and improved maternity services. The involvement of the National Federation of Women's Institutes in these campaigns will be discussed in more detail later.

It may now seem somewhat incongruous that an organisation most often associated with handicrafts, jam making and the singing of the hymn 'Jerusalem' was active in the campaign to secure citizenship rights for women. However, when the background of some of the women involved in the organisation during this period is considered, these activities do not seem so surprising. Many of those elected to the National Executive during this period had close connections with the suffrage movement and were involved in numerous campaigns to improve the health and welfare of women

¹²⁵ *Home and Country* Vol. X, No. 2, February 1928, p. 1. The involvement of the Women's Movement in citizenship education is discussed in Chapter Two.

and children. Lady Denman, for example, was a tireless campaigner on women's issues through her work with the Women's Institute Movement and her involvement in the National Birth Control Council.¹²⁶ At a Memorial Service held in her honour in June 1954, she was recalled for her 'determination to do everything she could to help the women of her country..to prevent them being trampled upon'.¹²⁷ Grace Hadow and Mrs. Auerbach, who served as Vice-Chairman and Treasurer of the National Federation respectively, had both been involved in the suffrage movement and supported the active participation of women in local and national affairs.

Grace Hadow¹²⁸, who was appointed National Vice-Chairman in 1933, hoped that membership of a Women's Institute would give women the opportunity to realize their responsibility towards the community in which they live and, from an interest in their own village and their own country, come to see the connection between their affairs and those of the nation at large.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ In 1921 Lady Denman was appointed Chairman of the National Birth Control Council.

¹²⁷ Cited in Penny Kitchen, *For Home and Country: War, Peace and Rural Life as Seen through the Pages of the Women's Institutes' Magazine, 1919-1959* (1990), p. 159.

¹²⁸ Grace Hadow was a graduate of Somerville College, Oxford who in 1916 had joined her local Women's Institute in Cirencester.

¹²⁹ Cited in Simon Goodenough, *Jam and Jerusalem*, p. 29.

Other prominent members of the National Federation of Women's Institutes Executive included the former Liberal MP and feminist Margaret Wintringham and Megan Lloyd George, who was elected to Parliament as a Liberal MP in 1929. Both were members of the National Council for Equal Citizenship and the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds, with Lloyd George also serving as an honorary member of the National Council of Women.

Yet in spite of the involvement of many prominent feminist activists, the National Federation of Women's Institutes never regarded itself as a feminist organisation. Janet Courtney, in her history of the Movement published in 1933, wrote that

the Institute movement is a feminine movement, but so far it has not shown itself feminist. It contains too large a proportion of married women. No doubt a husband can be a poor thing but a wise wife is not going to tell him so.¹³⁰

Instead of adopting a narrow feminist agenda, the National Federation of Women's Institutes catered for the hundreds of thousands of women who accepted their domestic role but who wished to join other women in non-sectarian social activities. In subsequent chapters this aspect of the work of the Women's Institutes will be explored to assess how far membership of the National Federation of Women's

¹³⁰ Janet Courtney, *Countrywomen in Council* (1933), p. 151.

Institutes improved the quality of life for women living in rural areas throughout the 1930s and 1940s.

THE NATIONAL UNION OF TOWNSWOMEN'S GUILDS

The ability of the National Federation of Women's Institutes to attract such a large membership during the 1920s did not go unnoticed amongst the smaller feminist societies, most notably the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship.¹³¹ Whilst non-feminist women's societies increased in size and popularity, the NUSEC had suffered a decline in membership, with the total number of Societies For Equal Citizenship and Women's Citizens Associations affiliated to the Union falling from 478 in 1914 to 90 in 1929.¹³²

Throughout the 1920s the NUSEC, under the leadership of Eleanor Rathbone¹³³, continued to campaign for the extension of the franchise to women over the age of twenty-one so that women would be entitled to the vote on equal terms with men. The NUSEC also championed egalitarian reforms such as equal pay, equal opportunities and an equal moral standard now that

¹³¹ Following the extension of the franchise to women over thirty in 1918 the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies changed its name to the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship.

¹³² Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959* (1992), p. 242.

¹³³ In 1919 Eleanor Rathbone succeeded Millicent Fawcett as President of the NUSEC. Rathbone, was a leading campaigner for family allowances and a proponent of new feminist ideas which drew particular attention to the needs of women as wives and mothers.

women's right to political citizenship had been established. At the same time, the Union highlighted the specific needs of women as wives and mothers by supporting the introduction of family allowances, the right to birth control information and the principle of protective legislation for women.¹³⁴

The 1928 Equal Franchise Act signified the end of the suffrage campaign and left the NUSEC to consider its future role as a woman's organisation.¹³⁵ Margery Corbett Ashby¹³⁶, who succeeded Eleanor Rathbone as President of the NUSEC in 1928, expressed her concern about the five million newly enfranchised women when she asked 'what good is the fact that women have the

¹³⁴ The priority given to new feminist demands within the NUSEC led to the resignation in 1927 of eleven members of the Executive Council. Many of these women went on to join egalitarian feminist groups including the Open Door Council, the Six Point Group and the Women's Freedom League. Harold Smith, 'British Feminism in the 1920s', in Harold Smith (ed), *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* (1990), pp. 47-49 & pp. 58-63.

¹³⁵ Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain* pp. 239-44 and Jane Lewis, 'In Search of a Real Equality: Women Between the Wars', in F. Gloversmith (ed), *Class, Culture and Social Change: A New View of the 1930s* (Brighton, 1980).

¹³⁶ Margery Corbett Ashby was a well known feminist, pacifist and suffragist who had been appointed secretary of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies in 1907. She was also an active member of the League of Nations Union and the International Women's Suffrage Alliance. Brian Harrison, *Prudent Revolutionaries: Portraits of British Feminists Between the Wars* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 193 ff.

vote, if they don't know how to use it?'¹³⁷ Corbett Ashby along with Eva Hubback, former Parliamentary Secretary of the NUSEC, quickly surmised that some form of education in citizenship was essential if women were to play a more active part in democratic society.

Impressed by the success of the Women's Institute Movement, Corbett Ashby observed:

how marvellously they [Women's Institutes] have developed citizenship, initiative and self-reliance among the countrywomen. Our aim should be to combine the feminism of the National Union with the social activities of the Rural Women's Institutes.¹³⁸

This statement is significant as it underlines the original intention of the Townswomen's Guild Movement to merge feminist ideology with the more traditional and domestic interests of the vast majority of women.

The fact that Women's Institutes were only established in towns and villages with a population under 4,000 gave the NUSEC the idea of setting up guilds for women in larger towns and cities which lacked a local Women's Institute. Although the NUSEC regarded the principal purpose of the proposed guilds as a way of instructing women in citizenship, the example of the Women's Institute Movement showed that to attract large numbers of women it was necessary to

¹³⁷ Caroline Merz, *After the Vote: The Story of the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds in the Year of its Diamond Jubilee 1929-1989* (Norwich, 1988), p. 8.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17

offer a wide range of social and educational activities. As a result, the programme devised by the NUSEC for the work of Townswomen's Guilds was divided into four major themes: civics, arts, handicrafts and homecraft.¹³⁹

Early in 1929, with funding from a £100 donation provided by Eleanor Rathbone, one of four experimental Guilds was set up in the market town of Haywards Heath in Sussex.¹⁴⁰ The Guild was established near to the home of Margery Corbett Ashby, who became its first President, and over 120 women attended the inaugural meeting.¹⁴¹ Following the success of the first Guilds, the NUSEC set up a special committee in March 1929 to oversee the launch of the Townswomen's Guilds Movement.

Gertrude Horton and Alice Franklin, who in 1933 were appointed National Secretary and Honorary Secretary of the Movement respectively, were responsible for much of the organisation of the Townswomen's Guilds. Both women came from families with a strong suffragist tradition. Horton's mother had been an active supporter of Christabel Pankhurst and Franklin's brother Hugh was one of the few men to

¹³⁹ *The National Union of Townswomen's Guilds Handbook 1938* (1938), p. 25, (Pamphlet Collection), The Fawcett Library.

¹⁴⁰ The other three Guilds were set up in Burnt Oak, Moulsecoombe and Romsey.

¹⁴¹ At its second meeting one month later, the Haywards Heath Guild attracted an audience of 153 women. Mary Stott, *Organisation Women, The Story of The National Union of Townswomen's Guilds* (1978), p. 27.

be arrested for militant suffragist activities.¹⁴² At the age of twenty-eight Gertrude Horton, then an unemployed, teacher was appointed Parliamentary Secretary of the NUSEC whilst Franklin, a Care Committee worker in London, was invited by her cousin Eva Hubback to get involved in the establishment of local Townswomen's Guilds. Both women went on to draw up the Constitution and Rules for the new organisation and supervised the administration of the Guilds for over twenty years.¹⁴³

By the end of 1929 twenty-six Townswomen's Guilds had been established providing women with a wide variety of activities and interests. Meetings were held once a month, usually in the early evening, and depending on the size of the Guild and on local facilities, took place in members' homes, school rooms or village and church halls.¹⁴⁴ Early Guild programmes included talks, lectures and debates on subjects ranging from the problem of maternal mortality and the need for international disarmament to the benefits of electricity in the home and the use of cosmetics.

From the outset handicrafts and homecraft proved to be the most popular activities offered by local Guilds. In common with local Women's Institutes, classes and demonstrations in glove making, cookery, dressmaking and embroidery were clearly favoured by

¹⁴² Mary Stott, *Organisation Women* pp. 11-13.

¹⁴³ Ibid. See also Caroline Merz, *After the Vote* p. 13.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 17.

members who attended these meetings in large numbers. In 1933, an analysis of 120 Guild reports undertaken by Alice Franklin revealed that 230 classes on subjects relating to handicrafts and 145 on homecraft had taken place that year in comparison with the 116 meetings dealing with civics and citizenship education.¹⁴⁵

In spite of the diverse programme offered by Townswomen's Guilds, it would appear that there was some reluctance amongst women to join local guilds affiliated to the overtly feminist NUSEC.¹⁴⁶ To overcome this difficulty, Alice Franklin proposed that Townswomen's Guilds should 'provide a common meeting ground for women irrespective of creed and party, for their wider education including social intercourse.'¹⁴⁷ In practice this meant that controversial subjects relating to religious, political and, most notably, feminist issues could not be discussed at guild meetings, thereby preventing the Townswomen's Guilds Movement from ever becoming an overtly feminist or political organisation.

In 1949, A.A. Mitchell, a member of the Executive Committee of the National Federation of Townswomen's Guilds recalled

¹⁴⁵ *National Union of Townswomen's Guilds Annual Report 1933* (1933), p. 40, (Pamphlet Collection), The Fawcett Library.

¹⁴⁶ The official aim of the NUSEC was 'to obtain all such reforms as are necessary to secure a real equality of liberties, status and opportunities between men and women'. Ibid. p. 10.

¹⁴⁷ *The National Union of Townswomen's Guilds Handbook 1938* (1938), p. 1.

so many of us in the early days were already keenly interested in some social or national cause and were eager to enthuse fellow members with our views. It was soon, however, made clear to us that to provide a ready-made audience for the insistence upon one side of any subject was not the function of the NUTG.¹⁴⁸

By 1932 it was clear that Townswomen's Guilds were more popular amongst women than the egalitarian Societies for Equal Citizenship.¹⁴⁹ This fact, coupled with the obvious divergence between the political work of the NUSEC and the educational and social activities offered by Townswomen's Guilds, left little doubt that the Townswomen's Guilds Movement had outgrown the narrower feminist agenda of the NUSEC. At its Annual Meeting in 1932, the NUSEC resolved to divide its work into two separate and independent organisations. The NUSEC was re-named the National Union of Guilds for Citizenship and a new body, the National Council for Equal Citizenship (NCEC), was set up to co-ordinate the political and egalitarian work previously undertaken by the NUSEC.

Eva Hubback was appointed President of the NCEC, which retained the traditional feminist objective of the NUSEC to secure 'all such reforms as are necessary

¹⁴⁸ *The Townswoman* Vol. 16, No. 3, March 1949, p. 1.

¹⁴⁹ In 1930, 110 Townswomen's Guilds and 67 Societies for Equal Citizenship were affiliated to the NUSEC. Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain* p. 242.

or may help to secure a real equality of liberties, status and opportunities between men and women.'¹⁵⁰ Conversely, the National Union of Guilds for Citizenship relinquished all feminist and egalitarian aspirations. Its principal function was to be educational not political, a fact reflected in its central objective 'to encourage the education of women to enable them as citizens to make the best contribution towards the common good'.¹⁵¹

The National Union's re-organisation on an educational basis and its commitment to provide women with a common meeting ground meant the Union was unable to affiliate with organisations 'identified with any form of propaganda'. Because of this it was announced 'with regret' that the Union had to withdraw both from the National Council of Women and the League of Nations Union and would not affiliate to the National Council for Equal Citizenship.¹⁵² Women's Citizen's Associations and Societies for Equal Citizenship were not invited to join the new organisation on the grounds that

there is..little room for societies

whose objects include political and feminist

¹⁵⁰ *The National Union of Townswomen's Guilds Annual Report 1932 (1932)*, p. 4. The NCEC remained an active feminist pressure group during this period but failed to attract either the support or the funding available to the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds.

¹⁵¹ *The National Union of Townswomen's Guilds Annual Report 1932 (1932)*, p. 28.

¹⁵² *The National Union of Townswomen's Guilds Annual Report 1932 (1932)*, p. 11.

activities, and the National Union is now for all practical purposes a Townswomen's Guild organisation.¹⁵³

In spite of this public rejection of feminist and political allegiances, the Executive of the National Union of Guilds for Citizenship included amongst its membership a number of leading feminist activists. Margery Corbett Ashby became first President of the National Union and expressed her hope that the new organisation would

see members so confident of equality that they can devote themselves to the improvement of their homes without feeling shut in by them; the Guilds should rationalize cookery and homecraft as men rationalize their businesses, without fear of losing their university education or their claim to equal entry into industry and profession.¹⁵⁴

In 1932, Lady Cynthia Colville J.P., a former lady in waiting to the Queen, was appointed Honorary President of the Union and Lady Denman of the National Federation of Women's Institutes was appointed Vice-President.¹⁵⁵ Eleanor Rathbone MP and Edith Picton

¹⁵³ *The National Union of Townswomen's Guilds Annual Report 1932* (1932), p. 4.

¹⁵⁴ *The Women's Leader* March 7 1930, p. 35.

¹⁵⁵ Both women were close friends of Eva Hubback and had been involved in fund-raising for the Townswomen's Guilds Movement since 1929. During this period Lady Colville also served as a member of the Shoreditch Borough Council's Maternity and Child Welfare Committee.

Tubervill, both members of the NCEC Executive Committee, also served as Vice-Presidents of the Townswomen's Guild Movement during the 1930s. Eva Hubback, President of the feminist NCEC, was elected to the Executive Committee of the renamed National Union of Townswomen's Guilds in 1933 and two years later she too was appointed Vice-President.

The involvement of so many prominent feminists on the Executive of the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds reveals the cross-over in membership between the National Executive of the non-feminist Townswomen's Guilds and the feminist NCEC. Equally significant is the fact that some of the welfare reforms championed by new feminists, namely Eleanor Rathbone, Margery Corbett Ashby and Eva Hubback, were also endorsed by the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds. Family allowances, improved maternity services, and the right of all women to a good standard of housing were amongst the campaigns supported by the National Union throughout the 1930s and 1940s.

The National Union of Townswomen's Guilds was, however, first and foremost an educative organisation, providing centres for women to study social and civic problems as well as handicrafts, arts, music and drama. Members were encouraged to 'educate themselves to take an effective part in national life, and to consider the problems of social welfare'.¹⁵⁶ Local Guilds were non-

¹⁵⁶ *The National Union of Townswomen's Guilds Annual Report 1932 (1932)*, p. 32.

party and non-sectarian and open to women and girls on payment of a two shilling annual subscription.¹⁵⁷

Regional Federations co-ordinated the provincial work of the Movement while the National Executive Committee meeting in London was responsible for administration and the enactment of policy agreed at the Annual Council Meeting.

The National Union of Townswomen's Guilds prided itself on the democratic nature of the organisation. It was argued that participation in Guild life gave members the opportunity to gain 'practical experience in the science of self-government' and encouraged women 'to take their share as citizens in the management of their town and country'.¹⁵⁸ Although Townswomen's Guilds were non-party, individual members were always encouraged to join political organisations as well as local pressure groups and urged to stand as candidates in local elections to increase the representation of women throughout the country.

The growth of the Townswomen's Guilds Movement in the 1930s owed much to financial support from the Carnegie Trust and National Council of Social Service.¹⁵⁹ The fact that these funds were only

¹⁵⁷ Twenty-five members were needed to set up a Guild with a maximum of one hundred and fifty women joining any one Guild.

¹⁵⁸ *The National Union of Townswomen's Guilds Annual Report 1932* (1932). p. 12

¹⁵⁹ During the 1930s the Carnegie Trust awarded educational grants worth £2,200 and the National Council of Social Service provided £1000 to fund the

available to non-political organisations was no doubt a further incentive for the National Union of Townswomen's Guild's policy of remaining a non-feminist and non-party association. The National Union also worked closely with the National Federation of Women's Institutes which was regarded as a firm ally during this period. Occasional Joint Conferences were held to foster greater co-operation and continuing good relations between the two societies.¹⁶⁰

By 1939, 544 Guilds had been established nationwide representing an overall membership of 54,000 women. Although the Movement claimed to represent a broad cross-section of urban women, the vast majority of members were middle-class wives and mothers. Above all the Guilds hoped to attract the thousands of married women living in the new suburban housing estates on the outskirts of towns and cities. The Townswomen's Guilds recognised that many women who lived in these areas were often 'cut off from all interests' and spent 'a lot of the day alone in a labour saving house'.¹⁶¹ Becoming a member of a Townswomen's Guild gave women the opportunity to meet

establishment of fifty Guilds for women living in areas of high unemployment.

¹⁶⁰ At these meetings the two organisations agreed about borderline areas with populations just above or below 4,000 and decided whether a Townswomen's Guild or a Women's Institute should be established.

¹⁶¹ *National Union of Townswomen's Guilds Annual Report 1935* (1935), p. 28.

'new friends and acquire new interests' outside the home.¹⁶²

Throughout the 1930s, arts, crafts and cookery classes remained the most popular Guild activities with citizenship education taking a poor second place. In 1935, the National Executive defended the 'study and practice of handicrafts' because it allowed members to 'develop their creative powers and enlarge their outlook on life, and so make a better contribution towards the common good.'¹⁶³ Contributing to the welfare of the community also included campaigning for housing reform and adequate maternity services. These activities are not often associated with the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds and it is hoped that the following chapters will redress the balance.

This overview of the aims and activities of non-feminist women's societies reveals the many differences which existed between the various organisations. Three groups represented women from contrasting religious backgrounds; Anglican, Catholic and Nonconformist. The other three were for women of all faiths and none, but they too categorised their membership into townswomen,

¹⁶² Ibid. For a detailed account of life for women living in urban estates during this period see D.L. North, 'Middle Class Suburban Lifestyles and Culture in England 1919-1939', (D.Phil. Thesis, Oxford, 1989).

¹⁶³ *National Union of Townswomen's Guilds Annual Report 1935* (1935), p. 28.

countrywomen and in the case of the National Council of Women, 'thinking' women.

There is no doubt that some of these groups were more conservative than others. The Mothers' Union and the Catholic Women's League were utterly opposed to divorce and birth control while the National Council of Women campaigned for more liberal social legislation. The National Council along with the Women's Institute Movement and the YWCA supported the introduction of equal pay while the other three societies remained silent.

These differences are important and should not be overlooked. However, the similarities between the six organisations were even more significant. All of these groups endorsed the domestic role of women and were united in their desire to sustain and protect traditional family life. The women who joined non-feminist women's societies were given the opportunity to meet other women outside the home, to relax, make friends and develop their interests in the arts and current affairs. These activities were an extension of women's work as wives and mothers and did not challenge the division of labour within the home.

All of these non-feminist women's societies offered more to women than egalitarian feminist groups. This was because their principal objective was social and educational rather than political. But this did not mean that organisations such as the Mothers' Union and the Women's Institutes were not interested in

politics. All six non-feminist women's groups recognised that women as wives, mothers and citizens had an important contribution to make to society. Members of non-feminist women's groups were encouraged to use their vote, stand for election and to take an interest in public affairs.

These societies believed that women, as housewives and mothers, performed a service to the community and in return were entitled to certain state benefits. Good housing, free health care and family allowances were just some of the demands made by non-feminist women's societies during the inter-war period. Nonetheless, because these groups represented conservative middle-class women who accepted domesticity, their contribution has tended to be overlooked or even dismissed as anti-feminist. It is now time to consider a more dynamic and inclusive history of the women's movement in England.

CHAPTER TWO

WOMEN SERVANTS OF THE STATE: THE RIGHTS AND DUTIES OF WOMEN'S CITIZENSHIP

Voluntary societies can do a tremendous amount to form public opinion, but first of all they must develop in their own members a capacity for the first element in citizenship-the capacity to examine, to discard, to distinguish between the important and the less important.¹

The extension of the parliamentary franchise to women in 1918 and 1928, confirmed that women, just like men were citizens of a democratic society. In the period following enfranchisement, feminist groups urged women to use their vote wisely and to participate in the on-going campaign for women's social and economic equality. However, the feminist movement was unable to win widespread support during this period and suffered a decline. In sharp contrast, non-feminist women's organisations, catering for the needs of wives and mothers, attracted hundreds of thousands of members throughout the inter-war years.

Although non-feminist women's societies endorsed the traditional domestic role of women, members were not expected to devote themselves exclusively to home and family. Instead, these groups sought to empower women through education in citizenship. Women were encouraged to play an active part in the community and

¹ *The Blue Triangle Gazette* Vol. 63, Nos. 8 & 9, August 1945, p. 9.

speak out on issues which affected the lives of housewives and mothers. In this chapter it will be argued that in spite of the unpopularity of feminism and the dominance of an ideology of domesticity, many women were aware of their rights and duties as citizens through membership of voluntary and non-feminist women's societies.

THE CONCEPT OF CITIZENSHIP FOR WOMEN

Before turning to the activities of individual women's societies, it is first of all necessary to consider what citizenship meant for women during the inter-war period. Citizenship, as defined by *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1959) is 'the position or status of being a citizen with its rights and privileges.' T.H.

Marshall, writing in 1949, suggested that there were three distinct types of citizenship: political, social and civil. Political citizenship referred to the right to vote, civil citizenship to individual freedoms and social citizenship to economic and welfare rights.²

Although women in England were not granted political citizenship until 1918, they did exercise some social and civil rights before this date. The 1870 Married Women's Property Act, the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts in 1885 and the right of women to judicial separation in 1878¹ were important reforms

² T.H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class and Other Essays* (Cambridge, 1950) p. 10. For a critique of Marshall's concept of citizenship see Bryan S. Turner, 'Outline of a Theory of Citizenship', *Sociology* 24, 2, (May, 1990).

which undoubtedly improved the status of women in society.³ From 1869 women were eligible to vote and stand in local government elections.⁴ In 1914 there were 1,546 female poor law guardians, 200 rural-district councillors and forty eight women municipal and county councillors.⁵

Women were also active in the established political parties before they were granted the vote. In 1906, the Women's Labour League was set up for women who supported the ideals of the Labour Party.⁶ Women involved in the Primrose League (1883), undertook electioneering work for the Conservative Party and acted as an auxiliary force of party workers.⁷

³ Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959*, p. 2.

⁴ See Patricia Hollis, *Ladies Elect: Women in English Local Government 1865-1914* (Oxford, 1987), for an account of women's participation in local government during these years.

⁵ Pat Thane, 'Women in the British Labour Party and the Construction of State Welfare, 1906-1939' in S. Koven & S. Michel, *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States* (1993), p. 334.

⁶ In 1918 women were admitted to the women's sections of the Labour Party which by 1931 had a membership of some 250,000 women. See Pat Thane, 'Visions of Gender in the making of the British welfare state: the case of women in the British Labour Party and social policy, 1906-1945', in Gisela Bock & Pat Thane, *Maternity and Gender Policies* (1991), p. 94. See also Caroline Rowan, 'Women in the Labour Party, 1906-1920', *Feminist Review* 12 (1982).

⁷ For a history of the Primrose League see Martin Pugh, *The Tories and the People 1880-1935* (Oxford, 1985) and Beatrix Campbell, *The Iron Ladies: Why do Women Vote Tory?* (1987). Following the extension of the franchise, many Conservative women joined the Women's Unionist Association which in 1934 had a membership of 940,000.

Similarly, the Women's Liberal Federation (1886) attracted considerable support and by 1914, had some 115,097 members.⁸ Involvement in local government and political organisations gave women the opportunity to participate in the political process, although they were still excluded from national government.

From the mid-nineteenth century, voluntary and charitable societies ensured that women could contribute to society beyond the confines of their homes. Organisations such as the Charity Organisation Society (1869) and the Workhouse Visiting Society (1858) gave middle and upper-class women the chance to get involved in public work and at the same time campaign for social welfare reforms.⁹ The Women's Co-operative Guild (1883), an organisation for working-class wives and mothers, spearheaded demands for divorce law reform and improved maternity care for women. At the same time, members were encouraged to stand for municipal elections and to familiarise themselves with the workings of a democratic society.¹⁰

⁸ Pat Thane, 'Women in the British Labour Party and the Construction of State Welfare, 1906-1939', p. 334.

⁹ Seth Koven and Sonya Michel write that by 1870 an estimated 500,000 British women were involved in public social welfare work. Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, 'Womanly Duties: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States in France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States, 1880-1920', *American Historical Review* 95, 11, (1990), p. 1099.

¹⁰ Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959* pp. 230-34. See also Gillian Scott, 'A Trade Union For Married Women': The Women's Co-operative Guild 1914-1920', in Sybil Oldfield (ed), *The*

It was also during this period that non-feminist women's societies, including the Mothers' Union, the YWCA and the National Council of Women were first established.

In spite of these developments, women were still denied the vote and continued to be subjected to numerous social, legal and economic inequalities. The suffrage movement focused on the campaign for the franchise as a starting point for removing all discrimination against women. When in 1918, the vote was extended to women over thirty, it was followed by a series of important legislative reforms which did much to improve the position of women in society. These measures included the Matrimonial Causes Act (1923), which allowed women and men equal grounds for divorce, the Guardianship of Infants Act (1925), giving both parents equal rights over the guardianship of their children, and the Widows, Orphans and Old Age Contributory Pensions Act (1925).¹¹ In 1928, the Equal Franchise Act granted the vote to women on equal terms with men.

Nevertheless, the vote itself did not signify an end to women's social and economic inequality. In 1936, the feminist Eleanor Rathbone remarked that

no doubt some of us exaggerated [the
power of the vote]..progress has been

Working Day World: Women's Lives and Culture(s) in Britain 1914-1945 (1994).

¹¹ Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959* pp. 107-11.

rapid when it depended on political action and slow when it depended on changes in heart and habits.¹²

Despite the extension of political citizenship, women continued to be regarded as dependents of men, a fact reflected in the low levels of pay for women workers, the marriage bar and the lack of free health care for wives and mothers. It was necessary, therefore, for feminist and non-feminist women's groups to demonstrate that women were citizens in their own right, entitled to claim full economic and social welfare benefits from the State.

If men were able to qualify for citizenship rights through soldiering and working outside the home, would housekeeping and mothering entitle women to the same rights?¹³ The notion that women could assert their citizenship through their work as wives and mothers is important when discussing women and citizenship in England in the period after enfranchisement. Carole Pateman has suggested that Mary Wollstonecraft was the first liberal theorist to acknowledge that citizenship

¹² Eleanor Rathbone, 'Changes in Public Life' in Ray Strachey (ed), *Our Freedom and its Results* (1936), p. 16.

¹³ This question is raised by Susan Pedersen in her study of separation allowances paid to soldiers' wives during the First World War. She argues that the allowances were not paid to women in recognition of their work within the home, but in return for the service to the nation performed by their absent husbands. Susan Pedersen, 'Gender, Welfare and Citizenship in Britain during the Great War', *American Historical Review* 95, 4, (October, 1990), pp. 983-1005.

for women would be defined differently from that of men. Wollstonecraft argued that women had 'specific capacities, talents, needs and concerns so that the expression of their citizenship will be differentiated from that of men'.¹⁴

This 'difference-based' concept of citizenship for women was reflected in the thinking of Eleanor Rathbone and the so-called new feminists during the inter-war period. As President of the NUSEC, Rathbone supported the introduction of welfare reforms, for example family allowances, which identified the specific needs of women as mothers. She argued that wives and mothers provided an important service to the community in caring for their husbands and children. In return for this work, women citizens were entitled to claim adequate social and welfare benefits from the State.¹⁵

In 1925, Rathbone told members of the NUSEC that

we can demand what we want for women, not because it is what men have got but because it is what women need to fulfil the

¹⁴ Carole Pateman, 'The Patriarchal Welfare State' in Amy Gutmann (ed), *Democracy and The Welfare State* (Princeton, 1988), p. 252. For a discussion of the concept of citizenship for women see also Anne Phillips, 'Citizenship and Feminist Theory', in G. Andrews (ed), *Citizenship* (1991), Carole Pateman, *The Disorder of Women* (Cambridge, 1989) and Jane Lewis, *Women in Britain Since 1945* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 114-121.

¹⁵ Susan Pedersen, 'Gender, Welfare and Citizenship', p. 1002-5. See also Hilary Land, 'Eleanor Rathbone and the Economy of the Family', in Harold Smith (ed), *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* (1990).

potentialities of their own natures and to adjust themselves to the circumstances of their own lives.¹⁶

The Women's Co-operative Guild and the Women Sections of the Labour Party also acknowledged the work done by housewives and mothers. As Pat Thane has suggested, labour women

sought to ensure that work in the home was valued by enabling the largest occupational group in the country, the housewives, to assert themselves publicly, to contribute their voice to politics, and hence to advancement of their own status and causes.¹⁷

In much the same way, non-feminist women's societies highlighted the contribution that women working within the home made to society. Although these groups rejected feminist ideology, they recognised the symbolic value of the franchise and the extension of political citizenship to women. Non-feminist women's societies did what they could to educate and inform their members, the majority of whom were wives and mothers, about the rights and duties of citizenship in a democratic society.

During the inter-war period, the importance of active citizenship for women as well as men became increasingly significant. The rise of fascism in Italy

¹⁶ Quoted in Hilary Land, 'Eleanor Rathbone and the Economy of the Family', p. 115.

¹⁷ Pat Thane, 'Visions of Gender', p. 96.

and Germany and reports of the brutality of Stalin's regime in Russia, focused attention on the need for participatory citizenship if democracy was to survive. In response to the grave developments in Europe, the Association for Education in Citizenship (AEC) was set up 'to advance the study of and training in citizenship, by which is meant training in the moral qualities necessary for the citizens of a democracy'.¹⁸ The work of this group, founded in 1934 by Sir Ernest Simon and Eva Hubback¹⁹, provides a useful insight into the citizenship education programmes developed by non-feminist women's societies.

The concept of citizenship promoted by the AEC has been described by John Field and Peter Weller as 'broadly social democratic'. It involved 'high-minded public service, tolerance of difference,..and "the beneficial exercise of rights"'.²⁰ Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the group published a series of pamphlets outlining a theory of citizenship and ways in which

¹⁸ Quoted in Brian Harrison, *Prudent Revolutionaries* p. 286.

¹⁹ Eva Hubback, it will be recalled, was Parliamentary Secretary of the NUSEC and a founding member of the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds. She was also actively involved in adult education and in 1927 was appointed Principal of Morley College for Working Men and Women. Ernest Simon was a Liberal businessman and an expert on housing policy who in 1931 was appointed Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Health.

²⁰ John Field & Peter Weller, 'The Association For Education in Citizenship, 1935-1955', unpublished paper presented to The Left and Citizenship in the 1940s and After, A Workshop held at the University of Warwick, 7 November 1991, p. 5, 12.

citizenship education could be incorporated into the national curriculum.²¹ In *Education in Citizenship* (1934), Hubback and Simon defined the good citizen as someone who had a sense of social responsibility, a love of truth and freedom, the power of clear thinking and a knowledge of political and economic facts.²² To ensure that all citizens met this criteria, the AEC called for citizenship education, in schools, universities and through adult education.

History, politics and economics were singled out as the most important subjects for citizenship education. The AEC acknowledged, however, that it was a difficult to stimulate an interest in public affairs, which many regarded as a 'dreary business'.²³ To overcome this problem, local study groups, the use of film, drama and discussion were recommended in order to interest the public in citizenship. It is significant that these were some of the methods incorporated by the larger women's organisations, in their effort to educate members in citizenship.

Indeed, the AEC recognised that voluntary societies, including the Women's Institutes, Women's Citizens Associations and Townswomen's Guilds, had a significant contribution to make to education in

²¹ These included: *Education in Citizenship* (1934), *Training in Citizenship* (1935) and *The Making of Citizens* (1942).

²² Eva Hubback & Ernest Simon, *Education in Citizenship* (1934), p. 12.

²³ Eva Hubback, *The Making of Citizens* (1942), p. 2.

citizenship. Although providing less formal education, these groups were capable of stimulating

a sense of social responsibility and a more widespread, if somewhat superficial, study of social conditions, and are therefore all to the good; although an unfortunate sheep like tendency in their members is apt to lead to the uncritical acceptance of the point of view of an able speaker.²⁴

Following the outbreak of war in 1939, the AEC continued to highlight the dangers that fascism posed for the future of democratic societies. In 1942, Eva Hubback warned that if Britain was to avoid autocracy it was imperative

to imbue our people with the belief in the democratic way of life and with pride in its achievement..to make active citizens of a democracy capable of building a fine civilisation.²⁵

Similar concern about the nature of democratic citizenship was expressed by Constance Braithwaite in *The Voluntary Citizen: An Enquiry into the place of Philanthropy in the Community* (1938). Braithwaite suggested that the most urgent social problem facing Britain in the 1930s was the need to establish 'the right relationship' between the State and its citizens.

²⁴ Eva Hubback & Ernest Simon, *Training For Citizenship* (1935), p. 43.

²⁵ Eva Hubback, *The Making of Citizens* p. 2.

She argued that liberal economic individualism 'no longer provides an adequate basis for ensuring the best possible conditions of a good life to all individuals'.²⁶ Braithwaite condemned totalitarianism arguing that it sacrificed the freedom of development of its own citizens as well as the welfare of citizens in other countries.²⁷

Drawing on the principle of 'high-minded public service', her concept of 'the voluntary citizen' referred to the involvement of citizens in charitable and philanthropic work. Braithwaite argued that the relief of poverty should be the responsibility of the State and not charitable organisations. She did acknowledge, however, that as long as poverty existed and was not adequately relieved by the State, charitable organisations were necessary.²⁸ The central argument in *The Voluntary Citizen* was that in order to improve the relationship between the State and its citizens, people must first of all be encouraged to become active in the administration of public social services.

For citizens to participate successfully in social welfare, it was necessary for them to be educated in citizenship. Braithwaite wrote that

Individuals do not become intelligent and

²⁶ Constance Braithwaite, *The Voluntary Citizen: An Enquiry into the place of Philanthropy in the Community* (1938), p. 78.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 15.

public spirited citizens merely by keeping the law, paying taxes, and recording their votes at election. They require opportunities of insight into the lives of fellows and into the practical work of group administration.²⁹

To gain an insight into the lives of fellow citizens, Braithwaite recommended participation in organisations which promoted recreational, educational and charitable activities. Organisations such as the Women's Institutes Movement and the Mothers' Union were regarded as ideal for this purpose. She also suggested that there were still many opportunities to organise social, educational and recreational pursuits for married women.³⁰ In common with the AEC, Braithwaite stressed the importance of informed opinion for the survival of democracy during the inter-war period.

Contemporary writings on the concept of citizenship reflect a number of similar themes. The value of voluntary philanthropic work is stressed as is the need for an educated public opinion. The participation of adult organisations, including women's societies, was an important aspect in the training of citizens. This in turn would facilitate the smooth running of democratic government and protect against the threat of totalitarian regimes. These ideas reflected contemporary concerns about the relationship between the State and its citizens and were

²⁹ Ibid., p. 80.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 58.

incorporated into the thinking of non-feminist women's organisations during this period.

NON-FEMINIST WOMEN'S SOCIETIES AND EDUCATION IN CITIZENSHIP

There is no doubt that education in citizenship was a serious consideration for non-feminist women's societies during the period after enfranchisement. The 1918 Representation of the People Act, marking the extension of citizenship rights to women, was as important to these groups as it was to feminist societies. Even more significant is the fact that non-feminist women's groups, whilst rejecting feminist principles, were as determined as feminist groups to ensure that the rights and duties of women citizens were fully acknowledged. Indeed, by focusing on citizenship rather than feminism, non-feminist women's groups were able to promote the public role of women without attracting anti-feminist feeling, so prevalent during this period.³¹

Although the Mothers' Union stood firmly for family life and defended the domestic role of women, it

³¹ In 1936, Ray Strachey wrote that modern women 'show a strong hostility to the word feminism, and all which they imagine it to connote'. Ray Strachey, *Our Freedom and its Results* (1936), p. 10. Martin Pugh suggests that the 1930s 'fostered a climate rather hostile for feminists, which was due, fundamentally, to the pervading sense of shrinking economic opportunities [for men]'. Martin Pugh, 'Domesticity and the Decline of Feminism, 1930-1950' in Harold Smith (ed), *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* (1990), p. 147.

recognised the important contribution that women could make to society. Through its work, the Mothers' Union wished to instil a sense of civic responsibility in mothers, encouraging them to take a more active part in local and national life. In doing so it was hoped that the ideals of the Mothers' Union, its belief in the sanctity of marriage and of family life, would be spread throughout the wider community.

However, the Mothers' Union acknowledged that the average woman may not embrace her responsibility as a citizen and 'believes it makes little or no difference whether she uses her vote or not'.³² In 1934 *The Mothers' Union Journal* proclaimed that

It remains true for all time that our real job as mothers is making of citizens and not laws...yet as thinking human beings we must see that laws good or bad, play a great part in helping or hindering us...Let us do all in our power, through our rights of citizenship to make a new England, a new world "safe for little children to live in".³³

The Union outlined ways to foster a sense of political and social responsibility amongst wives and mothers. Members were urged to 'take an intelligent interest in things, reading and thinking for ourselves, instead of taking our opinions ready-made from someone

³² *The Mothers' Union Journal* No. 157, August 1934, p. 20.

³³ *Ibid.*

else'.³⁴ In August 1934, an article entitled 'The Good Citizen' was published in *The Mothers' Union Journal*, highlighting the attributes of active citizenship. The importance of the vote was emphasised to ensure that 'good men' were appointed to maintain and develop community life. Once elected these 'good men deserved the respect and willing co-operation of all citizens'.³⁵

Understanding the implications of new legislation was also regarded as an imperative for Mothers' Union members. Taking an interest in public questions was encouraged because 'good citizens, men and women alike, should think deeply about these matters and act according to the dictates of conscience.'³⁶ The Central Council was particularly anxious that members would use their vote to protest against legislation conflicting with Christian teaching, for example divorce law reform during the 1920s and 1930s.³⁷

As a society for Anglican women, the Mothers' Union endorsed the concept of Christian citizenship, defined by the Conference on Christian Politics, Economics and Citizenship (COPEC). First convened in 1924 by William Temple, then Bishop of Manchester, the COPEC Report stated that 'the duties of citizenship are..a sacred obligation for Christian people'.³⁸ The

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 19.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 20.

³⁷ The Union's campaign against divorce is discussed in Chapter Three.

³⁸ *The Mothers' Union Journal* No. 157, August 1934, p. 20.

Report also recommended that the State should guarantee to every family, decent housing, education and an adequate income.³⁹ Significantly, the Mothers' Union included free health care for married women, family allowances and adequate maternity services, among the welfare rights the Union believed should be extended to every woman citizen.

Not surprisingly, the Union saw the duties of women citizens closely connected to their role as wives and mothers. The second objective of the Union highlighted the responsibilities that mothers had in caring for their children, the fathers and mothers of the future. However, if mothers were to make the world a safer and more Christian place for their children, they had a duty to contribute to life beyond their homes. It was suggested that

For a woman to give up all outside interests, to entirely merge her personality in that of another, is to help in producing husbands and fathers of a wrong type; the bully, the autocrat, the dictator. We have no use for the type [of mother] today.⁴⁰

³⁹ Cited by John Kent in his unpublished paper 'The attitudes of the British Churches to citizenship and national identity 1920-1960, with special reference to the work of William Temple', presented to a Conference on The Right to Belong, Citizenship and National Identity, University College London, 7 May 1994.

⁴⁰ *The Mothers' Union Journal* No. 158, September 1934, p. 11.

Although the Mothers' Union emphasised that a mother's first place was in the home, it believed that as 'educated human beings', mothers had a duty to their Church, their neighbours and their families to participate fully in public life.

It is difficult to ascertain just how successful the national organisation was in encouraging rank and file members to become active and well-informed citizens. Speakers were supplied by the Central Council to address local meetings on subjects ranging from religious education to current affairs. Reports from the London Diocesan branch in 1931 reveal that talks on 'The Jews in Palastine', 'Nursing' and 'Spring Cleaning' had taken place over the past year.⁴¹ In 1937, the list of lectures offered by central speakers included 'Citizenship and the Mothers' Union', 'The Right Use of Money', and 'Why am I a Churchwoman?'.⁴²

However, it is likely that many women who joined the Mothers' Union were more interested in the social and recreational activities offered by local branches. Sewing and knitting circles were set up in most dioceses and weekly meetings gave women the opportunity to meet friends and relax over a cup of tea. In 1930, reports from the London branches revealed the popularity of social gatherings and fund raising events

⁴¹ *The Mothers Union Journal* (London Cover), No. 93, March 1931, p. 9.

⁴² Minutes of the Mothers' Union Central Council, December 1937, (Central Council Minutes, Vol. XI, 1937-42), p. 45.

over all other activities. For example, the Twickenham branch held a winter festival and pageant while other branches raised money for Church repairs and local charities.⁴³

It would be wrong, however, to dismiss the work of the national organisation because rank and file members were most interested in the social activities. Like any large voluntary organisation, the Mothers' Union had both active and passive members. What is significant is the fact that a conservative non-feminist women's organisation, representing over half a million women, believed that women had an important contribution to make to life outside the home.

The Union may have argued that a woman's first duty was to her family, but as intelligent and responsible citizens, women also had a duty to society. It was the Union's aim, therefore, to encourage its members to get involved in local and national affairs which affected their own lives and the welfare of the community. Even more significant is the fact that the Mothers' Union was prepared to campaign for social and economic reforms to which women as wives, mothers and citizen, were entitled. It is this aspect of the Union's work which will be further explored in the following chapters.

The YWCA, like the Mothers' Union, was aware of the important contribution Christian women could make

⁴³ *The Mothers' Union Journal* (London Cover), No. 90, March 1930, p. 5.

to society. The Association welcomed the 1928 Equal Franchise Act as a sign that women were 'now in possession of the full political privileges of citizenship'.⁴⁴ In 1931, the Annual Report of the YWCA declared that 'all the activities of a good YWCA centre, physical, educational, social and religious, constitute training for citizenship and should be so regarded'.⁴⁵ However, the Association singled out the education of newly enfranchised women for special attention, so that they too would take an intelligent and active interest in public affairs.

Methods incorporated by the YWCA to ensure that members had 'some knowledge of and interest in political, social and economic problems' were many and varied.⁴⁶ Conferences, weekend study camps, lectures and study courses were organised by the Association throughout the 1930s. In 1931, it was reported that weekend conferences had been held in Brixton, Croydon, Acton, Dewsbury, Leeds and Leicester, which had been well attended by both girls and leaders.⁴⁷ Subjects discussed at these meetings included the development of English industry, the trade union movement and the problem of unemployment.

⁴⁴ *YWCA Annual Review 1931* (1931), p. 12, (YWCA Archive, MSS 243/2/1/16), Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Local centres also arranged classes and discussion groups on questions of public interest. In 1929, it was reported that there 'was a desire among members for classes in such subjects as citizenship, economics and social study'.⁴⁸ As well as the formal classes, social service groups were set up to facilitate community work amongst the membership. For example, staffing play centres or organising parties at local hospitals.⁴⁹ As a Christian organisation, the YWCA believed that education in citizenship and social work would encourage members 'to develop their powers and live their lives to the fullest' which the Association considered 'an essential part of our Christian duty'.⁵⁰

In spite of the National Executive's endorsement of citizenship education, the most popular activities at YWCA centres continued to be ballroom dancing and keep fit classes. In 1946, it was estimated that 1,826 classes in physical education and recreation had been held that year in the 226 centres. In comparison, 722 classes relating to citizenship education and current affairs had taken place. It should be noted, however, that citizenship education was still more popular than drama, music and handicrafts.⁵¹ This would imply that

⁴⁸ *YWCA Annual Review 1929* (1929), p. 9, (YWCA Archive, MSS 243/2/1/14).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ The figures for drama, music and handicrafts were 624, 311 and 431 respectively. *YWCA Annual Review 1947* (1947), p. 26, (YWCA Archive, MSS 243/2/1/28).

there was significant, if not overwhelming, interest in these social issues throughout the 1930s and 1940s.

The YWCA's journal, *The Blue Triangle Gazette* and its special supplement *News For Citizens*, kept members up to date on national and international events. Although careful to avoid party political questions, the YWCA encouraged its members to take an active interest in politics. An article in the October 1943 edition of *News For Citizens*, advised that 'some sort of political identity is necessary for every citizen in a democracy...politics means citizenship'.⁵² *News For Citizens* included articles on a wide variety of topical subjects including 'What is this "Beveridge Report?"', (March 1943), 'Party Politics: How will you vote?' (November 1949) and 'Is Britain really the "Land of the Free?"' (December 1940).

In 1949, the YWCA published a pamphlet highlighting the importance of citizenship education for the national organisation. It was recognised that 'responsible, intelligent citizens are sorely needed in every nation' and that 'the special gifts of women are as essential to the life of the community as to the home'.⁵³ It was hoped that a more extensive programme of citizenship education would help women to be

responsible citizens who will share

actively in the social and political life

⁵² *News For Citizens* October 1943, p. 2. (YWCA Archive, MSS 243/1/9/10).

⁵³ *Citizenship Education in the YWCA* (1949), p. 2, (YWCA Archive, MSS 243/13/10/79).

of the community. This means learning to use intelligently such privileges of democracy as the public discussion of important issues and the right to vote.⁵⁴

At the same time, the Association recognised that citizens were entitled to certain rights. As a Christian organisation it was the YWCA's responsibility to 'arouse the conscience of the community in order to secure basic rights and privileges for all citizens'.⁵⁵ These rights included efficient health services, adequate housing, the protection of the welfare of women and girls and the right of all adults to fair employment.⁵⁶ It is significant, therefore, that these were amongst the welfare reforms campaigned for by the YWCA throughout the 1930s and 1940s.

The concept of Christian citizenship was also incorporated into the work of the Catholic Women's League. One of the League's primary objectives was 'to help women to become good citizens through being good Catholics..[women] had an important role in safeguarding the laws of God and the rights of the family.'⁵⁷ In 1918, when the franchise was extended to women, the Catholic Women's League published a series of leaflets on the rights and duties of citizenship. Members were advised about the equal moral duties and

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 3.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine*, No. 309, July 1937, p. 14.

moral rights of men and women in a democratic society. This meant that all citizens had the right to freedom of speech, education and a family wage.⁵⁸

In these leaflets, the League made it clear that the family was the 'unit of human existence' and that 'the necessity for married women to work outside their homes during the infancy of their children should be regarded as an evil'.⁵⁹ It was clear, therefore, that the League, like the Mothers' Union, firmly believed that a woman's first place was in the home caring for her husband and children. However, the Catholic Women's League also recognised that women had responsibilities as citizens. It was their duty, moreover, to contribute to life beyond the home by participating in community work and taking an active interest in local and national affairs.

To facilitate these activities, the League set up a Social Service Bureau in 1928, to offer advice on careers for young women in professional and voluntary social work. The League hoped that this scheme would encourage more Catholic women would become social workers. Consequently, women would be better represented in voluntary and State sector welfare services, thereby incorporating the principles of Catholic social teaching into social policy.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 90, April 1919, p. 22.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 253, November 1932, p. 13.

Participating in public work was another important duty for Catholic Women. The League's Public Service Bureau urged members to get involved in a wide-range of local activities to raise the profile of Catholic women in the community. As a result, members of the League were encouraged to stand as candidates for urban and district councils, join secular women's societies and set up local debating and study clubs.⁶¹ Members of the Catholic Women's League did join local branches of secular women's groups during this period. For example, in 1938 it was reported that the Chairman of the Wolverhampton CWL was also the Chairman of the local Townswomen's Guild. The same year members of the League's West Riding branch were also affiliated to the local NCW and Townswomen's Guild.⁶²

The League was quick to deny that there was any conflict between this kind of public service and women's domestic duties within the home. In October 1932, Mrs. Chambers, speaking on behalf of the League's Executive, made it clear that home life could not be separated from local and national affairs. In an article published in *The Catholic Women's League* she told readers that

homes are very often built by the local authority, children attend schools built by the local authority..if you want to

⁶¹ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 246, March 1932, p. 15.

⁶² *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 317, March 1938, p. 12.

live and work under decent conditions, you have got to be represented on that local authority.⁶³

Mrs. Chambers added that it was imperative to get Catholics elected to local government 'so that they are always there to deal with anything which affects Catholic interests'.⁶⁴

In 1933 members of the Durham County branch were urged to 'record their vote at municipal elections' which was considered the 'first step towards being good citizens'.⁶⁵ The importance of Borough Councils was emphasised because they were responsible for decisions regarding the 'education of our children, for health, housing and the safety of ourselves and our children'.⁶⁶ At this meeting, it was suggested that any Catholic woman who did not take an interest in local and national affairs was a 'shame to her religion'.⁶⁷

These views were reiterated at a meeting of the Northern Province Public Service Committee in October 1935. During an address on 'Catholic Women in the Home and Public Life', Mrs. Kemball, Chairman of the Committee, told her audience that 'although women's work is and must always be mainly in the home', it should not end there. She stressed that women must

⁶³ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 252, October 1932, p. 13.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 257, March 1933, p. 10.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

also be encouraged to take part in national life 'to uphold and defend Catholic principles'.⁶⁸

In spite of these appeals, the Church hierarchy remained concerned that women were not doing enough to make their voice heard in political life. In 1936, the Archbishop of Liverpool urged members of the Catholic Women's League to make their views more widely known in the protest against moral dangers such as divorce and birth control. Speaking at the League's Annual Council Meeting, the Archbishop warned that

now women are emancipated and have the freedom they fought for..what is the result of this liberty? It is seen that sometimes women appear to be throwing away their influence and doing their best to wreak our social system.⁶⁹

The same year Mrs. Kemball deplored the apparent apathy amongst the Catholic electorate. She claimed that

if we are pulling our full weight as citizens and rendering real service to the communities in which we live, it is only reasonable to suppose that we shall be listened to when any matter affecting our principles is under discussion.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 290, December 1935. p. 8.

⁶⁹ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 302, December 1936, p. 16.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

To ensure that this objective was achieved, Dr. Rewcastle, the President of the League, told members attending the 1936 Annual Conference that it was the 'manifest duty of Catholic women to take a share in civic responsibilities'.⁷¹

From these statements it is clear that the Catholic Women's League saw citizenship for women as a way to uphold the teaching of the Catholic Church. However, this should not detract from the fact that as a women's organisation, the League was encouraging its members to use their vote and to take an active interest in local and national affairs. At the same time, the Catholic Women's League recognised that women as citizens were entitled to social and economic support from the State. As a result, the Catholic Women's League was able to demand, and campaign for welfare reforms which would improve the quality of life for all women working within the home.

Like many women's groups during this period, the National Council of Women was concerned that newly enfranchised women should be made aware of their duties as citizens and encouraged to use their vote. In March 1918, the National Council of Women oversaw the establishment of the National Women's Citizens' Association (NWCA). The principle aim of this new body was to foster a sense of citizenship in women and to encourage the study of

⁷¹ Ibid.

political, social and economic questions and to secure adequate representation for women in local administration and in the affairs of the nation.⁷²

As an independent society, the NWCA was made up of a loose federation of local Women Citizens' Associations which were also free to join the National Council of Women and the NUSEC. Maria Ogilvie Gordon was elected first President of the Association and over the years many women active in the National Council of Women served on the NWCA Executive.⁷³ However, with its narrow focus on citizenship education and local representation for women, the NWCA failed to attract a large membership and as a result many Women Citizens' Associations decided to join the more established and influential NUSEC.⁷⁴

In spite of the difficulties encountered by the NWCA, the NCW set up its own Women Citizens' Section in 1929, under the chairmanship of Mrs. Ogilvie Gordon. The aim of this Committee was to co-ordinate the work of the ten WCAs affiliated to the NCW and to promote active citizenship amongst these groups as well as

⁷² *The Constitution of the National Women Citizens' Association* (1918), (Pamphlet Collection), The Fawcett Library.

⁷³ These women included Cecile Matheson, Dame Beatrix Lyall and Lady Trustram Eve.

⁷⁴ Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959* (1992), p. 51. For a history of the NWCA see *The National Women Citizen's Association 1918-1968* (1968), (Pamphlet Collection) The Fawcett Library.

local branches of the NCW.⁷⁵ Maria Ogilvie Gordon highlighted the importance of this work when she remarked that

It must be recognized that vast numbers of women, leading circumscribed lives, with little leisure for anything outside their home duties, take little interest in the wider problems of government.⁷⁶

In common with the NWCA, the NCW believed that involvement in local politics and community affairs 'soon develops into a sense of wider civic responsibility' which would lead to an interest in Parliamentary legislation.⁷⁷ The Council also encouraged its members to participate in community work and social service 'which by its very nature calls urgently for the particular experience of women..the domestic detail of which the nation is sorely in need'.⁷⁸

In January 1928, the National Council of Women's journal, *NCW News*, reminded women that it was their definite obligation as citizens to give their opinion on national questions by choosing as their representatives in Parliament those who hold the same views

⁷⁵ *NCW Handbook 1929-1930* (1930), p. 59. WCAs affiliated to the NCW during this period included the Newport WCA, the Kingston, Malden and Surbiton and District WCA and the Sutton Coldfield WCA.

⁷⁶ *Women in Council* No. 5, May 1931, p. 4.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

as themselves on justice, freedom, honesty
and peace.⁷⁹

Later that year, when the franchise was extended to women over the age of twenty-one, the President of the Council, Lady Emmott suggested that

Our duty in the coming months is to encourage the younger members of the community to educate themselves in civic matters, so that they may take full advantage of their powers and responsibilities.⁸⁰

She was particularly concerned that younger women were 'holding back from our particular kind of work' and added that

the State has a real claim on us all to give service, either paid or unpaid, and I long for our young women to take their part just as their brothers did in the past.⁸¹

To stimulate the interest of women in public affairs, the Birmingham branch of the NCW set up a Citizenship Committee to 'encourage the study and practice of citizenship'.⁸² The aims of the Committee included working for 'all such reforms to secure a real

⁷⁹ *NCW News* No. 158, January 1928, p. 16.

⁸⁰ *NCW News* No. 167, October 1928, p. 2.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *The National Council of Women: What is it?* (Leaflet published by the Birmingham branch of the NCW, 1929), (Birmingham Branch Records, MSS 841/B/4), Birmingham City Library.

equality of liberties, status and opportunities between men and women' and to promote the 'election and appointment of women to local government'.⁸³ During the late 1920s, the subjects dealt with by this committee included the appointment of women police, the Equal Franchise Act and the provision of local health services.⁸⁴

Persuading women to stand in local elections was a major preoccupation for both the local and national sections of the National Council of Women. In February 1928, the National Council had urged 'all women citizens to do all in their power..to combat the indifference and apathy which have been so appalling a feature of local government elections in past years'.⁸⁵ The fact that fifteen county councils (out of a total of sixty-two) had no female members was deplored, particularly in view of the fact that there were 6,000 more women local electors than men.⁸⁶ In spite of the Council's efforts, however, the Birmingham NCW reported in September 1929 that its efforts to recruit women candidates for local council elections had proved disappointing.⁸⁷

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Minutes of the Citizenship Sub-Committee, January - March 1928, (Birmingham Branch Records, May 1925-January 1931, MSS 841 B/31), Birmingham City Library.

⁸⁵ NCW News No. 159, February 1928, p. 45.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 44.

⁸⁷ Minutes of Branch Meeting, September 19 1929, (Birmingham Branch Records, May 1925-January 1931, MSS 841 B/31).

Although the Council may not have been very successful in recruiting women for local elections, it consistently defended women's citizenship rights throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Representing over one hundred women's societies during this period, the Council urged women to work together 'to promote the social, civil, moral and religious welfare of the community' and 'to remove all the disabilities of women, whether legal, economic, or social'.⁸⁸ The activities of the Council in its efforts to achieve this goal~~s~~ will be considered in the following chapters.

Familiar themes relating to the importance of the franchise, the need for an informed public opinion and voluntary social work, were all to the fore in the work of the National Federation of Women's Institutes. In 1953 Inez Jenkins wrote that women were 'experiencing in the Institute movement a unique excursion from the preoccupations of home and family...and were becoming for the first time aware of their own potentialities'.⁸⁹ The WI also gave members the opportunity to contribute to life outside their homes, both as housewives and citizens.

When in 1918 the number of women local government electors increased from one million to over 8.5 million, the National Federation encouraged its members

⁸⁸ *NCW Handbook 1931-32* (1932), p. 61.

⁸⁹ Inez Jenkins, *The History of the Women's Institute Movement of England and Wales* (Oxford, 1953), p. 45.

to use their vote to add to the number of female candidates elected to serve in local government. In May 1921, the West Suffolk Federation put forward a resolution urging that it should be

the recognised duty of individual Institutes to educate their members in the powers of the Parish Councils, Rural District Councils, and County Councils with a view to getting local women on all these bodies.⁹⁰

It is difficult to ascertain just how successful this scheme was as the Institute did not provide any detailed figures of members elected to local government. However, it is significant that by the late 1920s the NUSEC had acknowledged that the increase in the number of women elected to Parish Councils, owed much to the work of the Women's Institute Movement.⁹¹

In 1928, the Women's Institute celebrated the passing of the Equal Franchise Act by sending a telegram to Prime Minister Baldwin, thanking him for

⁹⁰ National Federation of Women's Institutes, *Keeping Ourselves Informed: Our Concerns, Our Resolutions, Our Actions* (1981), p. 48.

⁹¹ *Home and Country* Vol X, No. 5, May 1928, p. 67. Martin Pugh writes that there was a steady increase in the number of women elected to local government during the inter-war period. By the late 1930s women were represented on almost two in very three local authorities but the total number still remained small with women representing only five to six per cent of councillors in 1937. Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain* pp. 56-61.

introducing this long awaited reform. Once the Act had become law, the editor of *Home and Country* wrote that

it now remains for women to show that they have sufficient political zeal and intelligence to justify the trust of the House of Commons.⁹²

In 1928, the August edition of *Home and Country* proclaimed that the Women's Institute Movement was 'a remarkable mechanism for political, as distinct from party-political, education in rural districts'.⁹³ As an educational organisation, the WI acknowledged that it was the responsibility of each Institute to ensure that every member was aware of

her sense of obligation to the country in which she is a citizen, to help her develop her mental powers, to make her realize the importance of the intelligent use of the vote.⁹⁴

As well as offering classes in handicrafts, cookery and other domestic skills, Women's Institutes also gave women the opportunity to discuss political and social issues. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, weekly meetings often included talks on topical subjects ranging from the problem of maternal mortality to the international crisis. In 1928, the Gloucestershire Federation reported that lectures held in its 128 branches had included, 'Health', 'The

⁹² *Home and Country* Vol. X, No. 5, May 1928, p. 67.

⁹³ *Home and Country* Vol. X, No. 8, August 1928, p. 136.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

Younger Generation' and 'Ideal Citizenship'.⁹⁵ At the same time, members were kept up to date on national affairs through the pages of *Home and Country*. Every month the journal reported on current events and followed the passage of legislation affecting the lives of rural women and children.

The National Federation regarded local Institutes 'as a splendid training ground for public work and Institute representatives will be quite capable of putting Institute views before the local authority'.⁹⁶ Annual reports for the 1920s and 1930s show that the majority of Women's Institutes were involved in community work during this period. The Cheshire Federation's Report for 1928 provides a typical example of some of the civic duties undertaken by members. In the course of the year parties had been organised for village children; eggs had been collected and donated to local hospitals and fund-raising schemes had been successful in providing relief to the families of unemployed men living in mining villages.⁹⁷

The leadership of the National Federation of Women's Institutes hoped that this kind of charitable work, together with the greater participation of women in local government, would stimulate the interest of

⁹⁵ *National Federation of Women's Institutes Annual Report, 1928* (1928), p. 39, (Pamphlet Collection), The Fawcett Library.

⁹⁶ *Home and Country* Vol. X, No. 4, April 1928, p. 47.

⁹⁷ *National Federation of Women's Institutes Annual Report 1928* (1928), p. 39.

members in national questions affecting the lives of women and children. Women who avoided the responsibilities of citizenship were frowned upon. In July 1928, *Home and Country* criticised three women jurors who had refused to sit on a case involving the sexual assault of a young boy. The editor accused the three of being 'shirkers' and wrote that

if women want the rights of citizenship they must carry out its duties...moreover what is women's work if it is not to protect and safeguard the children of the nation.⁹⁸

The democratic structure of the Women's Institute Movement was itself regarded as a training ground for women citizens. Inez Jenkins wrote that membership of a local Institute gave women the opportunity to learn about 'the meaning and importance of resolutions and amendments, accurate minutes, correct accounts, secret ballot'.⁹⁹ Speaking in 1937 Lady Denman concluded that

the greatest achievement of the Institutes is that we have learnt to govern ourselves. We do not believe in dictators; we believe that each member should be responsible for her Institute and should have a share in the work.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ *Home and Country* Vol. X, No. 7, July 1928, p. 84.

⁹⁹ Inez Jenkins, *The History of the Women's Institute Movement* p. 46.

¹⁰⁰ *Home and Country* Vol. 19, No. 7, July 1937, p. 111.

This firm commitment to democracy and education in citizenship remained an important aspect of the Women's Institutes' work throughout the 1930s and 1940s. In 1948 Lady Albemarle, President of the National Federation, told delegates attending the Annual General Meeting that

We are traders in democracy. In a democracy public opinion is a sovereign factor and that lays on each single one of us a responsibility..we must seek knowledge and pursue it. The Institute should give to the citizen opportunities for studying the questions of her day.¹⁰¹

When the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds was first established in 1932, its principle objective was 'to encourage the education of women to enable them as citizens to make the best contribution towards the common good'.¹⁰² However, it soon became clear that the activities most favoured by Guild members were handicrafts, homecraft, dancing and drama. The 'dreary business' of citizenship education proved to be far less popular amongst the rank and file membership.¹⁰³ Nevertheless, the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds

¹⁰¹ *Home and Country* Vol. 30, No. 6, June 1948, p. 91.

¹⁰² *The National Union of Townswomen's Guilds Annual Report 1932* (1932), p. 28.

¹⁰³ The 1933 survey of Guild activities revealed that there had been 230 lectures and demonstrations on handicraft skills in comparison to the 116 lectures on current affairs and citizenship. *National Union of Townswomen's Guilds Annual Report 1933* (1933), p. 30.

retained its interest in social and political issues and, like other non-feminist women's societies, encouraged women to get involved in local and national life.

In 1933, the Annual Report of the Townswomen's Guilds Movement claimed that a woman was the best citizen, who is not only able to appreciate her responsibilities as a voter, but also is able to contribute her share to the home life of the nation and is able to make a profitable use of her leisure.¹⁰⁴

Through the work of its Civics Committee, the National Federation hoped not only to encourage members to use their vote, but to give them every opportunity of 'developing themselves as citizens, encouraging and enabling them to fit themselves for the duties and responsibilities'.¹⁰⁵

During the 1930s, the Civics Committee was advised by Eva Hubback of the AEC who, it will be recalled, was also a founding member of the Guild Movement. She advocated a broad definition of citizenship which referred to 'any question affecting the lives of individuals as citizens, that is, as parts of communities [sic], local, national and

¹⁰⁴ *National Union of Townswomen's Guilds Annual Report, 1933 (1933), p. 13.*

¹⁰⁵ *National Union of Townswomen's Guilds Annual Report, 1938 (1938), p. 7.*

international'.¹⁰⁶ It is interesting to note that co-operation between the Townswomen's Guilds Movement and the AEC continued throughout the late 1930s and 1940s.¹⁰⁷

In the local Guilds, citizenship education took the form of lectures and debates on current affairs, as well as issues affecting the lives of women and children. In 1933, the reports of 120 Guilds revealed that there had been twenty-three lectures on the work of local councils, twenty on local history, ten on the work of the League of Nations and five on the State and the child.¹⁰⁸ Typical lecture topics during the 1930s also included 'Disarmament', 'Maternal Mortality', 'Women Police' and 'Local Government'.¹⁰⁹

Throughout this period, the National Union of Guilds was careful to avoid party-political or sectarian issues which might compromise the views of members. However, the Union was also committed to encouraging members

to equip themselves, as individuals, for
service to the community, by the study of any

¹⁰⁶ *National Union of Townswomen's Guilds Annual Report, 1937 (1937)*, p. 8.

¹⁰⁷ In 1938, the two groups set up an advisory committee to investigate the possibilities for a scheme of informal education in citizenship for adults and adolescents. *National Union of Townswomen's Guilds Annual Report 1938 (1938)*, p. 14.

¹⁰⁸ *National Union of Townswomen's Guilds Annual Report, 1933 (1933)*, p. 13.

¹⁰⁹ *National Union of Townswomen's Guilds Annual Report, 1932 (1932)*, p. 41.

subject; and so to develop their powers of discrimination and their ability to make decisions on questions affecting the common good.¹¹⁰

To overcome this apparent contradiction, special study groups were set up within local Guilds, which could focus on important, but sometimes controversial questions.¹¹¹

Topics explored by these groups included the international situation and the programmes of the various political parties. By discussing party politics in this way, it was hoped that members would be able to make up their own minds on which way to vote, instead of depending on the advice of their husbands.¹¹² Women were also encouraged to join the established political parties, as well as feminist women's societies, so that they could participate in political activities within their own communities. So committed was the Guild to this area of work, it announced in 1943 that its post-war priority would be to

take in all urban women, especially those who are not yet politically conscious, so that they may have an opportunity of having their interest aroused in the well being

¹¹⁰ *The National Union of Townswomen's Guilds, Handbook 1938* (1938), p. 17.

¹¹¹ In 1945 it was reported that most Guilds had set up special study groups. *National Union of Townswomen's Guilds Annual Report, 1945* (1945), p. 42.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 43.

of the community, local, national and international, and of developing their powers of discrimination in preparation for joining political parties of their own choosing.¹¹³

Social service was another important aspect of the Guild's citizenship work. In 1935, Margery Corbett Ashby told delegates attending the National Union's 1935 Annual General Meeting, that

It is no longer a burning sense of injustice that unites us but a growing realisation of our civic responsibilities, a growing conviction that the greatness of our country has its roots in our homes, that our cities can only grow and flourish, if fed by the contribution of citizens.¹¹⁴

The civic activities undertaken by Guild members during the 1930s were similar to those of other non-feminist women's societies. In 1932 it was reported that sewing parties had donated clothes to the local poor and that soup kitchens had been set up for the unemployed.¹¹⁵ Other projects included organising parties and outings for children, old people and the blind, as well as hospital visiting and fund raising

¹¹³ *The Townswoman* Vol. 11, No. 7, July 1943, p. 148.

¹¹⁴ *The Townswoman* Vol. 3, No. 1, April 1935, p. 3.

¹¹⁵ *National Union of Townswomen's Guilds Annual Report, 1932 (1932)*, p. 41.

for charitable causes.¹¹⁶ Guilds also got involved in local issues, including anti-litter protests, calls for efficient bus services and improved street lighting.¹¹⁷

Following on from these community campaigns, the National Union hoped that members would consider putting themselves forward as candidates in local government elections. In 1933, it was claimed that many Guild members had been elected to urban district councils or co-opted onto local committees, although no exact figures were given. Membership of a local Townswomen's Guild was thought to give women the confidence to stand for election. Attending Guild meetings meant that women had become familiar with the workings of local government and had 'gained the poise and assurance needed to take up public work'.¹¹⁸

The National Union of Townswomen's Guilds has often been regarded as a conservative organisation which did not live up to its feminist origins.¹¹⁹ There is no doubt that the Union avoided many controversial issues during the 1930s and 1940s and clearly distanced itself from the feminist movement. At the local level, traditional activities such as handicrafts, cooking and dressmaking, proved to be most popular amongst Guild

¹¹⁶ *National Union of Townswomen's Guilds Annual Report, 1934 (1934)*, p. 16.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *National Union of Townswomen's Guilds Annual Report, 1945 (1945)*, p. 9.

¹¹⁹ See for example Martin Pugh, 'Domesticity and the Decline of Feminism, 1930-1950', in Harold Smith (ed), *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* (1990), pp. 147-8.

members. Nevertheless the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds, through its education programmes, study groups and local civic work, gave women important opportunities to learn about their rights and duties as citizens. From the perspective of the national organisation, campaigns for women's welfare rights not only enhanced the lives of individuals but also raised awareness about the rights and duties of women's citizenship. It would be wrong to overlook the campaigning activities of the Townswomen's Guilds during this period.

It is clear that non-feminist women's organisations were very aware of the importance of citizenship for women. Although women had been involved in philanthropic and political activities long before the extension of the franchise, the fact that the 1918 Representation of the People Act gave formal citizenship rights to women was of enormous significance. Women's societies, both feminist and non-feminist, began to educate and inform their members about the rights and duties of democratic citizens.

Non-feminist women's groups focused on the contribution that women, as wives and mothers, could make to society. Representing hundreds of thousands of women who accepted their domestic role, these groups acknowledged that a woman's first duty was to her home and family. However, as a member of the community, every woman also had a responsibility to take an active interest in local and national affairs. Through their

membership of non-feminist women's organisations, women were encouraged to use their vote wisely and to familiarise themselves with the workings of democracy.

There is no doubt that active citizenship for women was a principal concern for non-feminist women's groups throughout the 1930s and 1940s. In keeping with the ideas put forward by the AEC and Constance Braithwaite, organisations such as the Mothers' Union and the Women's Institute Movement encouraged women to get involved in local government and community affairs. At the same time members were kept well informed about public questions, particularly when they related to the welfare of women and children. These societies made it clear to members that the personal was indeed political and that decisions taken by the authorities had a direct effect on the lives of all citizens, including housewives and mothers.

It can be argued that non-feminist women's groups sought to empower women through active citizenship during this period. Although societies such as the Catholic Women's League and the YWCA did not follow a feminist agenda, they did recognise that women had an important contribution to make to society as citizens. In return women were entitled to the rights of democratic citizenship. Having discussed the concept of citizenship for women, the following chapters will now explore how these organisations, previously excluded from the history of the women's movement, set

about campaigning for their members' citizenship rights.

CHAPTER THREE

MORAL DILEMMAS: DIVORCE, BIRTH CONTROL AND ABORTION

Significant changes in public attitudes towards divorce, birth control and abortion occurred during the inter-war period. Legislation was introduced which extended the grounds for divorce and for the first time information on birth control was made available to mothers at local authority clinics, albeit on strict medical grounds. At the same time, concern about the rise in the maternal mortality rate highlighted the prevalence, as well as the dangers, of illegal abortion. During the 1930s, a number of women's groups campaigned for the introduction of safe and legal abortion, in an effort to reduce the number of deaths attributed to criminal abortion.

This chapter will explore the reaction of non-feminist women's groups to divorce, birth control and abortion. Societies wishing to unite women from different social and religious backgrounds were reluctant to address these sectarian, and therefore potentially divisive issues. As a result the YWCA, the Women's Institute Movement, and the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds refused to discuss divorce, birth control and abortion in order to protect the unanimity of the membership.

In sharp contrast, the Mothers' Union and the Catholic Women's League devoted considerable time and energy to these moral and ethical questions. Both groups were fervently opposed to any liberalisation of

the law in relation to either divorce, birth control or abortion. At the same time, the National Council of Women, along with a number of feminist societies, called for reforms which would allow women greater access to these civil rights. Although the views expressed by the Mothers' Union and the Catholic Women's League were very different from those held by the NCW, all three organisations claimed to represent the interests of women and placed women's welfare at the top of their agendas.

DIVORCE

The reaction of the Mothers' Union and the Catholic Women's League to the liberalisation of divorce legislation during the inter-war years was predictable. Both the Catholic Church and the Church of England endorsed the belief that marriage was a sacred indissoluble sacrament which should not be ended by divorce.¹ As church societies representing the views of devout women, it was hardly surprising that the Mothers' Union and the Catholic Women's League opposed any proposal to introduce new grounds for divorce.

By the early 1920s divorce in England was only possible under the restrictive terms of the 1857

¹ For a detailed account of the history of divorce in England and the attitudes of the Anglican and Catholic Churches to divorce see Roderick Phillips, *Putting Asunder: A History of divorce in Western Society* (Cambridge, 1988) and Lawrence Stone, *The Road to Divorce, England 1530-1987* (Oxford, 1990).

Divorce Act. This Act allowed men to divorce their wives for adultery while women had to prove additional grounds of cruelty and desertion.² The Report of the Royal Commission on Divorce (1912), advised that reforms should be introduced to remove the discrimination against women and extend the grounds for divorce to include desertion, cruelty and insanity.³ These recommendations were not acted upon, however, because as Roderick Phillips has suggested they were 'out of line with the prevailing conservative attitudes'.⁴

Following the First World War, the number of marriages ending in divorce increased significantly. Between 1910 and 1913 an average of 701 divorces took place each year. However, partly due to wartime disruption, separation and infidelity, the yearly average rose to 1,407 divorces in 1918.⁵ The same year the franchise was extended to women over thirty and members of the Mothers' Union and the Catholic Women's

² Roderick Phillips, *Putting Asunder*, p. 525.

³ Giving evidence to the Royal Commission, the Mothers' Union argued that any extension in the grounds for divorce would undermine the stability of family life. In contrast, the Women's Co-operative Guild, representing 27,000 working-class wives, argued that cruelty, insanity and mutual consent should be accepted as grounds for divorce, demonstrating that not all women were satisfied with the existing divorce law. Roderick Phillips, *Putting Asunder*, p. 514. See also Olive Banks, *Faces of Feminism* (Oxford, 1981), p. 196.

⁴ Roderick Phillips, *Putting Asunder*, p. 525.

⁵ In 1920, 2,985 marriages ended in divorce increasing to 3,956 the following year. *Ibid.*, p. 517.

League were urged to use their influence as electors to prevent any change in the divorce law.

In 1918 the Archbishop of York, addressing the national conference of the Mothers' Union, told delegates that

your adhesion to the fundamental principle of the Mothers' Union in regard to indissoluble marriage is something which concerns you closely as citizens, now that citizenship of this country is very specially committed to your care. A great responsibility has been laid upon you in the life of the Church and the Nation.⁶

Similarly, the Bishop of Northampton advised members of the Catholic Women's League, in June 1921, that the main reason for conferring citizenship upon women was that women might speak for women... many of the ablest speakers of the day are pledged to easier divorce. Were they [women] going to give such leaders their votes to impose that abomination of divorce on a Christian nation? The answer would be emphatically NO!⁷

When two private members bills were introduced before the House of Lords in 1920 and 1921⁸, advocating

⁶ Typed document outlining the history of the Mothers' Union's policy on divorce. (1930), (Archbishop Temple Papers, Vol. 35, No. 55), Lambeth Palace Library.

⁷ *The Tablet* 19 June 1921, p. 830.

desertion as a ground for divorce, both the Mothers' Union and the Catholic Women's League protested. The Mothers' Union urged Diocesan Presidents and individual members to write to local MPs outlining their objections to divorce.⁹ In 1921, the Catholic Women's League drew up a petition against Lord Gorell's private members bill and a deputation led by the President of the League, Lady Sykes, visited Westminster and urged MPs to reject any new grounds for divorce.¹⁰

Neither bill was supported by the Conservative government and both failed to become law. It is important to note, however, that Lord Gorell's bill was passed in the House of Lords by a narrow majority, despite opposition from members of the Anglican hierarchy. Even more significant is the fact that the Bishop of Durham supported desertion as a ground for divorce, arguing that the marriage laws should adapt to 'modern conditions'.¹¹ The Bishop's views reflected the concern of a small but influential group of churchmen

⁸ The 1920 Bill was sponsored by Lord Buckmaster while his colleague Lord Gorell, introduced the 1921 bill. The two law lords were concerned about the increasing number of marriage breakdowns and the inability of existing legislation to deal with grounds other than adultery. Lawrence Stone, *Road to Divorce*, pp. 393-95.

⁹ Typed document on the 'Machinery for mobilisation against Bills for increasing facilities for divorce', (1930), (Archbishop Lang Papers, Vol. 107, No. 212), Lambeth Palace Library.

¹⁰ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 253, November 1932, p. 12.

¹¹ Quoted in Lawrence Stone, *Road to Divorce*, p. 395.

who believed that the existing divorce law was in need of amendment.¹²

Following pressure from women's groups, including the NUSEC and the Women's Co-operative Guild, limited reform was introduced in 1923 when women were given the right to sue for divorce on the single ground of adultery. The extension of the franchise to women and the passing of the 1919 Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act had highlighted the fact that the continued discrimination against women under the divorce law was 'an anachronism and an indefensible anomaly'.¹³ Although the Act did not include any new grounds, the number of divorce petitions filed by women immediately increased. As a result, between fifty and sixty per cent of divorce proceedings initiated each year, until the outbreak of the Second World War, were requested by women.¹⁴

Surprisingly, the Mothers' Union did not publicly oppose the 1923 Matrimonial Causes Act. This decision was taken on the specific instructions of the Archbishop of Canterbury who informed the Union that the Act did not conflict with Church teaching as no new grounds for divorce were proposed.¹⁵ Although the

¹² Dean Inge of St. Paul's and the Bishop of Salisbury also expressed the view that desertion should be included as a ground for divorce. *Ibid.*

¹³ These were the words of Major Entwistle who sponsored the bill, quoted in Roderick Phillips, *Putting Asunder*, p. 525.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 526.

¹⁵ Document outlining the history of the Mothers' Union's policy on divorce. (1930), (Archbishop Temple

measure made the legal position of women more equitable, the fact that the Archbishop had to intervene to prevent the Mothers' Union from protesting is significant. This episode reflected the uncompromising nature of the Union's attitude towards divorce, which at times proved to be more conservative than the teaching of the wider Church.

In 1920 the Mothers' Union had published its *Fundamental Principles*, outlining the Union's views on marriage and the family. With the rise in the number of divorces and the increasing likelihood of divorce law reform, the Union wanted to make its position on divorce clear. The document reaffirmed the Union's objective 'to uphold the sanctity of marriage' which was the 'lifelong and indissoluble union of one man with one woman to the exclusion of all others on either side'.¹⁶ In 1923, a footnote was added to the Union's membership card explaining that 'in the words "to uphold the Sanctity of Marriage" the Mothers' Union affirms the Christian principle of the permanence of the relationship between husband and wife'.¹⁷

Each member of the Union was expected to uphold the first object 'by loving, helping and being faithful to her husband' as well as supporting 'every effort

Papers, Vol. 35, No. 55). See also A.R.N. Winnett, *Divorce and Remarriage in Anglicanism* (1958).

¹⁶ Typed document reiterating the fundamental principles of the Mothers' Union, 9 October 1930. (Archbishop Temple Papers, Vol 35, No. 47).

¹⁷ Olive Parker, *For the Family's Sake* p. 51.

made to prevent any further weakening of our marriage laws'.¹⁸ As a result, women who were unfaithful to their husbands or had gone through a divorce were not eligible for membership of the Mothers' Union. At the same time, all those who did join were expected to protest against every attempt to extend the grounds for divorce. The fact that Central Council wished to compel Union members to reject any reform of the civil law, created some controversy within the Union throughout the 1930s.

In December 1931 Lady Maxse, President of the Army Division of the Mothers' Union, argued that the Union could not expect members to 'pledge themselves in advance to oppose every bill or every clause in a bill which extends the grounds for divorce'.¹⁹ Lady Maxse agreed that as an organisation for Anglican women, the Mothers' Union was right to condemn divorce, but that each individual member had the right to make up her own mind about the law as it applied to those outside the Christian Church. This view was supported by Dame Beatrix Lyall, who argued that although all members of the Union stood firmly for the sanctity of marriage, in

¹⁸ 'Leaflet on the Beliefs of the Mothers' Union', (1931), (Archbishop Lang Papers, Vol. 107, No. 216).

¹⁹ 'A Statement by the Army Division on Divorce', November 1931, (Archbishop Temple Papers, Vol 35, No. 82).

private life they should have the freedom to deal with people who did not accept the laws of the Church.²⁰

In response to these objections Mrs. Boustead, the Central President, defended the Council's action explaining that

if we are baptised communicant members of the Church and we pledge to believe and accept her laws and remember our marriage vows...are we not bound to stand up and try to prevent further weakening of the married state.²¹

However, the fact that the Union intended to impose its own views on the rest of society did go beyond the official policy of the Anglican Church.

In 1930, the Church of England had confirmed its belief in the indissolubility of marriage for all 'Christian people to maintain and bear witness' but declined to pass judgment on those who were not members of the Church.²² This view was reiterated by the Archbishop of Canterbury in March 1932, when he advised Mrs. Boustead that the Mothers' Union should 'avoid any controversial statements as to the attitude which its workers and members may feel obliged to take on this difficult question..relating to those outside its

²⁰ Minutes of the Mothers' Union Central Council, December 1931, (Central Council Minutes, Vol. IX, 1931), p. 157.

²¹ Central President's speech to the Annual Conference of the Mothers' Union, Exeter, 1931 (Archbishop Lang Papers, Vol. 107, No. 209).

²² *Encyclical Letter from the bishops, resolutions and reports of the Lambeth Conference 1930* (1930), p. 42. Lambeth Palace Library.

membership'.²³ With this warning the matter appeared to be resolved only to re-emerge four years later with the publication of A.P. Herbert's divorce reform bill.

In the meantime, the Mothers' Union focused its attention on the importance of the marriage relationship and traditional family life. Throughout the 1930s, the Union published numerous pamphlets offering advice to members on questions relating to marriage and family life, such as *Happy Home Life* (1932), *To those about to be Married* (1935) and *Birth-Control: A Different Approach* (1935). The Union's journals also included articles on marital questions. The September 1936 edition of *The Mothers' Union Journal* stressed that mutual compatibility, not mere physical attraction, formed the basis of a good relationship.²⁴ Engaged couples were advised about the importance of sex in marriage which

like any other of God's good gifts..needs to be carefully guarded. Modesty and self-control are guardian virtues of the marriage relationship together with mutual consideration and understanding.²⁵

Through its branch meetings and various publications, the Mothers' Union promoted equal

²³ Letter from the Archbishop of Canterbury to Mrs. Boustead, Central President of the Mothers' Union, 16 March 1932, (Archbishop Lang Papers, Vol. 133, No. 25).

²⁴ *The Mothers' Union Journal*, No. 166, September 1936, p. 19.

²⁵ Ibid.

partnership and mutual respect between couples which, it was hoped, would reduce the likelihood of marriage break-down. However, the Union also accepted that some marriages would end in failure. In these cases it was made clear that judicial separation or nullity, and not divorce, was the Christian solution. In contrast to divorce, separation did not break the bond of marriage and 'sad through its necessity may be, does still leave an "open door"'.²⁶

During the 1930s, the Catholic Women's League also emphasised the importance of Christian marriage. Members of the League and the Union of Catholic Mothers were urged to 'instil the ideals of marriage into the minds of their children'.²⁷ Upholding the teaching of the Catholic Church, the League believed that women were best suited for marriage and family life where 'mothers will above all devote their work to the home and the things connected with it'.²⁸ In 1936 the League's President, Dr. Genevieve Rewcastle, reiterated this belief when she suggested that 'the successful home is where the father is looked up to as the head and breadwinner and the woman is the homemaker'.²⁹

²⁶ *The Mothers' Union Journal* September 1929, No. 138, p. 23.

²⁷ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 243, January 1932, p. 5.

²⁸ Pope Pius XI, *The Encyclical Quadragesimo Anno-The Social Order: Its Reconstruction and Perfection* (1931), p. 32.

²⁹ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine*, February 1936, No. 292, p. 24.

Although the divorce rate increased following the 1923 legislation, the number of married couples who sought a divorce remained relatively small. For example, in 1936 only six per cent of all marriages ended in divorce. Nonetheless, there was growing concern about the inadequacies of the 1923 legislation which only granted a divorce on the grounds of proven adultery. As a result, collusion between husbands and wives wishing to part was a distinct possibility. This usually occurred when one partner, invariably the husband, agreed to be caught in the act of adultery, so that his wife could sue for divorce.³⁰

Limited grounds for divorce also encouraged the practice of co-habitation, as separated men and women who did not qualify for a civil divorce began new relationships. In 1934, concern about the moral welfare of the community, as well as the plight of deserted wives left to support their children, prompted the National Council of Women to address the sensitive issue of divorce. At its Annual Conference that year the Council passed a resolution calling on the government to re-consider the existing legislation which the Council argued 'encourages immorality and leads to much individual hardship'.³¹

The Council went on to urge that the grounds for divorce should be extended to include desertion,

³⁰ Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950* (Sussex, 1984), p. 130. See also A.P. Herbert, *Holy Deadlock* (1934).

³¹ *NCW Handbook 1934-1935* (1935) p. 78.

cruelty, drunkenness and incurable insanity, as recommended by the 1912 Royal Commission on Divorce.³² Although the Women's Co-operative Guild had advocated these reforms for many years, feminist societies such as the NUSEC had been reluctant to demand extended grounds for divorce. This was because its membership was divided on whether or not divorce should be made more easily available.³³ Nevertheless, the majority of feminist societies, as well as the National Council of Women and the Women's Co-operative Guild, supported A.P. Herbert's divorce reform bill when it came before Parliament in 1936.

The Bill, drawn up by the back-bench MP Alan Herbert, proposed to extend the grounds for divorce to include desertion after three years, cruelty, insanity and habitual drunkenness.³⁴ It also recommended that divorce proceedings should be initiated after two years of judicial separation, in an effort to prevent co-habitation. Herbert hoped that extended grounds for divorce would do away with the sense of scandal and immorality surrounding divorce cases which was common

³² Ibid. It should be noted that the Mothers' Union disassociated itself from this resolution. All of the other 135 member societies, including the YWCA, the NCEC and the Women's Freedom League supported the resolution whilst the Catholic Women's League had allowed its membership to lapse in 1930.

³³ See Harold Smith, 'British Feminism in the 1920s', p. 54.

³⁴ Under the terms of the Bill women were also able to file for divorce on the grounds of rape, sodomy and bestiality. Roderick Phillips, *Putting Asunder* p. 526.

during this period. Indeed, the abdication of Edward VII at the end of 1936, to marry a twice divorced woman, Wallis Simpson, highlighted the fact that divorce was still regarded by many as a rather disreputable business.³⁵

Although Herbert's Bill introduced new grounds for divorce, it was not his intention to allow 'quick and easy' divorces. The first clause of the Bill ensured that a divorce could not be granted within the first three years of marriage.³⁶ Aware of the opposition to divorce amongst members of the Anglican clergy, Herbert included a relief clause in his bill ensuring that no clergyman could be compelled to marry a divorced person whose former partner was still living.³⁷ Even though the Church of England still stood firmly against divorce, Archbishop Lang welcomed the inclusion of this proviso which he hoped would be 'retained and strengthened, otherwise it would be necessary to organise strenuous opposition to the Bill as a whole'.³⁸

When the Bill came before the House of Lords with the relief clause intact, Archbishop Lang abstained on the vote because 'as a statesman he believed that the Bill provided a "timely and valuable remedy" for many abuses, yet as a clergyman he could not support any

³⁵ Ibid., p. 529.

³⁶ A.P. Herbert, *The Ayes Have It* (1937) p. 212.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 223.

³⁸ Letter to Nina Woods, Central President of the Mothers' Union, from the Archbishop of Canterbury, 1 December 1936. (Archbishop Lang Papers, Vol. 152, No. 293).

bill in favour of divorce'.³⁹ Explaining his action to Nina Woods, Central President of the Mothers' Union, Archbishop Lang assured her that the Church of England remained committed to the principle of indissoluble marriage. He wrote that the Union, as an independent society within the Church, was entitled to oppose the 1936 bill without appearing in any way disloyal to the Church, but suggested there should be 'freedom of opinion as to the various extra grounds for divorce.. [they] must be considered one by one on their merits'.⁴⁰

The idea that members were free to make up their own minds about divorce legislation remained a contentious issue within the Mothers' Union. When Central Council came to debate the 1936 reform Bill, it soon emerged that some members were not convinced that the Bill should be rejected out of hand. The growing incidence of collusion and scandal in divorce cases had not gone unnoticed while the abdication crisis had demonstrated that even the Royal Family, much revered by the Mothers' Union, could not avoid the moral dilemma of divorce and remarriage.⁴¹

At the December 1936 meeting of Central Council, Dame Beatrix Lyall outlined the beneficial aspects of

³⁹ Lawrence Stone, *Road to Divorce* p. 398.

⁴⁰ Letter to Nina Woods, Central President of the Mothers' Union from the Archbishop of Canterbury, 1 December 1936. (Archbishop Lang Papers, Vol. 152, No. 293).

⁴¹ Following the abdication of Edward VII, the Mothers' Union had sent a message of sympathy to Buckingham Palace and invited Queen Elizabeth, wife of King George VI, to become the patron of the Mothers' Union.

the Bill, which she believed would improve the existing divorce laws. The guarantee that divorce proceedings could not be initiated within the first three years of marriage would, she argued, safeguard against quick divorces. Dame Lyall also referred to the clause in the Bill which ruled that any application for divorce found to be based on false evidence would be rejected. She felt that this clause would do much to prevent the incidence of collusion and perjury in divorce cases.⁴²

During the debate, Dame Lyall made it clear that as a member of the Mothers' Union she did not believe that divorce was a viable option either for herself or her fellow members. However, she felt that reform of the divorce law would 'be an attempt to make the law a little more decent and wholesome for the people outside [the Mothers' Union] who do not acknowledge the Law of Christ'.⁴³ This view was supported by the Hon. Mrs. Carfield who argued that Herbert's Bill had been drawn up 'with the earnest wish to raise the standards of morality in this country'.⁴⁴

⁴² Minutes of the Mothers' Union Central Council, December 1936 (Central Council Minutes, Vol. X, 1936), p. 400.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 399.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 402. The leadership of the Durham Diocesan branch went as far as to argue that 'in certain very exceptional cases divorce and remarriage may be morally as well as legally permissible'. 'Statement with regard to the First Object of the Mothers' Union and the Church's teaching on Marriage and Divorce', 28 May 1937, (Archbishop Temple Papers, Vol. 35, No. 89).

In spite of these appeals by high ranking members, the Central President of the Mothers' Union, Nina Woods, insisted that the Union could not support a bill which proposed to extend the grounds for divorce. If this happened, the divorce rate would increase and the family life of the nation, which the Mothers' Union had always fought to protect, would be put in jeopardy. Mrs. Woods also rejected the new grounds proposed in Herbert's Bill. She argued that the inclusion of desertion would encourage 'unworthy' husbands and wives to walk away from difficult marriages, whilst divorce on the grounds of insanity and drunkenness conflicted with the Christian marriage vow to remain faithful 'in sickness and in health'.⁴⁵

When put to the vote, the majority of Central Council members agreed that the Mothers' Union should campaign against the 1936 divorce reform Bill. A statement was issued explaining that

while there are some clauses in the Marriage Bill that the Mothers' Union would not oppose, the Central Council feel compelled to record the opposition of the Mothers' Union to the Bill as a whole because of the clauses..which would increase the grounds for divorce.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ *The Mothers' Union Workers Paper* No. 277, January 1937, p. 6.

⁴⁶ Minutes of the Mothers' Union Central Council, December 1936 (Central Council Minutes, Vol. X, 1936), p. 405.

Following this decision, the Mothers' Union launched a major campaign to protest against Herbert's reform Bill. Letters were written to MPs and the national newspapers by the Central Council and local branches, outlining the Union's objections to divorce. Individual members were also encouraged to write to their MP and advised to 'get your husband to sign the letter as well which will add greatly to its value'.⁴⁷

It is clear that the letter campaign made some impact in Parliament. In February 1937, Alan Herbert remarked that 'member after member displays to me with glee the latest fiery postcard or shocked resolution from the local [Mothers' Union] branch'.⁴⁸ Following a meeting at Westminster with members of the Mothers' Union to discuss the bill, Herbert expressed his dismay that an organisation representing married women did not support extended grounds for divorce. He asked

will any member of the Mothers' Union tell me what "sanctity of married life" remains and what precious thing we are destroying by permitting the deserted, the ill-treated, or the sane spouse to cast off a cruel mockery and marry again.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Open letter advising all members of the Mothers' Union to protest against the 1936 divorce bill. (December 1936), (Archbishop Lang Papers, Vol. 152, No. 317).

⁴⁸ *The Sunday Pictorial* 14 February 1937.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

In response to these criticisms the Central Secretary of the Mother' Union, Eva Remson Ward, defended the Union's desire to protect family life and the principle of indissoluble marriage. She warned that if the 1936 divorce bill was passed it would 'bring disaster on the community as a whole'.⁵⁰ Remson Ward also argued that women opposed the bill because they would be the first to suffer if divorce became more widespread

What about the women in the forties, no longer young or particularly attractive ? A husband of that age, with looks and figure well preserved might easily fall for someone younger and more entertaining.⁵¹

This statement underlined the Union's belief that deserted and divorced wives would be left without an income or home of their own. In a leaflet published by the Union on marriage and divorce, it had been suggested that more liberal divorce legislation would set aside 'the security not only of the home and family life, but of the married women of our nation'.⁵² It is important to note, however, that during the period 1931-35, fifty-five per cent of divorce petitions were filed by women.⁵³ The fact that more women than men

⁵⁰ *The Sunday Pictorial* 21 February 1937.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² E. Noel Barclay, *Marriage and Divorce* (1936), p. 1, (Pamphlet Collection), Mary Sumner House.

⁵³ Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959* p. 217.

wished to divorce was never alluded to by the Mothers' Union during this period, even though it weakened the argument that women were opposed to any extension of the grounds for divorce.

In spite of a well organised protest campaign the Mothers' Union failed to prevent the enactment of Herbert's Bill which became law at end of 1937. The National Council of Women welcomed the legislation which removed the need for collusion and co-habitation while allowing deserted or ill-treated wives the freedom to remarry. It should also be noted that although the Catholic Women's League opposed divorce, there is no evidence it campaigned against Alan Herbert's Bill. Instead, the League concentrated on social welfare issues affecting its own members, who as devout Catholics were unlikely to seek recourse in the divorce courts.

The effects of the 1937 Divorce Act were immediate with the number of petitions for divorce almost doubling by the end of 1938.⁵⁴ The real increase came, however, in the aftermath of the Second World War when it was reported in 1947 that 48,501 divorce petitions had been lodged in that year alone.⁵⁵ In the wake of

⁵⁴ The 5,903 divorce petitions filed in 1937 had increased to 10,233 in 1938. Roderick Phillips, *Putting Asunder* p. 529.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 558. It should be noted that the majority of these divorce petitions were filed by men on the grounds of adultery. This fact reflected the increase in female infidelity during wartime. See Lawrence Stone, *Road to Divorce* p. 400.

the Divorce Act and the rise in the number of divorces, the Mothers' Union continued to highlight the danger to traditional family life caused by divorce.

At the end of the war, the Union expressed its anxiety about the dramatic increase in the divorce rate by calling on the government to 'consider revising the law governing divorce, so as to include some provision for attempted reconciliation'.⁵⁶ This resolution was followed by a statement to the Royal Commission on Marriage and Divorce (1951), calling for 'a new and positive approach to matrimonial legislation which will give just consideration to the safeguarding of the institution of marriage and the integrity of the home'.⁵⁷ It was clear, therefore, that the Mothers' Union had lost none of its resolve to 'maintain and exemplify the full and uncompromised position of marriage' in a society slowly adapting to the idea of divorce and remarriage.⁵⁸

There is no doubt that the attitude of the Mothers' Union to divorce law reform during the 1930s and 1940s was both conservative and unyielding. As a Church of England society, the Union saw divorce as an

⁵⁶ Minutes of the Mothers' Union Central Council, December 1945, (Central Council Minutes, Vol. XII, 1945).

⁵⁷ *Memorandum submitted by the Mothers' Union to the Royal Commission on Marriage and Divorce, 1951-55* (1955), p. 14. (Pamphlet Collection), Mary Sumner House.

⁵⁸ Archbishop Fisher's address to the Mothers' Union, 10 June 1952, (Archbishop Fisher Papers, Vol. 105, No. 315).

attack on the Christian principle of indissoluble marriage. For this reason, the Mothers' Union was unwilling to accept any legislative reform which would increase the number of marriages ending in divorce. At the same time, the Mothers' Union regarded divorce as a threat to traditional family life which, if destroyed, would not only cause great hardship to women and children but undermine the stability of society as a whole.

The Catholic Women's League also objected to divorce on religious grounds but it too wished to promote the status of married women. The idea that the law should be changed to help women in bad marriages was unacceptable to the Mothers' Union and the Catholic Women's League. Both groups believed that women were happiest within marriage and that extended grounds for divorce would deprive women of their right to marriage and motherhood.

Conversely, the National Council of Women supported reform of the divorce law in order to protect the moral and physical welfare of women and children. In spite of the religious dilemmas involved, the Council welcomed legislation which would prevent the immoral acts of collusion and co-habitation. At the same time the Council believed that deserted and abused wives had the right to divorce their husbands and seek happiness in a second marriage.

Despite the fact that the Mothers' Union and the Catholic Women's League took a hard-line against

divorce and the NCW accepted women did have the right to end their marriages, each group was anxious to safeguard the security and status of married women. To do so was important at a time when the marriage rate amongst women was increasing, especially during the latter half of the 1930s.⁵⁹ It is significant, therefore, that the debate surrounding divorce reform revealed not only the conservative attitudes of the Mothers' Union and the Catholic Women's League, but the genuine desire of all three groups to protect the interests of married women in society.

BIRTH CONTROL

Birth control, similarly to divorce was a controversial and potentially divisive issue for women's societies. It was not until the early 1920s, when the provision of birth control information became more widely available and the use of contraceptives more respectable, that feminist and non-feminist women's organisations finally tackled this important issue.⁶⁰ Even then, the YWCA,

⁵⁹ During the years 1926-30, 54.8 per cent of women (per thousand population) married. This figure increased to 57.3 per cent between 1932-35 and 73.3 per cent during the period 1936-40. Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959* p. 223.

⁶⁰ Richard Soloway writes that the suffrage societies did not address the divisive issue of birth control because to do so would weaken the suffrage campaign. Richard Soloway, *Birth-Control and The Population Question in England 1877-1930*, (University of North Carolina, 1982), p. 134. Angus McLaren has also suggested that before the First World War many feminists believed that contraception would benefit men more than women, allowing them to engage in sexual

the National Federation of Women's Institutes and the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds, mindful of the religious and moral sensibilities of their members, refused to discuss the question of family limitation.⁶¹

Although women's groups avoided this contentious issue, many couples were already practising some form of birth control well before the outbreak of the First World War. Traditional methods included withdrawal (*coitus interruptus*), the sheath and the 'safe-period'.⁶² Since the beginning of the century, the impact of family limitation and later marriages meant that the average Victorian family of seven or eight children had fallen to just one or two children by the early 1930s.⁶³ In spite of the general decline in family size many women, in particular working-class

relationships outside marriage. See Angus McLaren, *Birth Control in Nineteenth Century England* (1978).

⁶¹ It should be noted that although Lady Denman was chairman of the National Birth Control Association (1930), the National Federation of Women's Institutes made it clear that it could not discuss the principle of birth control because it was a 'sectarian matter'. *Home and Country* Vol. 18, No. 3, April 1936, p. 199.

⁶² Jane Lewis writes that withdrawal was the most popular method of contraception used by working-class couples because it cost nothing while sheaths cost between two pence and three pence a dozen. Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950* p. 18. The use of diaphragms, for example the Dutch cap, grew increasingly popular during the 1920s as they became ~~made~~ more widely available at birth control clinics.

⁶³ There were, however, were significant regional and local variations to family size throughout this period. See Angus McLaren, *Birth Control*, pp. 219-20. See also Diana Gittins, *Fair Sex: Family Size and Structure* (1982).

women, continued to give birth to large numbers of children, which often had a detrimental effect on their health.⁶⁴

In 1915 the Women's Co-operative Guild published *Maternity: Letters from Working Women* which highlighted the terrible physical and emotional effects frequent childbirth had on mothers. When Marie Stopes published *Married Love* in 1918 she received thousands of letters from men and women enquiring about all kinds of sexual problems, including the use of birth control.⁶⁵ Many of these letters detailed the suffering of women with large families who did not want to have any more children. For example, one thirty-seven year old woman, who wrote to Stopes in 1922, already had fourteen children and was anxious to avoid another pregnancy because of a weak heart and prolapsed womb. However, because her husband was 'not a careful man in that respect' she needed some urgent advice about contraception.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Whilst middle-class family size declined rapidly after the Boer War, working-class families remained comparatively large although once again there were important regional variations. This trend gave rise to concerns that the population would be dominated by 'inferior' working-class stock. See Jane Lewis, 'The ideology and Politics of Birth Control in Inter-War England', *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, 2, (1979), pp. 33-40.

⁶⁵ See Ruth Hall, *Dear Dr. Stopes: Sex in the 1920s* (1978). For an account of the life and work of Marie Stopes see Ruth Hall, *Marie Stopes: A Biography* (1978).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Providing women with information on family planning was at the centre of the birth control debate during the 1920s and 1930s. In 1921, Marie Stopes opened her first birth control clinic in London where married women could go for advice about contraception and be fitted with a 'Pro-Race' cervical cap.⁶⁷ Although Stopes was a member of the Eugenics Society⁶⁸, her work in the clinics focused primarily on the health and welfare of mothers and less on the economic and eugenic advantages of birth control.⁶⁹ She argued that parents who planned and spaced their children would not only produce healthier babies but give mothers time to recover from childbirth.

The impact of Marie Stopes's work in birth control and her emphasis on the health of mothers was far-reaching. During the 1920s a number of societies and clinics were established which advocated the use of

⁶⁷ The same year Stopes set up the Society for Constructive Birth Control and Racial Progress (CBC) Ibid., p. 199.

⁶⁸ The Eugenics Society (1908) was set up to enhance the 'quality of the race' and advocated birth control for the 'unfit', which usually referred to members of the working-class and the disabled. Membership of the society included the Dean of St. Paul's, W.R. Inge. See Ruth Hall, *Marie Stopes* p. 176.

⁶⁹ Deborah Cohen has written that in spite of Marie Stopes eugenic beliefs, birth control information was given to all married women who attended her clinics regardless of their wealth and social standing. See Deborah Cohen, 'Private Lives and Public Spaces: Marie Stopes, the Mothers' Clinics and the Practice of Contraception', *History Workshop* Issue 35, (Spring 1993), p. 101. See also Jane Lewis, 'The Ideology and Politics of Birth Control in Inter-War England', pp. 33-48.

birth-control for married women.⁷⁰ These voluntary organisations, however, could only provide a limited service and urged the government to sanction the provision of birth control information at local authority maternity and child welfare centres.⁷¹ In 1930 the National Birth Control Association was set up by the leading birth control societies to bring pressure to bear on the government to introduce this important service for married women.⁷²

The establishment of birth control clinics and the association between family limitation and women's health succeeded in drawing women's societies into the debate. By the end of the 1920s, the Women's Co-operative Guild, the Labour Party Women's Sections and the NUSEC had all voted in favour of the provision of birth control information at local authority clinics.⁷³

⁷⁰ In 1921 the Malthusian League (1877) opened a family planning clinic in London. This group advocated the use of birth control amongst the working-classes to reduce economic hardship and poverty. The Workers' Birth Control Group was set up in 1924 and campaigned for the right of working-class women to have access to information on family planning.

⁷¹ By the end of the 1920s fewer than twenty birth control clinics had been set up in England and Wales. For an account of the work of the early birth control clinics and the women who attended see Diana Gittins, *Fair Sex: Family Size and Structure*.

⁷² These groups included the CBC and the Workers' Birth Control Group.

⁷³ Although there was support among men and women within the Labour Party for the provision of free birth control information at public clinics, the 1924 Labour government refused to act, mainly because of pressure from the Catholic Church. See Pat Thane, 'The Women of

However, concern about the falling the birth rate⁷⁴ and the moral implications of family limitation meant that both the Labour and Conservative administrations refused to yield to the demands of women's societies and of birth control campaigners throughout the 1920s.

In 1929 the National Council of Women added its voice to those calling on the Ministry of Health and Local Authorities to provide birth control information at maternity and child welfare clinics. The Council recommended that contraceptive advice should be given 'in cases in which either a married mother asks for such information, or in which, in the opinion of the medical officer, the health of the parents renders it desirable'.⁷⁵ Like other women's societies, the National Council of Women was concerned about the welfare of married women whose health was put in danger by repeated pregnancies and childbirth.

Predictably, the Mothers' Union and the Catholic Women's League dissociated themselves from this resolution.⁷⁶ In 1919, the Central Council of the

the British Labour Party and Feminism, 1906-1945', p. 137.

⁷⁴ During the inter-war period the crude birth rate (per thousand of population) in England and Wales fell from 18.6 in 1924-5 to 15.8 in 1931 and reached a record low of 14.8 during the years 1932-40. See Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959* pp. 87-90.

⁷⁵ *National Council of Women Handbook 1929-1930*, (1930), p. 81.

⁷⁶ The St. Joan's Social and Political Alliance and the Girl's Friendly Society also refused to endorse this decision. *Ibid.*

Mothers' Union had agreed that 'all artificial checks to conception are against the laws of nature'.⁷⁷ The Union disapproved of the voluntary birth control clinics and was outraged when in 1927 Marie Stopes converted two horse-drawn caravans into mobile clinics.⁷⁸ When a Catholic woman in Bradford destroyed one of the caravans by setting it on fire⁷⁹, the Central Council of the Mothers' Union did not condemn the action and warned members 'to be ready for the caravan' when it came to their city.⁸⁰

The Union's objection to artificial methods of birth control was based on the teaching of the Church of England. At the Lambeth Conference of 1908 and again in 1920, the Church had refused to condone the use of contraceptives, even in cases of medical or economic necessity.⁸¹ However, as it became clear that many couples were using birth control as a way of

⁷⁷ Olive Parker, *For The Family's Sake* p. 91.

⁷⁸ The two caravans visited towns and cities in the industrial north east providing information on birth control to married women. Ruth Hall writes that the caravans were not very successful because women were embarrassed to be seen visiting the clinic and 'one of the nurses, as well as being incompetent, was nearly always drunk'. See Ruth Hall, *Marie Stopes* p. 265.

⁷⁹ The woman, Elizabeth Ellis justified her action in court by claiming that the caravan was 'a source of immorality and venereal disease'. She was sentenced to two months in prison. *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Minutes of the Mothers' Union Central Council, June 1929, (Central Council Minutes, Vol. VIII, 1929), p. 252. There is no evidence that the Union took further action against the birth control caravans.

⁸¹ Richard Soloway, *Birth Control and the Population Question in England 1877-1930*, p. 237.

limiting their families, the Church came under increasing pressure to modernise its views.⁸²

It is worth noting that on average, the number of children in the families of Anglican clergymen during this period was actually smaller than the national average. This indicated that many clergymen were themselves using some form of family limitation.⁸³ Even more significant were the letters to Marie Stopes from members of the clergy revealing the hardship caused by abstinence (in one case for over twenty-nine years) and the desire for more information about birth control methods.⁸⁴

At the 1930 Lambeth Conference, the Church of England conceded that in certain circumstances there may be 'a moral obligation to limit or avoid parenthood'.⁸⁵ In these instances abstinence was recommended, but the Church accepted that where 'a morally sound reason for avoiding complete abstinence

⁸² See Richard Soloway, *Birth Control and the Population Question in England*, pp. 233-254.

⁸³ In the early 1930s, Dean Inge of St. Paul's, a member of the Eugenics Society, revealed that of forty diocesan bishops, one had five children, two others four each, and the remainder had only twenty-eight children between them. Cited in Ruth Hall, *Marie Stopes* p. 156.

⁸⁴ Ruth Hall, *Dear Dr. Stopes* pp. 59-80.

⁸⁵ In cases where the health of the mother was at risk or where the mother was exhausted and unable to care for any additional children a moral obligation existed to limit family size. *Encyclical Letter from the bishops, resolutions and reports of the Lambeth Conference 1930*, p. 44.

existed other methods may be used'.⁸⁶ Couples were warned, however, that 'the use of any methods of conception-control from motives of selfishness, luxury, or mere convenience' was unacceptable and must always be condemned.⁸⁷

The Church's new ruling on birth control created some difficulties for the Mothers' Union. Having declared that artificial birth control was unchristian, the Union was forced to rethink its attitude towards family limitation. The Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple advised the Union's President, Mrs. Boustead, to 'face the fact' that the use of contraceptives in certain circumstances was, as he put it 'not wrong'.⁸⁸ As a result, the Central Council of the Mothers' Union acknowledged that family limitation was a private matter for married couples and did not make the rejection of birth control a condition of membership.⁸⁹

Nonetheless, the Mothers' Union advised that 'all young couples should be willing to have at least one or

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Letter to Mrs. Boustead, President of the Mothers' Union, from Archbishop Temple, 10 November 1930, (Archbishop Temple Papers, Vol. 35, No. 49).

⁸⁹ In December 1930 the Central Council confirmed that the Mothers' Union 'did not dictate to members on the subject of birth control'. Minutes of the Mothers' Union Central Council, December 1930, (Central Council Minutes, Vol. IX, 1930-32), p. 45. The fact that Anglican clergymen had smaller families than the wider population indicated that many members of the Mothers' Union were already using some form of family limitation.

two children to complete their marriage' and urged members to 'strive to restore a public opinion which will rate the possession of children higher than owning a motor-car or a comfortably furnished house'.⁹⁰ While the risk to the health of mothers who had large families was acknowledged, the Union claimed that

much of the nervous strain and consequent ill-health accompanying child-birth to-day was unknown to earlier generations who rejoiced whole-heartedly in the prospect of motherhood.⁹¹

Unlike the Mothers' Union, the Catholic Women's League was not prepared to compromise on the question of birth control. Its objection to the use of contraceptive devices was based firmly on Catholic social teaching. The papal encyclical *Casti Conubii* (1930), reaffirmed the Church opposition to the 'grave sin' of contraception. Catholic couples were advised that total abstinence and the 'safe-period' were the only acceptable and Christian methods of family limitation.⁹² It was not surprising, therefore, that the Catholic Church became one of the most outspoken

⁹⁰ Dorothy Ward, *The Christian Attitude towards Birth Control and Abortion* (1937), p. 11, 15. This statement would imply that the Union was anxious to encourage middle-class couples to have more children in view of the general decline in middle-class family size during this period.

⁹¹ Dorothy Ward, *The Christian Attitude towards Birth Control and Abortion*, p. 15.

⁹² Richard Soloway, *Birth Control and the Population Question*, p. 254.

critics of Marie Stopes and the birth control movement.⁹³ As a result, the Catholic Women's League mounted a national campaign to protest against the provision of birth control information at voluntary and local authority clinics.

Following continued pressure from women's groups, the Women's Sections of the Labour Party and from birth control societies during the late 1920s, the Labour Minister of Health, Arthur Greenwood had reluctantly agreed to tackle the issue of birth control information.⁹⁴ In 1930 he issued a memorandum allowing maternity and child welfare clinics to advise married women about birth control in 'cases where further pregnancy would be detrimental to health'.⁹⁵ This was a limited measure and local authorities were not compelled to offer the service, but it was an important step in the provision of free contraceptive advice to married women.⁹⁶

⁹³ For an account of the Catholic Church's opposition to Marie Stopes during the 1920s see Ruth Hall, *Marie Stopes* pp. 197-212.

⁹⁴ The fact that a number of local authorities threatened to defy the government's instructions not to provide birth control information added to the pressure on the Ministry of Health. Richard Soloway, *Birth Control and the Population Question*, pp. 307-11.

⁹⁵ E.F. Griffith, *Modern Marriage and Birth Control* (1935), p. 182.

⁹⁶ In May 1934 the Ministry of Health issued a second circular to local authorities advising that birth control information should also be made available to women suffering from illnesses such as TB, heart disease and diabetes.

The Catholic Women's League objected to the fact that welfare clinics could now provide women with birth control information. In 1935, the League issued a statement highlighting its opposition to any policy of the Government or its departments which allows information on artificial birth control to be given at centres and clinics maintained out of public funds.⁹⁷

By this time, local League members had already demonstrated their willingness to protest against the establishment of family planning clinics. In 1932, the Birmingham branch passed a resolution calling on its members to

protest against the public recognition of the immoral and pagan practice of birth control..it [the Catholic Women's League] will oppose strenuously the establishment of clinics for such teaching and also all persons who advocate their establishment.⁹⁸

League members regularly disrupted meetings held by birth control campaigners in an effort to highlight their opposition to birth control clinics. It was hoped that any hint of controversy would dissuade local authorities from providing information on contraception at maternity and child welfare centres. This tactic

⁹⁷ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine*, No. 290, December 1935, p. 11.

⁹⁸ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine*, No. 249, July 1932, p. 6.

proved successful in April 1932, when members of the League and the Union of Catholic Mothers attended a meeting of birth control campaigners in Bolton. The meeting had been called to urge the local authority to sanction the provision of information at welfare clinics. However, following the objections raised by the Catholic women, the proposal was rejected by the local council.⁹⁹

The Catholic Women's League also disrupted the 1936 Conference of the National Birth Control Association held in Birmingham. During a discussion on the work of voluntary birth control clinics a League member who was in the audience attempted to have a resolution accepted from the floor. The local press reported that Mrs. Morton, representing the League, moved that

this meeting holds that birth prevention is the wrong method of attacking social evils, and that everyone should rather support such remedies as better housing for the working-classes and some form of family allowances.¹⁰⁰

Although the resolution was ruled out of order, *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* described the 'attack

⁹⁹ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine*, No. 252, October 1932, p. 15.

¹⁰⁰ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine*, No. 295, May 1936, p. 8.

as successful' having surprised the NBCA by its 'energetic and well argued opposition'.¹⁰¹

Public opposition from groups such as the Catholic Women's League and increasing concern about the falling birth rate meant that by 1937 only 95 out of 423 maternal and child welfare clinics were providing information on contraception.¹⁰² In 1938 the National Council of Women urged the public health authorities to remove the medical restrictions on birth control advice and provide 'contraceptive information to all married women who desire it'.¹⁰³ One member of the Council, Mrs. Bryant (Sutton Coldfield, WCA), supported the resolution arguing that birth control 'is a question of woman's freedom as an individual and a responsible citizen'.¹⁰⁴

Although the National Council of Women advocated the right of married women to birth control information, the unregulated sale and advertisement of contraceptives was strongly condemned. This opposition stemmed from the fear that young unmarried men and

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Seventy voluntary birth control clinics had also been set up by this time. Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959* p. 257. For an account of the impact of the population scare on birth control policy see Jane Lewis, 'The Ideology and Politics of Birth Control in Inter-War England', pp. 42-4.

¹⁰³ *NCW Handbook 1939-40* (1940), p. 116. Once again the Mothers' Union dissociated itself from the resolution.

¹⁰⁴ *Report of the NCW Council Meeting and Conference, October 1938* (1938), p. 61, (Pamphlet Collection), The Fawcett Library.

women would regard contraceptives as a licence for illicit sexual activity. Speaking in 1936, Lady Nunburnholme, President of the Council, described 'the indiscriminate use of contraceptives' as a social evil which 'is damaging the moral health and self-control of the nation'.¹⁰⁵

Working with the Public Morality Council, the Council campaigned to have the public display and advertisement of birth control devices banned.¹⁰⁶ In 1936 the National Council of Women passed a resolution urging the government to support a Contraceptives Bill drawn up by the Public Morality Council. The Bill proposed to outlaw the display and advertisement of birth control devices 'in, upon or outside any shop so as to be visible to persons outside the shop'.¹⁰⁷ Selling contraceptives in public places, either by individuals or automatic vending machines would also be prohibited. Finally, anyone found to have mailed birth control information to unmarried persons under eighteen would face prosecution if the Bill were enacted.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ *Report of NCW Council Meeting and Conference, June 1936*, (1936), p. 88.

¹⁰⁶ The Public Morality Council, founded by Bishop Creighton of London in the late nineteenth century, was part of the social purity movement and had campaigned against the advertisement of contraceptives since 1889. During the 1930s, membership of the Council included Lady Nunburnholme, Lady Steel Maitland and Marie Oglivie Gordon of the National Council of Women. See Edward Bristow, *Vice and Vigilance: Purity Movements in Britain since 1700* (Dublin, 1977), pp. 165, 205.

¹⁰⁷ *Report of NCW Council Meeting and Conference, June 1936*, (1936), p. 87.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

Lady Nunburnholme saw the Bill as an excellent opportunity to prevent the 'indiscriminate display of these goods which undoubtedly leads to promiscuous use by all and sundry'.¹⁰⁹ Another member of the Council, Mrs. Charles Ramsden, argued that it was a good way to control the supply to women of contraceptive devices which 'needed to be skilfully fitted' at a birth control clinic and not sold over the counter without proper instruction. Representing the Mothers' Union, Mrs. Michael Sadler said she believed the proposed legislation would do much to 'stop such displays and that thing [birth control] which was destroying the moral sense of young people'.¹¹⁰

Not surprisingly, the Catholic Women's League also supported the Public Morality Council's contraceptive bill. In March 1936, Dr. Rewcastle had advised her members 'to report to the nearest police station any case they know of contraceptives being advertised and sold through the post'.¹¹¹ It is significant that the National Council of Women was united with the Mothers' Union and the Catholic Women's League in calling for the control of contraceptive information. In keeping with the social mores of the day, all three groups firmly believed that sex outside marriage was wrong and

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 90. The Public Morality Council's Contraceptive bill reached a second reading in the Commons in December 1938 but was talked out and failed to become law.

¹¹¹ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 293, March 1936, p. 3.

that birth control should never be made available to unmarried men and women.¹¹²

Although agreement had been reached on this aspect of birth control, the three societies remained divided on the question of family planning for married women. This fact was reflected in the evidence each group gave to the Royal Commission on Population (1944).¹¹³ The National Council of Women reiterated its belief that all married women should have access to free birth control information.¹¹⁴ Representing the Catholic Women's League, Stella Given Wilson told the Commission that people had made a mistake in thinking that birth control was 'right and legitimate'. She argued that 'the wholesale use of contraceptives and the planned family were not compatible with healthy national life'.¹¹⁵

Speaking on behalf of the Mothers' Union, Rosamond Fisher accepted that birth control was private matter for 'every couple to decide for themselves'.¹¹⁶ She

¹¹² The NUSEC also opposed the uncontrolled sale and advertisement of contraceptives during this period.

¹¹³ The Commission was set up to investigate the low birth-rate of the 1930s and 'to consider what measures, if any, should be taken in the national interest to influence the future trend of population'. *The Report of the Royal Commission on Population* (HMSO, 1949), p. 1.

¹¹⁴ NCW Oral Evidence to the Royal Commission on Population, 29 March 1944, (The Royal Commission on Population, 1944-49). The British Library.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ The Mothers' Union Oral Evidence to the Royal Commission on Population, 13 October 1944, (Royal Commission on Population, 1944-49).

also acknowledged that the majority of married couples now used some form of family limitation. However, as late as 1949, the Union continued to believe that it was 'improper for the State to use public funds for instruction in birth control, as many objected to their use'.¹¹⁷ By this time the Royal Commission on Population had reported that 'there was nothing inherently wrong in the use of mechanical methods of contraception'.¹¹⁸ This decision was based on health grounds and the need to provide women with the freedom to 'engage in activities outside the home as well as within it'.¹¹⁹

There is no doubt that the attitude of the Mothers' Union and the Catholic Women's League to birth control was both conservative and conventional. Their views appeared to place religious and moral principles above the health and welfare needs of mothers. As organisations such as the National Council of Women campaigned for greater access to contraceptive information, the Catholic Women's League and the

¹¹⁷ *The Mothers' Union Workers' Paper* September 1949, p. 134.

¹¹⁸ *The Report of the Royal Commission on Population* p. 159.

¹¹⁹ Jane Lewis, *Women in Britain Since 1945* (1992), p. 17. Jane Lewis writes that this official endorsement of birth control was possible in 1949 because of the dramatic increase in the post-war birth rate and the fact that 'public sanction had been given to women's work' outside the home. See Jane Lewis 'The Ideology and Politics of Birth Control in Inter-War England', p. 44.

Mothers' Union objected even to the limited instruction provided at welfare clinics.

However, it would be wrong to suggest that these two groups ignored the difficulties encountered by mothers during this period. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, both the Catholic Women's League and the Mothers' Union urged the government to introduce measures which would enhance the quality of life for wives and mothers. Family allowances, better housing, improved health and maternity services were amongst the reforms demanded. The National Council of Women also recognised the need for these important welfare benefits which would assist women in their domestic role.

In the following chapters, the role played by the three societies in campaigning for these reforms is explored. It will be argued that although the Catholic Women's League and the Mothers' Union rejected birth control, they were prepared to demand social welfare rights for wives and mothers. At the same time, the National Council of Women, which recognised the value of birth control, placed just as much importance on other reforms which would improve the health and welfare of mothers in the community.

ABORTION

By the end of the 1930s it was generally accepted that birth control was a private matter for married couples; the majority of whom did practice some form of family

limitation. Abortion, however, remained a criminal act which attracted a great deal of public condemnation. At the 1930 Lambeth Conference the Anglican bishops who advocated the limited use of contraceptives, recorded their 'abhorrence of the sinful practice of abortion'.¹²⁰ This was in spite of the fact that the incidence of abortion, like the use of birth control, was on the increase throughout the inter-war period.¹²¹

Although abortion was prohibited by law under the Offences Against the Person Act (1861), it continued to be regarded as a legitimate method of family limitation. As late as 1938, the Birkett Committee inquiry into abortion found that 'many mothers seemed not to understand that self-induced abortion was illegal'.¹²² Jane Lewis has written that working-class women in particular, regarded abortion as a 'natural and permissible' solution to unwanted pregnancies.¹²³ Indeed, abortion was often considered more respectable than the use of internal contraceptives, which were fitted at birth control clinics.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ *Encyclical Letter from the bishops, resolutions and reports of the Lambeth Conference 1930*, p. 44.

¹²¹ For a detailed history of abortion in England during the twentieth century see Barbara Brookes, *Abortion in England, 1900-1967* (1988).

¹²² Quoted in Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950* p. 18.

¹²³ For working class women, poverty and the need to remain in work were strong incentives for resorting to abortion when other methods of birth control failed. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹²⁴ Barbara Brookes, *Abortion in England* p. 4.

Traditional remedies reputed to bring on miscarriage were also more widely available than artificial methods of birth control. They included pills, tonics and douches for 'female ailments' as well as homemade abortifacients, for example penny-royal tea.¹²⁵ If these methods failed, a visit to a professional abortionist was the only other option. This increased the risk of death or injury to the woman if the practitioner was unqualified, or failed to take the precautions necessary to avoid infection.

During the inter-war years concern about the rise in the maternal death rate focused greater public attention on the incidence of criminal abortion.¹²⁶ Ministry of Health investigations, set up to explore the causes of maternal mortality, revealed that the number of women dying from septic abortion was on the increase.¹²⁷ In 1934 alone it was estimated that some 68,000 illegal abortions had taken place, despite the fact that only seventy-three cases had been reported to the authorities.¹²⁸ In these circumstances, women's

¹²⁵ Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950* p. 17.

¹²⁶ In 1923 the maternal mortality rate for England and Wales was 5.15 per thousand births. This figure had risen to 5.59 in 1930 and peaked at 5.94 in 1933. Maternal death rates tended to be highest in the industrial North and West of England and in South Wales. See Irvine Loudon, *Death in Childbirth: An International Study of Maternal Care and Maternal Mortality, 1800-1950* (Oxford, 1992), p. 252.

¹²⁷ In 1930, 10.5 per cent of all maternal deaths were attributed to abortion. By 1934, this figure had risen to 20.0 per cent. Barbara Brookes, *Abortion in England* p. 43.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

societies became increasingly concerned about the incidence of abortion and the associated deaths.

In 1934 the Women's Co-operative Guild urged that in view of the persistently high maternal death rate, and

the evils arising from the illegal practice of abortion, the government should revise the abortion laws of 1861 by bringing them into harmony with modern conditions and ideas, thereby making abortion a legal operation that can be carried out under the same conditions as any other surgical operation.¹²⁹

In 1935 the NUSEC also voted in favour of reform to help combat the problem of criminal abortion and maternal mortality.¹³⁰

The same year the National Council of Women expressed its concern about the increasing number of fatalities attributed to abortion. The Council urged the government to set up committee to

enquire into the incidence of abortion and as to the law dealing with criminal abortion and attempted abortion and its administration, and to consider what measures, if any, medical legal, social or administrative, are advisable to improve the existing position.¹³¹

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 93.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ *Report of the NCW Council Meeting and Conference, June 1935 (1935)*, p. 33.

Speaking in favour of this resolution, Miss E. Kelly of the NCW Executive Committee, informed members attending the Annual Conference, that the 'taking of drugs of various kinds, noxious and otherwise, and the employment of domestic measures to procure abortion have increased beyond all knowledge'.¹³² She highlighted the fact that it was the older married woman and not the unmarried woman who turned to abortion when they feared that the family's income could not support another child.¹³³

Lady Ruth Balfour emphasised the damage done to women's health from illegal abortion. She told the Conference that women who survived abortion attempts often suffered from 'permanent inflammation and subsequent abortions, even when they did not wish to have them'.¹³⁴ What emerges from this meeting is the genuine concern amongst members of the National Council of Women for the health of mothers and pregnant women. Women who resorted to abortion were not condemned. Instead, it was argued that the government should consider social, legal and economic reforms which would deter women from seeking an abortion in the first instance.¹³⁵

¹³² Ibid., p. 34.

¹³³ Eighty-five per cent of the women who died after an abortion during the period 1926 and 1930 were married. Irvine Loudon, *Death in Childbirth* p. 110.

¹³⁴ *Report of the NCW Council Meeting and Conference, June 1935* (1935), p. 36.

¹³⁵ The provision of birth control information at local welfare clinics, the introduction of family allowances and an increase in the number of prosecutions against

In February 1936, the National Council of Women sent a deputation to the Minister of Health, Sir Kingsley Wood, again urging him to set up a Committee of Inquiry into abortion. The Council also requested that Medical Officers of Health should issue their reports 'showing deaths due to abortion, and deaths due to criminal abortion, separately from returns regarding other maternal deaths'.¹³⁶ It was hoped this measure would allow the true facts about abortion to emerge so that the problem would be given the attention it deserved. The Minister assured the Council that the matter would be given careful consideration, although it was made clear that no action could be taken until the latest government inquiry into maternal mortality had been completed.¹³⁷

The Mothers' Union welcomed the National Council of Women's efforts to highlight the incidence of abortion and supported the Council's resolutions in this regard. However, the Union made it clear that abortion was wrong as 'human life is sacred because it belongs to God; therefore it is a grave sin deliberately to destroy innocent life'.¹³⁸ The Union was determined to ensure that its members realised that

'back-street' abortionists were amongst the reforms recommended by the National Council of Women during this period.

¹³⁶ *NCW Handbook 1937-38* (1938), p. 105.

¹³⁷ *Report of the NCW Council Meeting and Conference, June 1936* (1936), p. 82.

¹³⁸ Dorothy Ward, *The Christian Attitude towards Birth Control and Abortion* (1936), p. 18, (Pamphlet Collection), Mary Sumner House.

self-induced abortion, even before the quickening (the third month), was not only a sin but also illegal.¹³⁹

In its publication, *The Christian Attitude towards Birth Control and Abortion* (1936), the Union confirmed that 'procuring an abortion at any time during pregnancy involves the deliberate destruction of life'.¹⁴⁰

The Union recognised, however, that therapeutic abortion, where 'an operation in which the death of the foetus is an indirect result and not the primary purpose of the operation' was acceptable.¹⁴¹ When pregnancy occurred following a rape or sexual assault, the Union acknowledged that 'a well-nigh intolerable burden has been placed upon the victims of the sins of others.'¹⁴² However, abortion in these cases could never be condoned as it would go against the teaching of the Christian Church.

As the National Council of Women and the Mothers' Union urged the government to investigate the incidence of abortion, seven feminists came together in 1936 to

¹³⁹ There was a common belief at this time that self-induced abortion during the first three months of pregnancy was acceptable. In 1921 Marie Stopes revealed she had received '20,000 requests for criminal abortion for women who did not apparently even know that it was criminal'. See Deirdre Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty: Women Between the Wars, 1918-1939* (1989), p. 108.

¹⁴⁰ Dorothy Ward, *The Christian Attitude towards Birth Control and Abortion* p. 18.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

form the Abortion Law Reform Association (ALRA).¹⁴³ They included Stella Browne, Dora Russell and Frida Laski, all of whom were active supporters of birth control and were involved in the labour movement.¹⁴⁴ The Association called for safe legal abortion to be made available to all women when other methods of birth control had failed.¹⁴⁵ It was argued that this measure would do much to reduce the maternal death rate attributed to botched and illegal abortions.

Following pressure on the government from organisations such as the National Council of Women, and on the basis of recommendations made by the Ministry of Health's report on maternal mortality, an inter-departmental committee on abortion was set up in 1937.¹⁴⁶ The committee, chaired by Norman Birkett, was instructed to

inquire into the prevalence of abortion
and the present law relating thereto,
and to consider what steps can be taken by
more effective enforcement of the law or

¹⁴³ For a detailed account of the history of the Abortion Law Reform Association see Barbara Brookes, *Abortion in England* pp. 80-98.

¹⁴⁴ These women regarded abortion as a 'women's question' although only Stella Browne argued that all women had the right to opt for abortion. Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950* p. 33.

¹⁴⁵ Barbara Brookes, *Abortion in England*, p. 80.

¹⁴⁶ The Ministry of Health's *Report on an Investigation into Maternal Mortality* (1937), recommended that a separate study of abortion was required to discover the 'influence it may exert on maternal mortality and morbidity and future child-bearing'. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

otherwise, to secure a reduction of maternal mortality and morbidity arising from this cause.¹⁴⁷

This investigation provided women's groups with an important opportunity to present their views on abortion as well as making suggestions on how the problem could be solved.

In November 1937, the Mothers' Union submitted a memorandum to the Birkett Committee outlining its principal objections to abortion. The fact that abortion was the destruction of an innocent life was reiterated and the Union expressed its fear that the desire to reduce maternal mortality could result in the legalisation of abortion.¹⁴⁸ Although the Union accepted that the intention of such a reform was to help women, it argued that

should abortion be legally recognised there would arise a quite undue pressure, well meant but on the materialistic plane, making it difficult for women to maintain that utterly vital recognition of their motherhood as the core and centre of both their spiritual and physical life, without which they are robbed of the fullest

¹⁴⁷ Barbara Brookes, *Abortion in England*, p. 80. Lady Ruth Balfour of the NCW was appointed to serve on the Birkett Committee.

¹⁴⁸ *The Mothers' Union Workers' Paper*, January 1938, No. 298, p. 18.

meaning of their womanhood.¹⁴⁹

As an alternative to abortion, the Mothers' Union recommended social and economic reforms, as well as adequate housing, to remove the financial burdens on larger families and restore 'a healthy attitude towards childbearing'.¹⁵⁰

In keeping with the teaching of the Catholic Church, the Catholic Women's League rejected abortion as a sin against God and nature. In its evidence to the Birkett Committee the League highlighted the fact that abortion allowed women to shirk the responsibility of motherhood.¹⁵¹ Artificial birth control and abortion it was argued, militated against 'the spirit of self sacrifice crucial for the practice of good citizenship'.¹⁵² The League's memorandum advised the Committee that the provision of legal abortion at a time when the birth rate was declining would be disastrous. Instead, it was suggested that social welfare reforms were needed which allowed married women to have children without fear of economic hardship.¹⁵³

Having urged the government to investigate the prevalence of abortion, the National Council of Women welcomed the establishment of the Birkett Committee. In evidence to the Committee, the NCW repeated its

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Barbara Brookes, *Abortion in England* p. 110.

¹⁵² *Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 326, December 1938, p 22.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

demand that the law in relation to abortion should be reviewed in order to protect the health and welfare of women.¹⁵⁴ By this time, the Council had become increasingly concerned about the number of maternal deaths attributed to criminal abortion. Accepting that abortion would always be regarded by some women, in particular married women, as a way of preventing unwanted pregnancy, the Council urged the government to consider 'the need for the legalisation of abortion under adequate safeguards'.¹⁵⁵

This controversial resolution was passed by the Council in October 1938 and carried by 236 votes to twelve. However, the Mothers' Union and the Catholic Women's League were quick to register their opposition. The Mothers' Union immediately dissociated itself from the resolution on abortion and in December 1938 announced that it was withdrawing its 597,412 members from the organisation. Nina Woods explained that this action had been taken as a result of the National Council of Women's policy on divorce, birth control and abortion which conflicted with 'the chief principles for which the Mothers' Union stands'.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ *NCW Handbook 1938-39* (1939), p. 56.

¹⁵⁵ *NCW Handbook 1939-40* (1940), p. 116.

¹⁵⁶ *The Mothers' Union Workers' Paper* No. 304, April 1939, p. 98. It should be noted that members of the Union were free to work with the NCW in a private capacity and it was hoped the two societies would co-operate on issues of mutual concern. In 1944 the Mothers' Union re-affiliated to the National Council of Women. This followed pressure from diocesan members

Not surprisingly, the Catholic Women's League also announced its 'complete dissent' from the NCW resolution on abortion.¹⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the League acknowledged that the NCW had undertaken important work for the protection of women and children and encouraged its members 'to join the local branches of the National Council of Women in order to keep in touch with women's public work, and to put forward the Catholic point of view when desirable'.¹⁵⁸

Despite the fact that women's groups such as the National Council of Women, the Women's Co-operative Guild and ALRA supported safe legal abortion, the Birkett Committee did not advocate a change in the law.¹⁵⁹ When the Committee reported in 1939, it was clear that concern about the falling birth rate and the medical view that 'abortion may entail danger to life and health', had outweighed all demands for reform.¹⁶⁰ Although the Committee confirmed that therapeutic abortion on health grounds was acceptable, it advised that legal abortion for any other reason would only

who wished to resume official work with the local branches of the NCW.

¹⁵⁷ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 326, December 1938, p. 22.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ For a detailed account of the evidence submitted by ALRA to the Birkett Committee see Barbara Brooks, *Abortion in England* pp. 117-25.

¹⁶⁰ Barbara Brookes writes that the medical profession had no desire to carry out legal abortion which would raise many difficult moral and ethical questions. Barbara Brookes *Abortion in England*, p. 125.

contribute to the population problem and 'prove an added temptation to loose and immoral conduct'.¹⁶¹

However, the outbreak of war in September 1939 quickly overtook events and the recommendations of the Birkett Committee were never adopted.¹⁶² After the war, the dramatic recovery in the national birth rate and the decline in the number of maternal deaths, diverted public attention away from the difficult subject of abortion.¹⁶³ The National Council of Women did not address the issue again until the early 1950s and it was not until 1967 that the Abortion Reform Act introduced legal abortion for all women.

The Mothers' Union and the Catholic Women's League objected to abortion on religious and moral grounds. Abortion was seen as the deliberate destruction of human life and, as such, could never be condoned. Both societies were also opposed to abortion because they regarded it as a way for women and men to avoid the responsibilities of parenthood. It was argued that

¹⁶¹ Ibid. A Minority Report was drafted by Dorothy Thurtle, an Executive Committee member of the NBCA. She recommended that abortion should be made legal for married women with four or more children and for the victims of rape and incest. This Report was welcomed by women's groups including the NCEC.

¹⁶² The Birkett Report also rejected any proposal to make birth control information more widely available at welfare clinics. See Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950* p. 33.

¹⁶³ This was in spite of the fact that the incidence of abortion appears to have increased during the war years as a result of casual sexual encounters and marital infidelity. See Irvine Loudon, *Death in Childbirth* p. 266.

legal abortion, like divorce and birth control, would do nothing to enhance the quality of women's lives and 'would be the heaviest blow possible to their highest expression of womanhood'.¹⁶⁴

Conversely, the National Council of Women supported the introduction of legal abortion in order to protect the health and welfare of women. The Council, in common with a number of other women's societies, accepted that a significant number of women would always turn to abortion, regardless of the serious health risks involved. It was for this reason that the Council advocated safe legal abortion for married women who, on medical or economic grounds, felt they could not give birth to another child.

Divorce legislation, birth control and abortion separated non-feminist women's groups along religious and moral divides. The Catholic Women's League and the Mothers' Union opposed all attempts to introduce legislation which conflicted with the religious beliefs of their members. Both groups argued that their uncompromising attitude was justified in order to safeguard the traditional role of women within the home and the stability of family life. At the same time, the National Council of Women campaigned for divorce law reform, birth control information and legal abortion in order to improve the health and welfare of married women.

¹⁶⁴ *The Mothers' Union Workers' Paper* No. 289, January 1938, p. 19.

In spite of these conflicting views, all three non-feminist women's societies were united in their desire to safeguard the security and status of women working within the home. Opposing divorce, birth control and abortion did not mean that the Catholic Women's League and the Mothers' Union overlooked the problems of wives and mothers. Indeed, both groups were duty bound to highlight the social, economic and health needs of women, so that fewer mothers would have to resort to these so-called 'social evils'. In doing so, women's groups with conservative attitudes towards social change, as well as those demanding radical reforms, were prepared to campaign for women's welfare rights. The work of feminist societies in this area has been recognised; that of non-feminist women's groups has been ignored. It is now time to set the record straight and give non-feminist women's organisations the recognition that they deserve.

CHAPTER FOUR

WELFARE RIGHTS FOR WOMEN: MATERNITY CARE, SOCIAL WELFARE BENEFITS AND FAMILY ALLOWANCES

Although the Mothers' Union, the Catholic Women's League and the National Council of Women devoted considerable time dealing with the contentious issues of divorce, birth control and abortion, they were also concerned about wider areas of social policy affecting the lives of women during this period. Along with the YWCA, the Women's Institute Movement and the National Federation of Townswomen's Guilds these societies played an active and important part in highlighting the welfare needs of women, in particular married women and mothers, throughout the 1930s and 1940s.

Three major areas of social policy are examined in this chapter. Maternity services, social welfare benefits for women and family allowances were crucial issues for feminist and non-feminist women's organisations alike, yet there has been a tendency amongst historians to overlook the fact that groups such as the National Federation of Women's Institutes, the Catholic Women's League and the Mothers' Union lobbied the government on numerous occasions to improve State services for women. This chapter will examine the influence of non-feminist women's organisations, representing hundreds of thousands of women, in demanding social welfare rights for their members.

MATERNITY SERVICES

Anxiety about the health and welfare of women in childbirth was a major concern for women's organisations during the late 1920s and early 1930s. In 1925, official statistics revealed that the number of women dying in childbirth had started to rise. That such an increase should occur in the wake of the 1918 Maternity and Child Welfare Act was cause for concern: added to this was the fact that a significant decline in the levels of infant mortality had taken place since the early 1900s.¹ The reduction in infant deaths made the high rate of maternal mortality appear even more unacceptable.

By 1933 the maternal mortality rate had peaked at 5.94 deaths per thousand births.² Whilst the main cause of maternal mortality during this period was puerperal fever and haemorrhage, the rising death rate focused public attention on the wider question of

¹ The infant mortality rate declined from over 150 per thousand births in the 1890s to a figure of 51 in 1939. It should be noted, however, that there were significant regional and social variations. Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959*, p. 250. See also Jay Winter, 'Unemployment, nutrition and infant mortality in Britain, 1920-50', in Jay Winter (ed), *The Working Class in Modern British History: Essays in Honour of Henry Pelling* (Cambridge, 1983).

² The maternal mortality rate averaged 4.03 per thousand births from 1911-15 and 3.90 from 1921-25. In 1925 the figure began to rise. Having peaked in 1933, the average number of deaths declined over the next six years resulting in a new low of 3.25 in 1939. For a detailed account of the history of maternal mortality see Irvine Loudon, *Death in Childbirth*.

maternal health and the provision of maternity care within local communities. In 1935 the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds expressed its anxiety when it called on all its members

to give earnest consideration to the question of maternal mortality..and to take steps to investigate local conditions; and calls upon all Guild members to pledge themselves to assist in every way possible to combat this high rate of mortality.³

The fact that the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds was willing to speak out on this question reflects the 'non-feminist' nature of the maternal mortality issue. An organisation quick to deny any feminist agenda, the National Union had no doubts about joining the influential Women's Maternal Mortality Committee. This voluntary committee, set up by the trade-unionist Gertrude Tuckwell of the YWCA and May Tennant, met regularly throughout the early 1930s. Primarily concerned with the health and welfare of pregnant women, the Committee continually urged the government and local authorities to improve the standard of health care available for mothers.

Representatives from the Mothers' Union, the National Federation of Women's Institutes, the YWCA and the National Council of Women attended the inaugural meeting of the Maternal Mortality Committee held at

³ *The Townswoman* Vol. 3, No. 5, May 1935 p. 25.

Westminster in December 1927. At this first meeting, participants were urged to familiarise themselves with 'what powers local authorities already possess and..find out why so many mothers do not avail themselves of help offered'.⁴ Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, non-feminist women's organisations took up this challenge and set out to improve the standard of maternity health care available for their members.

The need for a co-ordinated and comprehensive maternity service to overcome the high rate of maternal mortality became clear during the 1930s. At a time when unemployment and poverty were rife in many districts, particularly in the North and West, contemporary studies showed that areas suffering from high unemployment and poverty did not always experience an excessive number of maternal deaths. A study carried out in Rochdale during the 1930s revealed that when maternity and child welfare services were dramatically improved, there was a significant decrease in the number of maternal fatalities. This was in spite of the fact that high levels of unemployment and economic hardship in Rochdale continued unabated.⁵

⁴ Minutes of the Mothers' Union Central Council, December 1927, (Central Council Minutes, Vol. VIII, 1927), p. 89.

⁵ In 1931, Rochdale had a maternal death rate of 8.90, a figure well above the national average. Following concerted efforts to improve the standard of maternity care in the area the maternal death rate was reduced to 2.99 within two years. Irvine Loudon, *Death in Childbirth* p. 245.

The quality of medical care was another important factor in explaining the high levels of maternal mortality in England and Wales during this period. Research carried out in Leeds in the twenties showed that the maternal mortality rate was lower in working-class areas than in middle-class districts.⁶ One explanation offered for this disparity was the fact that middle-class women could afford to pay a doctor to attend the birth whereas working-class women were reliant on the help of a midwife, whose services were cheaper and at times paid for by the local authority. Throughout the inter-war period, trained midwives attending births were less likely to use instruments during labour and as a result experienced a lower rate of maternal mortality than many doctors.⁷

Inadequate maternity services and the poor standard [of sometimes poor standards] of care were compounded by the general ill health of women during

⁶ John Fairbairn, obstetric consultant and president of the College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, carried out research which showed that the maternal mortality rate in working-class districts of Leeds stood at 44.9 per cent in comparison to a figure of 59.3 per cent for middle-class areas. *Ibid.*, p. 244.

⁷ Irvine Loudon has argued that one of the most significant causes of maternal mortality during the 1930s was the poor standard of obstetric care. Irvine Loudon, *Death in Childbirth* p. 241. See also Lara Marks, 'Mothers, Babies and Hospitals: 'The London' and provision of maternity cases in East London 1870-1939', in L. Marks, V. Fildes & H. Marland (eds), *Women and Children First: International Maternal and Infant Welfare 1870-1945* (1992) and Lara Marks, *Model Mothers: Jewish Mothers and Maternity Provision in East London 1870-1939* (1994).

the 1920s and 1930s. Under the 1911 National Health Insurance Act, married women working within the home were not entitled to free health care insurance. This meant that many women were unable to afford the services of a private doctor when ill. Women in full-time paid employment who were eligible for free health care showed a higher propensity for sickness than the majority of their male counterparts.⁸ Poverty, unemployment and poor nutrition, combined with inadequate health care, all contributed to the appalling state of women's health particularly amongst the working classes.⁹

Members of the maternal mortality committee, including the Mothers' Union, the National Federation of Women's Institutes and the Women's Co-operative Guild, were united in demanding that the government take some action to improve conditions for mothers. For a Conservative government which endorsed the

⁸ During 1931-32, married women experienced 140 per cent more sickness and 60 per cent more disablement than anticipated by the government. The rate for unmarried women was 25 per cent more sickness and 65 per cent more disablement than previously expected. See Jane Lewis, 'In Search of a Real Equality: Women Between The Wars', in F. Gloversmith (ed), *Class, Culture and Social Change: A New View of the 1930s*, (Brighton, 1980), pp. 222-225.

⁹ From early in the century the Women's Co-operative Guild had highlighted the dangers and suffering faced by women in childbirth. In 1915, the Guild published graphic and disturbing first hand accounts of the pain and misery caused by difficult and mis-managed labour. See M. Llewellyn Davies (ed), *Maternity: Letters from Working Women* (1915).

prevailing ideology of motherhood, having introduced the public service marriage bar in the 1920s, the increasing rate of maternal mortality proved to be a major embarrassment.

With the Government actively encouraging women to be good mothers and to stay at home to care for their children, it was difficult to ignore the demands of large organisations, such as the Mothers' Union, for an improved maternity service.¹⁰ This situation was exacerbated even further by the dramatic decline in the birth-rate during the inter-war period. If women were to be encouraged to have more children it was imperative that they should not be afraid of childbirth. Childbirth needed to be made more attractive, with adequate financial and medical aid, to ensure that women would have larger and healthier families. So concerned was the government about the high maternal mortality rates and the decline in birth-rate that the Ministry of Health carried out five separate investigations into maternal mortality during the period 1924-1937.¹¹

¹⁰ For an account of the measures taken by the government to encourage women to be good mothers see Anna Davin, 'Imperialism and Motherhood', *History Workshop* 5, (Spring 1978).

¹¹ H.M. Campbell, *Maternal Mortality, Reports on Public Health and Medical Subjects # 25*, (HMSO, 1924); Janet Campbell, *The Protection of Motherhood, Reports on Public Health and Medical Subjects # 48* (HMSO, 1927); Ministry of Health, *Interim Report of the Departmental Committee on Maternal Mortality and Morbidity*, (HMSO, 1930); Ministry of Health, *Final Report of the Departmental Committee on Maternal Mortality and*

This research revealed that maternal mortality rates were increasing and a number of recommendations were made in an attempt to curb further escalation. Dr. Janet Campbell, author of the 1927 report, *The Protection of Motherhood*, concluded that up to half of all maternal deaths could be prevented by 'better ante-natal care, better training of midwives, improved obstetrical techniques and antiseptic methods'.¹² Later reports supported the idea of hospital births and advised that maternity hospitals should have a minimum of seventy beds, which would ensure the services of a consultant.¹³

Official investigations into the problem of maternal mortality were welcomed by non-feminist women's organisations. The National Federation of Women's Institutes acknowledged the publication of *The Protection for Motherhood* (1927) as a sign that the Ministry of Health was at least aware of the maternal mortality problem.¹⁴ Likewise, the National Council of Women welcomed the report but went on to urge that

the Ministry of Health shall be given every facility for the promotion of research work, and for the carrying out of preventive and remedial measures.¹⁵

Morbidity, (HMSO, 1932); Ministry of Health, *Report on an Investigation into Maternal Mortality*, (HMSO, 1937).

¹² Charles Mowat, *Britain Between the Wars 1918-1940* (1955), p. 516.

¹³ Jane Lewis, 'Women Between the Wars', p. 220.

¹⁴ *Home and Country* Vol. X, No. 5, May 1928, p. 98.

¹⁵ *NCW Handbook 1928-1929* (1929), p. 79.

In spite of the official enquiries into maternal mortality, the number of women dying in childbirth continued to rise throughout the early 1930s. This increase was viewed with increasing anxiety by women's organisations who called on both the government and their own members to take appropriate preventative action.

When the Interim Report on Maternal Mortality was published in 1930, the National Council of Women passed a resolution appealing to all local authorities to 'put into force the powers they already possess with regard to the provision of maternity services'.¹⁶ Under the terms of the 1918 Maternity and Child Welfare Act local authorities were responsible for providing maternity services in their area. This legislation compelled them to set up maternity and child welfare committees which would oversee and support maternity services. Amongst the services the authority could provide were: maternity and child welfare clinics, maternity hospitals, free or cheap food for pregnant and nursing women, day nurseries and home-helps for women in the weeks before and after confinement.¹⁷

The 1918 Act did not make the provision of any of these services compulsory. It was left to the

¹⁶ *NCW Handbook 1929-1930* (1930), p. 82.

¹⁷ Pat Thane, 'Visions of gender in the making of the British welfare state: the case of women in the British Labour Party and social policy, 1906-1945', Gisela Bock & Pat Thane (eds), *Maternity and Gender Policies* (1980), p. 106.

individual authority to decide which maternity services were to be offered and who was eligible to receive free care. This meant that the quality and range of maternity services in any given locality was dependent on the availability of resources and the commitment of the authority concerned. As a result the standard of maternity care in different regions varied considerably.¹⁸

The Catholic Women's League expressed the view of many when it blamed the high level of maternal mortality and morbidity on the 'outstanding failure of the maternity and child welfare movement'.¹⁹ Figures released by the National Council of Women in 1935 showed that 33 out of 62 County Councils and 141 out of 185 County Boroughs provided less than half of the services recommended by the government.²⁰ That same year the National Council passed a resolution urging all local authorities to provide 'easily accessible ante-natal and post-natal clinics, staffed by competent

¹⁸ See for example Elizabeth Peretz, 'A Maternity Service for England and Wales: Local Authority Maternity Care in the Inter-War Period in Oxfordshire and Tottenham' in Jo Garcia, Robert Kilpatrick and Martin Richards (eds), *The Politics of Maternity Care* (Oxford, 1990).

¹⁹ *Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 302, December 1936, p. 31.

²⁰ *Report of the National Council of Women Council Meeting and Conference, Southport June 29-July 2 1935* (1935), p. 111, (Pamphlet Collection), The Fawcett Library.

obstetricians, and...gynaecological clinics staffed by competent gynaecologists'.²¹

By 1938, the situation had improved with most local authorities in England providing ante-natal and post-natal clinics for women. If the council itself did not run a clinic, it ensured that there were equivalent voluntary clinics in the locality grant-aided by the council.²² This commitment to ante-natal and post-natal care was meaningless, however, if women did not attend the clinics. In 1937, Ministry of Health statistics showed that only ten per cent of women visited post-natal clinics.²³ The Catholic Women's League highlighted the difficulties faced by pregnant women wishing to attend their local clinic. These women had to ensure that their other children were cared for at this time; if no relative or neighbour was available, the mother would have to pay someone to watch over her children while she was away.

²¹ The resolution which was endorsed by the Council's affiliated societies, including the Mothers' Union, the Catholic Women's League and the YWCA, was sent to hospitals, medical schools and local authorities. *NCW Handbook 1936-1937* (1937), p. 103.

²² In 1938 there were 365 welfare authorities in England. Of these authorities: 347 had ante-natal clinics with twelve others arranging for ante-natal supervision by means of a domiciliary general practitioner service; 236 had post-natal clinics or special arrangements for post-natal cases to attend ante-natal clinics; 133 had special ante-natal consultative clinics and 159 had special gynaecological clinics. Minutes of the NCW Parliamentary and Legislative Committee Meeting, 21 September 1938. (NCW Archive).

²³ Jane Lewis, 'Women Between the Wars', p. 221.

The cost of travel to and from the clinic was another obstacle for poorer women. In 1936, the Catholic Women's League suggested that women should be able to reclaim the bus and train fares they incurred when visiting the clinic. It was argued that women who were in need of free maternity care would find it difficult to meet these expenses and would therefore be reluctant to seek the medical attention they required.²⁴ In a time of severe economic depression, however, it was unlikely that the government would concede to this demand.

For these reasons it was vital that women's societies, with many thousands of members, not only endorsed but promoted the treatment available at maternity and child welfare clinics. Despite the fact that the Catholic Women's League objected to the dissemination of birth control information at state-aided clinics the organisation showed no qualms when encouraging Catholic women to visit the clinics. Members of the Catholic community who denounced maternity and child welfare clinics were accused of showing little concern for the health of pregnant Catholic women. Opposing birth control and abortion, the Catholic Women's League recognised its responsibility to speak out for the rights of women, married or unmarried, who became mothers.

²⁴ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 302, December 1936, p. 34.

The Mothers' Union also encouraged its members to seek medical advice during pregnancy. In 1936, readers of the *Mothers' Union Journal* were advised that expectant mothers

can be greatly helped by all that modern science has taught us about infant and child welfare and she will no doubt gladly avail herself of the advice and encouragement which is easily found nowadays in clinics and welfare centres.²⁵

The National Union of Townswomen's Guilds advised its members to visit their local maternity centres and ante-natal clinics. It was hoped that members would familiarize themselves with the clinics and report any shortcomings to the national organisation.²⁶

Similarly, the National Council of Women passed a resolution in 1933 calling on all branches and affiliated societies

to persuade expectant mothers to avail themselves of the facilities for ante-natal treatment, and, later, of post-natal medical advice, where provided by their local authorities or otherwise, and to report to the Ministry of Health and to the local authority where facilities for either ante-natal or post-natal care are not available in their areas.²⁷

²⁵ *The Mothers' Union Journal*, No. 166, September 1936, p. 20.

²⁶ *The Townswoman* Vol. 3, No. 7, October 1935, p. 78.

²⁷ *NCW Handbook 1933-34* (1934), p. 80.

In urging their members to take advantage of the maternity services made available to them, non-feminist women's organisations were clearly asserting the right of women citizens to public health care, particularly during pregnancy.

Having recommended that members seek medical attention, women's organisations were anxious that the care they received was of the highest quality. Throughout the 1930s questions were raised about the training and standards of care provided by midwives and doctors attending maternity cases. These concerns were raised in Dr. Janet Campbell's report *The Protection of Mothers* (1927) when she recommended that better training of midwives and improved obstetrical techniques would bring about a reduction in the number of maternal deaths.

During the 1920s, fifty to sixty per cent of births were attended by a midwife. Under the terms of the 1918 Maternity and Child Welfare Act, local authorities were authorised but not required to provide subsidized midwifery services for expectant mothers. Women's organisations such as the National Council of Women were eager for every local authority to employ qualified and well-trained midwives to oversee normal home deliveries. Although training requirements had been improved in 1926, a move backed by the Central Board of Midwives and the Midwives' Institute, the high rate of maternal mortality and morbidity continued to

focus attention on the experience and qualifications of midwives and doctors.²⁸

In 1934, the National Council of Women passed a resolution which stated that

in view of the serious rate of maternal mortality and morbidity, it is desirable that more practical experience should be required of medical students and pupil midwives during their training in midwifery and that additional post-graduate courses should be arranged.²⁹

One way to regulate the employment and training of midwives was to compel local authorities to provide a salaried and domiciliary midwifery service. The National Council of Women backed this scheme which would ensure that women unable to afford the services of a doctor or an independent midwife would be seen by a trained midwife employed by the local authority. This egalitarian reform would ensure that even the poorest women would receive professional care. It was hoped that salaried midwives would dissuade poorer women from employing unqualified local 'handy-women' during their confinements.³⁰

²⁸ See Sarah Robinson, 'Maintaining the Independence of the Midwifery Profession: A Continuing Struggle', in Jo Garcia, Robert Kilpatrick and Martin Richards (eds), *The Politics of Maternity Care* (Oxford, 1990), p. 68.

²⁹ *NCW Handbook 1934-35* (1935), p. 82.

³⁰ Unqualified 'handy-women' had since the early 1900s offered their services for a lower fee than trained midwives and were still employed by many poorer women during the inter-war period. See Elizabeth Roberts, *A Women's Place: An oral history of working-class women*,

The 1936 Midwives Act went some way to ensure that expectant mothers received the standard of care to which all citizens were entitled. The new legislation introduced a national midwifery service by which private midwives became salaried employees of their local authority.³¹ Dame Janet Campbell strongly supported the Midwives Act and wrote a series of articles on the new legislation which appeared in *The Townswoman* and *Home and Country*.³² The National Federation of Townswomen's Guilds and the Federation of Women's Institutes gave their full support to the new legislation, as did the National Council of Women and the Catholic Women's League.³³

Although the 1936 Midwives Act improved the training of midwives by placing it under the control of the local authority, the performance of doctors during childbirth remained a matter of grave concern. The National Council of Women, aware of this problem, urged all teaching hospitals

to provide for their medical students a

1890-1940 (Oxford, 1984) and Maureen Sutton, *"We Didn't Know Aught": A Study of Sexuality, Superstition and Death in Women's Lives in Lincolnshire during the 1930s, '40s and '50s* (Stamford, 1992).

³¹ The Act legislated for the employment of midwives by local authorities or by welfare and voluntary groups approved of by the local authority. See Sarah Robinson, 'Maintaining the Independence of the Midwifery Profession: A Continuing Struggle', p. 71.

³² *The Townswoman* March 1936; *Home and Country* May 1936.

³³ The Mothers' Union refused to support amendments to the 1936 Midwives (Salaried Service) Bill on the grounds that the Bill was a political matter and therefore 'outside the scope of the Union's work'.

longer course in midwifery, with personal delivery of a larger number of cases and..to encourage those students wishing to become general practitioners to undergo post-graduate training in midwifery and gynaecology.³⁴

As the numbers of women giving birth in hospital gradually increased throughout the 1930s, the demand for better trained doctors took on even greater significance.³⁵ Women's organisations were cautious about recommending hospital births for normal deliveries. There was a general feeling that the family home was the best and safest place for women to give birth. Hospital wards could prove a source of infection resulting in puerperal fever and death. In evidence to the Royal Commission on Population, witnesses for the National Council of Women expressed their belief that maternal mortality occurred more often in hospitals than in the home.³⁶

Although the home was seen as the ideal place to give birth, the National Council of Women did concede

³⁴ *NCW Handbook 1936-1937* (1937), p. 103.

³⁵ In 1927 fifteen per cent of births took place in hospital. This rose to twenty five per cent in 1937 and forty five per cent in 1945.

³⁶ It is difficult to prove these claims. Jane Lewis has written that hospitals tended to treat abnormal cases and so recorded a higher mortality rate. She does suggest, however, that the standard of hospital care varied considerably and that middle-class nursing homes were dangerous places in which to give birth during this period. Jane Lewis, 'Mothers and Maternity Policies in the Twentieth Century', in *The Politics of Maternity Care* (1990), p. 22.

that 'for the abnormal case or the woman whose home conditions are unsuitable, the certainty of a [hospital] bed ought to be assured'.³⁷ Midwives' accounts of cramped, dilapidated living conditions, infestation and the lack of running water were common in areas of acute social deprivation such as the East End of London.³⁸ In these extreme cases, middle-class members of the National Council of Women and the Mothers' Union concurred with the Women's Co-operative Guild that hospital births were the best option.

The availability of anaesthesia was another reason why non-feminist women's organisations favoured hospital births for some women. During the 1930s it was more likely, though by no means a certainty, that women giving birth in hospital would receive some form of pain-relief.³⁹ It was much less likely that women having their babies at home would receive any relief from the pain of labour. In 1936, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists prohibited midwives from giving chloroform capsules to women in their care. Midwives were only permitted to administer gas and air, but many lacked the training and equipment needed and

³⁷ *Report of the National Council of Women Council Meeting and Conference, Leicester, 14-18 October, 1935.* (1935), p. 112.

³⁸ See Lara Marks, 'Mothers, Babies and Hospitals'.

³⁹ The most common method used was chloroform gas used as an analgesic.

could not afford to employ the assistance necessary to perform this procedure.⁴⁰

A number of women's organisations supported calls by the National Birthday Trust Fund to allow midwives to administer new forms of pain relief during home births.⁴¹ Members of the National Federation of Women's Institutes, at their annual general meeting in 1938, urged their Executive Committee 'to take all possible steps to get the new methods of analgesia made available for all countrywomen in childbirth in their own homes provided there are adequate safeguards'.⁴² The issue of pain relief for women giving birth at home was of particular interest to rural women, many of whom lived great distances from the nearest hospital.⁴³

Upper and middle-class women who could afford the services of a private doctor benefited from pain-relieving drugs such as chloroform. The fact that midwives could not provide this service meant that

⁴⁰ See Jennifer Beinart, 'Obstetric Analgesia and the Control of Childbirth in Twentieth-Century Britain', Jo Garcia, Robert Kilpatrick and Martin Richards (eds) *The Politics of Maternity Care* (Oxford, 1990).

⁴¹ The National Birthday Trust Fund was founded in 1928 in response to the increasing number of maternal fatalities.

⁴² *National Federation of Women's Institutes, 22nd Annual Report 1938*, (1938), p. 36.

⁴³ In 1946 the National Federation of Women's Institutes welcomed the decision to allow gas and air to be administered by one person. There still remained the practical difficulty of transporting the heavy equipment and in 1949 the Institute called on local authorities to provide rural midwives with a car allowance. *Home and Country* Vol. 31, No. 1, January 1949, p. 49.

working-class women more often than not had to endure the full pain of childbirth. The National Council of Women highlighted this injustice when it called on local authorities to train midwives in gas and air techniques so that all women could benefit from pain relief during labour. Despite the Council's efforts to draw attention to this problem, it was reported in 1946 that 'over 100 authorities do not possess any means whatever for bringing relief to the average mother'.⁴⁴

With the outbreak of war, maternity services in England underwent a number of crucial changes. In 1939, an emergency maternity service was established to meet the needs of expectant and nursing mothers during wartime. Pregnant women were evacuated from areas at risk from bombing to be accommodated in nursing homes and hospitals for the birth of their babies. As a result the number of hospital beds made available for maternity cases increased during the war.⁴⁵ The demand for hospital births was firmly established during the war years when many women came to expect that they would give birth in hospital.

This changeover from home to hospital deliveries was further emphasised in May 1943 when the Mothers'

⁴⁴ In the same year an official report revealed that over 60 per cent of women gave birth without the aid of pain relief. See Jennifer Beinart, 'Obstetric Analgesia and the Control of Childbirth in Twentieth-Century Britain', pp. 123-125.

⁴⁵ In 1938 there were 10,000 maternity beds in England and Wales. By 1945 this figure had been increased to over 15,000.

Union campaigned for an increase in the number of maternity beds in urban and rural districts. Representatives from the Union visited the Ministry of Health and produced detailed accounts of maternity bed shortages in London and in other areas. Following a sympathetic hearing, Ministry of Health officials guaranteed that staffing levels in maternity hospitals all over the country would be increased as soon as possible. Dr. Pursley, representing the Ministry, assured the Mothers' Union that 'all that can be done will be done to meet the needs of mothers and babies'.⁴⁶

The Union's efforts to increase the allocation of maternity beds signified its approval of hospital maternity wards. For an organisation representing over 500,000 mothers, such an endorsement was influential. The Union, most often associated with traditional images of home and family, accepted that hospitals were a safe and appropriate place for women to give birth. In 1950 the Union's enthusiasm for hospital births was illustrated when the organisation took credit for the increase in the number of maternity beds available in London. This development, which occurred in 1946, was singled out as one of the Union's major achievements in recent years.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Minutes of the Mothers' Union Central Council, June 1943, p. 68. (Central Council, Vol. XII, 1943-1950).

⁴⁷ *The Mothers' Union Workers' Paper* July 1950, p. 86.

By 1950, the number of women dying as a result of childbirth had declined dramatically.⁴⁸ Improvements in the training of midwives and doctors had contributed to this recovery. Other significant factors were war-time advancements in medicine, particularly the treatment with penicillin of puerperal fever and the use of blood transfusions to reduce the numbers of deaths resulting from haemorrhage.⁴⁹ The general health of women improved during these years with expectant and nursing mothers benefiting from free milk and vitamins schemes which had become more widespread and accessible during wartime.

The right of all pregnant women to a nutritious diet, including free or cheap supplies of milk, was something for which non-feminist women's organisations had campaigned for right through the 1930s.⁵⁰ The importance of diet in pregnancy was stressed by groups such as the National Council of Women. In 1935 the Council called upon all local authorities to give careful consideration

to the results obtained from recent research on the value of diet to the expectant nursing (sic) mother, and the advisability of providing meals at

⁴⁸ The maternal mortality rate in 1950 was only one-fifth of the 1935 figure.

⁴⁹ Irvine Loudon, *Death in Childbirth* p. 254.

⁵⁰ Jane Lewis has commented that the Ministry of Health, through the Advisory Committee on Nutrition (1931), recognised that 'feeding of the pregnant woman was at the base of the problem.' Lewis writes that the Ministry's later work never reflected this belief. See Jane Lewis, 'Women Between the Wars', pp. 224-225.

convenient centres for those mothers who do not appear to be satisfactorily nourished at home.⁵¹

In the winter of 1934, the Sheffield branch of the National Council of Women set up a day care centre for disadvantaged women providing them with a hot midday meal five days a week. Twenty women, recommended by local health workers, benefited from the scheme. A doctor's report at the end of nine months concluded that twenty healthy babies had been born following 'uniformly satisfactory confinements'.⁵²

Whilst the provision of nutritious meals for pregnant and nursing women went beyond the financial resources of many local authorities, non-feminist women's organisations concentrated on the campaign for the less costly objective of free or subsidised milk supplies. The National Federation of Women's Institutes took a leading role in this campaign when in 1936 it passed a resolution calling on the government to reduce the retail price of milk which, it was argued, was essential for the health of the nation.⁵³

⁵¹ *NCW Handbook 1935-1936* (1936), p. 103.

⁵² The National Birthday Trust and the People's League of Health carried out two similar projects during this period, both of which resulted in a significant decline in the maternal mortality rate. See Jane Lewis, 'Women Between the Wars', p. 225.

⁵³ Representatives from the National Federation met with Mr. Walter Elliot, the Minister of Agriculture in July 1936 to discuss this issue. The Minister said he would take the views of the Women's Institutes into consideration. *National Federation of Women's Institutes Annual Report, 1936* (1936), p. 14.

With the overall supply of milk increasing during the 1930s, the government introduced a system of quotas to maintain milk prices. This resulted in milk being made available to mothers at 2 shillings per gallon while milk sold to the manufacturing industries fetched the lower price of 5 pence per gallon.⁵⁴ In these circumstances, it is understandable that women's organisations protested that a mother's right to cheap milk was greater than that of industry. In 1937 a delegation from the National Federation of Women's Institutes visited the Minister of Health, Sir Kingsley Wood, to lobby for a reduction in the price of milk for mothers and young children. The delegation based its demands on a survey of local Institutes which revealed that many local authority milk schemes were either ineffective or had not yet been introduced.

At its annual general meeting in June 1937 the National Federation of Women's Institutes continued to campaign for cheaper milk. The meeting expressed its regret that the government had not taken adequate steps to ensure that the price of milk was reduced for 'all needy parents of children under school age'.⁵⁵ A copy of this resolution was sent to the Ministries of Health and Agriculture as well as to the Milk Marketing Board and the Maternity and Child Welfare Council. Individual members of the organisation were called upon

⁵⁴ Charles Mowat, *Britain Between the Wars 1918-1940* p. 439.

⁵⁵ *National Federation of Women's Institutes Annual Report, 1937 (1937)*, p. 17.

to write to their local MPs requesting them to support the introduction of cheaper milk for every mother and child under the age of five.⁵⁶

On the eve of the Second World War, subsidised milk schemes had been set up by all the 409 welfare authorities in the country.⁵⁷ In spite of this fact, the availability of low cost milk for mothers and children under five remained dependent on the commitment of individual local councils. Subsidising milk prices was a costly practice and some local authorities were unwilling to extend the service beyond a very limited number of women believed to be suffering from extreme hardship. Elizabeth Peretz has written of the wide variations which existed between local councils when it came to deciding which women were eligible for free or reduced priced milk. Local authorities acted independently on this issue and each had its own complicated qualification procedure.⁵⁸

Non-feminist women's organisations were anxious that disadvantaged members were aware of their right to a daily supply of free or subsidised milk. The Catholic Women's League, through its maternity and child welfare centre on the Old Kent Road, ensured that

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Pat Thane, 'Visions of gender in the making of the British Welfare State' p. 106.

⁵⁸ These inconsistencies meant that a woman entitled to free milk in Tottenham would have been excluded from the scheme if she moved to Oxford. Elizabeth Perez, 'The Costs of Modern Motherhood to Low Income Families in inter-war Britain', V. Fildes, L. Marks & H. Marland (eds), *Women and Children First* p. 272.

women attending the clinic were informed about the milk scheme. Staff at the clinic explained the application procedure to mothers so that all those eligible would receive the milk from the local borough council.⁵⁹

It was not until the outbreak of the Second World War that the National Federation of Women's Institutes' proposal for a universal subsidised milk scheme was adopted. In July 1940, war-time food shortages led the government to set up a National Milk Scheme. Under the scheme all expectant and nursing mothers and children under five were entitled to one pint of milk a day at the reduced price of two pence.⁶⁰ If a family's income was below 40 shillings a week eligible women and children were given the milk free of charge. Official statistics showed that by September 1940, 70 per cent of those eligible for the National Milk Scheme had received subsidised milk with 30 per cent of them benefiting from free milk.⁶¹

Maternal health improved during the war years as a result of free milk schemes, the availability of vitamin and iron supplements and food rationing, which gave poorer women access to a balanced and affordable diet.⁶² As Irvine Loudon has commented, the War was 'good for mothers'. Mothers did have to contend,

⁵⁹ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 306, April 1937, p. 27.

⁶⁰ The retail price of one pint of milk was four and a half pence.

⁶¹ Sheila Ferguson & Hilda Fitzgerald, *Studies in the Social Services* (HMSO, 1954), p. 157.

⁶² Irvine Loudon, *Death in Childbirth* p. 263.

however, with the difficulties of caring for their children during war-time. This situation was made even more arduous when mothers were deprived of the support of their husbands and relatives many of whom were serving in the forces or engaged in war work. At the same time middle-class women who would have normally employed domestic servants were unable to do so during war-time.⁶³

The 1941 National Service (Number Two) Act ordered the compulsory registration of women between the ages of nineteen and forty at employment exchanges. Married women were not conscripted on account of their responsibilities within the home. Married women were, however, encouraged to volunteer for war work.⁶⁴ In 1943, the continuing labour shortage resulted in the government widening the eligibility for compulsory national service. Married women with children over fourteen years of age were now called upon to register for part-time work. Once again women with young children were encouraged, though not required, to engage in part-time work in their local community.

By 1943, an estimated 7,750,000 women were in paid employment, forty-three per cent of whom were married.⁶⁵ As the war progressed, non-feminist women's

⁶³ Official reports estimated that the number of domestic servants available for work fell by seventy-five per cent during the war. See Sheila Ferguson and Hilda Fitzgerald, *Studies in the Social Services*, p. 6.

⁶⁴ See Gail Braybon & Penny Summerfield, *Out of the Cage: Women's Experiences in Two World Wars*, (1987).

⁶⁵ Ibid.

organisations such as the Mothers' Union and the National Council of Women became increasingly concerned about the welfare of pregnant and nursing mothers in this context. They were anxious to ensure that women workers received adequate maternity benefit and maternity leave when they became pregnant. The well-being of pregnant and nursing women working within the home also became a priority with women's groups. In 1942, the Mothers' Union began a campaign to increase the number of home-help schemes for mothers.

The employment of home-helps by local authorities was something which the Women's Co-operative Guild and Women's Sections of the Labour Party had supported throughout the 1920s.⁶⁶ The 1918 Maternity and Child Welfare Act had given local authorities the right to employ home-helps as part of their maternity welfare programme. By 1928, however, it emerged that authorities were spending only 0.1 per cent of their maternal and child welfare budgets on home-helps.⁶⁷ Ten years later, the situation had changed little with an estimated 190 out of 305 local authorities providing home-help workers for mothers in their areas.⁶⁸

As has been suggested, war conditions created new difficulties for young mothers. Without the

⁶⁶ In 1922, Labour Party policy included the provision of home-helps and subsidised milk schemes for mothers and young children. See Pat Thane, 'Visions of Gender in the British Welfare State', p. 105.

⁶⁷ Jane Lewis, 'Women Between the Wars', p. 220.

⁶⁸ Sheila Ferguson and Hilda Fitzgerald, *Studies in the Social Services* p. 10.

traditional support of their husbands and family, women coping with young children as well as a new baby required the assistance of a home-help more than ever before. During the early 1940s, the Mothers' Union began to focus more on the needs of young mothers. This was part of 'the young wives campaign', a concerted effort to attract greater numbers of young women into the organisation. One obvious way of appealing to young wives was to advocate that pregnant women were offered more domestic help in the weeks before and after their confinements.

In February 1943, a delegation of 'young wives' from the Mothers' Union visited the MP, Margaret Keir. Three major difficulties facing mothers in wartime were addressed at this meeting; the lack of home-helps available to mothers, the shortage of maternity beds and the scarcity of adequate housing for mothers with young children.⁶⁹ Margaret Keir agreed to assist the Mothers' Union in its campaign and did so by raising the subject of home-helps in the House of Commons and bringing the matter to the attention of Ernest Bevin, the Minister of Labour and National Service.

The following May, the Mothers' Union was invited to appear before the Parliamentary Woman Power Committee where the need for more home-helps, maternity beds and suitable housing for young mothers was

⁶⁹ Minutes of the Mothers' Union Central Council, June 1943, (Central Council, Vol. XII, 1943-1950), p. 68

discussed.⁷⁰ The Union's representatives were given a very sympathetic hearing by the members of the all-party Committee. During the course of the meeting the Committee's Chairman, the Conservative MP Irene Ward, remarked that the Mothers' Union was 'the most influential body of women in the country...it has tremendous weight'.⁷¹

The ability of the Mothers' Union to bring the Government's attention to the problems facing young mothers was impressive, if not surprising. As Irene Ward stated, the Mothers' Union was an influential organisation. The Mothers' Union was not regarded by members of the establishment as a 'radical' egalitarian feminist organisation. Rather, it was seen as an organisation which stood for and upheld conservative middle-class values. Affiliated to the Church of England, the Union was itself very much part of the establishment. When such an organisation became openly critical of the government and suggested that the state was failing mothers, the authorities were quick to react.

Following their meeting with the Woman Power Committee, representatives of the Mothers' Union met

⁷⁰ The Parliamentary Woman Power Committee was set up in 1940 by women MPs from all parties including the Conservative MP Lady Astor and the Labour MP Edith Summerskill. Its principal objective was to protect the welfare of women, in particular women workers, during war-time.

⁷¹ Minutes of the Mothers' Union Central Council, June 1943, (Central Council, Vol. XII, 1943-1950), p. 68.

with officials from the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Health to discuss their grievances. At the Ministry of Labour, Mothers' Union members warned of the risk of miscarriage and ill-health to pregnant women who received no help with housework and childcare in the weeks before and after giving birth. The Union urged that all pregnant women, but particularly those with young children, should be provided with a home-help. The Ministry of Labour was in agreement with the Mothers' Union that the shortage of home-helps for mothers was a matter of national importance.⁷²

Throughout 1942, the Ministry had encouraged 'immobile' women, usually married women with older children, to volunteer as home-helps in their local area. These efforts proved largely unsuccessful. Many older women regarded domestic work for other women as a menial task and the low rates of pay offered did not persuade them otherwise. When the Mothers' Union suggested that women aged between forty and forty-five should be directed into work as home-helps, the Ministry rejected the idea on the grounds that older women would not do the work.

The Ministry was more in favour of County Councils and voluntary organisations providing professional part-time help for pregnant and nursing women.⁷³

Despite the Ministry of Labour's enthusiasm for home-

⁷² Sheila Ferguson and Hilda Fitzgerald, *Studies in the Social Services* p. 10.

⁷³ Minutes of the Mothers' Union Central Council, June 1943, (Central Council, Vol.XII, 1943-1947), p. 72.

helps, the number of women actually benefiting from the scheme remained relatively small. In 1945, only 13,605 pregnant women had been assisted in this way.⁷⁴ Home-helps for mothers remained a key issue for women's organisations throughout the later years of the war. In evidence to the Royal Commission on Population, both the National Council of Women and the Catholic Women's League insisted that home-helps were essential if women were to be encouraged to have more children. They argued that home-helps were important not only for the physical well-being of pregnant and nursing women but also to ensure that women had time to be 'a companion to their husbands'.⁷⁵

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, non-feminist women's organisations were increasingly active in their efforts to improve the standard of maternity care for women. Reacting first of all to the increasing number of maternal deaths and then to the consequences of war, voluntary women's groups called into question the government's commitment to mothers. In doing so, the six women's organisations, to varying degrees, provided an important and practical service for women.

On the one hand, they put pressure on both the government and local authorities to provide all of the maternity services recommended under the 1918 Maternity

⁷⁴ This was in comparison to a figure of 12,316 women attended by home-helps in 1938.

⁷⁵ National Council of Women, Written Evidence to the Royal Commission on Population, June 1944, (Evidence No. 12, Royal Commission on Population, 1944-1949).

and Child Welfare Act. On the other hand, these groups encouraged their members to use whatever services were available to them. This was imperative if the health and welfare of expectant and nursing mothers was to be improved. Women were informed of their right to an efficient and extensive maternity service. At the same time organisations representing hundreds of thousands of women demanded that such a service be provided. In this way, non-feminist women's organisations played an important part in establishing the right of women to state-funded health care, particularly during pregnancy.

THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN UNDER THE SOCIAL WELFARE SYSTEM

As part of their campaign to reduce the maternal mortality rate, non-feminist women's societies became critical of the status of women under the existing social welfare system. Women's organisations condemned the fact that women working within the home, revered by the state as the centre of family life, were not entitled to health care under the National Health Insurance Act.⁷⁶ Not only were women working within the home deprived of free medical attention but insured women who missed work because of pregnancy were not considered eligible for sick pay.

⁷⁶ Under the terms of the 1911 National Health Insurance Act, women and children were treated as dependents and were not entitled to state support. Women working outside the home were covered but they paid smaller contributions than men and received lower benefits.

The majority of approved societies responsible for paying out sickness benefits did not accept that pregnancy was an illness. The approved societies' view was that 'if a woman is disabled by pregnancy alone, if such an expression is permissible, she cannot thereby be entitled to sickness benefit'.⁷⁷ This meant that women who missed work because of morning sickness or other illnesses relating specifically to pregnancy were disqualified from receiving sick pay.

Non-feminist women's organisations were indignant that women should be discriminated against in this way. Once again it was clear to them that the ideology of domesticity, promoted by the Government, would not translate into financial benefits for wives and mothers. In an effort to rectify this situation, pressure was exerted on the Government by the larger women's societies to include uninsured housewives and pregnant working women in the National Health Insurance Scheme. In 1936, the National Federation of Women's Institutes proposed that women insured before marriage should be entitled to medical expenses after marriage, so long as a payment of 6 pence per week, or whatever sum was considered necessary, was maintained.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Jane Lewis, 'Dealing with Dependency: State Practices and Social Realities, 1870-1945' in Jane Lewis (ed), *Women's Welfare/Women's Rights* (1983), p. 28.

⁷⁸ National Federation of Women's Institutes, *Keeping Ourselves Informed: Our Concerns, Our Resolutions, Our Actions* (1981), p. 148.

Throughout the 1930s, the government refused to accept any responsibility for the general medical expenses of housewives or pregnant women beyond the one-off payment of maternity benefit. As official statistics revealed, it was married women who were most likely to suffer from ill-health during this period. Not surprisingly, therefore, the government was reluctant to include married women working at home in any national health care scheme. Married women, like children, were regarded as dependents and as such were to be looked after by their husbands. This meant that husbands were expected to pay for their wives' medical expenses regardless of the family's ability to afford private medical care.

Despite the government's unwillingness to accept responsibility for married women's health, the provision of health care for housewives and for pregnant working women remained an important issue for the National Federation of Women's Institutes. An article which appeared in *Home and Country* in 1942, under the heading 'The Nation's Cinderella', bemoaned the fact that married women working within the home were expected to perform 'unpaid domestic labour.' That these women were not even allowed to contribute to or benefit from national health insurance meant that women resorted to medical treatment only when they were already very ill and sometimes not at all. The hope was expressed that new laws would be introduced in

peacetime which would make the position of women within the home more equitable.⁷⁹

As the war continued and the numbers of women entering the workforce multiplied, the Mothers' Union became increasingly involved in the campaign for adequate maternity leave and benefit for working mothers.⁸⁰ In July 1942, 'A Charter for Motherhood' appeared in *The Mothers' Union Workers Paper* which condemned the fact that pregnant women were not eligible for cash benefits under the National Health Insurance Scheme.

It is true that a mother receives maternity benefit, but this is to cover the cost of confinement. For a month thereafter she is prevented by law from working in a factory; during this period, whatever her state of health, she is legally debarred from drawing national health benefit.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Penny Kitchen, *For Home and Country: War, Peace and Rural Life as Seen through the Pages of the Women's Institutes' Magazine, 1919-1959* (1990), p. 27.

⁸⁰ It is important to note that it was only when middle-class women began to work in significant numbers outside the home that organisations such as the Mothers' Union began to campaign on their behalf. This was in spite of the fact that the Women's Co-operative Guild and the Women's Sections of the Labour Party had for many years highlighted the difficulties faced by working-class wives and mothers who worked to supplement their family's income. See Pat Thane, 'The Women of the British Labour Party and Feminism, 1906-1945' in Harold Smith (ed.), *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* (1990), p. 124.

⁸¹ *The Mothers' Union Workers Paper* No. 343, July 1943, p. 159.

The charter went on to highlight the fact that working women who decided not to return to work following the birth of their child, thereby failing to pay insurance contributions, lost their right to full cash benefits for up to two and a half years. It concluded that

such conditions as this strike at the root of our national health, for they present a bonus to the mother who ignores her own well-being and her baby's health. Childbirth makes lifelong partial casualties of many working women, but it is not necessary and should not happen if only health insurance were extended to cover the unborn baby and the nursing mother.⁸²

The Mothers' Union and the Catholic Women's League publicly denounced the meagre maternity benefit paid to nursing mothers under the terms of the 1911 National Insurance Act.⁸³ As the 'Charter for Motherhood' emphasized, the benefit fell drastically short of providing financial support to mothers for the four-week period they were prohibited from paid work. The benefit was also limited to women workers who were themselves insured or the wives of insured men. These

⁸² *The Mothers' Union Workers Paper* No. 343, July 1943, p. 161.

⁸³ The Women's Co-operative Guild had led the campaign for the inclusion of maternity benefits in the 1911 National Health Insurance Act. Following strong protests from the Guild, the maternity benefit, which was at first made payable to the husbands of pregnant women, was in 1913 paid to the mother.

women were entitled to a once-off payment of two pounds (plus an additional two pounds if the woman herself was insured) to cover the medical and other expenses incurred by the birth. Unmarried women who were not insured or women whose husbands were unable to afford regular insurance payments were not entitled to the benefit. These women usually represented the poorest members of society, those in need of greatest support.

Outlining its demands for better maternity care, the Catholic Women's League asserted the right of all mothers to maternity benefit; even when their husbands were unemployed. The League looked favourably on the French system, where expectant and nursing mothers were entitled to weekly cash payments during their period of maternity leave, eight weeks before and after the birth of their babies.⁸⁴ The organisation believed that if such a system were introduced in England it would greatly improve the quality of mothers' lives. It would also give parents the incentive to have more children, an important consideration when the decline in the birth rate was a matter for national concern.

In response to the growing disquiet of women's societies, the National Council of Women set up a special sub-committee to investigate the problems encountered by women employees before and after childbirth. The committee, which first met in 1942, recommended that women workers should be paid maternity

⁸⁴ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 302, December 1936, p. 54..

benefit during the weeks before and after the birth of their baby. The committee advised that

normal pregnancy should entitle a woman to an adequate maternity benefit to be paid weekly to the woman in cash, to begin eight weeks before the expected birth of the child, and that such benefit should preclude a woman from employment.⁸⁵

The proposal that expectant and nursing mothers should be prevented from engaging in paid work for sixteen weeks was greeted with caution by some of the groups affiliated to the National Council of Women. Dr. Janet Aitkin, representing the Medical Women's Federation, argued that there was no need for a woman to stop work so early if she were in good health.⁸⁶ The Standing Joint Committee of Working Women's Organisations along with egalitarian feminist groups expressed concern that many less well-off women would be financially disadvantaged if excluded from paid work for such a long period.⁸⁷

It was for this reason that the National Council of Women's sub-committee stressed the importance of cash payments covering the entire sixteen weeks of

⁸⁵ Typed Report of the NCW Executive Committee, 20 March 1942 (TUC Archive, MSS. 821.5 (1)) Modern Record Centre, University of Warwick.

⁸⁶ National Council of Women: Oral Evidence to the Royal Commission on Population, 29 September 1944 (Evidence No. 4, Royal Commission on Population, 1944-1947).

⁸⁷ Harold Smith, 'British Feminism in the 1920s' in Harold Smith, (ed) *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* (1992), p. 60.

maternity leave. This measure would ensure that women could take advantage of their extended period of leave without suffering undue financial hardship. As the Mothers' Union's 'Charter for Motherhood' explained

It is highly advisable that she [the mother] should stay at home for the first eight weeks, both for her own sake and the child's, but the present regulations encourage her to start work directly after lying-in, and break the law to do so.⁸⁸

The establishment of the Inter-Departmental Committee on Social Insurance and Allied Services, in June 1941, gave women's organisations the opportunity to present their proposals for reform of the social welfare system. The committee, under the chairmanship of Sir William Beveridge, had been set up by the government to review existing social welfare services and make recommendations for reform.⁸⁹ As it transpired, the committee's final report, known as the Beveridge Report and published in 1942, represented the blueprint for the modern British welfare state.

It was crucial, therefore, that the views of women's organisations were made known to this influential committee. This was achieved through a memorandum drawn up by the National Council of Women and presented to the committee in February 1942. The

⁸⁸ *The Mothers' Union Workers' Paper*, No. 343, July 1942, p. 159.

⁸⁹ See David Vincent, *Poor Citizens* (1991), pp. 117-25.

National Council of Women's submission outlined in detail the changes the Council wished to see in the existing social welfare system. The Council strongly criticised the National Health Insurance Scheme for being too narrow and not providing adequate cash benefits for workers entitled to health insurance.⁹⁰ The fact that insured women paid fewer contributions and received lower rates of sickness and unemployment benefit than men was condemned as was the 'inadequate provision..made for the maintenance of the income of women, married or unmarried, during pregnancy, confinement and the early infancy of the baby'.⁹¹

The Council's memorandum also referred to the status of women under the various pension schemes and their eligibility for unemployment insurance. Any differentiation between the eligibility of men and women, whether for pensions or unemployment benefit, was unacceptable to the Council. Married women in particular had suffered as a result of discrimination in the arrangements for unemployment assistance and pensions. The assumption that the majority of women would cease to be gainfully employed on marriage resulted in married women workers being treated as a

⁹⁰ Male workers were entitled to a sickness benefit of 15 shillings while female workers received the lesser sum of 12 shillings on the grounds that women had fewer dependents than men.

⁹¹ NCW Memorandum for submission to the Inter-Departmental Committee on Social Insurance and Allied Services, February 1942. (T.U.C. Archive, MSS. 821.5(1)).

separate category under National Insurance regulations. This was an aberration which the National Council of Women wished to see abolished.

Inequalities experienced by women applying for unemployment assistance or qualifying for pension schemes persisted throughout the 1930s.⁹² As a result, women's organisations were anxious that any proposals for the reform of the social welfare system would eliminate the disparity between male and female workers. Traditional assumptions that married women did not need to work after marriage, backed up by the public service marriage bar, meant that many married women were unable to secure work during the 1930s. When these women applied for unemployment assistance they found that under the terms of the 1931 Anomalies Act they faced the double burden of having to prove that they were genuinely seeking work and that they had a realistic chance of securing employment in their local area. With the 'reasonable expectation' of work considerably less for married women than for single women and all male workers, married women were much more likely to be disqualified from receiving unemployment benefit during this period.⁹³

⁹² See Jane Lewis, 'Dealing with Dependency: State Practices and Social Realities, 1870-1945', pp. 26-30.

⁹³ Between 13 October 1931 and 3 December 1931, 48 per cent of women's claims were disallowed compared with 4 per cent of claims lodged by men. See Jane Lewis, 'Dealing with Dependency', p. 27.

Anomalies in relation to the pension schemes available for men and women also existed during the inter-war years. The 1929 Widows, Orphans and Old Age Contributory Pensions Act gave widows of insured men a pension at the age of fifty-five. Old age pensions were granted to insured women at the age of sixty-five. The National Council of Women felt that it was unfair for an able-bodied widow to be given a pension earlier than a single woman on the sole ground that she had been the dependent of an insured man. The Council claimed that widows' pensions, which took no account of a widow's ability to find work, undercut the wages of other women workers and kept the wages of women at a minimum.⁹⁴

In 1937, the National Council of Women welcomed the inclusion of married women in the Widows', Orphans' and Old Age Contributory Pensions (Voluntary Contributions) Act. Married women working at home were now entitled to make voluntary contributions which would entitle them to a pension at the age of sixty-five.⁹⁵ The Act, however, excluded women whose income exceeded £250 a year while men were allowed an annual income limit of up to £400. The Council argued that this anomaly would

not only seriously damage individual women,

⁹⁴ NCW Memorandum for submission to the Inter-Departmental Committee on Social Insurance and Allied Services.

⁹⁵ In 1940 the Old Age and Widows Pension Act lowered the pensionable age of women to sixty.

but introduces for the first time a new discrimination against women by making a difference of income level for admission into insurance based on the sex of the contributor.⁹⁶

The National Union of Townswomen's Guilds shared the Council's concern on this issue and its National Executive undertook to inform members of any further attempts to exclude dependent women from the National Pensions Scheme.⁹⁷ It was the underlying discrimination encountered by women applying for National Insurance benefits that prompted the National Council of Women's submission to the Committee on Social Insurance and Allied Services. As the Open Docr Council's representative to the National Council of Women explained:

It is finally as a matter of principle, a denial to women of the full status and responsibility which is accorded to men.. We ought to stir up women to be vocal in their own interests.⁹⁸

The Beveridge Report was published in November 1942 and was initially welcomed by the larger women's organisations. The National Federation of Women's

⁹⁶ *NCW Handbook 1937-1938* (1938), p. 109.

⁹⁷ *The Townswoman* Vol. 3, No. 10, January 1936, p. 2.

⁹⁸ *Report of the Council Meeting and Conference of the National Council of Women, Bournemouth, October 11-14 1937.* (1937), p. 62. .

Institutes greeted the report with a resolution recording its appreciation of

Sir William Beveridge's great work for social security and particularly of his recognition that health insurance for housewives and children's allowances are essential if family life is to be free from want.⁹⁹

This view was endorsed in *Home and Country* which stated enthusiastically that 'housewives have come into their own at last! The Beveridge Plan for social security..puts in its own words "a premium on marriage instead of penalising it".'¹⁰⁰

The National Union of Townswomen's Guilds acknowledged the Report's recognition of the work performed by the housewife as 'an improvement on the hitherto accepted view of those whose profession is described as "unpaid domestic duties"'.¹⁰¹ The YWCA gave full coverage to the Report in the March 1943 edition of its monthly supplement *News For Citizens*. Readers were given a brief summary of the recommendations contained in the Report with particular emphasis on the new category of citizen, the housewife. The article highlighted the fact that 'this is the

⁹⁹ The National Federation of Women's Institutes, *Keeping Ourselves Informed*, p. 148.

¹⁰⁰ *Home and Country*, Vol. 24, No. 2, February 1943, p. 36.

¹⁰¹ *The Townswoman* Vol, 10, No. 7, March 1943, p. 17.

first time that the housewife, as such, had been considered a person contributing to the community'.¹⁰²

As these comments suggest, the recognition of the unpaid work done by women in the home was an important breakthrough for non-feminist women's organisations. The Beveridge Report made it clear that

In any measure of social policy in which regard is had to the facts, the great majority of married women must be regarded as occupied on work which is vital though unpaid, without which their husbands could not do their paid work and without which the nation could not continue.¹⁰³

Married women working within the home had finally been acknowledged as worthwhile citizens. This was something which non-feminist women's organisations, through all their aims and activities, had tried to foster throughout the 1920s and 1930s. When Beveridge referred to the importance of women's work, the delight of non-feminist women's organisations was clearly audible.

Simple appreciation, however welcome, was not enough. The Beveridge Report addressed many of the grievances raised by the National Council of Women and went some way to rectify the discrimination and hardship faced by women under the social welfare

¹⁰² *News For Citizens* March 1943, p. 2. (YWCA Archive, MSS 243/1/9/3)

¹⁰³ William Beveridge, *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, (November 1942, Cmd. 6404, HMSO.), p. 49.

system. Adequate provision of maternity benefit and maternity leave was considered a question of 'national interest'. The expectant mother 'should be under no economic pressure to continue work as long as she can, and to return to it as soon as she can'.¹⁰⁴ The plan recommended that all mothers should receive a maternity grant of £4 on the birth of their baby. Women engaged in paid employment should be provided with a further cash benefit of 36 shillings per week to cover a period of thirteen weeks maternity leave.¹⁰⁵

This was a significant improvement on existing arrangements for expectant and nursing mothers, even if it did not extend the period of maternity leave to sixteen weeks as recommended by the National Council of Women and the Mothers' Union. Neither group protested against the shorter period of maternity leave and Beveridge's proposals were adopted in the 1946 National Insurance Act.¹⁰⁶

The establishment of a National Health and Rehabilitation Service was another aspect of the Beveridge Plan widely acclaimed by non-feminist women's organisations. Free health care made available to 'one

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Under the new legislation, women in paid employment were entitled to a maternity allowance for a period of thirteen weeks, beginning six weeks before the expected delivery date. Women working within the home whose husbands were insured qualified for maternity benefit covering a period of four weeks following the birth of their baby. *The National Insurance Act, 1946* (HMSO, 1946), pp. 15-16.

hundred per cent of the population' meant that uninsured housewives and mothers would be entitled to free medical attention under a scheme which would ensure that for every citizen there is available whatever medical treatment he requires, in whatever form he requires it, domiciliary or institutional, general, specialist or consultant, and will ensure also the provision of dental, ophthalmic and surgical appliances, nursing and midwifery and rehabilitation after accidents.¹⁰⁷

This provision satisfied the demands made by groups such as the National Federation of Women's Institutes and the Catholic Women's League that married women must be included in any health insurance scheme. The establishment of a National Health Service was seen as a major advance for women's health, in particular for married women, who had suffered the highest incidence of ill-health throughout the 1930s.

Having actively campaigned for radical health reforms, it was hardly surprising that non-feminist women's organisations welcomed the implementation of the National Health Service in 1948. The new scheme was described by the Women's Institute Movement as an important 'tightening up of the services offered' and a way to ensure that local health authorities maintained

¹⁰⁷ William Beveridge, *Social Insurance and Allied Services* p. 158.

an adequate service 'for the care of expectant mothers.'¹⁰⁸

Other reforms advocated by the Beveridge Committee included a revision of widows' pensions which would prevent able-bodied women receiving a full pension and earning an income at the same time. This meant that widows' pensions could not be used to undercut the wages of other working women.¹⁰⁹ The Report had successfully tackled three of the social insurance provisions highlighted by the National Council of Women. But this still left the important issue of a married woman's right to unemployment assistance and the right of women workers to equal unemployment and sickness benefits. In dealing with these questions, the Beveridge Committee ignored the National Council of Women's request that married women should not be treated as dependent citizens within the family. Because of this the Report attracted criticism not only from egalitarian feminist groups but also from the larger non-feminist women's organisations.

In his report, William Beveridge made it clear that his plan for social security 'treats married women as a special insurance class of occupied persons and treats man and wife as a team.' This meant that

¹⁰⁸ *Home and Country* Vol, 30, No. 1, January 1948, p. 2.

¹⁰⁹ The Beveridge Report advised that widows under the age of sixty should be entitled to a pension of 36 shillings per week for thirteen weeks. Widows with children of school age were entitled to an additional guardian's benefit of 24 shillings, subject to a deduction for any earnings.

although the work done by housewives was recognised and marriage was considered a 'team effort', under the social welfare system married women would continue to be classified as their husband's dependent. Working women who contributed towards National Insurance lost their right to unemployment and disability benefit on marriage on the basis that their husbands were now responsible for their welfare.¹¹⁰ Married men received additional unemployment and disability benefit to cover the additional cost of supporting their dependent wives and children.

Women who continued to work after marriage were regarded as an oddity and were not treated in the same way as single working women. Married women workers would not be required to pay insurance contributions after their marriage and so were not entitled to unemployment or disability benefit. Those who did opt to continue paying insurance contributions would receive lower benefits than their male colleagues. Beveridge assumed that married women would have children and would then be entitled to maternity benefit. This would compensate for the fact that women workers received lower sickness and unemployment benefits. In his report, Beveridge made the assumption that women would choose between marriage and a career. He wrote that 'the attitude of the housewife to gainful

¹¹⁰ Beveridge proposed that women would be given a 'marriage grant' to compensate for the loss of their benefit rights on marriage. This proposal, however, was not included in the 1946 National Insurance Act.

employment outside the home is not and should not be the same as that of the single woman. She has other duties'.¹¹¹

The National Council of Women rejected Beveridge's proposals for the insurance of married women. Following a special meeting of the Council's Executive in December 1943 a list of objections to the Beveridge Report was forwarded to the Government. The Council called for the direct insurance of the married woman, who like any other citizen, had the right to cash benefits when she was disabled by sickness or accident. Married women who had contributed towards their pension should also have the right to a retirement pension at sixty instead of being included in their husband's pension when he retired at the age of sixty-five.

For married women workers, the Council argued that it was wrong for them to lose their insurance rights on marriage. All women workers, whether they were married or not, should have to pay compulsory contributions at the same rate as male workers. This would then entitle them to the same level of benefit as men. Through its objections, the National Council of Women was demanding nothing less than complete equality for men and women under any new scheme for National Insurance.

The Council based most of its recommendations on the leaflet *The Woman Citizen and Social Security* (1943), which was written by two feminist activists,

¹¹¹ William Beveridge, *Social Insurance and Allied Services* p. 51.

Elizabeth Abbott and Katherine Bompas.¹¹² In it they argued that the Beveridge Report was responsible for perpetuating the

denial of any personal status to a woman because she is married, the denial of her independent personality within marriage..far from putting a premium on marriage, as it purports to do, the Plan penalises both the married woman and marriage itself.¹¹³

Often referred to as the 'feminist' reaction to the Beveridge Report it is significant that the National Council of Women, representing both feminist and non-feminist women's groups, reproduced almost word for word the criticisms made by Abbott and Bompas. Non-feminist women's organisations were quite willing to accept any recognition of women's work within the home. In common with feminist groups, however, they were unwilling to tolerate any discrimination against women because of their perceived roles as wife and mother.

¹¹² Elizabeth Abbott was a founder member of the Open Door Council (1926) set up to campaign for equal pay, equal status and equal opportunity for women workers. Katherine Bompas was active member of the egalitarian feminist society the Women's Freedom League (1907). See Harold Smith, 'British Feminism in the 1920s', p. 49, 59.

¹¹³ Elizabeth Abbott and Katherine Bompas, *The Woman Citizen and Social Security: A Criticism of the Proposals made in the Beveridge Report as they affect Women* (October 1943), p. 4. (Pamphlet Collection), The Fawcett Library.

It was the continued 'special treatment' of married women which prompted one high-ranking member of the National Federation of Women's Institutes openly to criticise Beveridge. In an article published in the August 1944 edition of *Home and Country*, Cicely McCall, the Federation's Educational Organiser, objected to the Government's White Paper on Social Security.¹¹⁴ The White Paper incorporated many of Beveridge's reforms, including his proposals for the insurance of married women.

In her article, McCall argued that it was wrong to exclude housewives from paying National Insurance. She wished to make it clear to readers that this would prevent married women from claiming sickness and disability benefits. She also questioned the provision of a £20 death grant when the maternity grant was worth only £4 and the fact that working mothers were to receive a higher rate of maternity benefit than mothers who worked at home.¹¹⁵ McCall urged that members should consider these anomalies, which if passed into law would mark the continuation of discrimination against women in the social welfare system.

This critique of Beveridge did make some impact on the general membership of the Women's Institutes. In

¹¹⁴ Cicely McCall, a journalist and social worker, was also editor of *Women in Council* during this period. In 1945 she resigned from the National Federation of Women's Institutes to stand as a Labour Party candidate.

¹¹⁵ *Home and Country* Vol. 28, No. 8, August 1944, p. 161.

1945, the organisation passed a resolution calling on the government to 'include in their National Insurance Scheme some cash sickness benefit for all non-gainfully employed married women and non-gainfully employed widows'.¹¹⁶ Following up on this resolution, members of the Institute's Education and Public Questions Committee met with officials of the Ministry of National Insurance. The Institute's representatives argued that married women should be classified as self-employed workers entitled to sickness benefit under the proposed National Insurance Act. The Ministry rejected these claims, insisting that insurance payments were intended to cover loss of earnings. This stipulation excluded housewives who 'must regard themselves as dependent on and insurable through their husbands'.¹¹⁷

By the late 1940s, it had become clear that the Beveridge Report was a mixed blessing for married women. The Report did acknowledge the work done by women both in the home and the workplace. It promoted the ideal of 'companionate marriage' where husband and wife were to be considered equal partners. Yet when it came actually to catering for the needs of women, the Report reaffirmed the dependent position of married women and denied women workers the same rights to insurance as their male colleagues. Nevertheless, by the end of the 1940s, women had access to much improved

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ *National Federation of Women's Institutes 30th Annual Report, 1946* (1946). p. 37.

maternity services and paid maternity leave. Added to this, the general health of all women was to be greatly enhanced by the provision of free health care under the National Health Service.

These factors did much to improve the quality of hundreds of thousands of women's lives. Non-feminist women's organisations, representing the interests of large numbers of women, had played a crucial part in the fight for these services. The efforts of these societies to highlight the day-to-day concerns of women and mothers, and their willingness to demand that the state provide for women's needs, has not received the recognition it deserves.

THE CAMPAIGN FOR FAMILY ALLOWANCES

Beveridge's report on *Social Security and Allied Services* contained one other recommendation long fought for by women's organisations. For over twenty-five years women had participated in the campaign for the introduction of family allowances which would provide mothers with a degree of economic independence and their children with greater economic security. Whilst Beveridge's scheme provided an allowance for each child after the first to be paid to 'those responsible for the care of children', it was not perceived as a wage for mothers and was set firmly in the context of children's allowances. Indeed, Beveridge suggested that children's allowances 'can help to restore the birth rate' and benefit mothers and housewives who 'have vital work to do in ensuring the adequate

continuance of the British race and of British ideals in the world'.¹¹⁸

Despite the important reforms proposed by the Beveridge Committee it was clear that married women would continue to be regarded as dependents, primarily responsible for the nurture of future citizens. This was an assumption which angered both feminist and non-feminist women's groups. The fact that the majority of women would marry and become mothers was not at issue. What women's groups demanded was the recognition of women as citizens in their own right, entitled to every advantage of democratic citizenship. Family allowances, as envisaged by women's societies, were one way of providing mothers with a degree of economic independence, paid in return for their work within the home.

Eleanor Rathbone, who spearheaded the campaign for family allowances, was determined to see an end to the financial dependency of women in marriage. In her influential book *The Disinherited Family*, published in 1924, she had warned of the dangers of economic dependency which placed wives at their husbands' mercy. It was argued that control of the family's finances gave men the opportunity to dominate their wives and set themselves up as the 'tin God of the family'. Having witnessed at first hand the beneficial effects of separation allowances, paid to the wives of

¹¹⁸ William Beveridge, *Social Security and Allied Services*, p. 53 & 154.

servicemen during the First World War, Rathbone was convinced that a universal system of state payments to mothers should be introduced.¹¹⁹

In *The Disinherited Family*, Rathbone argued that the traditional family wage, paid to the male breadwinner for his own upkeep and that of his wife and children was not an effective way of supporting a family. Not only was the 'family wage' an important factor in denying women equal pay, on the grounds that women did not have a family to support, it was also wasteful because all male workers received a 'family wage' regardless of their marital status or the number of children in the family. This meant that large numbers of men received a wage for their 'phantom wives and children' whilst the children of larger families were not included in the family wage and were effectively disinherited.¹²⁰

From the early 1920s, the campaign for family allowances went far beyond the question of a woman's right to economic independence. The introduction of

¹¹⁹ The payment of separation allowances during the war years contributed to an increase in the living standards of the wives and children of servicemen. See Jane Lewis, 'Models of equality for women: the case of state support for children in twentieth-century Britain', p. 82. See also Susan Pedersen, 'Gender, Welfare, and Citizenship in Britain during the Great War', *American Historical Review* 95, 4, (October 1944).

¹²⁰ Rathbone pointed out that if a family wage was paid to male workers on the assumption that each had five children, there would be 3 million phantom wives and over 16 million phantom children provided for whilst over a million actual dependents in larger families would not receive any financial support at all.

family allowances touched on the important area of child poverty, the equal pay debate and the survival of the 'family wage', which trade unionists argued was the safest way of ensuring adequate pay rates for male workers.¹²¹ Fears about the decline in population meant that family allowances were also seen as a way to encourage women to have more children, a fact clearly illustrated in the Beveridge Report.

Eleanor Rathbone and the Family Endowment Society absorbed many of these diverse views.¹²² A member of the Children's Minimum Council, Rathbone realised the importance of family allowances, paid in respect of each child, in combating child poverty and malnutrition. As a feminist, she accepted that allowances could not be paid directly to wives for their service within the home. Anxious though she was to remove the economic dependency of all women, there was a real danger that married women would find it even more difficult to get a job if they were seen to earn a wage for their housework. In her evidence to the

¹²¹ For a detailed account of the campaign for family allowances see: John Macnicol, *The Movement for Family Allowances* (1980) and 'Family Allowances and Less Eligibility' in Pat Thane (ed), *The Origins of British Social Policy* (1978), Jane Lewis, 'Models of equality for women: the case of state support for children in twentieth-century Britain', in Gisela Bock and Pat Thane (eds.), *Maternity and Gender Policies* (1991) and Hilary Land, 'Eleanor Rathbone and the Economy of the Family' in Harold Smith (ed), *British Feminism in the Twentieth-Century* (1990).

¹²² Eleanor Rathbone had set up the Family Endowment Committee in 1917 which in 1925 became the Family Endowment Society with William Beveridge as President.

Beveridge Committee, Rathbone explained 'we felt the case is really stronger if you leave out the wife.'¹²³ Family allowances, paid to the mother on behalf of her children, was a compromise which would give them a degree of economic freedom and ensure that the welfare of children was protected.¹²⁴

The principle of family allowances was supported by a wide range of women's organisations representing working-class and middle-class women. The Women's Co-operative Guild and women within the Labour Party had been amongst the earliest advocates of the 'state endowment of motherhood'.¹²⁵ As the campaign for a scheme of allowances gathered pace throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the larger non-feminist women's organisations agreed to offer their support. These groups, with memberships consisting largely of wives and mothers, were in favour of payments to mothers which acknowledged their domestic work and contributed towards the upkeep of their children.

¹²³ Hilary Land, 'Eleanor Rathbone and the Economy of the Family', p. 111.

¹²⁴ The Family Endowment Society did not campaign for the right of unmarried mothers to receive an allowance for their children.

¹²⁵ During the 1930s efforts by Labour women to have family allowances adopted as party policy were repeatedly frustrated. This was because of the belief held by many within the party that family allowances would undermine the principle of the 'family wage' and so weaken the wage bargaining ability of male workers. See John Macnicol, *Family Allowances* and Pat Thane, 'Visions of gender in the making of the British welfare state', pp. 107-114.

Societies such as the National Federation of Women's Institutes, the Mothers' Union and the National Federation of Townswomen's Guilds were determined to show that the work carried out by wives and mothers was a skilled and professional occupation. The National Federation of Women's Institutes argued that

women doing their own traditional and specific job of running a household and bringing up a family should be considered as important, as responsible and as much worthy of respect as women doing the kind of job..done equally well by either sex..their work is just as vital if not more so.¹²⁶

The Mothers' Union emphasised the importance of a woman receiving an equal share of her husband's income in return for her work within the home

It is not for a girl to have to ask her husband for money as a favour; this is specially intolerable to the women of to-day who have most probably earned an income of their own before marriage.¹²⁷

Always wary of becoming embroiled in political controversy or becoming too closely identified with 'feminist' causes, non-feminist women's organisations had no qualms about being associated with the Family Endowment Society. The society, unaffiliated to any

¹²⁶ *Home and Country* Vol 14, No. 6, June 1942, p. 147.

¹²⁷ *The Mothers' Union Journal* No. 166, September 1936, p. 19.

political party, had managed to avoid the 'taint of feminism', not least by appointing William Beveridge as president. This move demonstrated that the principle of family allowances was no longer an exclusively feminist issue.¹²⁸

Although the National Council of Women backed the Family Endowment Campaign as early as 1926, it was the Catholic Women's League which was most outspoken in its support for family allowances during the 1930s. It suggested that the introduction of family allowances would curtail the use of birth control by making it easier for mothers to afford larger families. In 1936, the League confirmed this view by stating that 'birth prevention is the wrong method of attacking social evils, and that everyone should rather support such remedies as better housing for the working classes and some form of family allowances.'¹²⁹

The League also hoped that the prospect of family allowances would help prevent women from resorting to abortion, an even greater sin in the eyes of the Church. To this end, the League envisaged allowances as a 'living wage' paid to married and unmarried mothers to assist them in the rearing of their children. To include unmarried mothers in the scheme for family allowances was a radical proposal, notably absent from the agenda of the Family Endowment Society.

¹²⁸ Jane Lewis, 'Models of Equality for women', p. 85.

¹²⁹ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 295, May 1936, p. 38.

The motive of the Catholic Women's League was to encourage women to have children but the fact that the payment was to be made to the mother whether she was married or single is significant. In many ways the League's view upheld the original and feminist belief in the state endowment of motherhood with women entitled to a 'wage' from the state in return for their service as mothers.

It was unlikely that a system of family allowances would be introduced by either the Conservative or Labour administrations of the 1920s and 1930s. With the Labour Party divided over the relationship between family allowances and wage rates and the Conservatives reluctant to finance expensive schemes of public welfare, the campaign for family allowances had little chance of success.¹³⁰ With the outbreak of war in 1939, this situation altered dramatically. The evacuation of children, particularly from inner-city areas, increased public awareness about the extent of child poverty. Accounts of malnourished and stunted children arriving in reception areas brought to light the devastating effects of unemployment and privation.

Anxiety about the health of children, compounded by fears concerning population levels when young men were being sent into battle, did much to persuade the National Government to introduce family allowances. When Beveridge recommended allowances for children it

¹³⁰ See Pat Thane, 'Visions of gender in the British welfare state', p. 110.

was clear that he was more concerned about the population question and child poverty than about implementing a radical scheme of 'wages for mothers'. This fact should not detract, however, from the importance of Beveridge's proposals which three years later provided the blueprint for the Family Allowances Act.

Non-feminist women's groups, encouraged by the Beveridge proposals and increasingly concerned about the welfare of women and children during wartime, put pressure on the government to introduce the necessary legislation. In October 1941, the National Council of Women sent a declaration to the Government urging that to

preserve the welfare of the children of the nation the National Council of Women calls upon the Government to introduce a universal scheme of Family Allowances, paid by the State at the rate of six shillings per child, to be paid to the mother.¹³¹

Significantly, the Council's resolution emphasised the needs of children, not mothers. In the context of the war years this displayed a realistic approach to the question of family allowances. However, the demand that allowances be paid directly to the mother was crucial. In evidence to the Royal Commission on Population, representatives of the National Council of

¹³¹ *NCW Handbook 1941-42* (1942), p. 64.

Women emphasised that payment to the mother 'was a gesture of recognition to the mother by the state'.¹³²

The Mothers' Union became actively involved in the Family Endowment Society's campaign in 1941 when representatives attended two conferences on the subject held that year. The Union, always anxious to promote family life and the welfare of women and children, saw family allowances as an ideal way of protecting families from hardship. An article in *The Mothers' Union Workers' Paper* pointed out that 'the State is making real efforts to promote family life through better housing and the proposed schemes for family allowances.'¹³³

The Union's commitment to family allowances was made clear in its evidence to the Royal Commission on Population, submitted in March 1944. Its memorandum listed family allowances as one way to increase the birth rate as they would provide young couples with the financial security to start a family.¹³⁴ In their evidence to the Commission, the Union's delegates insisted that the allowance must be paid to the mother even though it had come to light that not all members were agreed on this proposal.

¹³² *The Royal Commission on Population, Oral Evidence 1944-1949* (Evidence No. 4, 29 September 1944.).

¹³³ *The Mothers' Union Workers' Paper* No. 345, September 1942, p. 126.

¹³⁴ *The Royal Commission on Population, Written Evidence 1944-1949* (Evidence No. 11, The Mothers' Union, March 1944).

A questionnaire sent to diocesan officials indicated that the majority of members wanted allowances to be paid to mothers, yet it had been brought to the attention of the Central President, Rosamond Fisher, that some younger members were in favour of fathers being paid the money. Mrs. Fisher admitted that she found this very odd and could not understand it. In an attempt to explain this view it had been suggested that after five years of war some mothers were tired of shouldering all the responsibility for the family and hoped their husbands would take over when they returned home.¹³⁵

Supporting the majority's wishes of the Mothers' Union, Mrs. Fisher explained that 'we think it ought to be paid to the mother because she is the person really responsible for the child and for the spending of the money.'¹³⁶ On a more personal note, the Central President suggested that family allowances paid to the mother would smooth the way for mothers returning to their homes after the war. She felt it unfair to expect women who earned their own income during the war to 'relinquish that bit of independence they get from money they earn for themselves'.¹³⁷

In June 1944 the government set out its proposals for family allowances with the publication of the

¹³⁵ *The Royal Commission on Population, Oral Evidence 1944-1949* (Evidence No. 5, The Mothers' Union, 13 October 1944).

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

Family Allowances Bill. The principal reason for introducing the Bill at this time was to curb inflationary wage levels with cash benefits for children. Family allowances were seen as a way of achieving this goal whilst at the same time addressing the problem of child poverty and the low birth rate.¹³⁸ Much to the consternation of stalwart campaigner Eleanor Rathbone and numerous women's groups, it became clear that the government intended to pay the allowance to the father.¹³⁹

Individual members of the women's organisations were urged to write to their local M.P. and to the press demanding that family allowances be paid to the mother. This action was essential if the government and the country were to be left in no doubt about 'the strength of women's opinion.'¹⁴⁰ Eleanor Rathbone wrote to the National Federation of Women's Institutes appealing to members to voice their discontent. In a letter published in *Home and Country* she explained that the

¹³⁸ Jane Lewis, 'Models of equality for women: the case of state benefit for children in twentieth-century Britain', p. 86.

¹³⁹ John Macnicol has written that the Cabinet was against paying the allowance to the mother because it 'might imply a recognition that she was responsible for the child's maintenance and might thus provide a demand for an increase in the allowance sufficient to enable her to discharge the responsibility in full.' John Macnicol, 'The Family Allowances Movement 1918-1945' (Ph.D Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1978), p. 469.

¹⁴⁰ *Home and Country* Vol. 26, No. 10, October 1944, p. 168.

payment to the mother has a symbolic value as a sign that the nation thinks of her not just as a 'dependent' which literally means a hanger on, but as standing on her own two feet as the children's natural guardian.¹⁴¹

The Mothers' Union was spurred into action by Eleanor Rathbone and the Family Endowment Society. At its request, the Union wrote to Lord Woolton in June 1944 urging the immediate introduction of family allowances. In a second letter that month the Union impressed upon the Minister the importance of paying the allowance to the mother and insisted that this proviso be included in the Bill.¹⁴² Once again, the Mothers' Union had showed its willingness to bring pressure to bear on the government when the welfare of women and children was at stake.

The efforts of Eleanor Rathbone and women's societies, including the Mothers' Union, the National Council of Women and the National Federation of Women's Institutes, to reverse the government's decision on payments to the father ended in a resounding triumph. Facing an onslaught of criticism from such influential women's organisations, the government was forced to capitulate. When the Family Allowances Act was passed

¹⁴¹ *Home and Country* Vol. 26, No. 8, August 1944, p. 126.

¹⁴² Minutes of the Mothers' Union Central Council, June 1944 (Central Council Minutes, Vol. XII, 1943-50).

into law later that same year it was stipulated that payments would be made to the mother.¹⁴³

By the end of the 1940s, non-feminist women's groups had contributed towards a number of far-reaching advances in the struggle to secure adequate social welfare benefits for women. Family allowances, improved maternity services and free health care provided women, and in particular mothers, with some of the basic rights of citizenship. It is true that the government introduced these reforms with other considerations in mind. The introduction of family allowances had more to do with controlling wage levels than acknowledging women's work within the home. Likewise, improvements in the maternity services were motivated by the high maternal mortality rate and falling population levels rather than signifying recognition of women's service as mothers.

Nevertheless it is clear that the impact of these reforms did make a difference to the quality of women's lives. Whatever the motive family allowances paid to the mother, even at the lower rate of five shillings a week, did provide women with an independent source of income within the family. At the same time maternity

¹⁴³ The Family Allowances Act paid a rate of five shillings a week in respect of all children after the first. This sum was lower than the eight shillings proposed by Beveridge and the Mothers' Union and the six shilling rate suggested by the National Council of Women. Women's organisations were also disappointed that the first child was not entitled to a weekly allowance.

services and paid maternity leave gave women the support they needed as mothers and in doing so acknowledged their service to society in caring for children, the citizens of the future.

The significance of these reforms for women was first recognised by radical groups of women including the Women's Co-operative Guild, the Fabian Women's Group and various individuals active in feminist and Labour circles. However, it must be acknowledged that it was the participation of the more conservative middle-class women's organisations in calling for change which provided not only the respectability but the sheer mass of numbers needed to launch successful national campaigns. The Mothers' Union, the Women's Institutes and the Townswomen's Guilds joined forces with other organisations in demanding that women's contribution to society, in the home and in the workplace, be recognised and rewarded.

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WOMEN + CITIZENSHIP: A STUDY OF
NON-FEMINIST WOMEN'S SOCIETIES AND THE WOMEN'S
MOVEMENT IN ENGLAND
CHAPTER FIVE

192 - 1950

ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP FOR WOMEN: PEACE, WAR AND PROTESTS

Having considered the role played by non-feminist women's societies in demanding social welfare reforms, it is time to explore their part in four diverse but nonetheless important endeavours. These were: the inter-war peace movement, the war effort and the campaign for equal pay and women police. Anxious to avoid any repetition of the First World War, non-feminist women's societies were actively involved in the inter-war peace movement and encouraged their members to support the work of the League of Nations. Yet when war broke out for a second time in 1939, each group quickly faced the reality of the situation and got involved in voluntary war work pledging 'to relax no effort until victory is won'.¹

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At the same time non-feminist women's societies continued to campaign for legislative reforms which would enhance the lives of women and children. Throughout the inter-war period the National Council of Women and the YWCA joined with feminist women's groups calling on the Government and private employers to introduce equal pay for equal work. During the 1920s and 1930s women's societies also supported the National Council of Women's campaign for the employment of women police to deal with cases involving women and children. These two areas of special interest took on even greater urgency following the outbreak of war and

¹ *Women in Council* No. 41, November 1943, p. 1.

became the focus of important wartime campaigns. This study will reveal that organisations such as the Mothers' Union and the National Federation of Women's Institutes were involved in a number of national campaigns in which women as citizens not only had a vested interest but had an important part to play.

THE CAMPAIGN FOR PEACE

Support for the League of Nations, pacifism and disarmament was frequently expressed by non-feminist women's societies throughout the inter-war period. This followed a long tradition of women's involvement in the peace movement which dated back to the first decades of the nineteenth century.² It was during the First World War, however, that a more distinct women's peace movement emerged with the establishment of the Women's International League³ in 1915 and the Women's Peace Crusade one year later.⁴

² For a full account of women's involvement in the peace movement before and during the First World War see Jill Liddington, *The Long Road to Greenham: Feminism and Anti-Militarism in Britain since 1820* (London, 1989) and James Hinton, *Protests and Visions: Peace Politics in 20th Century Britain* (1989).

³ The Women's International League was set up in 1915 by a group of notable suffragists and feminists including Helena Swanwick, Margaret Bondfield and Kathleen Courtney. The League hoped to link together the suffrage and pacifist movement on the grounds that 'only free women can build up the peace which is to be, themselves understanding the eternal strife engendered by domination.' See Jill Liddington, *The Long Road to Greenham* p. 106.

⁴ The Women's Peace Crusade was founded in Glasgow in the summer of 1916. The Crusade attracted a majority

At the end of the war the franchise was extended to women over thirty and, as Jill Liddington has suggested, many women peace activists felt that the need for women-only peace groups had passed. The League of Nations Union, set up by the League of Nations in October 1918, provided women with the opportunity of joining an international peace organisation for both men and women. The Union's central aim was to promote arbitration in international disputes and encourage multilateral disarmament agreements in the hope of preventing future wars. In the years after the First World War, the League of Nations Union proved popular in Britain with its membership reaching 255,469 within six years. By 1931 this figure had increased to 406,868.⁵

Although the League of Nations Union attracted many former suffragists, including Vera Brittain and Maude Royden, it was the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) which maintained the direct link between pacifism and feminism first established during the First World War.⁶ The British Section of WILPF, led by Kathleen Courtney, had two

of working-class women drawn from local suffragette groups and the Independent Labour Party as well as co-operative and religious organisations. *Ibid.*, pp. 107 ff.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 132. For the origins of the League of Nations Union see James Hinton, *Protests and Visions*, pp. 75-80.

⁶ The Women's International League was renamed the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom in 1919.

clear objectives: 'the settlement of disputes by some means other than war and the emancipation of women'.⁷ Like other feminist groups WILPF found it difficult to attract new members during the inter-war period.⁸

One explanation for its inability to attract a wider membership was the fact that many middle-class and non-feminist organisations for women showed a preference for the newly formed League of Nations Union. The fact that groups such as the National Council of Women and the Mothers' Union did not support WILPF illustrates once again the reluctance of non-feminist women's groups to join overtly feminist bodies. As members of the Women's Advisory Council of the League of Nations Union, non-feminist women's organisations were able to express their support for peace and reconciliation without becoming embroiled in feminist issues.⁹

By 1934, the Mothers' Union, the Catholic Women's League, YWCA and the National Council of Women were all represented on the Women's Advisory Council of the

⁷ *The Hutchinson Women's Who's Who* (London, 1934), p. 851.

⁸ By the early 1920s British membership of WILPF had fallen to just 3,000 women. In 1923, it allowed women's sections of the Labour Party and branches of the Women's Co-operative Guild to affiliate to the League which provided a much-needed boost in membership. See Jill Liddington, *The Long Road to Greenham* p. 140.

⁹ The objective of the Women's Advisory Council was to secure the support of women for the work of the League of Nations and ensure that the views of women were represented in Geneva.

League of Nations Union.¹⁰ Maria Ogilvie Gordon of the National Council of Women served as Vice-President of the British Union and other notable members included Lady Emmott, Vice-President of the National Council and Nancy Tennant of the National Federation of Women's Institutes. The National Union of Townswomen's Guilds declined an invitation to join the Union on the grounds that the League's work was too 'political'.¹¹

The YWCA and the National Federation of Women's Institutes publicly pledged their support for the League of Nations during the 1920s. In 1929, a resolution from the Berkshire Federation of Women's Institutes urged every 'Women's Institute to study the work of the League of Nations and to consider how best to further the cause of world peace'.¹² The YWCA focussed on the need for disarmament arguing that 'great armies and navies and other instruments of

¹⁰ The National Council of Women worked closely with the International Council of Women's Peace Committee under the chairmanship of Dame Elizabeth Cadbury. The International Women's Suffrage Alliance (1902), later renamed the International Alliance of Women was also very involved in the promotion of peace and the League of Nations during the 1930s. See Arnold Whittick, *Woman Into Citizen* (1979) and Carol Miller, 'Lobbying the League: Women's International Organisations and the League of Nations', (D.Phil thesis, Oxford, 1992).

¹¹ In 1937, members of local Townswomen's Guilds were reminded of the Guild's policy of providing 'a common meeting ground' and instructed not to join local branches of the League of Nations Union. *National Union of Townswomen's Guilds Annual Report 1937* (1937), p. 23.

¹² *Keeping Ourselves Informed: Our Concern, Our Resolutions, Our Actions* (1981), p. 82.

warfare are a direct menace to the peace of the world and that their upkeep imposes an unwarrantable and intolerable burden upon the tax-payer.¹³

Although non-feminist women's societies declined to join WILPF, they were willing to work with the League to promote the cause of peace and the recommendations of the League of Nations. When Austen Chamberlain, the Conservative Foreign Secretary, rejected the Geneva Protocol in 1926 twenty-eight women's groups came together to organise a women's peace pilgrimage in support of international arbitration and disarmament. Marches and meetings were held all over the country culminating with a huge rally in Hyde Park on 19 June 1927 attended by over 10,000 women.¹⁴

The Peace Pilgrimage sent a clear message to the government that many thousands of women supported the work of the League of Nations for peace and disarmament. The organisers of the Pilgrimage hoped that the Government would co-operate fully with the League's plans for an international conference on disarmament.¹⁵ In the wake of the Peace Pilgrimage's success, it was decided to set up a permanent Women's

¹³ YWCA Memorandum on Disarmament, (nd.), (YWCA Archive, MSS. 243/13/3).

¹⁴ WILPF and the National Council of Women played a key role in organising the pilgrimage. Jill Liddington *The Long Road to Greenham*, p. 144-47.

¹⁵ The Foreign Secretary met with Helena Swanwick and Maude Royden, representatives of the Peace Pilgrimage and assured them that Britain would support the Disarmament Conference. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

Peace Crusade to facilitate co-operation between a wide range of women's groups involved in the peace campaign. Despite the fact that the Peace Crusade operated from WILPF's central office in London, it did not incorporate a feminist agenda. As a result, non-feminist women's organisations such as the National Council of Women appeared to have no objection to be associated with the work of the Women's Peace Crusade.¹⁶

The breakdown of the 1927 Naval Disarmament Conference led the National Council of Women to pass an emergency resolution reaffirming the Council's commitment to peace and disarmament, asserting that 'all progress in social reform depends on the maintenance of peace'. The Council urged the government and member states of the League of Nations to 'reconcile points of divergence' so as to 'enable the League to guarantee security as the guardian of the common peace'.¹⁷ It is significant that the National Council of Women regarded world peace as a prerequisite for social betterment. The idea that lasting peace was linked with social and moral progress helps explain why non-feminist women's organisations were so eager to participate in the inter-war peace movement.

Concern for social stability and the preservation of family life prompted the Mothers' Union to appeal directly to the Prime Minister on the question of

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 306.

¹⁷ *NCW Handbook 1928-1929* (1929), p. 75.

peace. The Union sent a resolution to Ramsay MacDonald in 1932 informing him that

The Central Council of the Mothers' Union representing as it does a large proportion of Christian motherhood of the Empire desires to thank his Majesty's Government for steps they have already taken for promotion of peace and better understanding between the Nations. The Mothers' Union recognises that it is only on this foundation that the family and the homes of the Nation can be safeguarded.¹⁸

The Executive Committee of the Mothers' Union was adamant that the Union should not be represented on peace demonstrations and processions which were thought to be 'outside the province of the Three Objects'. But as peace was considered essential for the protection of family life, the Mothers' Union's Executive urged local branches to teach members about the 'power of prayer for world peace'.¹⁹

Similarly, the National Council of Women and the YWCA hoped to inform and educate their members about the importance of peace and disarmament. In 1928, the National Council of Women undertook 'to impress upon its members the supreme importance of an active and

¹⁸ Minutes of the Mothers' Union Central Council, December 1932, p. 12. (Central Council Minutes, Vol. X, 1932-37).

¹⁹ Minutes of the Mothers' Union Central Council, June 1938, p. 66. (Central Council Minutes, Vol. XI, 1937-42).

well-informed public opinion to ensure the success of the forthcoming World Conference on Disarmament'.²⁰ In 1933, the YWCA reported that International Education classes, discussing the implications of disarmament, arbitration and the role of the League of Nations, were being held in many centres throughout the country. These discussions and debates were regarded as 'a valuable means of creating and developing intelligent public opinion'.²¹ Even the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds, always anxious to avoid 'political' issues, encouraged local guilds to make a study of world peace

It seems to us that there is a duty incumbent on all citizens to try to understand the present position, what are the problems to be solved in the near future and in the long future, and which of the many points of view (if any) they will support.²²

In February 1932, when the League of Nations Disarmament Conference finally opened in Geneva, it was universally welcomed by women's organisations in England. The National Council of Women repeated its call for an all-round reduction of weapons and urged that 'a concentrated national effort be made to ensure that the Conference shall result in immediate reductions of the Army, Navy and Air Forces of the

²⁰ *NCW Handbook 1928-29* (1929), p. 75.

²¹ *The YWCA Annual Review 1933* (1933), p. 5.

²² *The Townswoman* Vol. 5, No. 11, November 1938, p. 12.

world'.²³ In Geneva, the signatures of eight million women supporting arbitration and disarmament, collected by women's organisations in Europe and America, were presented to the Conference.²⁴

In spite of the optimism expressed by women's groups, the Disarmament Conference was quickly overtaken by disagreements which resulted in stalemate. Confidence in the ability of the League of Nations to solve the impasse had declined following the outbreak of war between Japan and China in September 1931, hostilities which the League had been unable to prevent. As a result of these underlying tensions and Germany's withdrawal from the Conference, the meeting was forced to adjourn without any agreement on disarmament having been reached.²⁵

In May 1933 the National Council of Women organised a mass demonstration at Westminster in support of the Disarmament Conference. A statement was issued declaring that 'a fresh competition in armaments, with the inevitable suggestion of war, can only be averted by conclusion of an international disarmament convention.'²⁶ Although the Conference reconvened in January 1933 hopes for an agreement between the nations were shattered when nine months later

²³ *NCW Handbook 1931-32* (1932), p. 76.

²⁴ Amongst the organisations involved in collecting signatures for the peace petition were WILPF, the International Council of Women the YWCA.

²⁵ See Charles Mowat *Britain Between The Wars* p. 423.

²⁶ *NCW Handbook 1934-35* (1935).

Hitler ordered the withdrawal of Germany from the Conference and from the League of Nations.

The deteriorating situation in Europe led women's societies to reconsider their position on the international question. WILPF continued to support disarmament and pacifism despite the fact that Germany was rapidly rearming throughout 1933. Spending on arms in Britain had decreased since the 1920s, but in July 1934 the government decided to reverse its disarmament policy and build up the strength of the RAF.²⁷ In light of these developments it is significant that the National Council of Women abandoned its call for disarmament and focused instead on the peace-keeping endeavours of the League of Nations. In 1935, the National Council passed a resolution claiming that 'only by maintaining and strengthening the collective system based on the Covenant of the League of Nations can peace be secured and civilisation saved'.²⁸

During the early 1930s, public support for the League of Nations in Britain appeared to be strong. This was reflected in the results of a Peace Ballot backed by the League of Nations Union. Members of WILPF, the Women's Co-operative Guild, the National Council of Women and the YWCA were amongst the thousands of women who visited 11,640,066 homes during the Winter of 1934 and the Spring of 1935.

²⁷ Britain had reduced spending on arms from £116 million in 1926-27 to £102.7 million in 1930-31. Charles Mowat *Britain Between the Wars* p. 475.

²⁸ *NCW Handbook 1936-37* (1937), p. 100.

Householders were questioned about their attitude to the League of Nations and to the policy of disarmament. The results of the ballot showed that 87 per cent of those questioned supported the League's proposal for economic sanctions against aggressors whilst 59 per cent supported military measures.²⁹

Between 1936 and the outbreak of war in September 1939, hopes for a peaceful resolution of European disputes remained the dominant attitude of non-feminist women's organisations. As the political situation grew more tense with the outbreak of war in Abyssinia and Spain, the majority of women's groups were careful to avoid any pronouncements which could be interpreted as either party-political or partisan. This caution did not, however, prevent the National Council of Women condemning the use of modern warfare in Abyssinia, Spain and China. In 1937, the Council acknowledged the grave danger to the general peace of the world in the present spread of aggression and violence and views with dismay and horror the development of indiscriminate bombing of the civil population as a method of warfare.³⁰

Only the Catholic Women's League felt it appropriate to abandon temporarily its neutrality in

²⁹ It is worth noting that the survey did not mention that economic sanctions could only be viable if backed up by the threat of military action. James Hinton, *Protests and Visions*, pp. 95-7; See also Martin Pugh, 'Pacifism and Politics in Britain, 1931-1935', *Historical Journal* 23, (1980).

³⁰ *NCW Handbook 1938-39* (1939), p. 108.

order to support the nationalist side in the Spanish Civil War. Seeing the conflict as a direct attack on Catholicism by republican and communist forces, the League encouraged its members to provide foster homes for Catholic children escaping the conflict. In 1939, the League sent its congratulations to the victorious General Franco, offering 'earnest prayers to Almighty God in Thanksgiving for the freedom of Catholic Spain won by your Excellency and in supplication for her secured peace and restored prosperity'.³¹

For many women involved in the inter-war peace campaign it became increasingly difficult to ignore the sinister implications of Fascism. Eleanor Rathbone, an honorary member of the National Council of Women, travelled to Spain in 1936 to highlight the plight of the democratically elected Republican Government. Margery Corbett Ashby, former President of the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds and President of the International Alliance of Women, was outspoken in her condemnation of fascist ideology. Speaking in 1938, she denounced the 'criminal farce of British non-intervention in Spain'. She was also aware of Hitler's suppression of women's rights. In March 1938, she told members of the International Alliance of Women that victory for fascism would signify 'a world governed by

³¹ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* September 1939, p. 2.

force, brutality and fraud' where women would have no place 'save as breeders of men and forced labourers'.³²

Yet in spite of these warnings and the fact that the National Council of Women and WILPF in Germany had been forced to disband, non-feminist women's organisations in England remained steadfastly committed to the peace movement.³³ The National Council of Women did accept, however, that the League of Nations had not prevented the war in Asia and Abyssinia and had subsequently been unable to resolve these conflicts. Following the Munich Crisis of September 1938, when war in Europe was narrowly averted, the National Council of Women called on the League's member states to 'take steps towards the revision and reconstruction of the League of Nations, in light of its successes and failures during the last twenty years'.³⁴

The National Council of Women's faith in the Munich Agreement was finally destroyed in March 1939 when Germany invaded Czechoslovakia. In Britain preparations for war now began in earnest. As plans for the mobilisation of the Armed Forces and the co-ordination of Air Raid Precaution services went ahead, the Women's Voluntary Service (1938) recruited and trained women for civil defence and welfare work in the

³² Brian Harrison, *Prudent Revolutionaries* (1987), p. 195.

³³ Jill Liddington, *The Long Road to Greenham* p. 150.

³⁴ *NCW Handbook 1939-40* (1940), p. 115.

community.³⁵ In 1938 the Vice-President of the National Council of Women, Elizabeth Ness and former President Lady Nunburnholme JP, were both appointed to the Executive of the WVS.³⁶

It is significant that the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds and the National Federation of Women's Institutes did not take part in ARP training or co-operate with the WVS before war was declared.³⁷ This rather surprising decision was taken on the grounds that any active involvement in plans for war would compromise the position of their Quaker members who opposed war under any circumstances.

The National Union of Townswomen's Guilds explained its position stating that

³⁵ The Women's Voluntary Service was established in 1938 to co-ordinate the voluntary work of women during war time. Acting as a link between women's organisations and local authorities, the WVS. was to 'assist the community with welfare work of every kind..to work for children, old people, hospitals...to assist the country by conservation, economy, etc'. Mary Buchanan (ed.) *World Directory of Women's Organisations* (1953), p. 183.

³⁶ In October 1942 it was reported that a large number of NCW branches supported the work of the WVS and that it was common for the President of the branch to be the WVS Central Organiser. *Women in Council* No. 29, October 1942, p. 4. Members of the Mothers' Union Central Staff also provided clerical services to the WVS and assisted in the distribution of 70,000 leaflets and notices. Minutes of the Mothers' Union Central Council, December 1939, (Central Council Minutes, Vol. XI, 1937-42), p. 215.

³⁷ The Women's Co-operative Guild, actively involved in the peace movement throughout the 1920s and 1930s, also declined to be officially represented at ARP meetings during the Summer of 1939. See Jill Liddington, *The Long Road to Greenham* p. 170.

were a Guild officially associated with National Service, it would mean that those with religious or political convictions against National Service would feel bound to resign from the Guilds, which would no longer be a common meeting ground. No Guild should have a representative on an organisation undertaking National Service or Air Raid Precaution work.³⁸

The Catholic Women's League had no such qualms and assured members that joining the Women's Voluntary Service 'means nothing aggressive but merely that the civilian population proposes to be prepared for emergency'.³⁹

James Hinton has argued that the refusal of peace activists during the 1930s to accept the inevitability of war was not a sign of naivety but one of sincerity.⁴⁰ This is certainly true for non-feminist women's societies which firmly believed that negotiation and co-operation must always take precedence over conflict.⁴¹ Even as it became clear that fascism threatened to destroy the democratic ideals which these groups championed, it remained difficult, if not

³⁸ *The Townswoman* Vol. 7, No. 3, March 1939, p. 13.

³⁹ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 320, July 1938, p. 7.

⁴⁰ James Hinton, *Protests and Visions*, p. 90.

⁴¹ This was also true for anti-war feminist societies such as WILPF. Jean Bethke Elshtain writes 'anti-war feminists pushed for continuous arbitration, for a negotiated peace short of total victory, and for a peace settlement shorn of vindictiveness.' Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War* (1987), p. 234.

impossible, for them to relinquish all hope of peace. This was the dilemma facing not only women's organisations but the whole inter-war peace movement.

Non-feminist women's societies also supported the peace campaign because they wished to protect the welfare of women and children as well as the stability of family life. This upheld traditional assumptions that women as mothers had a 'vested interest in peace'.⁴² To promote peace and disarmament, non-feminist women's societies urged their members as active and responsible citizens to discuss the problems facing the international community and support the work of the League of Nations. In doing so these groups made it clear that women as well as men had an important part to play in securing a better future for society.

THE WAR CAMPAIGN: NON-FEMINIST WOMEN'S SOCIETIES IN WARTIME

On 3 September 1939 Britain declared war on Germany: members of women's organisations, like the rest of the nation, braced themselves for the forthcoming conflict. The National Federation of Women's Institutes reassured its members that the women's institute movement would strive to maintain tolerance and broad-mindedness and to continue as a unifying force by continuing our ordinary activities

⁴² Ibid.

to foster a spirit of steadiness, self-discipline, and friendliness which will be of inestimable value whatever the future may bring forth.⁴³

Similarly, *The Mothers' Union Workers' Paper* urged all members to 'prove by the steadfastness of our characters and the joyfulness of our lives that the Faith we practice will not fizzle out in the face of adversity'.⁴⁴

The first months of war were a period of major re-adjustment for women's societies. Fearing that German air attacks on London were imminent, staffing levels at the national headquarters of women's societies were reduced and plans made for the safe storage of files and records outside London. Restrictions on public meetings and the appropriation of halls and meeting places by the army created difficulties for all voluntary societies.

In October 1939, branch closures were announced by the women's societies although the majority re-opened when alternative arrangements for meetings had been made.⁴⁵ Local branches also reported that fewer members

⁴³ *National Federation of Women's Institutes 22nd Annual Report, 1938 (1938)*, p. 3.

⁴⁴ *The Mothers' Union Workers' Paper* No. 310, October 1939, p. 247.

⁴⁵ For example, in November 1939, the Blackpool branch of the Catholic Women's League reported that its weekly meetings had been switched to the afternoon because of the black-out and ARP duty assigned to members. *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 335, November 1939, p. 14. Following the outbreak of war, local

were attending meetings as women volunteered for work with the WVS or the Armed services.⁴⁶ The evacuation of 166,300 mothers with their children in September 1939 had some impact on branch membership in the larger cities, despite the fact that 88 per cent of mothers had returned home by the following January.⁴⁷

During the war years membership of non-feminist women's societies, with the notable exception of the YWCA and the Catholic Women's League, did suffer a decline.⁴⁸ But this was not surprising, considering the large scale disruption caused by the war and the new demands placed on women as they became involved in war work. For these reasons membership of the Women's Institute Movement fell from 331,600 in 1940 to 288,000 in December 1944. The Mothers' Union had 597,412 members in 1937 and 484,869 in 1942. The National Council of Women recorded a decline in membership from

branches of the Mothers' Union were given permission to hold their meetings in Church. Minutes of the Mothers' Union Central Council, December 1939, (Central Council Minutes, Vol. XI, 1937-42), p. 215.

⁴⁶ During the war, 470,000 women served in the armed services joining either the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS), the Women's Auxiliary Air Force or the Women's Royal Naval Service. The Women's Land Army recruited 30,000 women whilst 375,000 women were involved in civil defence work. See Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959* p. 274.

⁴⁷ Women's Group on Public Welfare, *Our Towns: A Close Up* (Oxford, 1943). p. 2.

⁴⁸ Membership of the YWCA increased by 9,000 during the war years to reach a total of 51,368 in 1945. The Catholic Women's League membership remained relatively static with a reported a membership of 20,000 in 1943. These two organisations attracted new members through their work with women serving in the Armed Forces.

12,421 women in 1939 to 8,699 in 1941 although it should be noted that the war time figures are incomplete. Finally, the number of Townswomen's Guilds fell from 511 in 1938 to 448 in 1941.⁴⁹

Undeterred by this decline in membership, which was not as dramatic as might have been expected, non-feminist women's societies continued with many of their regular national and local activities throughout the war years. Emphasising the importance of these 'normal' activities, Lady Denman stressed that it was 'essential that the Women's Institutes in their anxiety to help at a time of war do not lose sight of their functions in peace time.'⁵⁰ She also encouraged women 'to keep up morale and to prevent life in an emergency from becoming wholly disorganised'.⁵¹

Closer co-operation between national women's organisations was an important feature of the war-time experience of non-feminist women's societies. In September 1939 the National Council for Social Service⁵² called a conference to discuss problems resulting from

⁴⁹ As well as the reduction in rank and file membership, Executive members of non-feminist women's societies were also drawn into war work. For example Lady Denman was appointed Chairman of the Women's Land Army and Dr. Genevieve Rewcastle, President of the Catholic Women's League, resigned to serve as a surgeon in the Navy.

⁵⁰ *Home and Country* Vol. XXI, No. 7, July 1939, p. 260.

⁵¹ *Home and Country* Vol. XXI, No. 2, February 1939, p. 56.

⁵² The National Council of Social Service was established in 1919 to assist the work of voluntary organisations and provide a link between them and the relevant statutory authorities.

the evacuation of women and children. The outcome of this meeting was the establishment of the Women's Group on Problems Arising From Evacuation, later renamed the Women's Group on Public Welfare.⁵³

Membership of this new body included the National Federation of Women's Institutes, the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds, the National Council of Women and the YWCA. The Mothers' Union and the Catholic Women's League were represented by the Churches Group which affiliated to the new organisation.⁵⁴ Under the chairmanship of the Labour MP Margaret Bondfield, the Women's Group on Public Welfare proposed to act 'as a two-way channel of information between statutory authority and the ordinary citizen (particularly the housewife),...to meet a very real present-day need'.⁵⁵

The group's primary objective was 'to bring the experience of its constituent organisations to bear on questions of public welfare especially those affecting women and children'. In particular, the new body hoped to 'secure the maximum advantage for the nation of the redistribution of the civilian population, and contribute to the solution of problems resulting from

⁵³ In 1943 Standing Conferences of Women's Organisations were set up to co-ordinate the work of the WGPW at the local level.

⁵⁴ Other members of the Women's Group on Public Welfare included: the Labour Party's Women Section, the Standing Joint Committee of Working Women's Organisations and the Women's Co-operative Guild.

⁵⁵ *Women's Group on Social Welfare: Report 1939-1945* (1945), p. 4, (Pamphlet Collection), The Fawcett Library.

this distribution' whilst at the same time strengthening 'good understanding between town and country people and developing social activities in the light of war-time experience'.⁵⁶

By January 1940, 735,000 unaccompanied children and 166,300 mothers with 260,000 young children had been evacuated from London, Manchester, Liverpool and other areas at risk from German bombers.⁵⁷ In 1943, the Minister of Health, Ernest Brown, speaking at the National Conference of Women, praised all those women who had agreed to take evacuated mothers, children and war workers into their homes. The Minister underlined the fact that the evacuation scheme was

simply an appeal to the richest and oldest and deepest feelings of women. The call to share their homes with strangers, with other women's children, was, as the Government well knew, asking a tremendous lot. The women have responded greatly. Had they not done so, the scheme would have completely broken down.⁵⁸

In spite of these enthusiastic words, the evacuation of tens of thousands of women and children

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Although many women and children evacuated in September 1939 subsequently returned home there remained over 150,000 evacuated children living in reception areas in the Autumn of 1943. Women's Group on Public Welfare, *Our Towns: A Close Up* p. 2.

⁵⁸ *The National Conference of Women, called by H.M. Government, Report of Proceedings, Tuesday 28 September, 1943, Royal Albert Hall, London. (1943), p. 11. (Pamphlet Collection), The Fawcett Library.*

to reception areas was fraught with difficulties.⁵⁹ The fact that the scheme did not end in failure was thanks not only to the efforts of individual women but also to the work of national and local women's societies. These groups did their utmost to improve conditions both for evacuees and host families in the reception areas. Members of Women's Institutes and Townswomen's Guilds were particularly concerned about the health and welfare of some of the children who came from the cities to live in their towns and villages.⁶⁰

Lady Cynthia Colville, President of the Townswomen's Guilds, expressed her concern when she wrote that 'large-scale evacuation has laid bare the hidden things of English life, many ugly and terrifying...'.⁶¹ This view was echoed by Nina Woods, Central President of the Mothers' Union, who remarked in December 1939 that the experience of evacuation had 'brought to some people a seamy side of national life which they did not know existed'.⁶² These comments reflect the reaction of middle-class women involved in social and moral reform to the sometimes exaggerated

⁵⁹ See John Macnicol, 'The effect of the evacuation of schoolchildren on official attitudes to State intervention', in Harold Smith (ed), *War and Social Change* (1986). On evacuation see also: B.S. Johnson (ed), *The Evacuees* (1968) and Angus Calder, *The People's War 1939-45* (1971).

⁶⁰ Lancashire, Sussex, Yorkshire and Kent were among the 'safe' areas designated by the Government.

⁶¹ Caroline Merz, *After the Vote*, p. 22.

⁶² Minutes of the Mothers' Union Central Council, December 1939, p. 196, (Central Council Minutes, Vol. XI, 1937-42).

reports about the conditions of inner-city life and the supposed inability of a minority of working-class mothers to care for their children.⁶³

What some members of the Women's Institutes and Townswomen's Guilds did discover when they took evacuated children into their homes was the reality of the deprivation and poverty experienced by mothers and their children living in poor and disadvantaged areas. Many of these children suffered from malnutrition and diseases including head lice and scabies.⁶⁴ Bed-wetting was another common, though not surprising, problem amongst children separated from their home and family for the first time.

Tensions between evacuated mothers and host families were inevitable when families were expected to share a home together. It was reported that some evacuated mothers were 'dirty, verminous, idle and extravagant' and were either unable or unwilling to care for their children'.⁶⁵ On the other hand many evacuated mothers resented the experience of having to live by someone else's rules. As one young mother wrote 'I couldn't stick it any longer. We were treated like bits of dirt by the locals.'⁶⁶

⁶³ John Macnicol, 'The evacuation of schoolchildren', pp. 24-8.

⁶⁴ As Macnicol points out the problem of head lice was more to do with living in cramped living conditions than with poor parenting. Ibid., p. 18.

⁶⁵ Women's Group on Public Welfare, *Our Towns: A Close Up* p. 3.

⁶⁶ Dorothy Sheridan (ed), *Wartime Women: A Mass Observation Anthology* (1990), p. 64.

In an effort to overcome these difficulties, local women's groups established day centres for evacuated mothers and children in the reception areas. In November 1939, the Worthing Townswomen's Guild opened a club for the 1,200 mothers and 2,000 children billeted in their locality. A fee of one penny per week was required to cover the cost of tea and the rent of the hall for the Saturday afternoon meeting. While their children were cared for by local girl guides, evacuated mothers were given time to relax and socialise away from their overcrowded living conditions.

Club members were encouraged take up sewing and knitting as well as participate in other typical guild activities such as amateur dramatics and singing competitions. Reporting on the success of this project, the January 1940 edition of *The Townswoman* concluded: 'the mothers are most appreciative of the club, where they may spend a happy and sociable afternoon with freedom from their children'.⁶⁷ The fact that these meetings gave local families some time to themselves in their own homes was another beneficial aspect of the Guild's clubs.

The Executive Committee of the Mothers' Union urged its members to invite 'lonely or homesick' mothers to the Union's weekly meetings. Once again, sewing, knitting and light entertainment were common

⁶⁷ Cited in Caroline Merz, *After the Vote*, p. 23.

pursuits undertaken by the women who attended.⁶⁸ The Mothers' Union was anxious to attract evacuated women to their meetings because of the realisation that many of the mothers and their children were 'entirely ignorant of our Holy Faith'. It was hoped that attendance at Union meetings would draw more women into the Church of England and the Central Council called on diocesan branches in reception areas to 'let those from outside join in meetings to help them learn the power of prayer'.⁶⁹

The YWCA also expressed concern for the welfare of evacuated mothers and children during the early months of the War. As part of its war work, the YWCA set up 'home from home' daytime clubs for evacuated mothers and babies in reception areas. When the number of evacuated mothers was too small for their own club these women were invited to join the YWCA's regular married women's groups where they could relax and enjoy the company of both local and evacuated women.⁷⁰

As individual women's societies did what they could to provide clubs and leisure activities for evacuated women, the Women's Group on Public Welfare drew attention to the problems of children evacuated from the larger towns and cities. On the

⁶⁸ *The Mothers' Union Workers' Paper* No. 310, October 1939, p. 247.

⁶⁹ Minutes of the Mothers' Union Central Council, December 1939, (Central Council Minutes, Vol. XI, 1937-42), p. 196.

⁷⁰ *YWCA Annual Report 1940-41* (1941), (YWCA Archive, MSS 243/2/1/22).

recommendation of the National Federation of Women's Institutes, the Hygiene Committee of the Women's Group on Public Welfare decided to investigate the 'low standard of customs and living of a small section of women and children evacuated from towns'.⁷¹

In 1943, the findings of the Hygiene Committee were published in *Our Towns: A Close Up*. This report focused on the health and behavioural problems prevalent amongst a small section of evacuated children. Out of this investigation came the proposal from the Women's Group on Public Welfare that all children over the age of two should attend nursery schools.⁷² It was hoped that nursery education would teach children and their mothers about the importance of good eating habits, cleanliness and disciplined behaviour. Education for children was considered essential if they were to develop 'initiative, self-respect and a sense of citizenship'.⁷³

The report also focused on the alleged poor standards of 'mothercraft' skills shown by a small but significant number of evacuated mothers. It was suggested that the apparent inability of these women to knit and sew or cook 'without a tin opener' was due

⁷¹ Women's Group on Public Welfare, *Our Towns: A Close Up* p. 106.

⁷² Throughout the 1930s, the National Council of Women passed three resolutions supporting greater provision of nursery education because of the 'vital importance of care in early childhood'. *NCW Handbook 1937-38* (1938), p. 105. Attitudes to nursery education will be discussed in the following chapter.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

primarily to a lack of domestic training. The Committee recommended that future wives and mothers should be educated in home-craft so that they would have the necessary skill to 'build-up a housewife's routine' as well as keeping up their 'personal appearance'.⁷⁴

This emphasis on the importance of domestic science training for young women and girls was not a new idea. As Anna Davin has documented, 'lady visitors' and 'schools for mothers' dated back to the late nineteenth century and were seen as a way of 'teaching the ideology as well as the skills of domesticity, and more generally instilling habits of regularity, obedience, punctuality and discipline'.⁷⁵ This emphasis on the importance of domestic science for young women and girls, both in preparation for married life and as a way of maintaining standards of behaviour, remained a major preoccupation for women's societies during the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s.⁷⁶

There is no doubt, as John Macnicol suggests, that *Our Towns: A Close Up* presented a very negative and often selective view of working-class mothers and their children.⁷⁷ But it would be wrong to assume that the

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 105-6.

⁷⁵ Anna Davin, 'Imperialism and Motherhood', *History Workshop Journal* 5, (Spring, 1978), p. 38. See also Johanna Bourke, *Working Class Cultures* p. 68.

⁷⁶ See Chapter 6.

⁷⁷ John Macnicol, 'The evacuation of schoolchildren', p. 27.

groups involved in the WGPW were only interested in altering the moral behaviour of these women. The efforts of societies such as the Mothers' Union and the National Council of Women to improve maternity services and housing conditions for working-class and middle-class women alike should not be ignored. It demonstrated their belief that the State had a responsibility to provide for the poor and disadvantaged in society. The experience of evacuation and the publication of *Our Towns* only strengthened the resolve of non-feminist women's societies to campaign for social welfare reforms in the immediate post-war period.⁷⁸

As work with evacuated women and children continued, non-feminist women's organisations became involved in a number of other schemes which it was hoped would contribute to the national war effort. These activities included the preservation of surplus fruit supplies, knitting for the troops and encouraging members to participate in 'make do and mend' classes. The work of the National Federation of Women's Institutes in organising local fruit canning schemes and jam-making was so successful that it remains the activity most often associated with the Women's Institute movement.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ For a discussion of post-war reconstruction see Chapter Six.

⁷⁹ As one Women's Institute worker remarked in a recent interview, 'Oh Dear, not the jam thing again'. *The Guardian* 24 April 1994.

With the support of the Ministry of Agriculture, who provided the local institutes with recipes for jam and a guaranteed supply of sugar, Women's Institutes provided hospitals and canteens with jam and canned fruit throughout the war.⁸⁰ *Home and Country* reported that during 1944, 1,174 preservation centres had been set up by local Institutes.⁸¹ In response to the success of the Women's Institute's fruit preservation initiative, the Women's Group on Public Welfare encouraged women's organisations in towns to set up their own centres for canning and processing fruit grown in gardens and allotments.

By 1942, the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds was operating over a hundred local fruit preservation centres. The Minister of Food, Lord Woolton, thanked the women involved in the scheme for

the industry and the resource which they displayed in dealing at short notice with large quantities of perishable fruit...some thousands of pounds of fresh fruit, which might otherwise have been wasted, have been made into jam and put into consumption by their efforts.⁸²

In 1941, the Women's Group on Public Welfare, assisted by the Boards of Education and Trade, had launched a national 'make do and mend' campaign. The aim was to encourage women to repair and renovate their

⁸⁰ Margaret Morgan, 'The Acceptable Face of Feminism', p. 151.

⁸¹ *Home and Country* Vol. 27, No. 1, January 1945, p. 2.

⁸² Caroline Merz, *After the Vote* p. 29.

old clothes instead of buying new ones for themselves and their families. The recycling of cotton and linen garments reduced the demand for new material which was in short supply as a result of trading restrictions and the transfer of textile workers to the munitions industry.

Societies affiliated to the Women's Group on Public Welfare supported the 'make-do and mend' campaign and local societies set up classes and groups for members. Mothers were taught ways of repairing and renovating the family's clothes as well as given tips on how to turn their own dresses into fashionable new garments. An indication of the success of this campaign was reflected in the fact that, by September 1943, 20,000 'make-do and mend' classes had been set up throughout the country.⁸³

The sewing and knitting skills of women were also put to war-time use by organisations including the Catholic Women's League, the National Federation of Women's Institutes and the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds. Members of these societies were encouraged to knit 'comforts' for the Armed Forces, as they had done during the First World War, as well as for evacuees and bombed-out families. By the end of the war, the National Federation of Women's Institutes reported that its members had knitted over 160,000

⁸³ The Government's 'make-do and mend' booklet became a national best seller with over one million copies sold.

garments.⁸⁴ In February 1940, the Catholic Women's League set up a Comforts Depot which supplied local branches of the League with wool to knit gloves, vests, jumpers and other 'comforts' for the troops.

Finished garments were sent to the League's Comforts Depot for collection and were then shipped out to troops serving in Eastern Europe and to members of the Merchant Navy. By 1941, knitting parties had been established in most local branches of the League as well as Townswomen's Guilds and Women's Institutes throughout the country. Such was the success of this project that by August 1941 the Catholic Women's League reported that over 6,000 knitted garments had been received by the Comforts Depot.⁸⁵

As in the First World War, the YWCA and the Catholic Women's League opened huts, canteens and hostels for men and women serving in the HM Forces. As thousands of women joined the WRNS, the ATS and the WAAF, the YWCA set up temporary clubs at their training camps. The huts provided the recruits with a commonroom of their own where they could relax, read, smoke and chat in the familiar surroundings of a clubhouse sitting room.

The YWCA leadership felt that these huts provided 'the feminine touch' for women working in a traditionally male environment.⁸⁶ Women posted to

⁸⁴ *Home and Country* Vol. 27, No. 7, July 1945, p. 132.

⁸⁵ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* August 1941, No. No. 356, p. 6.

⁸⁶ *YWCA Review 1940-41* (1941), p. 34.

isolated camps or at anti-aircraft stations were visited by YWCA volunteers in mobile club vans selling lipstick, soap, chocolate and cigarettes. It is clear from this list of items that the Association was anxious that women should not be deprived of their 'feminine' luxuries during war-time.⁸⁷

By the end of 1941, the YWCA had set up nineteen huts attached to training camps in Britain with an additional seventy mobile centres to visit all other camps and military bases.⁸⁸ One van which served camps in the Yorkshire area had been presented to the Association by the Executive Council of the National Council of Women. The YWCA, working with the Ministries of Labour and Supply, provided residential hostels for women conscripted for work in the Land Army and in munitions factories. The Catholic Women's League also provided huts, canteens and hostels for members of the Armed Forces and for women working in the munitions factories.⁸⁹

In England, these facilities were run by local branches of the League and members volunteered to cook and serve meals to the troops in their area. In January 1941, the Nottingham City Section of the Catholic Women's League reported that canteen work was

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ The Association also set up eleven centres for Nursing Sisters serving with the Army in the Middle East.

⁸⁹ By the end of the War, the Catholic Women's League had set up seventy-four huts, canteens and hostels in Britain and six hostels in the Middle East.

now the principal activity of the branch. Similar reports came from the League's Darlington and St. Leonard's branches whilst members of the Westminster branch had the use of a mobile canteen catering for civilians in the bombed out areas of London.⁹⁰ Canteen work was also undertaken by the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds. Members set up canteens in towns where service men and women were stationed, providing them with a place to eat and relax away from the Army camp. The domestic nature of the voluntary work undertaken by women's societies described here did not challenge traditional assumptions about the role of women within the home. Working in clubs and canteens, knitting for the troops and the production of jam and preserves was, as Caroline Merz has argued, 'an extension of, rather than an alternative to, women's normal domestic duties'⁹¹.

Nonetheless these domestic and voluntary activities gave housewives and mothers, many of whom were ineligible for compulsory national service, the opportunity to contribute in a very active and public way to the war effort.⁹² Their achievements were acknowledged in September 1943, when Ernest Brown admitted, 'I should not be doing my duty as Minister of Health if I did not recall the work of those many

⁹⁰ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 347, November 1940, p. 8.

⁹¹ Caroline Merz, *After the Vote* p. 25.

⁹² During the war years, an estimated 8,770,000 women remained full-time housewives working within the home.

thousands of women without any uniform at all.'⁹³ Lady Denman added her own personal endorsement of the work done by members of Women's Institutes and other local women's societies which demonstrated that 'we are taking our small share in winning the victory which we believe will come.'⁹⁴

In sharp contrast to the voluntary war-work the conscription of women into the Armed Services and the industrial labour force did call into question, at least in the short term, the traditional role of women in society. This was in spite of the fact that over two million working-class women had been employed as domestic servants during the 1930s in addition to the large numbers of women working in the textile industry and in the new light industries, for example, engineering.⁹⁵ It was however the mass influx of women into the wartime labour force which led non-feminist women's societies to reassess their position on the employment of women outside the home.⁹⁶

⁹³ 'The National Conference of Women', 28 September 1943, p. 11.

⁹⁴ *Home and Country* Vol. XXI, No. 10, October 1939, p. 369.

⁹⁵ For an account of women's work in industry during the 1920s and 1930s see Miriam Glucksmann, *Women Assemble: Women Workers in the New Industries of Inter-War Britain* (1989).

⁹⁶ For a detailed discussion about the employment of women during the Second World War see: Penny Summerfield, *Women Workers in the Second World War: Production and Patriarchy in Conflict* (1984), Penny Summerfield, 'Women, War and Social Change: Women in Britain in World War II', in A. Marwick (ed), *Total War and Social Change* (1988), pp. 95-118. See also Harold

In 1941, the National Service (No. 2) Act ordered all women between the ages of eighteen and forty to register for full-time war work. Many of these women were required to work in the chemical, engineering and shipbuilding industries traditionally dominated by men. In addition, over 500,000 women were recruited into the civil service.⁹⁷ Married women with domestic responsibilities or children under the age of fourteen were exempt from National Service. The government, however, urged married and single women of all ages to volunteer for warwork.⁹⁸

Due to the continuing labour shortage in 1943, the government widened the eligibility for National Service to include housewives and mothers with children over the age of fourteen and women between the ages of forty and fifty. Housewives were directed into local part-time work. By 1943 an estimated 7,750,000 women were in paid employment, forty-three per cent of whom were married.⁹⁹

The employment of married women in such significant numbers outside the home was a matter of concern for non-feminist women's societies. In particular, the Mothers' Union and the Catholic Women's

Smith (ed), *War and Social Change: British Society in the Second World War* (1986).

⁹⁷ Penny Summerfield, 'Women, War and Social Change', p. 97.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁹⁹ In 1931, the proportion of the female work-force who were married was sixteen per cent. Gail Braybon & Penny Summerfield (eds), *Out of the Cage* p. 167.

League were anxious about the effect that working mothers would have on the stability of family life. When discussing the issue of working women in 1936, the League's President, Dr. Genevieve Rewcastle, had stated that 'the successful home is where the father is looked up to as head and breadwinner and woman as the homemaker'.¹⁰⁰

The Catholic Women's League also objected to single women taking up jobs traditionally performed by men. Members of the League were expected to use their influence over daughters to ensure they embarked upon careers more suitable for women. These more 'feminine' careers included domestic service, teaching and nursing. Women should not take 'men's jobs' because it would deprive men of their right to marry and support a family.¹⁰¹

The belief that a mother's first duty was to her home and children was shared by the Mothers' Union:

Everything that happens in the world starts from the home. Every single mother in the world to-day is helping to decide what the world will be like in twenty, thirty or forty years time. No mother belongs to herself alone..everything she does makes some impression..on her family, and through her family

¹⁰⁰ *The Catholic Women's Magazine* No. 293, March 1936, p. 4.

¹⁰¹ *The Catholic Women's Magazine* No. 263, September 1933, p. 10.

on the country and on the world.¹⁰²

As significant numbers of women began to enter the work-force towards the end of 1941, the Catholic Women's League and the Mothers' Union were anxious to ensure that women with young children were not encouraged to seek employment outside the home.

Although women with children under the age of fourteen were excluded from compulsory war-work, they were not prevented from entering the work force and indeed were encouraged to do so. Married women were welcomed back into the public service with the suspension of the marriage bar for women teachers and civil servants.¹⁰³ In December 1943, the Catholic Women's League and the Mothers' Union met to discuss the 'bad effect on home life of mothers doing full time war work'. It was agreed to send a letter to the Ministry of Labour urging that 'married women with young children living at home should only be accepted for full-time work under very exceptional circumstances.'¹⁰⁴

As the Mothers' Union and the Catholic Women's League suggested, not all married women were happy with the idea of entering the work-force. Many were

¹⁰² Minutes of the Mothers' Union Central Council, December 1943, (Central Council Minutes, Vol. XII, 1943-47), p. 125.

¹⁰³ The National Council of Women had protested against the imposition of the marriage bar during the 1930s which it regarded as 'unjust, uneconomic and contrary to the public interest'. *NCW Handbook 1933-34* (1934), p. 78.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

concerned about the double burden they would face with a full-time job and housework.¹⁰⁵ Women were also reluctant to volunteer for war-work until they were sure about their conditions of employment.¹⁰⁶ Uncertainty about wage rates, working hours and childcare was identified as the principal reasons why married women were slow to enter the war-time labour force.

In September 1941, a conference was held at the Ministry of Labour and National Service to discuss ways in which the recruitment of women workers could be accelerated. This meeting was attended by representatives of women's societies including the National Council of Women and the Catholic Women's League. It is important to note that although the Mothers' Union and the Catholic Women's League did not approve of women with young children working outside the home, they did accept that married women workers were needed on a short-term basis if Britain was to win the war.

¹⁰⁵ In 1941, a survey of 1,000 women by the Wartime Social Survey revealed that thirty-two per cent of women questioned were reluctant to volunteer for war-work because of their domestic responsibilities and their unwillingness to leave home. See Penny Summerfield, 'Women, War and Social Change: Women in Britain in World War II', p. 104.

¹⁰⁶ A 1941 Mass Observation survey showed that the women were unhappy with the lack of information from Government sources about wage rates, working hours and childcare facilities. Ibid.

At this meeting representatives from the various women's groups informed Ministry officials that married women were most concerned about wage rates, working conditions in factories and job security once the war was over. Until the Government made clear the terms under which women were to be employed, it would be difficult to persuade them to volunteer for war-work.¹⁰⁷ If working conditions were improved, women's societies, including the Catholic Women's League, would be willing to organise meetings encouraging women to join the wartime work force.¹⁰⁸

In the March 1943 edition of *The Mothers' Union Journal*, Violet Markham wrote that 'a fair deal stripped of all favour and privilege is what any decent woman who is proud of her citizenship wants when working side by side with men at a time like the present'.¹⁰⁹ The Government did act on the advice of women's societies by reducing the working hours of women in industry to ten hours a day and instructing employers to take on local married women as part-time workers.¹¹⁰ It was clear, therefore, that although non-

¹⁰⁷ During the early years of the war women conscripted into the wartime industries faced a twelve hour day which left little time for shopping, housework and other domestic duties which they still had to perform.

¹⁰⁸ *The Catholic Women's Magazine* No. 358, October 1941, p. 3.

¹⁰⁹ *The Mothers' Union Journal* No. 192, March 1943, p. 25.

¹¹⁰ The number of female part-time workers had increased from 380,000 in June 1942 to 900,000 in June 1944. Harold Smith, 'The effect of the war on the status of

feminist women's societies did not approve of mothers with young children working outside the home, they were willing to make representations to the Government on behalf of working women during wartime, a fact well illustrated by the wartime equal pay campaign.

The Second World War gave non-feminist women's groups the opportunity to prove beyond doubt that their members were willing to do their bit, just like their soldier husbands and sons, to secure victory for the nation. Following the outbreak of war, organisations such as the YWCA, the Catholic Women's League and the Women's Institute Movement took up the work they had so successfully undertaken during the First World War. Food preservation, knitting for the troops and opening hostels and huts were important ways of boosting morale whilst giving wives and mothers the chance to make their own individual contribution to the war effort.

However, participation in the war effort did not mean that non-feminist women's societies were prepared to abandon their campaigns on behalf of women and children during the war years. The civilian evacuation scheme and the recruitment of women into the work-force raised important questions about the social and moral welfare of women. To tackle these problems feminist and non-feminist women's groups joined the Women's Group on Public Welfare and at the same time took an active part in two other important war-time campaigns,

women', in Harold Smith (ed), *War and Social Change* (1986), p. 216.

the demand for equal pay and the employment of women police.

WARTIME CAMPAIGNS: THE DEMAND FOR EQUAL PAY

As the number of women entering the work-force increased dramatically during the war years, the campaign for equal pay took on far greater significance. As a result, the equal pay campaign took on a new urgency leading to the establishment of the Equal Pay Campaign Committee in January 1944.¹¹¹ For many organisations affiliated to the Equal Pay Campaign Committee, including the National Council of Women, the YWCA and the National Federation of Women's Institutes, the urgent need for women workers during war-time provided an ideal opportunity to increase the pressure for equal pay following years of unsuccessful campaigning.¹¹²

Indeed it was the failure of the Government to introduce equal pay legislation during the First World War which prompted women's societies to step up their demands for reform.¹¹³ Throughout the 1920s feminist

¹¹¹ For a detailed account of the war-time equal pay campaign see: Harold Smith, 'The Problem of "Equal Pay for Equal Work" in Great Britain during World War II', *Journal of Modern History*, 53, (December, 1981).

¹¹² For a record of successive Government failure to implement equal pay legislation see *Equal Pay for Equal Work: A Black Record* (1949), a leaflet published by the Equal Pay Campaign Committee. (Equal Pay Campaign Archive, Box 262), The Fawcett Library.

¹¹³ Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain, 1914-1959* pp. 27-8. For an account of women's participation in the work-force during the First World

societies including the NUSEC, the London and National Society for Women's Service and the Women's Freedom League all campaigned for the introduction of equal pay for women workers.¹¹⁴ This demand was also backed by the Women's Sections of the Labour Party and the Women's Co-operative Guild.¹¹⁵

In 1918 the YWCA and the National Council of Women expressed their concern about the low wage rates paid to women workers when they advocated equal pay for equal work; the National Council of Women stressed that 'all payment should be related to the work done and not to the sex of the worker'.¹¹⁶ Yet in spite of the fact that equal pay was the norm for women in a limited number of professions such as medicine, law, journalism and for members of parliament, the vast majority of women workers earned a lower income than their male colleagues throughout the inter-war period.¹¹⁷

War see Gail Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War* (1981).

¹¹⁴ Harold Smith, 'British Feminism in the 1920s', in Harold Smith (ed), *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* (1990), p. 49.

¹¹⁵ Pat Thane, 'The Women of the British Labour Party and Feminism, 1906-1945', in Harold Smith (ed), *British Feminism* (1990), pp. 133-34.

¹¹⁶ This resolution was reaffirmed by the Council in 1942. *Women in Council* No. 30, November 1942, p. 2.

¹¹⁷ In 1935 women's average earnings in industry were between 37.3 and 55.9 per cent of the wage paid to male workers. Women working in the public sector received up to 80 per cent of average male earnings. Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959* p. 96 and Harold Smith, 'The Problem of "Equal Pay for Equal Work"', p. 654.

During the 1920s and 1930s the majority of women's societies campaigning for equal pay focused on the wage differentials in the public service: here the Government could take direct action to introduce equitable pay rates and at the same time set the example for private industry.¹¹⁸ This demand was supported by public service unions including the National Union of Women Teachers, the National Association of Women Civil Servants and the Council of Women Civil Servants. The National Council of Women also participated in the public service campaign, calling in 1930 for 'the adoption of the principle of equal pay for men and women civil servants of the same grades and seniority'.¹¹⁹

In April 1936, the House of Commons voted by a majority of eight to introduce equal pay in the civil service.¹²⁰ This result reflected the cross-party support for pay reform but the decision was quickly overturned when the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, immediately called for a vote of confidence in the National Government. In response, Eva Hartree,

¹¹⁸ It was easier to prove that women and men employed as teachers and civil servants were doing the same work whereas in private industry many men and women performed separate tasks with women earning lower wages.

¹¹⁹ *NCW Handbook 1930-31* (1931), p. 84.

¹²⁰ This vote was called by the Labour MP Ellen Wilkinson at the request of the Civil Service Equal Pay Committee and the Joint Committee on Women in the Civil Service. Harold Smith, 'The Problem of "Equal Pay for Equal Work"', p. 654.

President of the National Council of Women, condemned this action, claiming that it 'caused much resentment not only among women's organisations but among other supporters of the principle'.¹²¹

The reason given by the Labour and Conservative administrations for not implementing equal pay in the public service was the extra expense which would result. Both argued that during a period of economic depression such a large increase in public spending would not be feasible.¹²² Nevertheless, the National Council of Women called on the Conservative Government in October 1937 to implement equal pay:

on economic grounds and as a matter of common justice, a piece of work whether carried out by a man or a woman, should receive reward according to its value and not for any other reason.¹²³

It is significant that during the 1930s the National Council of Women and the YWCA also highlighted the injustice of unequal pay rates for women in industry. In 1935, the National Council of Women condemned the fact that women working in the clothing and textile industries received lower rates of pay than

¹²¹ *NCW Report of the Council Meeting and Conference, Southport, June 29-July 2, 1936* (1936), p. 14.

¹²² Trade union support for the 'family wage' and the cheap labour already supplied by unskilled women workers were other reasons why both the Government and private industry were unwilling to introduce equal pay. Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement 1914-1959* pp. 96-7.

¹²³ *NCW Handbook 1937-1938* (1938), p. 109.

men.¹²⁴ One member of the Council's Executive described this situation as a scandal, suggesting that 'the whole status of women is kept down by inequality of pay and opportunity'.¹²⁵ The Executive of the YWCA argued that low wages for women would result in a general reduction in wage rates for both men and women.¹²⁶

In spite of the continued efforts of campaigners, equal pay in both the public and private sectors remained an elusive goal throughout the 1930s. Just as the First World War had drawn attention to the urgent need for equal pay, the Second World War provided women's societies with the opportunity to highlight inequalities perpetuated during the inter-war period. As thousands of women joined the Armed Forces and were recruited into the wartime labour force, it became increasingly obvious that the vast majority of women workers would continue to earn lower rates of pay than men.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Women working in the dressmaking and women's light clothing trade were paid seven pence per hour while men received one shilling per hour. Similar rates applied in the ostrich and fancy feather trade. *NCW Report of the Council Meeting and Conference, Leicester, October 14-18 1935* (1935), p. 40.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Blue Triangle Gazette* Vol. 51, No. 9, September 1933, p. 138.

¹²⁷ In 1940 the 'Extended Employment of Women' agreement guaranteed the 'men's rate for the job' for women working in the engineering industry. But this only applied to women doing exactly the same work as men and many employers were able to alter the work process in order to avoid paying equal rates. Harold Smith, 'The Problem of "Equal Pay for Equal Work"', p. 657; See also Pat Thane, 'Towards Equal Opportunities? Women in

This fact was confirmed in 1941 when the conscription of women into the industrial workforce was not accompanied by equal pay legislation. The Parliamentary Woman Power Committee had tried to persuade the National Government to include an equal pay clause in the National Service (No. 2) Act.¹²⁸ But this proposal was rejected on the grounds that local trade union officials would object to equal pay being imposed from above and threaten nationwide industrial action.¹²⁹ Unsurprisingly, the Government's decision was condemned by women's societies involved in the equal pay campaign.

The feminist Six Point Group urged women to demand equal pay when registering for war-work.¹³⁰ At the same time the National Council of Women voiced its objection to the fact that women in the ARP Service were paid lower rates than men. In May 1941 the YWCA highlighted the injustice of the fact that unskilled women in the

Britain since 1945', in Terry Gourvish and Alan O'Day (eds), *Britain Since 1945* (1991), pp. 184-85.

¹²⁸ The Woman Power Committee was set up in March 1940 by a number of women MPs to protect the welfare of women during war-time. The Committee was made up of representatives from the three main political parties including Lady Astor, Megan Lloyd George, Edith Summerskill and Mavis Tate.

¹²⁹ Although the TUC supported the principle of equal work for equal pay it was feared that women workers doing designated 'women's work' would resent the higher rate of pay awarded to women replacing male workers. There was also concern that male union members would object to Government interference in local pay bargaining. Harold Smith, 'The Problem with "Equal Pay for Equal Work"', pp. 656-67.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 660.

transport and engineering industries earned less money than unskilled men.¹³¹ Anxious to assert the right of married women to a fair wage, the YWCA complained that the propaganda slogan 'Be like Dad - Keep Mum' was offensive because it suggested 'married women should be kept rather than earn their living by war work'.¹³²

In spite of these protests it was the establishment of the Equal Compensation Campaign Committee in October 1941 which succeeded in drawing wider support for the implementation of equal pay. This Committee was set up by a number of women's groups, including the National Council of Women, to protest against the Personal Injuries (Civilians) Act.¹³³ Under the terms of the Act women who were prevented from working because of a war injury were to receive less compensation from the Government than men.

Such blatant discrimination outraged many women, including those not actively involved in the equal pay campaign. In January 1943, the Women's Institute Movement reported that the majority of its local

¹³¹ *News For Citizens* May 1941, p. 1. The majority of women workers continued to be paid less than men during the war years with women earning on average fifty to seventy per cent of men's wages. *Ibid.*, p. 658.

¹³² *News For Citizens* October 1941, p. 2. The Labour MP Edith Summerskill also objected to the slogan describing it as 'the worst Victorian music-hall taste'. Cited in Brian Harrison, 'Women in a Men's House: The Women MPs, 1919-1945', *The Historical Journal* 29, 3, (1986), p. 644.

¹³³ The Committee was chaired by the Conservative MP, Mavis Tate, and members included the British Federation of Professional and Business Women, the Woman Power Committee and the Women's Freedom League.

Institutes were in favour of equal compensation payments.¹³⁴ Following a well organised and highly publicised parliamentary campaign, the Equal Compensation Campaign Committee won the support of over 200 MPs and in April 1943 the Government was forced to back down and award equal compensation payments to men and women.¹³⁵

The success of the equal compensation campaign had important implications for the equal pay debate. It had now been established that women and men were entitled to the same rate of compensation when not at work: as a result supporters of equal pay were optimistic that the Government would review its policy on equal pay. Hopes were raised in September 1943 when the Government invited 6,000 representatives of the country's leading women's societies to a National Conference of Women in London. In his opening address to the Conference, Ernest Bevin, the Minister of Labour and National Service, told the women that the Government wished to pay 'tribute and express our gratitude to the women of the country for the magnificent contribution they have made to the war effort'.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ *Home and Country* Vol. 25, No. 1, January 1943, p. 1.

¹³⁵ Harold Smith, 'The Problem of "Equal Pay for Equal Work"', pp. 661-64; See also Pamela Brookes, *Women At Westminster* pp. 138-39.

¹³⁶ *National Conference of Women called by H.M. Government, Report of Proceedings, 28 September 1943* (1943), p. 2. This meeting was attended by representatives of all six non-feminist women's organisations considered in this study.

In spite of all the lavish praise of women's work, the Chancellor of the Exchequer confirmed during the meeting that the Government had no intention of changing its position on equal pay. The decision was a major blow to both feminist and non-feminist women's groups who had campaigned for equal pay for so many years. The National Council of Women had already dismissed the Government's 'innumerable bouquets' pointing out that it would be 'far better and more just to give women the proper rate for the job.'¹³⁷

Inspired by the triumph of the equal compensation campaign, an Equal Pay Campaign Committee (EPCC) was set up in January 1944 to co-ordinate the work of women's societies campaigning for equal pay.¹³⁸ The Campaign Committee focused on the common grades of the civil service where men and women performed the same work but received differential pay rates. Founder-members of the Campaign Committee included the National Council of Women, the National Association of Women Civil Servants and the British Federation of Business and Professional Women.¹³⁹ The YWCA joined soon

¹³⁷ *Women in Council* No. 30, November 1942, p. 3.

¹³⁸ See Allen Potter, 'The Equal Pay Campaign Committee: A Case-Study of a Pressure Group', *Political Studies* 5, (February, 1957).

¹³⁹ By 1946 seventy-two women's societies had affiliated to the Committee. They included: the National Council for Equal Citizenship, the Women's Co-operative Guild, the Open Door Council and the Women's Liberal Federation. (Equal Pay Campaign Committee Archive, Box 263), The Fawcett Library.

afterwards as did the National Federation of Women's Institutes.

For some time the Women's Institute Movement had objected to the fact that women working in agriculture received lower wages than men.¹⁴⁰ As the equal pay campaign gathered pace during the early 1940s, Women's Institutes demonstrated their increasing support for radical reform. At the Annual Conference in June 1943, the Bures Women's Institute (West Suffolk) put forward a resolution 'that men and women should receive equal pay for equal work' which was carried by a large majority.¹⁴¹

The Catholic Women's League and the Mothers' Union did not join the EPCC, on the grounds that equal pay was a political and potentially divisive issue. But it is important to note that neither group dissociated themselves from the National Council of Women's endorsement of equal pay during the inter-war period. This action would imply that they did support the principle although there is no evidence to suggest that

¹⁴⁰ In 1928, the Federation had written to the Ministry of Agriculture complaining about the lower wage rates set for women agricultural workers. *National Federation of Women's Institute Annual Conference Report, 1928* (1928).

¹⁴¹ Copies of this resolution were sent to the Ministries of Labour and Education, the Treasury, the Federation of British Industries and the Trade Union Congress. *Keeping Ourselves Informed: Our Concern, Our Resolutions, Our Actions* (1981), p. 45.

these two groups ever contemplated a national campaign in favour of equal pay.¹⁴²

The National Union of Townswomen's Guilds also refused to support the EPCC on the grounds that equal pay was a feminist issue and one which would divide the membership. The Union claimed that its members were split fifty-fifty on the question of equal pay. Some considered it 'indefensible that women's employment should play second fiddle to men's' while others believed that 'women should not be paid at the same rate as men for the same work'.¹⁴³ It is important to note that although the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds did not speak out in favour of equal pay, it would appear that the Union's Executive did have some sympathy with the campaign.¹⁴⁴ During the height of the equal pay debate in 1943, individual Guilds were encouraged 'to learn about the feminist propagandist societies so that their members can hear about them, join them and work for them if they so wish'.¹⁴⁵

By March 1944 the EPCC, under the chairmanship of the Conservative MP Mavis Tate, had collected 160

¹⁴² In July 1936 it was reported that a debate on equal pay for equal work organised by the Westminster Diocesan Branch of the Catholic Women's League. The motion was carried by a large majority suggesting that some members were in favour of equal pay. *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 297, July 1936, p. 11.

¹⁴³ *The Townswoman* Vol. 11, No. 2, October 1943, p. 17.

¹⁴⁴ This was not so surprising considering that the NUTG Executive still included Alice Franklin and Gertrude Horton who were both committed feminists.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

signatures from MPs calling for a Parliamentary debate on equal pay in the civil service. Support was also forthcoming from the National Union of Women Teachers and the Woman Power Committee.¹⁴⁶ Later that month when the 1944 Education Bill was discussed in the Commons the Conservative MP Thelma Cazalet-Keir, speaking on behalf of the Tory Reform Group, proposed an amendment to abolish differential pay rates between male and female teachers.

The Government immediately rejected this equal pay clause but when put to the vote it was passed in the Commons by 117 votes to 116. This victory reflected the recognition amongst MPs of all political parties that equal pay for women was a legitimate demand. For Churchill and the Cabinet, fears about cost and industrial unrest continued to outweigh any thoughts of reform and the Prime Minister called for a vote of confidence in the Government. In the ensuing Commons debate the equal pay amendment was removed from the Bill.

Now clearly aware of the strong support for equal pay, both within Parliament and beyond, the Government announced that a Royal Commission on Equal Pay would be set up to investigate and report on its 'social, economic and financial implications'.¹⁴⁷ Like many of those involved in the campaign, the National Federation

¹⁴⁶ Harold Smith, 'The Problem of "Equal Pay for Equal Work"', p. 666.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. pp. 669-71.

of Women's Institutes was pessimistic about the value of a Royal Commission. The Federation's Executive remarked that the Commission signified 'a turn away from progressive action back to consideration, which has already lasted too many years and is by many regarded as a sop'.¹⁴⁸

Nevertheless, the EPCC agreed to suspend its activities until the Commission published its report. Both the National Council of Women and the National Federation of Women's Institutes, along with other members of the Campaign Committee, gave evidence to the Royal Commission on Equal Pay. All of these groups defended the right of women and men doing similar work to earn the same wage.¹⁴⁹ When the Royal Commission on Equal Pay published its Report in October 1946 it gave a clear picture of the inequalities in pay which existed in both the public and private sectors.¹⁵⁰

The Commission was unable to make any specific recommendations for legislative change but it argued that there was no logical reason why equal pay for equal work should not be introduced in the civil service.¹⁵¹ The Report did acknowledge, however, that immediate implementation would be unwise in view of the

¹⁴⁸ *Home and Country* Vol. 26, No. 6, June 1944, p. 85.

¹⁴⁹ Pat Thane, 'Towards Equal Opportunities?', p. 190.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 190-91.

¹⁵¹ There was no agreement on the payment of equal rates in industry and as a result three members of the Commission, Dame Anne Loughlin, Miss L. Nettlefold and Dr. Janet Vaughan, submitted a minority report supporting equal pay for female industrial workers. *Daily Mail* 7 November 1946.

post-war economic crisis.¹⁵² Following the publication of the Report the YWCA called on the Government to introduce equal pay without delay.¹⁵³ The National Federation of Women's Institutes defended the position of women in industry arguing that

if a woman, despite her lesser physical strength and shorter industrial life, does in fact weave as much cloth, or sell as many bus fares as her male counterpart, it is surely only fair that she be paid the same wage?¹⁵⁴

The Equal Pay Campaign Committee resumed its activities in November 1946 and in December wrote to all members of the House of Commons urging them to bring pressure to bear on the Government to 'make an early announcement of their intention to carry it [equal pay] into effect for all employment over which they have direct responsibility'.¹⁵⁵ On 30 January 1947 the EPCC organised a mass meeting at the Central Hall, Westminster attended by 2,000 women representing seventy-seven women's societies and nine trade unions.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵² Pat Thane, 'Towards Equal Opportunities?', p. 191.

¹⁵³ *News For Citizens* November 1946, p. 2.

¹⁵⁴ *Home and Country* Vol. 29, No. 1, January 1947, p. 78.

¹⁵⁵ Letter from H.C. Hart, Honorary Secretary of the EPCC to all members of the House of Commons, 11 December 1946, (EPC Archive, Box No. 263).

¹⁵⁶ *Women in Council* Vol. XIX, No. 7, March 1947, pp. 1-4.

Speakers included members of the three main political parties and a resolution was adopted expressing indignation at the long delay in establishing the principle of equal pay and urging the Government to 'give a lead by implementing the policy of Equal Pay for Equal Work in all Government and public employment NOW'.¹⁵⁷ Although the Labour Party agreed to the principle of equal pay for equal work, the post-war Labour Government announced in June 1947 that it would not introduce equal pay in the public service on the grounds that 'it would be wholly inflationary in its results'.¹⁵⁸

In spite of this set back the EPCC continued to press for pay reform and held a second mass meeting in Westminster on 10 June 1948. Once again some 2,000 people attended and a resolution was passed which stated

that although twelve months ago the Chancellor of the Exchequer refused to implement the principle of Equal Pay for Equal Work through fear of inflation, since that time wages and salaries have been increased by more than £100,000,000 a year.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 1. Two speakers at the meeting, Megan Lloyd George MP and the Labour MP Barbara Castle, were also honorary members of the National Council of Women.

¹⁵⁸ *Equal Pay for Equal Work: A Black Record 1914-1949*, p. 4.

¹⁵⁹ Typed Report of EPC Meeting, 10 June 1948, (EPC Archive, Box 260, B15/2).

The resolution went on to demand the immediate implementation of equal pay for equal work in all Government and public employment. At the end of the meeting it was reported that hundreds of women, led by the Chairman of the EPCC, Thelma Cazalet Keir MP, marched to the House of Commons where extra police were called in as the women stood outside the lobbies chanting 'We want equal pay now'.¹⁶⁰

At the national level the National Council of Women and the National Federation of Women's Institutes remained active members of the EPCC. It would appear, however, that the majority of local branches and Institutes did not join the campaign for equal pay. In 1948 and again in 1949 the National Council of Women reported that support for equal pay amongst the branches was meagre with few providing any information on their work for the equal pay campaign.¹⁶¹ Similarly, the Women's Institute Executive urged its members to get involved in the campaign. However, there appears to have been little response to a request from Thelma Cazalet Keir for Institutes to raise the question of equal pay at local political meetings and report back to the EPCC.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ *The National Association of Women Civil Servants Newsletter* July 1948, p. 2. (EPC Archive, Box 260, B15/2).

¹⁶¹ *NCW Handbook 1947-1948* (1948), p. 42 and *NCW Handbook 1948-1949* (1949), p. 39.

¹⁶² The results of this survey were to be presented at the June meeting but there is no evidence that the information was either received or given out. *Home and Country* Vol. 2, No. 30, February 1948, p. 65.

pay could no longer be dismissed as a narrow feminist demand. Being paid the rate for the job was the right of all citizens and the YWCA, the Women's Institute Movement and the National Council of Women joined in the campaign to secure that citizenship right for women.

WARTIME CAMPAIGNS: THE EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN POLICE

The outbreak of the Second World War brought renewed attention to another long-running campaign supported by feminist and non-feminist women's societies. This was the demand for the compulsory appointment of women police to every police force in the country. Arguing from moral rather than feminist principles, women's societies emphasised the important role of policewomen in safeguarding the welfare of vulnerable women and children.¹⁶⁵ It was on these distinctly non-feminist grounds that the National Council of Women led the campaign for the employment of women police for over thirty years.

During the First World War the National Council of Women, then named the National Union of Women Workers, was one of three groups which set up voluntary women

¹⁶⁵ It is worth noting that throughout the campaign for women police little reference was made to the equality of opportunity for women hoping to pursue a career in the police force. See John Carrier, *The Campaign for the Employment of Women as Police Officers* (Aldershot, 1988). This point is also made by Philippa Levine, 'Walking the Streets in a Way No Decent Woman Should': Women Police in World War I', *Journal of Modern History* 66, 1, (1994).

police patrols.¹⁶⁶ Patrolling parks, cinemas and other public places likely to be frequented by servicemen, the patrols were there to ensure that good moral behaviour prevailed at all times. Unlike the police matrons whose work was limited to the supervision of female detainees,¹⁶⁷ the voluntary patrols marked a new development in police work as women took to the streets. By the end of 1915 there were 2,301 Women Patrols in 108 towns and cities in Britain and Ireland.¹⁶⁸

The work of voluntary patrols was so successful that in September 1918, Sir Nevile Macready, the Police Commissioner, proposed the establishment of a women's police force in the Metropolitan area. It is

¹⁶⁶ The two other groups were: the Women Police Volunteers established by the suffragist Nina Boyle in 1914 to promote the appointment of full-time woman officers on normal police duties. Margaret Damer Dawson, a former member of the WPV, in 1914 set up the Women Police Service which concentrated on rescue work and favoured the idea of a separate women's police force for the protection of women and children. See Alison Woodeson, 'The First Women Police: a force for equality or infringement?' *Women's History Review* 2, 2, (1993).

¹⁶⁷ Since 1883, the police force had employed matrons to sit with women detained in police cells or awaiting trial. Many women employed in this capacity were the unpaid wives of policemen who were called in on cases involving women and children. These women had no power of arrest and were not looked upon as members of the police force. See Barbara Weinberger, *The Best Police in the World: An Oral History of English Policing* (1995), p. 110.

¹⁶⁸ Angela Woollacott, '"Khaki Fever" and its control', p. 335, see also Philippa Levine, '"Walking the Streets in a Way No Decent Woman Should": Women Police in World War I', *Journal of Modern History* 66, 1, (1994).

significant that the NUWW patrols were selected to provide this service. As Levine and Woollacott, argue the Women Police Service was regarded by the police authorities as a feminist organisation run by suffragists.¹⁶⁹ Conversely, the NUWW was a non-feminist women's society which appeared content to limit its patrol work to domestic and moral welfare work and so was not regarded as a threat to the established male police force.

The policewomen employed by the Metropolitan Police Force acted as auxiliaries and did not have the power of arrest. Nevertheless, the official recognition given to the work undertaken by women police was a significant step forward in the campaign for women police. In 1920 and again in 1924 two Select Committees (the Baird and the Bridgeman Committees) recommended the employment of women police but public spending cuts in 1922 meant that the numbers of women police employed by the police force remained nominal.¹⁷⁰ In 1924 there were only 68 attested and 37 non-attested

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. See also Chole Owens, *Women Police: A Study of the Development and Status of the Women Police Movement* (New York, 1925).

¹⁷⁰ Proposals to disband the Metropolitan women police force in 1922 were only averted by the intervention of the National Council of Women and influential supporters including the Archbishop of Canterbury and Lord Aberdeen. Edith Tancred, *Women Police 1914-1950* (1950), p. 10. See also Barbara Weinberger, *The Best Police in the World* p. 91.

policewomen in England and Wales in comparison with 54,945 policemen.¹⁷¹

Apart from the cost factor in employing policewomen for special duties, a significant number of local Police Commissioners appeared reluctant to accept the idea of women in the police force. The principal objection was the assumption that police work, like soldiering, was an unsuitable job for a woman. For others the work performed by women police was seen as an extension of welfare work which could be undertaken just as well by untrained police matrons.¹⁷² Lack of support amongst Chief Constables for the appointment of women police was reflected in the fact that by 1928 142 out of a total of 181 local police forces were without the services of a single policewoman.¹⁷³

It was in this context that the National Council of Women strongly defended the police work performed by Women Patrols. The Council argued that cases involving women and children were best handled by women police; patrolling in public places, taking statements from women and children, inspecting common lodging houses and the supervision of female prisoners in court were

¹⁷¹ In the Metropolitan area 100 policewomen were employed in comparison with 20,381 policemen. John Carrier, *The Campaign for the Employment of Women as Police Officers* (Aldershot, 1988), p. xviii.

¹⁷² Barbara Weinberger, *The Best Police Force in the World*, p. 92.

¹⁷³ John Carrier, *The Campaign for the Employment of Women as Police Officers*, p. 169.

duties which women were more competent to carry out than men.

It is important to note that even though the National Council of Women focussed on the suitability of women police for special protective duties, it did not accept that policewomen should be treated any differently from their male colleagues. As early as June 1929 the Council, working with the NUSEC, had outlined its proposals for the employment of women police. The Council requested that women appointed to the police force should have the same status, powers and conditions of service as male officers. It was also hoped that regulations defining the duties of policewomen should be drawn up without further delay.¹⁷⁴

Following continuing pressure from women's societies and MPs including Lady Astor, Eleanor Rathbone and Sir Arthur Steel Maitland, whose wife was an Executive member of the National Council of Women, statutory regulations for policewomen were issued by the Home Office in October 1931. For the first time attested policewomen were given uniform conditions of pay and service although they were paid lower wages than men. Women eligible for police work had to be

¹⁷⁴ The Council also requested that statements from women and children should only be taken by a policewoman; that a woman of senior rank be appointed to the Metropolitan police in London and that a woman assistant inspector be appointed at the Home Office to co-ordinate the work of policewomen and advise Chief Constables in the selection and training of policewomen. Edith Tancred, *Women Police 1914-1950*, p. 11.

unmarried or widowed and between the ages of 22 and 35 and their duties were usually restricted to patrolling, dealing with women and children, clerical work, plain clothes duty and detective work.¹⁷⁵

Much to the chagrin of women's societies, the employment of women police was left to the discretion of Chief Constables and local Watch Committees who were under no obligation to appoint policewomen.¹⁷⁶ In July 1934, the National Council of Women presented a petition calling for the employment of more women police to the Home Office. Over 6,000 signatures had been collected by members of the National Federation of Women's Institutes, the YWCA and other women's societies urging that protection duties relating to women and children be made compulsory for policewomen.¹⁷⁷

The Home Office rejected these demands, being unwilling to interfere with the 'local discretion' of individual Chief Constables.¹⁷⁸ The following year the National Council of Women, supported by the National Federation of Women's Institutes, the Mothers' Union, the Catholic Women's League and the YWCA, urged both the Home Office and regional Watch Committees to

¹⁷⁵ See John Carrier, *The Campaign for the Employment of Women as Police Officers* pp. 244-49 and Barbara Weinburger, *The Best Police in the World* p. 93.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁷⁷ It was also requested that a woman Police Inspector be appointed to the Home Office. Edith Tancred, *Women Police 1914-1950*, pp. 18-20.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

increase the number of women police they employed. A resolution was sent to local Police Authorities calling on them to

appoint an adequate number of trained and attested Policewomen who shall include among their duties the taking of statements from women and children when allegations of sexual offences are under investigation, and such detective duties as can most appropriately be performed by women.¹⁷⁹

The Executive Committee of the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds also showed its support for the campaign, calling on members to 'examine the position regarding women police' and to urge the local Chief Constable to make provision for policewomen where necessary.¹⁸⁰

Reports of local campaigns for women police during this period included a joint effort by the Brighton and Hove branch of the Catholic Women's League and the Lewes Women's Institute in 1938 to press for the appointment of more women police in the East Sussex area.¹⁸¹ Yet in spite of the persistent demands of women's societies, progress was slow and by 1939 only

¹⁷⁹ *NCW Handbook 1936-37* (1937), p. 101.

¹⁸⁰ *National Union of Townswomen's Guilds Annual Report 1934* (1934), p. 38.

¹⁸¹ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 327, January 1939. p. 4. The Oldham and Bolton branches of the National Council of Women also reported their involvement in the woman police campaign. *NCW Handbook 1935-36* (1936), p. 94.

forty-five out of 183 police forces in England and Wales had appointed policewomen.¹⁸²

In much the same way as the outbreak of the Second World War gave greater urgency to the question of equal pay, it also brought new significance to the debate surrounding the employment of women police. In 1939 the Government announced its intention to set up a Women's Auxiliary Police Corps (WAPC) to supplement the regular police force during wartime. Women recruited to the WAPC had no police powers and their duties were restricted to clerical and canteen work as well as driving and maintaining police vehicles. Organisations involved in the women police campaign objected to the fact that these women were not being used for patrols. Concerned about the moral welfare of young women and girls, who in the words of the Mothers' Union were 'loitering' around Army Camps, women's societies appealed to the Home Office and Local Police Chiefs to set up Women Patrols just as they had done during the First World War.

In response the Home Office issued a circular to Police Authorities encouraging but not compelling them to employ full-time policewomen to undertake regular police duties including patrol work.¹⁸³ Once again a

¹⁸² One sixth of those women were not attested constables. Cited in Barbara Weinberger, *The Best Police in the World* p. 92. See also Joan Lock, *The British Policewoman: Her Story* (1979).

¹⁸³ M.H. Cowlin, *Women Police in War Time: What is the W.A.P.C.? Leaflet published by the National Council of*

significant number of Chief Constables proved unwilling to employ women police in their forces and the problem remained unresolved.¹⁸⁴ Realising that more affirmative action was needed the National Council of Women, in collaboration with twenty other women's societies, set up the Women Police Campaign Committee in June 1940.

Membership of the Campaign Committee included the Y.W.C.A., the Mothers' Union and the National Federation of Women's Institutes. Feminist societies such as the Women's Freedom League and the Women's Co-operative Guild also supported the work of the Committee. It was hoped that these organisations could work together 'in order to secure justice and humanity in the treatment of women, girls and children' by ensuring that the 'appointment of a percentage of fully trained women police in every force should be made compulsory'.¹⁸⁵

In April 1944, the Campaign Committee organised a conference in London to protest against the Home Secretary's continued refusal to make the appointment of women police obligatory. The meeting, chaired by the Labour MP Margaret Bondfield, was attended by some 500 representatives from seventy national women's

Women in November 1939, p. 3, (Pamphlet Collection), The Fawcett Library.

¹⁸⁴ In 1940 there were ninety-nine attested and twenty unattested policewomen serving in England and Wales. This meant that 138 out of a total of 181 police forces still did not employ women police. *NCW Handbook 1940-41* (1941). p. 73.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

societies including the Women's Group on Public Welfare. The important duties performed by women police, particularly their work with women and children, were highlighted by each speaker.

William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury, whose wife, it will be recalled, was Vice-President of the Mothers' Union, insisted in his address to the meeting that

There is always a need for the work of women police - war only adds to this urgency. The demand for more women police is quite an old question - I regard its history with dismay because it is extremely discreditable to my sex. It seems that the main obstacle has been sheer, downright, stark prejudice.¹⁸⁶

Moved by the strong words of the Archbishop and the publicity surrounding the conference, the Home Secretary requested that every Police Authority in England and Wales should see 'as a matter of urgency to the appointment of adequate numbers of women police'.¹⁸⁷ The Home Secretary had finally acknowledged the contribution made by women police and was now willing to insist that policewomen were employed by every police force in the country. Having achieved its central objective, the Woman Police Campaign Committee

¹⁸⁶ Edith Tancred, *Women Police 1914-1950*, p. 28.

¹⁸⁷ In October 1944, the Home Secretary announced that a Woman Staff Officer was to be appointed to H.M. Inspectors of Constabulary. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

disbanded and the campaign for women police was brought to an end.¹⁸⁸

That fact that non-feminist women's societies were willing to campaign so actively for the employment of women police is noteworthy. Although they were defending the right of women to be employed as police officers, non-feminist women's societies did not regard the women police campaign as part of the wider struggle for women's rights. Policewomen were to perform special duties and work primarily with women and children. Throughout the campaign it was always clear that non-feminist women's societies were more concerned with the moral welfare of women and children than with career opportunities for women in the police force.

On these grounds it has been suggested that the campaign for women police was anti-feminist.¹⁸⁹ There is no doubt that the needs of women were equated with those of vulnerable children and that the emphasis on the moral welfare of women suggested they needed extra protection to safeguard their virtue. Nevertheless, the fact that non-feminist groups were prepared to challenge the authority of the Home Office, especially during wartime, is significant. It reflects their firm

¹⁸⁸ Although the National Council of Women bowed out of the campaign at this point Barbara Weinburger writes that the numbers of women police constables remained a very small minority. By 1963 there were just over 3,000 policewomen serving in England and Wales. Barbara Weinberger, *The Best Police in the World*, p. 98.

¹⁸⁹ See John Carrier, *The Campaign for the Employment of Women as Police Officers* p. 252.

belief that women in custody or in distress should be dealt with by other women. This was a basic but important civil right won for women by the National Council of Women and other non-feminist women's societies.

At the end of the war, non-feminist women's societies like the rest of Britain emerged battle-scarred but undefeated. During the six years of the war each group had kept up many regular activities while at the same time making a significant contribution to the war effort. Participation in the equal pay and women police campaign had shown that non-feminist women's societies had not lost their desire to demand reforms which would enhance the lives of women and children.

The wartime experience left non-feminist women's groups with a strong desire to play an active and dynamic part in the plans for post-war reconstruction. In 1942 the National Council of Women had stressed that women who had 'equal responsibility during the war years..shall have in the post war world equality of status'.¹⁹⁰ At the same time these groups were anxious to attract new members and cater for the needs of servicewomen and ex-war workers returning to their 'natural place in the home and the community'.¹⁹¹ The following chapter will explore the efforts of non-feminist women's societies to foster and promote

¹⁹⁰ *Women in Council* No. 26, June 1942, p. 2.

¹⁹¹ *YWCA Review 1944-45* (1945), p. 12.

women's domestic role after years of disruption and to secure greater equality of status for women in the post-war period.

CHAPTER SIX

RECONSTRUCTION: THE ROLE OF NON-FEMINIST WOMEN'S
SOCIETIES IN THE POST-WAR YEARS

Let the valiant citizen never be dismayed to confess that she has no solution of the social problem to offer her fellowmen. Let her offer them rather the benefit of her skill, her vigilance, her fortitude and her probity.¹

In September 1943, Winston Churchill told delegates attending the National Conference of Women that the support women had given to the war effort 'will be found to have definitely altered those social and sex balances which years of convention had established'.² The Minister for Reconstruction, Lord Woolton, repeated this assertion one year later when he informed members of the National Council of Women that the Government 'must see to it that the progress of reconstruction gives [women] a fair deal in return'.³

In spite of these assurances non-feminist women's societies were determined that the opinions of women would be represented at all levels of post-war planning. Megan Lloyd George, a member of the National

¹ The closing words of Lady Albermarle's Presidential address to the NFWI Annual Meeting, May 1947. *National Federation of Women's Institutes Annual Report 1947* (1947), p. 2.

² *The National Conference of Women: Report of Proceedings, Tuesday 28 September 1943* (1943), p. 6.

³ *Women in Council* November 1944, p. 10.

Council of Women and the Women's Institute Movement, expressed this view when she insisted that women

shall be brought in to assist the Government in planning..not so much because we think we have a right, although we have earned that right..but because we really have a definite contribution to make.⁴

This chapter will consider the involvement of non-feminist women's societies in plans for post-war reconstruction. Focusing on the housing, child-care and domestic needs of women, these groups hoped to safeguard the stability of family life and promote the traditional role of women as wives and mothers. They did not, however, expect women to retreat into the family home after years of war work. Instead, women were encouraged to be active citizens who as housewives and workers would assist in the national recovery. In return, non-feminist women's societies expected and campaigned to ensure that women would benefit from all the 'new social services and improved amenities that are the right of every citizen'.⁵

⁴ Extract from Megan Lloyd George's address to the National Conference of Women, September 1943. *National Conference of Women Report of Proceedings, Tuesday 28 September 1943* (1943), p. 38.

⁵ *Home and Country* Vol. 31, No. 7, July 1949, p. 143.

RECONSTRUCTION OF THE FAMILY AND HOUSING POLICY: HOMES FIT FOR HOUSEWIVES

In 1941, the National Government began to consider the social and economic position of the nation after the war had ended. In the aftermath of the First World War Britain, like most of central Europe, experienced a period of economic depression. This culminated in the high unemployment and extreme poverty which characterised much of the inter-war period. With Europe at war once again, it was hoped that early plans for reconstruction would prevent a repetition of the hardships endured during the nineteen thirties.

At the same time, post-war planning provided an opportunity to boost morale. Some political leaders believed that visions of a safer more democratic society, free from the worst excesses of poverty and privilege, would inspire the Armed Forces and the general public to work together for a better future.⁶ This optimistic view of the post-war world was eagerly embraced by non-feminist women's societies who looked forward to a time when families would be re-united and the wartime disruption of every-day life would be brought to an end.

The preservation of family life in the aftermath of the war was one of the central objectives of post-war reconstruction.⁷ Conscription, the employment of

⁶ See David Vincent, *Poor Citizens* (1991), pp. 112-32.

⁷ See Janet Finch & Penny Summerfield, 'Social Reconstruction and the emergence of companionate marriage, 1945-59', in Clark, D. (ed), *Marriage*,

over seven million women in the labour force and the evacuation of children from their family homes raised fears about the stability of family life. Women's societies were amongst those most concerned. In December 1941, the Mothers' Union warned members that 'the family life of the nation' must be safeguarded and 'based on Christian foundations'.⁸

In June 1943, *The Mothers' Union Workers' Paper* suggested that family life had been

badly disrupted and broken owing to the separation for long periods of husbands and wives, to the new types of work for women and to the attraction of wage earning. Many young wives will find it immensely difficult to settle down into the quiet routine of household jobs after the hustle and noise and cheery companionship of factory or office life.⁹

In order to facilitate the smooth transition from the work-place to the home, women's societies argued that the standard of living for housewives and mothers would have to be improved if young women were to be persuaded to take up their traditional domestic role.¹⁰

⁸ Minutes of the Mothers' Union Central Council, December 1941, p. 345. (Central Council Minutes, Vol. XI, 1937-1942).

⁹ *The Mothers Union Workers Paper* No. 354, June 1943, p. 129.

¹⁰ This was perhaps an over pessimistic view considering that between 1943 and 1947, 1,740,000 women withdrew from the labour force. Penny Summerfield, 'Women, War

As anxiety about the low birth rate grew following the outbreak of war, the possibility that women might now turn their backs on marriage and motherhood was a genuine concern during the early years of the war.¹¹

Lord Chatfield, the Minister for Co-ordination of Defence, appealed to readers of *The Townswoman*:

do not let your war work, or the fact that we are at war, cause you to lessen your devotion to your homes, any more than you would allow it to lessen your devotion to your children.¹²

Fears about the falling birth rate and the consequences of employing large numbers of married women gave women's societies the ideal opportunity to promote the work performed by housewives and mothers in the home. As the Government considered its plans for post-war reconstruction, women's groups were in a strong position to argue that the working conditions of housewives and mothers needed to be improved. In March 1942, the National Council of Women had submitted evidence to the Beveridge Committee on Social Insurance and Allied Services calling for family allowances and

and Social Change: Women in Britain in World War II', p. 98.

¹¹ In 1941 the lowest ever birth rate was recorded with only 13.9 births per 1,000. Public concern about this low rate was reflected in the fact that the Government excluded women with children under fourteen from compulsory war-work.

¹² Cited in Caroline Merz, *After The Vote*, p. 25.

an end to the differential treatment of women under the social insurance system.¹³

When the Beveridge Report was published at the end of 1942, it heightened expectations that women's work within the home would finally receive the recognition it deserved. The Report acknowledged that work done by housewives was 'vital though unpaid' and went on to recommend the introduction of family allowances and increased maternity benefits for women. In spite of these gains, women's societies remained convinced that further reforms were necessary. This in turn would encourage more women to marry and start a family once the war had ended.

The publication of *Our Towns: A Close Up* (1943) by the Women's Group on Public Welfare highlighted the effects that extreme poverty, unemployment and bad housing could have on the physical and moral welfare of women and children. Members of Women's Institutes, Townswomen's Guilds and other women's societies had witnessed at first hand the severe malnutrition, ill-health and unruly behaviour of some evacuees. As a result, these groups focussed their attention on the urgent need for improved housing and child-care facilities which it was argued would help ameliorate these social problems.

¹³ See Chapter Four for a full account of the National Council of Women's memorandum to the Beveridge Committee.

If the opinions of women were to have any influence over the Government's reconstruction programme it was imperative that local and national planning committees included female representatives and considered evidence from women's societies. In October 1941, the National Council of Women called on the Government to guarantee that women 'shall have full opportunity for putting their demands for reforms affecting their status before any body appointed to deal with post-war reconstruction'.¹⁴ Although few women were appointed to committees, women's societies were able to ensure that a feminine voice was heard by giving evidence to various committees; for example, the NCW memorandum on social insurance submitted to the Beveridge Committee.¹⁵

Unsurprisingly, housing policy was one aspect of post-war planning which particularly interested non-feminist women's societies. Throughout the inter-war years housing shortages and the persistence of slum conditions had prompted women's groups to consider the housing needs of the community.¹⁶ This was in spite of

¹⁴ *NCW Handbook 1941-42* (1942), p. 64.

¹⁵ By the end of 1943, the Ministry of Agriculture had set up nine committees to discuss war and post-war subjects. Membership of these committees was made up of seventy-eight men and four women. Of the forty-one committees set up by the Ministry of Food, only one committee included a woman representative while the Board of Education's five committees consisted of seventy-one men and seventeen women members. See Margaret Goldsmith, *Women and the Future* (1946), p. 81.

¹⁶ In 1931 70,000 houses in Manchester were condemned as unfit for human habitation and in London over 30,000 of

the fact that four million houses had been built during the 1920s and 1930s, the majority of which were in new estates situated on the outskirts of towns and cities. Families moved to these areas benefited from the superior housing conditions¹⁷, but found that they were living far from friends, family and jobs, in areas with few shops, playgrounds or other basic amenities. For both middle-class and working-class women this meant the break-up of traditional kinship and support networks leaving many women isolated in their new homes.¹⁸

In 1936 the Women's Advisory Housing Council was set up by over thirty women's societies, including the Catholic Women's League and the National Council of Women, to draw attention to the housing 'needs of the working housewife and mother'.¹⁹ This body made representations both to the Ministry of Health and to

the city's poor were living in basement dwellings. See Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950*, p. 28 and John Burnett, *A Social History of Housing 1815-1985* (1986), p. 243. See also Leonora Eyles, *The Woman in the Little House* (1922) and Margery Spring Rice, *Working Class Wives* (1939).

¹⁷ Forty per cent of new council houses built during the 1920s included a parlour, running water and an indoor WC. These basic design features had been recommended by the Women's Labour League to the Tudor Walters Committee set up by the Government after the First World War to advise on future housing standards. See Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950*, pp. 29-31 and Caroline Rowan, 'Women in the Labour Party 1906-20', *Feminist Review* 12, (1982), pp. 87-9.

¹⁸ See Elizabeth Roberts, *A Women's Place* (Oxford, 1984) and David Vincent, *Poor Citizens*, pp. 87-89.

¹⁹ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 304, February 1937, p. 16.

local housing committees calling for improvements in public and private housing schemes. Well equipped kitchens, indoor bathrooms, hot running water, gardens and playgrounds were listed as the basic design features which should be included in every new home and housing estate.²⁰ All of these features would make the lives of housewives and mothers easier and give them more time to spend with their husbands and children . Less time spent on housework also gave women the opportunity to attend regular meetings of their local women's group and take up other interests outside the home.²¹

Individual women's societies had their own specific priorities for housing reform during the inter-war years. The Catholic Women's League campaigned for larger houses to be built to accommodate families with four or more children. The National Council of Women and the YWCA championed the right of single women and the elderly to be housed in affordable small dwellings or flats.²² Throughout the period, the National Federation of Women's Institutes lobbied the

²⁰ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 309, July 1937, p. 45.

²¹ For an account of inter-war housing developments see Deirdre Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty: Women Between the Wars, 1918-1939* (1989), pp. 89ff.

²² Local authorities were slow to provide accommodation for single people and concentrated primarily on the needs of families. This meant that single women had to look for lodgings or, if they were lucky, rent a flat from a charitable housing trust such as the Women's Pioneer Housing Company. Deirdre Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty* p. 98.

Government for improvements in the standards of rural housing. The Federation urged local authorities to provide a far greater number of rural homes with piped water and modern sewage systems.²³

The outbreak of the Second World War brought an end to new building and development programmes as manpower and resources were diverted into the war effort and by the early 1940s it was already obvious that there would be a major housing shortage after the war. The 1941 blitz and subsequent flying bomb attacks demonstrated the destructive power of German bombing raids which left over 475,000 homes destroyed by the end of the war.²⁴ With such large scale damage and destruction it was no wonder that housing policy became one of the most important aspects of post-war planning.

Non-feminist women's groups emphasised the need for every family to be accommodated in high quality housing if family life was to be rebuilt and sustained after the war. It seemed logical to these groups that women were the most qualified to give advice on the design of new houses

since it is she who has the personal
experience of housing needs and knows
better than any architect or designer what
is wanted to provide labour saving fitments,
heating and washing conveniences and what

²³ For a detailed account of this campaign see Margaret Morgan, 'The Acceptable Face of Feminism', p. 117ff.

²⁴ John Burnett, *A Social History of Housing* p. 285.

arrangements of rooms will bring most comfort to the family and help the mother in the economical management of the home.²⁵

As part of the Government's reconstruction programme, the Ministry of Health had set up the Design of Dwellings sub-committee in May 1942 under the chairmanship of the Earl of Dudley. The Committee's task was to consider ways in which the design of homes and the lay-out of suburban housing estates could be improved, setting out guide-lines for future planning schemes. The Ministry of Health was anxious to ensure that the views of women were taken into account and seven women were appointed to the Committee, three of whom were Women's Institute members.²⁶

As well as appointing women to sit on the Dudley Committee, the Women's Group on Public Welfare, the Townswomen's Guilds and the National Council of Women were invited to submit evidence outlining the housing needs of their members. For women's groups who had campaigned for housing reform throughout the inter-war years, this request gave them an important opportunity to put their ideas directly before the authorities.

A housing questionnaire was drawn up by the Women's Advisory Housing Council on behalf of the Women's Group on Public Welfare which was then sent out

²⁵ Statement by the Women's Advisory Housing Council cited in *The Mothers' Union Workers' Paper* No. 354, June 1943, p. 136.

²⁶ *Home and Country* Vol. 26, No. 9, September 1944, p. 140.

to constituent members including the Mothers' Union and the National Federation of Women's Institutes. The survey requested women to describe the kind of houses they would like to live in and asked a wide range of questions relating to the design and lay-out of kitchens, bedrooms and bathrooms.²⁷ Recipients were also asked to suggest ways in which the every-day burden of housework could be reduced.²⁸

The Mothers' Union collected 5,000 answers to the Women's Advisory Housing Council's questionnaire²⁹ while the National Federation of Women's Institutes received replies from branches in forty-five counties. Although not a member of the Women's Group on Public Welfare, the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds also distributed the questionnaire to its members and

²⁷ A full list of questions is available in the June 1943 edition of *The Townswoman*.

²⁸ During the inter-war period, the amount of housework undertaken by middle-class women began to increase as the number of domestic servants available for work declined. In 1931 over two million women had been employed in domestic service but by the early 1950s this number had been reduced to 750,000. The principal reason for the decline was the new demand for working-class women in light industry, for example electrical engineering, which offered better pay and conditions for women workers. Penny Summerfield, 'Women in Britain since 1945: companionate marriage and the double burden' in Jim Obelkevich & Peter Catterall, (eds), *Understanding Post-War British Society* (1994), pp. 60-62. See also Miriam Glucksmann, *Women Assemble: Women Workers in the New Industries of Inter-War Britain* (1989).

²⁹ Copies were sent to seven selected dioceses to provide a broad overview of opinion within the organisation. The seven were: London, Birmingham, Chelmsford, Exeter, Llandaff, Mammoth and Ely.

received 11,753 completed forms. The National Council of Women drew up a separate memorandum for the Dudley Committee addressing the needs of the lower-paid professional classes. Recommendations included gas and electric heating, windows for easy cleaning and well planned estates with ample amenities such as shops, laundries, libraries and playgrounds.³⁰ The Council blamed inter-war housing policy for the proliferation of isolated urban housing estates with few facilities and warned that such 'mistakes in rehousing must not be repeated'.³¹

Before submitting the findings of the housing questionnaire to the Dudley Committee, the Women's Group on Public Welfare analysed the 40,000 replies and compiled a comprehensive report. A survey of this size inevitably reflected a wide variety of opinion but there was a good deal of uniformity when it came to describing the essential features of an ideal home. Privacy, space and simplicity emerged as the three most important considerations. The survey revealed that the majority of women questioned wanted a three bedroom house with a garden and an upstairs bathroom. Downstairs there should be a parlour, a

³⁰ 'Design of Dwellings', Household Service League Supplement, July 1942, *Women in Council* No. 27, July 1942.

³¹ *Women in Council* No. 42, April 1942, p. 3.

kitchen/scullery and a living room for everyday use by the family.³²

Large bright rooms with sound-proof walls were recommended and it was suggested that the corners in all rooms should be rounded to make the sweeping of floors less cumbersome. Tiled bathrooms, kitchens with built-in cupboards and draining boards were simple but important features which would reduce the daily workload of the housewife. The demand for hot running water upstairs and downstairs, which had been made repeatedly during the inter-war period, appeared frequently in the replies.

The housing questionnaire was influential because it gave thousands of women the opportunity to describe the kind of 'labour-saving' homes they hoped to live in after the war. At the same time, it allowed non-feminist women's societies to impress upon their members how important it was for women to speak out on public questions. These groups recognised that all women, including housewives and mothers, had a voice. They had to be encouraged to use that voice if the quality of their own lives and the lives of their children was to be improved.

The survey also succeeded in arousing the interest of local branch members in the housing debate. In June 1943, *The Townswoman* reported that Guild members taking

³² 'The Report of the Women's Advisory Housing Council Questionnaire', *The Mothers' Union Workers' Paper* No. 354, June 1943, p. 135.

part in the housing inquiry had 'visited existing housing schemes; they had lectures from architects, from town councillors, and from experts on special aspects of housing.'³³ Likewise, members of the Mothers' Union in London and Coventry, where some of the most destructive bombing had taken place, were said to be taking an active part in post-war housing policy.

In July 1942 Mrs. Winser from Coventry asked the Union's Central Council for advice on how 'the Mothers' Union could make its voice heard all over the country on the matter of housing'.³⁴ She was told that members must themselves stand for election to housing committees or ensure that they voted for suitable candidates to represent the views of women in local government.³⁵ As a direct result of participation in the housing survey, the Mothers' Union became a co-operating society within the Women's Advisory Housing Council.

Non-feminist women's societies were given a second opportunity to put forward their views on housing when they were invited to give evidence to the Royal Commission on Population. When the Royal Commission was set up in 1944, fears about the falling birth rate were still prevalent and the Commission hoped to find ways of encouraging married couples to have more

³³ *The Townswoman* Vol. 10, No. 10, June 1943, p. 130.

³⁴ Minutes of the Mothers' Union Central Council, July 1942, p. 390, (Central Council Minutes, Vol. XI, 1937-1942).

³⁵ *Ibid.*

children. Bad housing was identified as one of the principal reasons why parents appeared reluctant to have more than one or two children.

The National Council of Women agreed, and in their evidence argued that 'the lack of suitable housing accommodation was a major reason for the limitation of families.'³⁶ This view was supported by the Mothers' Union who in common with the Catholic Women's League hoped the availability of larger houses would encourage parents to have more children.³⁷ There is no doubt that non-feminist women's societies saw housing reform as a way to improve the quality of women's lives. But the prospect of an affordable modern home was also an important factor in encouraging women and men to marry and start a family.

The publication of the Dudley Report in 1944 was something of a triumph for the non-feminist women's societies.³⁸ Many of the recommendations contained in it had been included in the responses to the women's housing questionnaire and reflected the needs of the housewife and mother working within the home. The Report proposed, for example, that kitchens should be well equipped with gas and electric cooking appliances,

³⁶ NCW Written Evidence to the Royal Commission on Population June 1944, (Evidence No. 12, The Royal Commission on Population, 1944-1949).

³⁷ The Mothers' Union Written Evidence to the Royal Commission on Population, March 1944, (Evidence No. 11, The Royal Commission on Population, 1944-1949).

³⁸ *Design of Dwellings: Report of Central Housing Advisory Committee* HMSO, (1944).

cupboards, draining boards and ventilated larders.³⁹ Increased floor space, tiled bathrooms and a living room with a dining recess or a dining kitchen were amongst the Reports' other recommendations. Referring to the design of housing estates, it advised that new ones should contain a mixture of houses, flats and maisonettes.⁴⁰ This would avoid the dreary rows of identical council houses condemned by the National Council of Women.

The Design of Dwellings Report may have described the 'ideal' home of the future but during the latter years of the war it was the chronic housing shortage which was of greatest concern to the Government and the general public. The demand for new homes for bombed-out families was exacerbated by the increasing number of newly married couples looking for a home of their own.⁴¹ In October 1944, Lord Woolton, speaking at the National Council of Women's Annual Conference, acknowledged the gravity of the housing problem and grimly warned that 'there must be unmerited suffering this winter'.⁴²

Temporary housing was one way to solve the housing problem, at least in the short-term. In 1944, the

³⁹ John Burnett, *A Social History of Housing* p. 298.

⁴⁰ Alison Ravetz, 'Housing The People', in Jim Fyrth (ed), *Labour's Promised Land? Culture and Society in Labour Britain 1945-51* (1995), p. 155.

⁴¹ The marriage rate increased dramatically between 1945-1948 with over two million new marriages recorded. After years of decline the birth rate also began to rise and reached a peak of 20.6 per 1,000 in 1947.

⁴² *Women in Council* No. 52, November 1944, p. 10.

Government announced plans to house families in mass produced pre-fabricated homes.⁴³ The National Council of Women was sceptical, doubting that Portal homes could provide the same level of comfort as traditionally built houses. Representatives of the Council inspected the 'Portal house' on show in Millbank and advised officials at the Ministry of Works about the height of rooms, the need for a rear entrance and a passageway through the kitchen. The Council's Housing Committee was later pleased to report that 'the improved Portal House has dealt in a more satisfactory way with all these defects'.⁴⁴

The sheer scale of the wartime housing shortage meant that accommodation, even if it was only temporary, had to be a priority for both national and local government. A Gallup Poll carried out in October 1944 revealed that the majority of voters believed housing to be the most important single issue for the party returned to power at the next General Election.⁴⁵

⁴³ The Housing (Temporary Accommodation) Bill sanctioned the building of 250,000 Portal houses immediately after the war to alleviate the housing shortage. Margaret Goldsmith, *Women and the Future*, p. 46.

⁴⁴ *Women in Council* No. 51, October 1944, p. 8. By 1948 125,000 'prefabs' had been built which proved to be 'one of the most popular of all twentieth-century dwelling types'. Alison Ravetz, 'Housing The People', p. 157.

⁴⁵ The survey asked voters 'If you had to say which question should be tackled the very first by the Government returned at the next General Election, What would it be? The results were: Adequate Housing - 39 per cent; Providing Employment - 29 per cent; Pensions

In the 1945 Election, housing was one of the most important issues. The Labour Party's promise of 'five million homes in quick time'⁴⁶ appealed to the electorate and probably contributed to Labour's victory in July 1945.

Following the election, women's organisations eagerly awaited the implementation of a nationwide building programme. The new Labour Minister for Health, Aneurin Bevan, committed the Party to a housing policy which promised 1,140,000 new homes by the end of the decade. But progress was slower than anticipated and only 55,400 new houses had been built by the end of 1946. Shortages in man-power and raw materials as well as the need to repair existing stock slowed down the building programme. The situation had improved somewhat by 1948 and 227,000 new houses were built that year, but the numbers then fell as demands on public spending increased with the launch of the National Health Service.⁴⁷

During this period, Labour Party housing policy focused on the need for high standard low cost public housing. Local authorities were instructed to give priority to public housing and planning restrictions

- 7 per cent. Margaret Goldsmith, *Women and the Future* (1946), p. 54.

⁴⁶ Cited in John Callaghan, 'The Welfare State: a New Society?', in Jim Fyrth (ed), *Labour's Promised Land?* (1995), p. 125.

⁴⁷ John Callaghan, 'The Welfare State', p. 125. See also John Stevenson, 'The Jerusalem that Failed? The Rebuilding of Post-War Britain', in Terry Gourvish & Alan O'Day (eds), *Britain Since 1945* (1991).

were used to limit the number of houses built for private sale.⁴⁸ By 1951, 900,000 houses had been built with the help of Government subsidies, the vast majority of which provided low cost local authority housing for working-class families.⁴⁹ In the immediate post-war period these public housing schemes were of a particularly high standard as laid down in the recommendations of the Dudley Committee.⁵⁰

Nevertheless, the National Council of Women expressed dissatisfaction with the national re-housing programme in October 1947, when it claimed that 'the health and happiness of the community is being undermined by present housing conditions'.⁵¹ Other non-feminist women's societies were also critical about the continuing housing problem. In 1948, the Birmingham Standing Conference of Women's Organisations (1943)⁵², sent a resolution on housing to the Local Council and the Ministry of Health calling on them 'to bear in mind the human misery in about a quarter of a million homes throughout the country, and the effects this has on the

⁴⁸ A ratio of five public houses to every one private house was enforced. Alison Ravetz, 'Housing the People', p. 152.

⁴⁹ John Burnett, *A Social History of Housing* p. 300.

⁵⁰ One example of a model housing scheme was the London County Council Somerfield Estate in Hackney (1949) which provided modern houses for families and single people. Ibid.

⁵¹ *NCW Handbook 1947-48* (1948), p. 38.

⁵² This group, representing women's societies in Birmingham, including the Mothers' Union, the Catholic Women's League, the Townswomen's Guild, the YWCA and the NCW, was a branch organisation for the WGPW.

moral standards of life'. The resolution went on to urge 'that the provision of homes for letting and selling even of the simplest design be expedited'.⁵³

This view was shared by the National Council of Women which suggested that the needs of middle-class families who wanted to purchase their own homes were being overlooked. In July 1948, the chairman of the Council's Housing Committee, Mrs. Pleydell-Bouverie, argued that the Government had provided for the needs of public housing. Now it was time the middle income group

were given a break; or are we content to house our whole population in the Government subsidised 800-1000 feet house? Is this standard of housing the high light of what we shall hand down to coming generations?⁵⁴

The National Council of Women urged the Government to allow half of all new house building schemes to be 'allocated to the private builder for the purpose of building houses at a controlled price and of an approved standard for home ownership'.⁵⁵ In 1949, the Council went as far as advocating the construction of smaller council houses without 'the desirable but less necessary fitments' which would reduce the cost and rent of local authority housing. The money saved could

⁵³ Typed Report of the Birmingham SCWO, November 1948, (Women's Forum Archive, WF/K6), The Fawcett Library.

⁵⁴ *Women in Council* Vol. XX, No. 10, July 1948, p. 4.

⁵⁵ 'NCW Housing Memorandum' in *Women in Council*, Vol. XXI, No. 8, June 1949, p. 5.

then be diverted to private housing schemes.⁵⁶ These demands undoubtedly reflected the predominantly middle-class constituency of the National Council of Women.⁵⁷

Nonetheless, it is important to remember that the National Council of Women had campaigned for the provision of high standard local authority housing for many years.⁵⁸ Now that the Labour Government was subsidising public housing schemes, the Council felt it was time to speak out on behalf of its middle-class members. The Council urged the Government not to overlook the housing needs of middle-income families arguing that reconstruction and post-war economic recovery depended on the health and happiness of all sectors of society.

The involvement of non-feminist women's groups in the housing debate was significant for two reasons. Firstly, women's groups succeeded in drawing attention to the specific housing needs of women during the 1930s and 1940s. In campaigning for the provision of good standard low rent public housing the National Council

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 6.

⁵⁷ Beatrix Campbell has suggested that the National Council of Women's Housing Committee was 'strongly Conservative' at this time but there is no evidence to suggest that the Council dropped its non-party stance and actively supported the Conservative Party. See Beatrix Campbell, *The Iron Ladies* (1987), p. 87.

⁵⁸ In 1929 the National Council of Women passed a resolution calling for an increase in national financial support which would allow Local Authorities to accelerate their slum clearance programmes and to subsidise the rents charged for public housing. *NCW Handbook 1930-31* (1931), p. 82.

of Women and the Mothers' Union asserted the right of working-class women and their families to decent and equitable housing conditions.

Focusing on the needs of middle-class women, non-feminist women's groups recognised that the decline in domestic servants would increase the work-load of women living in large Victorian houses. In order to overcome this problem, women's groups recommended that the design of all new houses, public and private, include labour saving features which would reduce the burden of housework and provide housewives with a more modern and pleasant working environment. Secondly, the housing campaign gave non-feminist women's groups the opportunity to demonstrate to the rank and file membership the importance of active citizenship. The 1942 housing questionnaire and the subsequent recommendations of the Dudley Committee showed that it was possible for women to influence housing policy and as a result improve the quality of life for women working within the home.

There is no doubt that women's organisations such as the Mothers' Union and the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds took part in the housing campaign to promote and protect traditional family life. Nevertheless, these groups were also anxious to highlight the fact that women had the right to a good standard of public and private housing and that it was up to the State to ensure this right. The participation of non-feminist women's societies in the

housing question during this period revealed what real benefits could be gained from the active involvement of women in all areas of social and political life.

RECONSTRUCTION AND THE FAMILY: NURSERY EDUCATION AND CHILD-CARE

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the debate surrounding the merits of nursery care for young children reached its peak. As the Government withdrew funding from hundreds of war-time nurseries, child psychologists emphasised the importance of the relationship between mothers and their children and warned of the effects that daily separation would have not only on the child but on the stability of family life.⁵⁹ Expert opinion held that young children were best cared for by their mother in the home and women were encouraged to devote a significant proportion of their time to child-rearing.⁶⁰

This view was shared by middle-class and working-class women's societies, both of whom accepted the traditional division of labour within the home. Giving evidence to the Royal Commission on Population, the

⁵⁹ See Denise Riley, 'War in the Nursery', *Feminist Review* 2, 1979; Jane Lewis, *Women in Britain Since 1945* (Oxford, 1992); Janet Finch & Penny Summerfield, 'Social Reconstruction and the emergence of companionate marriage, 1945-59', in Clark, D. (ed), *Marriage, Domestic Life and Social Change: Writings for Jacqueline Burgoyne (1944-88)* (1991).

⁶⁰ See for example John Bowlby *Forty-four Juvenile Thieves* (1946) and David Winnicott, *Getting to Know Your Baby* (1947).

Standing Joint Commission on Working Women's Organisations, for example, made it clear that when the family's finances allowed it, women with young children should remain at home

On the whole, we think there is still a widespread feeling on the part of women with young children that their place..is in the home looking after the children, and far from desiring to go out to work they want to have a proper standard in the home to enable them to do their job as a housewife and mother.⁶¹

The National Council of Women concurred, telling the Commission that they were not in favour of the continuance of day nurseries 'in the sense they were used during the war...children of that age are best brought up in the home, we all realise that'.⁶² The endorsement of women's domestic role did not mean that women's groups were unaware of the difficulties involved in rearing children, nor were they oblivious of the fact that many mothers had to work outside the home and would continue to do so after the war. The Mothers' Union and the National Council of Women's wartime campaign for home-helps and better paid

⁶¹ The Standing Joint Committee of Working Women's Organisations Oral Evidence to the Royal Commission on Population, 16 March 1945, (The Royal Commission on Population, 1944-1949).

⁶² NCW Oral Evidence to the Royal Commission on Population, 29 September 1944. (The Royal Commission on Population, 1944-1949).

maternity leave had demonstrated their concern for the welfare of working mothers.

The attitude of non-feminist women's societies to the idea of nursery education depended largely on the age of the child. It was clear that the majority of women's groups believed children under the age of two should be cared for at home by their mothers. During the inter-war period the majority of mothers who worked outside the home did so out of economic necessity. With limited nursery places for pre-school children, young children of working mothers were usually looked after by relatives or neighbours.⁶³ This meant that although the mother was out at work, her child was still cared for within a traditional home environment.

Nursery education for children between the ages of two and five proved to be a more divisive issue. During the 1930s the Catholic Women's League opposed nursery education while the National Council of Women campaigned for an increase in nursery places for pre-school children. The Catholic Women's League objected to nurseries because of 'our realisation of the vital Catholic duties and implications of motherhood'.⁶⁴ The League was concerned that nursery schools would encroach upon parental authority within the home and

⁶³ In 1938 there were 104 day nurseries and 118 nursery schools in England and Wales. Denise Riley, 'War in the Nursery', p. 83.

⁶⁴ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 431, January 1948, p. 3.

deprive mothers of their natural role as the educators of their children.⁶⁵

The National Council of Women accepted the importance of a good home life for children but believed that a nursery education would complement and enhance the care that each child received within the home. Under the terms of the 1918 Education Act local authorities were given the power to set up nursery schools but few authorities had provided adequate funding.⁶⁶ In 1934 the National Council of Women called for the expansion of nursery education pointing out that

the nursery school is not, as some people have thought, a substitute for the home: nothing can make up to a child for a bad home or a bad mother. It is a useful or necessary adjunct to the home, and it plays its part in bringing about in the home a better understanding of the child.⁶⁷

The National Federation of Women's Institutes also supported this concept of nursery education which would

⁶⁵ In 1936, the League even suggested that the expansion of nursery education would encourage delays in housing reform. *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 294, April 1936, p.34.

⁶⁶ At this meeting it was reported that only 3,277 children were attending voluntary and council nursery schools with a further 22,728 children enrolled in nursery classes. These figures were based on the latest Board of Education Report. *Report of the NCW Council Meeting and Conference, 1934* (1934), p. 88.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

provide a good training in socialization for children.⁶⁸

These views reflected the general consensus during the inter-war period that nursery schools should cater for the physical and educational needs of the child and not offer professional child-care facilities for working women with young children. Indeed, it was only after the outbreak of the Second World War that the needs of working mothers were considered. Much to the approval of the Mothers' Union and the Catholic Women's League, the National Service (No. 2) Act had excluded married women with young children from compulsory war-work. As the demand for workers increased, however, the Government encouraged all women to volunteer for work as part of their contribution to the war effort.

As more women entered the labour force or took up voluntary war-work it became increasingly difficult for working mothers to find a female neighbour or friend to look after her children.⁶⁹ This meant that women who had worked outside the home during the inter-war years were unable to continue in employment unless some other form of child-care was provided. By the end of 1940 the severity of the war-time labour shortage forced the

⁶⁸ *Home and Country* Vol. X, No. 10, October 1928, p. 146.

⁶⁹ Attempts by the Ministry of Labour to organise a scheme of paid child-minders failed due to bad organisation and confusion over pay and subsidies as well as the unwillingness of older women to do this job. The Women's Co-operative Guild condemned the scheme as a poor alternative to nursery care. See Chapter Four and Denise Riley, 'War in the Nursery', p. 88.

National Government to establish day nurseries and nursery schools to cater for the children of working mothers.

Unlike the nursery school, day nurseries cared for children under the age of two and looked after them for up to fifteen hours while their mothers were at work. An increased number of nursery schools were also set up for pre-school children, providing a more traditional educational service. By 1944 an additional 1,450 day nurseries, 109 nursery schools and 784 nursery classes had been established which meant that 59,000 children received nursery care during the war.⁷⁰ There is little evidence of non-feminist women's groups campaigning for the provision of day nurseries. Indeed, they opposed full-time day nurseries because they permitted working mothers to leave their children under the age of two in care while they went out to work.

This view was expressed by the Mothers' Union in its memorandum to the Royal Commission on Population. The Union argued that day nurseries might encourage married women to look for full-time work outside the home even when the father's income was enough to support the family. This meant that mothers with young children might be tempted to put their career before the welfare of their children, something which the Union could never condone. It was also felt 'to be against the national interest for small children to

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 83.

have life in a nursery substituted for life in the home'.⁷¹

The National Council of Women agreed that no institution could compare with a good mother. But the Council was willing to accept that some women would want to work outside the home

if a woman feels she is not suitable for domestic work and would rather go out to work or if she wishes to do something outside the home - arrangements should be made for the small child to be looked after in the home and not in a day nursery.⁷²

Here the Council was referring to middle-class professional women who had the choice whether or not to return to work following the birth of their babies. Like many of the leading members of women's organisations, these women were able to afford the services of a live-in nanny to care for their children.

Non-feminist women's groups accepted the need for day nurseries during war-time but hoped that the long hours would be curtailed once the war had ended. Nevertheless, the experience of war-time nurseries did make an impact on non-feminist women's societies. The Mothers' Union, the Catholic Women's League and the

⁷¹ The Mothers' Union Written Evidence to the Royal Commission on Population, March 1944, (Evidence No. 11, The Royal Commission on Population, 1944-1949).

⁷² NCW Oral Evidence to the Royal Commission on Population, 29 September 1944, (The Royal Commission on Population, 1944-1949).

National Council of Women believed that there was a case to be made for the retention of part-time day nurseries after the war. In their evidence to the Royal Commission on Population, representatives of all three societies agreed that there was a need for short-term day nurseries to care for children under the age of two.

These groups argued that a nursery which was open for four or five hours a day would give busy mothers a well-earned break and allow them some valuable time on their own or with their husbands.⁷³ The National Council of Women also saw part-time day care as an important back-up for mothers when they were ill or expecting or nursing a new baby. The Mothers' Union accepted that every mother would benefit from some time away from her children and even the Catholic Women's League argued that leaving a baby in a nursery for one or two hours would give women valuable time to shop or do housework. The League did add a word of caution warning that 'day nurseries are utterly wrong if they disrupt the family'.⁷⁴

⁷³ Pat Thane writes that the Women Sections of the Labour Party also advocated short-term day nurseries for mothers working at home which would 'allow them space free from child care and domestic responsibility to devote to their own leisure, education, political or voluntary action'. See Pat Thane, 'The Women of the British Labour Party and Feminism, 1906-1945', in Harold Smith (ed), *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* (1990), p. 129.

⁷⁴ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* December 1943, p. 25.

It is clear that non-feminist women's groups did not support part-time day-care so that mothers could go out to work. The free time was to be used relaxing, shopping or catching up with the housework. In this way part-time day nurseries could not be regarded as a threat to the traditional role of the mother. In fact day nurseries would make a young mother's life easier and maybe even encourage her to have more children. This after all was the principal objective of the Royal Commission on Population.⁷⁵

Nevertheless the support shown by non-feminist women's groups for part-time child-care should not be dismissed as mere pro-natalist propaganda. It is true that the Catholic Women's League, the Mothers' Union and the National Council of Women wanted women to have more children but at the same time they were also genuinely concerned about the welfare of young mothers. These women had a difficult job to do and they had a right to state assistance in the home. If domestic servants and home-helpers were unavailable, which was increasingly the case during the 1940s, then it was up to the State to provide day nurseries. At a time when women were being encouraged to devote themselves to full-time mothering, it was imperative that women's

⁷⁵ When the Royal Commission on Population published its Report in 1949, the provision of day care nurseries and nursery schools to provide women with more free time were recommended. See Denise Riley, *War in the Nursery: Theories of the Child and Mother* (1983), pp. 159-62.

groups stood up for the rights of women within the home.

Following the outbreak of war the National Council of Women continued its campaign for the provision of nursery school education for children aged between two and five. At its 1941 Annual Conference, the Council recognising that in the interests of the community education should be maintained, if not increased, during the war, urges the provision of more nursery schools and welfare centres and the greatest possible extension of all health and food services for children.⁷⁶

The publication of *Our Towns: A Close Up* in March 1943 further highlighted the benefits of a nursery school education. The Report of the Women's Group on Public Welfare recommended that attendance at a nursery school would improve the health and behaviour of young children, particularly those from an underprivileged background. The Report concluded that 'we cannot afford not to have the nursery school: it seems to be the only agency capable of cutting the slum mind off at its root and building the whole child while yet there is time.'⁷⁷

During the war, the expansion of nursery education was supported by a number of different organisations.

⁷⁶ *NCW Handbook 1941-1942* (1942), p. 65.

⁷⁷ Women's Group on Public Welfare, *Our Towns: A Close Up* (1943), p. 105.

Apart from the Women's Group on Public Welfare, which represented over forty women's societies, nursery schools were endorsed by the Standing Joint Committee of Working Women's Organisations, the Trades Union Congress and the National Society of Children's Nurseries.⁷⁸ Representing the views of working-class women, the Standing Joint Committee of Working Women's Organisations believed that many women would want to continue working after the war and that domestic help or nursery schools should be available to assist them.⁷⁹

In spite of this widespread support the Government regarded the funding of day nurseries and nursery schools only as a war-time contingency. Once the war ended, central funding for nurseries was cut by half and responsibility for nursery education was passed onto local authorities. As a result, by May 1946, 350 of the 1,560 war-time nurseries had already been closed down. Protests by professional bodies, including the National Council of Maternity and Child Welfare and the National Society of Children's Nurseries against the closures were unavailing.⁸⁰

A number of non-feminist women's groups also objected to the closure of nursery schools. In October 1946, *Women in Council* published an article in support

⁷⁸ See Denise Riley, 'War in the Nursery' p. 85.

⁷⁹ The Standing Joint Committee of Working Women's Organisations Oral Evidence to the Royal Commission on Population, 16 March 1945, (The Royal Commission on Population 1944-1949).

⁸⁰ See Denise Riley, 'War in the Nursery', pp. 90-1.

of nursery schools which claimed that nursery provision, as an extension of home life was a powerful, educative force for the citizen of tomorrow and a potent weapon with which to combat a whole range of social evils (not least of these the illegitimate and institution child, the delinquent juvenile and the promiscuous adolescent).⁸¹

Echoes of the Women's Group on Public Welfare Report are clear, with the hope that nursery schools would make up for the supposedly 'bad upbringing' of some working-class children.

The article, however, categorically denied that nurseries were 'a dumping ground for the improvident mother' and that 'to infer that the reasons of mothers demanding this extension to their home life are inadequate is to my mind an impertinence'.⁸² Members of the National Council of Women were encouraged to take action and urge their local authorities to provide part-time day nurseries and nursery schools for local children.

In October 1946, the Council used the continuing housing problem to appeal for an urgent increase in the number of local authority day nurseries. The Council's resolution read that

while believing that in normal circumstances

⁸¹ *Women in Council* Vol. XIX, No. 2, October 1946, p. 4.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

children under two years of age are best kept in their own homes, [the Council] considers that under present housing conditions nurseries should be provided.⁸³

The Council's pleas, even on the grounds of bad housing, were not enough to prevent the closure of war-time nurseries.

In spite of the efforts of the National Council of Women there is little evidence of a united campaign for nursery schools in the post-war years. Unlike the equal pay protest, the fight for family allowances or the women police campaign, the demand for nursery education did not provoke widespread support. One reason for this was the realisation that the Labour Government would not provide funding for nursery schools during a time of economic crisis. Christine Collette has written that during the late 1940s, the question of nursery school provision at the Labour Women's Conference gained less support each year 'as women delegates expressed solidarity with a Labour government facing economic crisis'.⁸⁴

The National Council of Women, one of the most outspoken defenders of nursery education throughout the

⁸³ It should be noted that the Chesterfield Branch of the National Council of Women dissociated itself from this resolution. *Women in Council* Vol. XIX, No. 3, November 1946, p. 9.

⁸⁴ Christine Collette, '"Daughter of the Newer Eve": The Labour Movement and Women' in Fryth, J. (ed), *Labour's Promised Land? Culture and Society in Labour Britain 1945-51* (1995), p. 49.

1930s and early 1940s, also appears to have accepted the fact that the Labour Government would not provide funding for nursery schools. No further resolutions calling for an expansion in nursery education were passed by the Council after 1946 as the Council devoted its energies to higher priority issues such as housing and equal pay.

Post-war concern for the stability of family life and the growing emphasis on the primary role of women as mothers had made it increasingly difficult for non-feminist women's societies to argue in favour of nursery care. These groups represented women who wanted to be good mothers and who were now being told by the experts that they should spend as much time as possible with their children. In 1948 the Catholic Women's League, which had supported limited nursery care during the war, adhered to this view claiming that 'every mother should have the knowledge, means, time and accommodation to bring up her own children in health and happiness within the family circle in their earliest years.'⁸⁵ No mention was made of part-time day care for tired mothers.

The attitude of non-feminist women's societies to nursery provision during the 1930s and 1940s reflects the underlying assumption that young children were best cared for by their mothers in the home. The advantages of nursery education for pre-school children were

⁸⁵ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 431, January 1948, p. 3.

highlighted by the National Council of Women as an important extension of home care. Rather than replacing the mother the Council saw nurseries, like the mothers' meeting, as the ideal way to enhance the physical and mental welfare of the nation's children. Professional advice would see to it that all mothers were aware of the best way to bring up their children.

What is most significant about the involvement of non-feminist women's societies in the nursery debate was their recognition that mothers were entitled to some time away from their children. The fact that the Catholic Women's League, the Mothers' Union and the National Council of Women accepted that the State should provide short-term respite care for children was a departure from traditional expectations of wives and mothers. These groups argued that mothers should have some time to themselves, not to engage in paid work, but to relax and have a break from full-time childcare.⁸⁶

There is no doubt that these views must be considered in the context of the population scare and the huge expansion of nursery care during the war. Neither can it be ignored that the enthusiasm of women's societies, even for part-time day nurseries, all but disappeared in the wave of domesticity

⁸⁶ This view was echoed by William Beveridge in 1948 when he too recognised that mothers needed a break from full-time mothering. See William Beveridge, *Voluntary Action: A Report on Methods of Social Advance* (1948), p. 264.

engulfing the post-war period. But the fact that the more conservative non-feminist women's groups suggested that mothers needed time away from their children to pursue their own interests is an important fact which should not be overlooked.

RECONSTRUCTION AND DOMESTICITY: HOUSEWIVES, WORKERS AND CITIZENS

The involvement of women in the war effort, whether in voluntary or paid work, heightened expectations amongst women's groups that the status of women citizens would be enhanced in the post-war period. In 1943 Mrs. Home Peel, President of the National Council of Women, told members that

the time has surely come for the government to give some indication of the attitude they propose to adopt towards women after the fighting has ceased. It is unthinkable that the reserves of women power, which the War has brought to light, should be lost to the nation after the war.⁸⁷

The National Council of Women was equally emphatic that 'each individual should have opportunity to make the maximum contribution to national life of which they are capable, quite irrespective of sex'.⁸⁸ In October 1941, the Council had passed a resolution calling on the Government to guarantee that 'when the present

⁸⁷ *Women in Council* No. 41, November 1943, p. 1.

⁸⁸ *Women in Council* No. 41, November 1943, p. 3.

emergency is over women citizens shall have a status identical with that of men'.⁸⁹ The involvement of the National Council of Women and the National Federation of Women's Institutes in the Equal Pay Campaign demonstrated that two of the most influential organisations for women were prepared to campaign publicly for equal treatment of women in the labour force.

What was the attitude of non-feminist women's groups to married women taking up paid employment? Did the war change their perception about the traditional domestic role of women in the home? During the war, non-feminist women's societies had reluctantly accepted that some married women with young children would volunteer for war-work. Nonetheless it was hoped that the majority would return to full-time mothering once the war had ended. Advocating marriage and motherhood for young women was not regarded as a backward step by non-feminist women's organisations. It was widely held that a return to traditional family life was what most young women would want after the years of war-time disruption and upheaval.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ *NCW Handbook 1941-42* (1942), p. 64.

⁹⁰ This view was borne out by the dramatic increase in the number of marriages during the period 1945-1948. The subsequent post-war baby boom meant that the birth-rate, in decline throughout the 1930s, peaked in 1947 at 20.6 births per 1,000. See Harold Smith, 'The effect of the war on the status of women' in Harold Smith (ed), *War and Social Change: British society in the Second World War* (1986), pp. 220-21.

At the same time non-feminist women's groups were anxious that women would continue to contribute to national and local life in the post-war period just as they had so successfully done during the war. In 1944 members of the Mothers' Union were reminded that

we, housekeepers and mothers, are marshalling our intelligence to make food and clothes adequate for our families..we are also called to look at our State housekeeping and our national children..and find out where we can help the generation just about to build their world.⁹¹

Participating in the post-war labour force during a time of economic crisis was just one way in which women were called upon to contribute to the national recovery after six years of war.

Non-feminist women's groups adopted a pragmatic approach to the employment of married women outside the home. In 1943 a survey of women's attitudes towards paid work reported that forty-three per cent of young women aged between 18-24 and 25-34 intended to give up work after the war. The most common reason given for their decision to stop working was the prospect of marriage and starting a family. This finding backed the assertion made by women's groups that mothers with

⁹¹ *Mothers in Council* No. 216, Vol. LVI, September 1944, p. 175..

young children should and would want to look after their own children at home.⁹²

At the same time, it was revealed that a significant number of older married women hoped to continue working once the war had ended. Thirty-nine per cent of married women and forty-nine per cent of married women with children questioned in 1943 expressed their intention to remain in employment after the war.⁹³ For some married women the experience of war-work had given them confidence in their own abilities and provided them with an independent income for the first time.⁹⁴ In March 1944, the Mothers' Union acknowledged that there may be 'a growing reluctance on the part of women to lose the economic independence they enjoyed before marriage or through war work'.⁹⁵

⁹² Geoffrey Thomas, *Women and Industry, An Inquiry into the problem of recruiting women to Industry carried out for the Ministry of Labour and National Service* cited in Penny Summerfield, 'Women, War and Social Change: Women in Britain in World War II', in Arthur Marwick (ed), *Total War and Social Change* (1988), p. 108.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁹⁴ During the war women with domestic responsibilities were directed into local part-time work which resulted in an increase in part-time workers from 380,000 in June 1942 to 900,000 in June 1944. Harold Smith, 'The effect of the war on the status of women', p. 216.

⁹⁵ The Mothers' Union Oral Evidence to the Royal Commission on Population, March 1944, (The Royal Commission on Population 1944-1949). Penny Summerfield has also suggested that the war-time experience of work 'was regarded by many participants as a key phase in terms of personal change and development'. Penny Summerfield, 'Women, War and Social Change: Women in Britain in World War II', p. 96.

When questioned by a member of the Royal Commission on Population about the advisability of mothers going out to work, the National Council of Women and the Mothers' Union defended a mother's right to work in certain circumstances. Rosamond Fisher, Central President of the Mothers' Union, told the Commission that

speaking as a feminist I say yes [to mothers working] but speaking as a mother I would say let her have a career provided it does not stand in the way of having babies..but it almost always does.

Mrs. Fisher went on to argue on behalf of working mothers pointing out that it was

hard for people not to have a career when people of my generation could do voluntary work..and nobody ever criticised them for that or for leaving their babies.. but..if a young woman takes up a career and leaves her baby she is severely criticised. I think it a little hard to argue that a woman should not continue her career if she has a baby, but the baby must come first.⁹⁶

In this statement, the President of the Mothers' Union not only described herself as a feminist but supported the idea that some mothers had the right to

⁹⁶ The Mothers' Union Oral Evidence to the Royal Commission on Population, 13 October 1944. (The Royal Commission on Population 1944-1949).

decide whether or not they would continue working after they had children. The Union believed that middle-class professional women had much to offer society and should be encouraged to return to work as soon as their children had grown up. On the other hand, the Union advised working-class mothers to avoid unskilled labour and concentrate on caring for their families. The implication appeared to be that middle-class women would always have more to contribute to society than their working-class sisters.⁹⁷

Giving evidence to the Royal Commission on Population, the National Council of Women also defended the right of women to have a career as well as a family. However, the Council also stressed that the welfare of the children must come first. In order to ensure that women with young children could stay at home, the Council proposed a 'dual-role' for married women. This would allow mothers to pursue a career before they started a family, and then return to it when their children had grown up.⁹⁸ Once again the decision to continue with a career after childbirth was seen only as an option for middle-class women. The

⁹⁷ 'Mothers in Jobs' *Mothers in Council* March 1947, p. 46.

⁹⁸ NCW Oral Evidence to the Royal Commission on Population, 29 September 1944, (The Royal Commission on Population, 1944-1949). This idea of a 'dual role' for women was advocated in the influential book *Women's Two Roles* (1956) by Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein. They suggested that married women should return to the labour force after raising their families to offset the continuing post-war labour shortage.

vast majority of working-class women had little choice but to go out to work if the family's income could not support a new baby.

In spite of the obvious class bias the suggestion made during the 1940s by the Mothers' Union and the NCW, that women had the right to marriage and a career, was nothing short of radical. Traditionally, family life and a career were regarded as mutually exclusive for women.⁹⁹ The fact that the Mothers' Union and the National Council of Women acknowledged that some married women would want to continue working after they had children suggests that non-feminist women's groups did not become completely engulfed in the ideology of domesticity which some have claimed characterised this period.

Although the total percentage of women workers fell from fifty-one per cent in 1943 to forty per cent in 1947¹⁰⁰ the number of married women working outside the home gradually increased during the post-war period.¹⁰¹ One reason for this increase was the urgent

⁹⁹ This was also true of feminist organisations. Jane Lewis has written that 'on the whole, post-war feminists accepted that women's most vital task was that of motherhood.' Jane Lewis, *Women in Britain since 1945* (1991), p. 24.

¹⁰⁰ In 1951 women workers made up thirty-five per cent of the total work force. For a detailed break-down of women's participation in the post-war work force see Penny Summerfield, 'Women, War and Social Change: Women in Britain in World War II' pp. 98-99.

¹⁰¹ In 1931 sixteen per cent of working women were married. This figure rose to forty-three per cent in 1943 at the height of wartime recruitment but fell

need for additional workers in the export industries to offset the severe post-war balance of payment deficit. In 1947, the Labour Government launched a major recruitment campaign which consisted of radio appeals and newspaper advertisements appealing to married women to help solve the country's financial crisis by making themselves available for work in industry.¹⁰²

Most non-feminist women's societies accepted that their members had a duty as citizens to assist the Government in its plans for a national recovery. In response to the Government's appeal for women workers the National Council of Women recognised that 'the participation of women [in industry] is necessary to secure the increased production on which the future of this country depends in the present national crisis.'¹⁰³ The Council supported the efforts of local branches to assist in the Government's recruiting drive. Mrs. Cockcroft, a prominent Halifax member, was praised for holding a public meeting urging women to work part-time in the regional textile industry.¹⁰⁴

The Catholic Women's League, however, had reservations about the Labour Government's policy of recruiting women for industrial work. Stella Given Wilson, President of the Catholic Women's League,

again to forty per cent in 1947. By 1951 forty three per cent of women workers were married. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

¹⁰² Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959*, p. 287.

¹⁰³ *Women in Council* Vol. XX, No. 11, November 1947, p. 9.

¹⁰⁴ *NCW Handbook 1948-49* (1949), p. 67.

expressed her disquiet at the decision which appeared to overlook the important work done by women in the home. She warned that Catholics must be watchful to safeguard the home and family.¹⁰⁵ It was in an effort to protect the stability of family life that the Mothers' Union and the National Council of Women made representations to the Government not to include women with children of school age in their appeal for women workers.

In 1947 the Mothers' Union wrote to the Ministry of Labour advising that undue pressure should not be put on young mothers to return to work. In his reply, the Minister assured the Union that

instructions have been given that there should be no effort to recruit mothers of very young children and there should be no pressure..brought to bear on women whose home responsibilities prevented them from going to work.¹⁰⁶

The Government's refusal to provide full-time day nurseries for working mothers after the war also discouraged women with young children from seeking employment outside the home.

Whilst welcoming the Ministry of Labour's decision not to target young mothers for industrial intake, the National Council of Women urged the Government to see

¹⁰⁵ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 437, August 1948, p. 4.

¹⁰⁶ *The Mothers' Union Workers' Paper* No. 408, January 1948, p. 3.

to it that women who did return to work were offered fair terms of employment. In October 1947 the Council passed a resolution calling on the authorities to 'exert themselves to help the women workers with regard to their remuneration and conditions of work, and in such matters as the provision of transport and shopping facilities'.¹⁰⁷ It will be recalled, however, that the Labour Government refused to accede to any request for equal pay throughout its period in office.¹⁰⁸

The demand for married women workers in other areas of the work-force also increased during the late 1940s. Job opportunities for women expanded in light industries such as electrical engineering, where women were engaged in low paid, unskilled and repetitive jobs. The post-war labour shortage led to the removal of the civil service marriage bar in 1946 and the recruitment of married women teachers in 1948 which increased the employment opportunities for married middle-class women in the public sector.

In spite of the changes in women's work patterns, with an increasing number of older married women taking up part-time work, women still had to see to their domestic duties. Speaking at a YWCA Conference in July 1944 Margaret Bondfield, chairman of the Women's Group on Public Welfare, emphasised the important role that women had in rebuilding the home life of the nation.

¹⁰⁷ *Women in Council* Vol. XX, No. 11, November 1947, p. 9.

¹⁰⁸ See Chapter Five.

She told delegates that 'you, as a citizen, have a responsibility towards all those laws which effect the home' and insisted on recognition for 'the status of the housewife as a skilled worker entitled to professional standing in the community'.¹⁰⁹

Following pressure from non-feminist women's groups, the Minister of Labour's statement in 1947 that 'a woman's first duty is to her home' was welcomed by the majority of women's organisations.¹¹⁰ This view was apparently shared by many working women. In 1948, a survey of women workers revealed that the majority of respondents felt 'women should go out to work only if they could carry out their duties to their homes and families.'¹¹¹ The experience of wartime work for over seven million women had done little to change perceptions about the division of labour within the home.

While the number of married women working slowly increased during the late 1940s, women's magazines, most notably *Woman's Own* (1932) and *Woman* (1937) encouraged women to devote themselves entirely to their homes and families. Throughout the 1930s, these weekly magazines were particularly influential in propagating

¹⁰⁹ *News For Citizens* July 1944, p. 2, (YWCA Archive, MSS. 243/10/7).

¹¹⁰ *The Mothers' Union Workers Paper* No. 408, January 1948, p. 3.

¹¹¹ Geoffrey Thomas, *Women and Industry* (1948), Cited in Janet Finch & Penny Summerfield, 'Social Reconstruction and the emergence of companionate marriage, 1945-59', p. 16.

the image of the full-time professional housewife. For much of the period they encapsulated the ideal of domesticity to which many women aspired. In these publications, marriage was portrayed as the ultimate career choice for women.¹¹²

Tips on housekeeping, fashion, beauty and child-care were the mainstay of women's magazines which became increasingly popular during the 1930s and 1940s. The circulation of the weekly magazine *Woman* reached a million in 1940 and 3.5 million by the end of the 1950s.¹¹³ There is no doubt that the domestic ideal portrayed by magazines such as *Woman* and *Woman's Own*, of a devoted wife capable of looking after her home as well as her appearance, was shared by non-feminist women's groups, such as the Mothers' Union. Just as *Women's Own* advised readers that 'it's very bad policy to care for your furniture and neglect your face' which wasn't 'quite fair to the man', *The Mothers' Union Journal* warned new wives not to 'let yourselves go, remember to home-make well for him.'¹¹⁴

¹¹² Cynthia White, *Women's Magazines 1693-1968* (1970), Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959* (1992), pp. 207-218 and Jill Greenfield, 'From "Angels in the House" to "The Craft Workers of Today": Women's Roles and the Ideology of Domesticity in Popular Women's Magazines in the 1930s', (M.A. thesis, University of Warwick, 1991).

¹¹³ Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1945* (1992), p. 209.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 213; *The Mothers' Union Journal* No. 166, September 1936, p. 21.

After 1945, monthly magazines including *Good Housekeeping* (1922) and *Everywoman* (1934) continued to discuss topical issues including education, women's health and consumer advice. Nevertheless the popular weeklies focussed even more exclusively on domesticity and the role of women in the home. *Woman* and *Woman's Own* encouraged married women workers to leave their wartime jobs and concentrate on home-making, despite the fact that the Government was at the same time appealing to older married women to return to the work force.¹¹⁵ The image of domesticity put forward by the weekly women's magazines fitted in with post-war ideas about the reconstruction of the family and expert opinion that a good mother stayed at home to look after her children.

In 1944, Rosamond Fisher of the Mothers' Union suggested that young men should learn to take a greater share in home-making which would 'make for a happier married life'.¹¹⁶ The idea that boys as well as girls should be taught domestic science in schools had been put forward by the National Council of Women in 1938. That year the Council passed a resolution urging that 'in all schools for boys and girls, instruction in

¹¹⁵ Cynthia White, *Women's Magazines 1693-1968* pp. 131-35.

¹¹⁶ The Mothers' Union Oral Evidence to the Royal Commission on Population, 13 November 1944, (The Royal Commission on Population, 1944-1949).

housecraft..should at some suitable time during their school life be a compulsory part of the curriculum.'¹¹⁷

Nonetheless the overwhelming assumption was that young women would benefit most from instruction in domestic science. The influential Norwood Report on Education (1943), whose recommendations were adopted in the 1944 Education Act, endorsed the view that domestic science subjects were important for girls because they were 'potential makers of homes'.¹¹⁸ Non-feminist women's groups agreed. In 1946, members of the Townswomen's Guilds recommended that homecraft should be taught in schools and by youth organisations to cater for girls in their early teens.¹¹⁹ Although a small number of members suggested that boys be instructed in cooking and sewing it was

the emphatic opinion of the majority of groups that "men should provide for the home, not run it", and that "wives should train their

¹¹⁷ *NCW Handbook 1939-1940* (1940), p. 119. It should be noted that boys already received manual training related to domestic work. See Joanna Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures* (1994), pp. 91-2.

¹¹⁸ John Newsom's influential book *The Education of Girls* (1948) recommended that young women should be taught domestic science in County Colleges to prepare them for married life. See Janet Finch and Penny Summerfield, 'Social Reconstruction and the emergence of companionate marriage, 1945-59', pp. 14-15.

¹¹⁹ Sixty-four Townswomen's Guilds participated in a survey on attitudes towards training in homecraft at the request of the Standing Conference of National Voluntary Youth Organisations. The results were submitted to an Inter-Departmental Committee of the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education. *The Townswoman* Vol. 14, No. 4, February 1947, p. 45.

husbands to be of use in an emergency".¹²⁰

In 1947, the YWCA expressed its concern about young women who had 'been cut off from the chance of setting up home during the war years'. Outlining future plans, the Association announced that 'special attention is to be given in club programmes to home making in the widest sense.' Dress making, the care of children, decoration and furnishing were all listed as possible course subjects.¹²¹ The National Federation of Women's Institutes also supported the idea of home management training courses. In 1946 the Federation urged local education authorities to provide courses in cookery, home decoration and fruit preservation for women in rural areas.¹²²

In the aftermath of the Second World War, non-feminist women's organisations not only embraced but actively promoted the domestic role of women. They believed that women were at the centre of traditional family life and that the needs of the family must be the primary concern of wives and mothers. This was particularly significant at a time when the number of marriages ending in divorce was on the increase.¹²³ It

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 46.

¹²¹ *YWCA Review 1947* (1947), (YWCA Archive, MSS. 243/2/1/28).

¹²² *Home and Country* Vol. 28, No. 8, August 1946, p. 121.

¹²³ Between 1936 and 1939 the average number of divorce petitions filed each year was 7,500. This yearly average increased to 39,000 between 1945 and 1948. Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959*, p. 270.

is important, however, to draw some distinction between the views of non-feminist women's groups and the ideology of domesticity promoted by magazines such as *Woman* and *Woman's Own*.

Non-feminist women's societies did not want wives and mothers to devote themselves entirely to their homes and families. If that were the case women would never have had the time to join voluntary women's organisations. Instead, organisations such as the Mothers' Union and the Catholic Women's League encouraged active citizenship amongst their members helping them to become educated and responsible members of the community.

One way in which non-feminist women's organisations encouraged their members to be good citizens was to urge them to do what they could to assist in the national recovery. The imposition of economic austerity during the post-war years made exceptional demands on the patience and goodwill of women. During the war many women had felt it their duty to put up with the hardships of wartime rationing which was regarded as the fairest method of distributing limited supplies.¹²⁴ As a result, women's groups had co-operated with the Ministry of Food and members of the National Federation of Women's

¹²⁴ It was acknowledged in *Home and Country* that a good system of rationing ensured that 'a considerable section of the population were better fed than ever before'. *Home and Country* Vol. 26, No. 1, January 1944, p. 3.

Institutes and the Townswomen's Guilds had advised women on the best use of rations to provide healthy meals for their families.¹²⁵

The end of the war did not bring any relief to the housewife whose responsibility it was to feed and clothe her family regardless of scarce resources. Rationing remained in force for another eight years and bread, the staple diet of many families, was rationed for the first time.¹²⁶ Such action was deemed necessary by the Labour Government to overcome the serious deficit in the balance of payments. As a result, a policy of austerity was introduced which restricted foreign imports and increased taxation on domestic consumption.¹²⁷

Having already experienced six years of rationing, the Government was anxious to emphasise the necessity of austerity if the country was to overcome the post-war economic crisis. It was hoped that housewives in particular would support the Government's economy drive and accept, as they had done during the war, that it

¹²⁵ The National Federation of Women's Institutes participated in the Government's Food Advice Campaign providing nutritional information to women at travelling exhibitions and domestic science demonstrations.

¹²⁶ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Bread Rationing in Britain, July 1946-July 1948', *Twentieth Century British History* 4, 1, 1993.

¹²⁷ See Kenneth Morgan, *Labour in Power, 1945-51* (Oxford, 1984), Henry Pelling, *The Labour Governments, 1945-1951* (New York, 1984) and Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Rationing, Austerity and the Conservative Party Recovery after 1945', *Historical Journal* 37, 1, 1994.

was their duty as citizens to participate in the national recovery.

Nevertheless, discontent had been growing amongst women about the long hours they spent standing in queues since the end of the war. In July 1945, two housewives from London, Irene Lovelock and Alfreda Landau, set up the British Housewives' League and collected 17,000 signatures which were presented to Parliament, protesting about the prevalence of queues.¹²⁸ The Housewives' League was at its most active during 1946 and 1947 when it became an outspoken critic of bread rationing and the Labour Government's austerity programme.

The League organised public meetings and marches to protest against the continuing shortages. These events attracted considerable press attention resulting in dramatic headlines such as 'British Housewives National Revolt Campaign'.¹²⁹ The League had an active membership of some 15,000 mainly middle-class women who were involved in public protests in cities including Liverpool, Glasgow, Leeds and London.¹³⁰ But the League

¹²⁸ James Hinton, 'Militant Housewives: the British Housewives' League and the Attlee Government', *History Workshop Journal* 38, 1994, p. 132 and Beatrix Campbell, *The Iron Ladies: Why do Women Vote Conservative?* (1987), p. 74.

¹²⁹ *Daily Mail* Friday 15 February 1946. James Hinton 'Militant Housewives: the British Housewives' League and the Attlee Government' paper given at History Workshop London Seminar, 9 January 1995.

¹³⁰ James Hinton, 'Militant Housewives: the British Housewives' League and the Attlee Government', *History Workshop Journal* 38, 1994, p. 145.

failed to attract a widespread membership or win political respect and was often viewed by contemporaries as a Tory front whose principal aim was to agitate against the Labour Government.¹³¹ More recently, however, James Hinton has argued that the British Housewives' League remained a non-partisan organisation which

represented a possibility that women would revolt against austerity in ways which would fundamentally challenge the constructive "mend and make do" ethos which informed the role of the "housewife" in 1940s Britain: but the possibility was never realized.¹³²

One reason why the British Housewives' League failed to become an influential women's organisation was its inability to win the support of mainstream women's groups. Non-feminist women's groups did not endorse the League's criticism of the Government and more particularly its militant tendencies. In August 1945, the National Council of Women organised its own Anti-Queue Conference to discuss the problem of food and clothing queues. Just as concerned about the hardships endured by women due to the continuing shortages, the Council advocated co-operation with the authorities in making the best use of scarce resources

¹³¹ Elizabeth Wilson, *Only Halfway to Paradise. Women in Post-war Britain: 1945-1968* (1980) and Beatrix Campbell, *Iron Ladies*.

¹³² James Hinton, 'Militant Housewives', p. 150.

rather than confrontation to overcome the difficulties.¹³³

In February 1946 it was announced that supplies of bacon, poultry and eggs were to be cut. Five months later, bread was rationed for the first time - a clear sign that things would get worse before they got better. The British Housewives' League organised protests against bread rationing and collected some 600,000 signatures objecting to the new restrictions.¹³⁴ Non-feminist women's groups took a more conciliatory line and tried to explain to their members why such harsh measures were required to ensure that everyone got their fair share.

In the April 1946 edition of *The Mothers' Union Workers' Paper* the President Rosamond Fisher, gave guidance on the problem of food shortages. She highlighted the plight of the starving and homeless in Europe and reminded members that 'Queues and shortages are trying and tiring, but what are they compared to the broken hearts of mothers and wives.'¹³⁵ The National Union of Townswomen's Guilds and the Women's Institute Movement were also willing to support the Labour Government's rationing policy and agreed that

¹³³ *NCW Annual Report 1946 (1946)*, p. 6.

¹³⁴ James Hinton, 'Militant Housewives', p. 135.

¹³⁵ *The Mothers' Union Workers' Paper* No. 388, April 1946, p. 97.

members of both organisations could volunteer to work as Food Leaders for the Ministry of Food.¹³⁶

In spite of this support, both organisations were careful to avoid any accusation of political bias. The National Federation of Women's Institutes made it clear that although it was willing to assist with the implementation of bread rationing, the Federation remained a non-political organisation.¹³⁷ Likewise, the Townswomen's Guild Movement issued a memorandum to all local Guilds informing them that they could not pass resolutions on any controversial issue including bread rationing. The National Executive Committee warned that in most cases protests against bread rationing were sponsored by political parties.¹³⁸

It was hardly surprising that some local Guild members were expressing dissatisfaction at the continued cuts in the ration considering the hardship endured by housewives during this period. One member of the Townswomen's Guild, Constance Hill, was responsible for organising a housewives protest in Liverpool and told a meeting of 700 women that 'the smiling mother of yesterday is the bad-tempered mother

¹³⁶ Members of women's societies including the Women's Co-operative Guild, the Women's Institutes and the Townswomen's Guilds worked with Local Food Officers giving advice to housewives on how to make the best of their rations. *National Union of Townswomen's Guilds Annual Report 1946* (1946), p. 36.

¹³⁷ *Home and Country* Vol. 28, No. 8, August 1947, p. 121.

¹³⁸ *National Union of Townswomen's Guilds Annual Report 1946* (1946), p. 36.

of today..we are under-fed, under washed, and over-controlled.'¹³⁹

Whilst individual members of non-feminist women's groups may have identified with the highly publicised protests of the British Housewives' League, most women accepted that rationing was the only equitable way to deal with food shortages. In August 1946, one month after bread rationing had been introduced, opinion polls showed that seventy per cent of housewives felt they could manage in spite of the ration cuts.¹⁴⁰ This meant that non-feminist women's groups could continue to co-operate with the Labour Government's programme of austerity in the knowledge that the vast majority of members supported this policy.

The 1947 coal shortage resulted in a national fuel economy drive and non-feminist women's organisations were again approached by the authorities to assist in the campaign. Following a request by Sir Stafford Cripps, the National Council of Women and the Women's Institute agreed to do their utmost to heighten public awareness about the need for food and fuel economies. Both groups worked with local authority recovery committees set up to encourage all members of the community to produce more food and participate in

¹³⁹ Cited in James Hinton, 'Militant Housewives', p. 133.

¹⁴⁰ Polls of July and August 1946, in BIPO archive, ESRC Data Archive, University of Essex. Cited in James Hinton, 'Women and the Labour vote, 1945-50' *Labour History Review* 57, 3, Winter 1992, p. 61.

salvage and fuel economy schemes set up by the Government.¹⁴¹

Speaking in October 1947, Lady Albemarle, President of the National Federation of Women's Institutes, discussed ways in which Institute members could respond to the Government's 'call for good citizenship'.¹⁴² As a result it was decided to launch Operation Produce, a scheme similar to the wartime fruit preservation project, which urged every Institute member to produce an extra 10 lbs. of home-grown food. The surplus produce was then sold to the public at Women's Institute markets.¹⁴³

The need to ration essential goods during a period of economic austerity was accepted by women's organisations who willingly assisted the Government in the administration of food and fuel economy schemes. In return for this co-operation, the Executive Committees of these women's groups hoped that housewives would be treated fairly by the authorities. One outstanding grievance raised by them during this period was the fact that household linen, sheets and towels, could only be purchased with personal clothing coupons. This meant that housewives, whose primary responsibility was to look after the home, were

¹⁴¹ *Home and Country* Vol. 20, No. 9, September 1948, p. 154.

¹⁴² *Home and Country* Vol. 29, No. 11, November 1947, p. 191.

¹⁴³ *Home and Country* Vol. 31, No. 3, March 1949, p. 103.

invariably left with fewer clothing coupons than other members of the family.¹⁴⁴

In an effort to resolve this apparent injustice, the Mothers' Union appealed directly to Sir Stafford Cripps, President of the Board of Trade, to end restrictions on the supply of sheets to housewives.¹⁴⁵ In spite of this formal request, no change in the existing rationing arrangements was immediately forthcoming. In April 1947 the Executive of the National Federation of Women's Institutes sent a deputation to the Board of Trade to highlight the hardships endured by rural women 'owing to the shortages of bed linen and curtains, country shoes and wellingtons.'¹⁴⁶ Little progress was made in relation to the supply of shoes and boots but the June edition of *Home and Country* reported that women could now purchase blankets and sheets with separate coupons.¹⁴⁷ This was a minor but nonetheless important victory for housewives, the majority of whom had demonstrated their desire to work with the Government throughout the period of economic reconstruction.

As non-feminist women's organisations co-operated with the Labour Government during the post-war years,

¹⁴⁴ During the war, the Women's Co-operative Guild and the Labour Party Women Sections had protested to the Government about this anomaly but were unable to bring about any change in procedure.

¹⁴⁵ *The Mothers' Union Workers' Paper* No. 397, January 1947, p. 6.

¹⁴⁶ *Home and Country* Vol. 29, No. 5, May 1947, p. 89.

¹⁴⁷ *Home and Country* Vol. 29, No. 6, June 1947, p. 101.

women did benefit from the introduction of major social reforms, many of which had been recommended in the Beveridge Report. These measures included the payment of family allowances and improved maternity benefits for working mothers.¹⁴⁸ The National Health Service, inaugurated in 1948, did much to enhance the quality of life for women during the post-war years.¹⁴⁹

Despite these important and far-reaching reforms, housewives still had to manage on meagre rations and the majority of working women had to make do without professional child-care. The failure of both the Labour Government and private employers to introduce equal pay contributed to the fact that the majority of women workers continued to earn lower rates of pay than men. By the end of the 1940s, the promise of a 'fair deal' for women during the period of reconstruction remained unfulfilled.

Nevertheless, the post-war years did provide non-feminist women's groups with the opportunity to highlight the importance of active citizenship for women. Encouraging their members to play a part in the rebuilding of the nation, these societies claimed a role for women as responsible members of the community. This role involved co-operating with the Government in

¹⁴⁸ See Chapter Four.

¹⁴⁹ For an account of the origins of the NHS see Daniel Fox, 'The National Health Service and the Second World War: the elaboration of consensus', in Harold Smith (ed), *War and Social Change* (1986) and Richard Titmuss, *Problems of Social Policy* (1950).

its national austerity programme supporting measures such as rationing and fuel economy schemes. In return, non-feminist women's societies insisted that post-war planners consider the opinions of women who were willing to support the nation during a time of crisis. Non-feminist women's groups did succeed in having their proposals on housing and child-care adopted by the Design of Dwellings Report and the Royal Commission on Population. Even though not all of their recommendations were acted upon the fact that their submissions were considered and accepted demonstrated that the views of ordinary women could make an impact on official policy. To secure representation for women through active citizenship was one of the principal objectives of non-feminist women's societies and one which they achieved during the post-war period.

CONCLUSION

By the end of the 1940s, non-feminist women's societies continued to play an important part in the lives of a significant number of women. The Women's Institute Movement and the Townswomen's Guilds experienced a rapid expansion in the immediate post-war period. In 1947, 876 Townswomen's Guilds had been established and 379,000 rural women had joined the National Federation of Women's Institutes. These two groups continued to provide women with instruction in traditional crafts and domestic skills. Mary Courtney, elected Chairman of the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds in 1948, emphasised the importance of craftwork which

serves as a release and a recreation from the many present problems of family life. This work has been done by busy women in their leisure time. I have yet to hear similar criticism of what a man chooses to do with his leisure time.¹

In September 1948, the Women's Institute Movement opened Denman College, a residential college for members, which offered courses in rural and domestic economy as well as classes in handicrafts and other traditional skills for women.

The Mothers' Union's membership also increased after the war although it did not return to its pre-war

¹ Quoted in Caroline Merz, *After the Vote* p. 34.

level. By 1950 the society had half a million members and was anxious to recruit younger women. Open groups, attached to local Union branches, had been set up in 1942 to 'reach out to try to help the many young wives and mothers who have lost their faith or are out of touch with any form of organised religion'.² This move reflected the Union's concern about the apparent decline in religious observance and Christian moral values throughout the 1930s and 1940s.

It was reported in 1945 that 36,000 women were attending the Union's Open Groups. However, the decline in the number of new members actually joining the Union remained a matter of concern. In 1950, Central Council suggested that meetings should include drama, book clubs and talks on national and international affairs as well as religious education in an effort to appeal to the wives of professional men.³ It should be noted that divorced women and unmarried mothers remained excluded from the Mothers' Union. With the dramatic increase in the post-war divorce rate the Union felt that it was its duty, now more than ever, to uphold Christian principles and to protect the stability of family life.

The National Council of Women was unable to sustain its pre-war membership of some 13,000 women which fell to 8,648 by 1948. This drop indicates that

² *The Mothers' Union Workers Paper* No. 356, August 1943, p. 188.

³ *The Mothers' Union Workers Paper* July 1950, p. 68.

women returning from war work were more likely to join their local Townswomen's Guilds or the YWCA, which offered a wide range of activities, than the NCW which focused primarily on questions of local and national interest. In spite of the decline in individual membership, the Council remained an important national organisation for women with over one hundred affiliated societies, including the Mothers' Union, the YWCA and the Catholic Women's League.

The YWCA and the Catholic Women's League had recruited additional members during the war years through their work with women in the Armed Forces and by setting up youth groups. In 1948, however, the YWCA reported a fall in membership to 49,098, attributed to the closure of wartime youth clubs. In 1950, Mrs. Frederic Newhouse, President of the YWCA, reiterated the Association's commitment to providing young women and girls with the opportunity of becoming involved in sporting activities and improving their education in order to 'foster Christian standards of behaviour'.⁴ The YWCA also recognised its responsibilities in preparing young women for married life. In 1949 a Home-Making Adviser was appointed to plan courses on all aspects of Christian family life, including classes in family budgeting, health and beauty.⁵

Not surprisingly, the Catholic Women's League continued to advocate marriage and motherhood for women

⁴ *YWCA Review 1949-1950* (1950), p. 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*

during the late 1940s. In 1949, the League disagreed with any suggestion that housework for women was 'an endless drudgery' and claimed that 'at least women are freer in their own home than in poorly paid jobs.'⁶ Although the League believed that a woman's first place was in the home, it hoped that members would find in the League a 'good training ground for women who are ready to take part in local government as a matter of conscience'.⁷ In December 1945, members had been reminded that 'in effect your place is in the centre of the home, but an immense task awaits you in public life, there is to be no hiding behind household duties'.⁸

The paradox of women's two roles, as housewife and citizen, is a recurring theme which emerges from the study of non-feminist women's societies during the 1930s and 1940s. These organisations, ranging from the conservative Catholic Women's League to the more progressive National Council of Women, regarded marriage and motherhood as the most important vocations for women. The growing popularity of marriage during the 1930s, followed by the dramatic increase in the post-war marriage rate, indicated that non-feminist women's groups were correct in their assertion that

⁶ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 452, November 1949, p. 2.

⁷ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 442, January 1949, p. 3.

⁸ *The Catholic Women's League Magazine* No. 408, December 1945, p. 3.

marriage was the preferred option for the vast majority of women.

The social and educational activities made available to women who joined non-feminist women's societies were designed to compliment rather than conflict with their domestic role. Handicrafts, sewing circles, cookery demonstrations and social gatherings were seen as ways for women to extend and develop their interests without challenging traditional assumptions about women's work within the home. However, it has become clear from this research that the leadership of organisations such as the Mothers' Union and the Townswomen's Guilds were very aware of the responsibilities that women had as citizens. Members were encouraged to use their vote wisely and to become more involved in local and national affairs. Involvement in a non-feminist women's society gave large numbers of women the opportunity to learn about the democratic process whilst providing them with the vocabulary necessary to discuss concepts such as political participation and social rights. This knowledge was particularly important following the extension of political citizenship to women in 1918.

Combining motherhood with active citizenship, as advocated by non-feminist women's societies, was difficult for women at this time. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, middle-class women had been able to overcome this problem by employing servants and nannies to see to their domestic

duties while they devoted much of their time to philanthropic work. As Rosamond Fisher, Central President of the Mothers' Union, suggested in her evidence to the Royal Commission on Population, there had been little criticism in the past of women who left their children to get involved in charitable causes.

The steady decline in the number of domestic servants throughout the 1930s and 1940s together with the new emphasis placed on the relationship between a mother and her baby by child psychologists such as Bowlby and Winnicott, meant that it was increasingly difficult even for middle-class women, to combine motherhood with active citizenship. Mothers were now expected to devote even more time caring for their children within the home.

The dilemma of women's dual roles as mother and citizen also extended to the question of paid work. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, non-feminist women's societies were in no doubt that mothers should care for young children within the home and should not, if at all possible, go out to work. This was in keeping with the prevailing ideology of domesticity and, as the wartime social surveys revealed, the view of a considerable number of working women.

As late as 1952, when over forty per cent of the female work-force were married women, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Geoffry Fisher, told a meeting of the Mothers' Union that 'it is always regrettable when a mother goes out to work and probably never sees her

family, like Mrs. [Rosamond] Fisher!'⁹ Archbishop Fisher's comments again highlight the conflict which existed between a woman's domestic role and her right to pursue interests or a career outside the home.

One solution to this problem, put forward by the Mothers' Union and the National Council of Women was for married women to resume their work outside the home once their children had grown up. The increase in the number of older married women taking up part-time work during the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s would suggest that this was one way for women to combine full-time motherhood with paid employment. Part-time work for women meant that the traditional division of labour within the home remained unchanged. It is significant that the difficulty experienced by women who wished to be both mothers and workers, which remains unresolved for women today, was addressed by non-feminist women's societies during the 1930s and 1940s.

On the national level non-feminist women's societies were involved in a number of key campaigns during the 1930s and 1940s. The fact that these organisations were outspoken on questions relating to women's lives indicates that they played a much more significant part in the struggle for women's rights than has previously been acknowledged. Non-feminist

⁹ Archbishop's Fisher speech to the Mothers' Union Annual Conference, June 1952, (Archbishop Fisher Papers, Vol. 105).

women's groups highlighted the specific needs of wives and mothers. They insisted that housewives, who performed an important service to the State, were entitled to social rights including adequate health care, family allowances, and the right to be treated as independent citizens under the social welfare system. The involvement of mainstream women's societies in these campaigns added weight to the demands of feminist and political women's groups for reform.

It could be argued that the rank and file membership of large voluntary organisations were more interested in social and recreational activities than in topics such as citizenship and welfare reform.¹⁰ As the evidence suggests, handicrafts, dressmaking and cookery appealed to the vast majority of members. Nevertheless, the evidence also shows that many local branches were involved in campaigns for improved health services and the appointment of women police in their areas. The 1942 housing survey revealed that branch members of non-feminist women's groups had very definite ideas about the housing standards they expected the Government to provide. These activities suggest that a significant number of ordinary members did take an interest in local and national affairs. However, further research is necessary to discover just

¹⁰ This suggestion is made by D.L. North in 'Middle-Class Suburban Lifestyles and Culture in England 1919-1939'.

how interested and how active local branches were in the campaign work of their National Executives.

The over-lap in membership between non-feminist women's societies at both the national and local level demonstrates that there was a vibrant female network in existence throughout the 1930s and 1940s. This led to co-operation between the various organisations on questions of common interest, for example the campaign against the advertisement of contraceptives and in the inter-war peace movement. It is significant that one of the main reasons the Mothers' Union re-affiliated to the National Council of Women in 1944 was the fact that grassroots members were anxious to resume work on local projects with National Council of Women branches.

The national leadership of organisations such as the National Council of Women, the Townswomen's Guilds and Women's Institute Movement had close links with feminist societies, for example the NCEC, and the three main political parties. Although non-feminist women's societies were careful to avoid overtly feminist or party political issues, the National Council of Women, the Women's Institute Movement and the YWCA were prepared to co-operate with feminist societies in the campaign for equal pay. Similarly, the more conservative Mothers' Union and the Catholic Women's League, through their membership of the National Council of Women, were willing to work alongside feminist groups, supporting joint demands for social welfare reform.

This complex network of women's societies, often with diverse and sometimes conflicting ideologies, campaigned for the social rights of women as citizens throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Although non-feminist women's groups were anxious to improve the position of women in society and raise the status of housewives, they did not consider themselves to be feminist organisations. Margaret Morgan, in her history of the Women's Institute Movement, has suggested that the WI represented the 'acceptable face of feminism'.¹¹ Her argument is persuasive but what is perhaps more interesting is the fact that organisations such as the WI, the Townswomen's Guilds and the YWCA refused to be defined as feminist.

Non-feminist women's groups did not challenge accepted gender roles within the family. Neither did they wish to alter the traditional gender hierarchy in society. Instead, it was the preservation of the family, with the mother at its centre, which preoccupied non-feminist women's societies throughout the 1930s and 1940s. The fact that the word feminism was regarded as a pejorative term during these years was another reason for non-feminist women's groups to avoid close association with egalitarian feminist groups.

In 1928, Vera Brittain wrote that feminists were perceived as 'spectacled, embittered women,

¹¹ See Margaret Morgan, 'The Acceptable Face of Feminism'.

disappointed, childless, dowdy and generally unloved'.¹² Two years later Edith Picton-Turbervill MP, declared 'I abominate the word "feminist"..I am looking at the matter [of women's rights] from a common sense point of view'.¹³ As these remarks suggest, feminism was often thought to represent the interests of radical, single and middle-class women. For organisations such as the Townswomen's Guilds and the National Council of Women, who wished to attract a wider membership, it was important to avoid a narrow focus on equal rights and concentrate on the needs of the majority of women, who at this time were housewives and mothers.

The involvement of voluntary and non-feminist women's societies in campaigns for the welfare rights of women during the 1930s and 1940s was not confined to England. In France the conservative and Catholic La Ligue Patriotique des Femmes Francaises (the Patriotic League of French Women), which in 1914 had over 400,000 members, was the most influential organisation for women in the country throughout the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁴ The League set up anti-tuberculosis clinics in Paris

¹² *Manchester Guardian* 13 December 1928, cited in Harold Smith 'British Feminism in the 1920s', in H. Smith (ed), *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* (1990), p. 62.

¹³ Quoted in Brian Harrison, 'Women in a Men's House: The Women MPs, 1919-1945', p. 643.

¹⁴ Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, 'Womanly Duties: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States in France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States, 1880-1920', p. 1100.

and developed far-reaching infant-care programmes.¹⁵

Koven and Michel write that

well into the twentieth century French women were far more likely to participate in maternalist activities than join feminist organisations, even though maternalism did not necessarily further their emancipation as a sex.¹⁶

In the Irish Free State, where women were granted the franchise on equal terms with men in 1922, egalitarian feminist societies remained small minority organisations. The Irish Women's Citizens' Association (1876), for example, had a membership of less than two hundred members during the 1930s. Conversely, non-feminist women's organisations such as the Irish Country Women's Association (1910) and the Joint Committee of Women's Societies and Social Workers (1935), which emphasised the needs of women as 'home-makers', together represented over 22,000 women. In common with their English counter-parts, these societies highlighted the contribution that women could make to society and called for improvements in health care and housing standards.¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ See Caitriona Beaumont, 'Women and the Politics of Equality: The Irish Women's Movement 1930-1943', in Mary O'Dowd and Maryann Valiulis (eds), *Engendering Irish History: Festschrift for Dr. Margaret MacCurtain* (forthcoming).

The failure of feminism to attract widespread support during the 1930s and 1940s should not be allowed to overshadow the activities of non-feminist women's societies. The six organisations considered in this research have in the past been portrayed as conservative associations which represented traditional middle-class values. Moreover, they extolled the virtues of motherhood and appeared to distance themselves from egalitarian feminist groups. Instead of contributing to the struggle for women's rights these societies have been accused of conforming to the prevailing ideology of domesticity.

To exclude *non-feminist women's societies* from the history of the women's movement overlooks the fact that organisations such as the Mothers' Union and the Townswomen's Guilds sought to empower women through their rights of citizenship. Whilst rejecting feminism, non-feminist women's societies were determined to enhance the status of women in society. They campaigned for the social welfare rights of women and at times worked with feminist women's groups to achieve their goals. Above all they brought value to the work of women in the home and highlighted the contribution that women made and would continue to make to society. For all of these reasons non-feminist women's groups must be included in any history of the women's movement in England. To do so will provide a more accurate account of the lives of housewives who began to assert their rights as independent citizens,

long before the emergence of the Women's Liberation Movement.

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