Feminism and Women’s Work, 1776–1928

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Abstract
This article surveys the emergence of work as a key priority for feminism, as it developed from early roots in the late eighteenth century, through the nineteenth-century women’s movement, and into the early twentieth-century campaign for the vote. It argues that the pursuit of paid work and financial autonomy was initially slow to establish itself as a feminist priority, and draws attention to intersectional issues of class informing feminism’s growth out of a small middle-class constituency. It surveys key issues relating to feminist agitation for access to employment and the professions, including tensions with trades unionist campaigns for the ‘family wage’, and the schism between egalitarian and maternalist feminists over the extent to which women should be ‘protected’ from perceived occupational dangers. It concludes by considering the enfranchisement of some women in 1918 and all women in 1928 as a partial and incomplete victory.

Introduction
The possibilities and proprieties of women’s work became a mounting concern for feminism as it developed from the late eighteenth century. The nature of women’s work fell into different categories, often dependent upon class, economic and social status. How might work be defined? Did it take place in the home, or in the public and commercial spaces – factories, offices, shops – of Great Britain’s expanding towns and cities? Was work a necessity to support a woman and her family, or was it a matter of social duty, moral obligation or even personal fulfilment? Did the work bring essential subsistence, or was it a means through which a woman might realise abilities and talents equal to that of her male counterpart? Did she receive enough to live on, and how did her pay compare to her male colleagues’? These were questions absorbing feminist campaigners over many generations, as the relationship between women and work became a sustained and taxing political and social issue.

Theorising women’s work: Wollstonecraft and the birth of feminism
The late eighteenth century was a period of nascent, fledgling feminism, difficult to pin down and define. For Karen O’Brien, the era was foundational for the development of later nineteenth-century feminist thinking. Enlightenment philosophy supplied a conceptual framework for ‘understanding the gendered structures of society without which nineteenth-century feminism would not have been possible’ (2009: 2). O’Brien argues that feminism, defined as a demand for equal civil and political rights for women, did not emerge until the very end of the eighteenth century. When it did, concern with work as a route to economic
autonomy was a small aspect of a wider cry for full female subjectivity. Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) is often understood to be the first feminist manifesto, arguing against the stultifying effects of an artificially constructed femininity. Wollstonecraft called for equality of educational opportunity to fit women to be rational companions of their husbands, and intelligent mothers to their children, rather than pretty playthings, redundant at forty. Employment, however, appears as something of an afterthought:

Women might certainly study the art of healing, and be physicians as well as nurses. And midwifery, decency seems to allot to them... Business of various kinds, they might likewise pursue, if they were educated in a more orderly manner, which might save many from common and legal prostitution.

(Wollstonecraft 2004: 100–101)

These suggestions either select occupations which might plausibly be gendered feminine (medicine as a natural development of nursing), or airily indicate indistinct possibilities. Wollstonecraft’s investment is primarily in the dignity of the female condition, rather than its economic subsistence.

**Women’s work in the Agrarian and Industrial Revolutions**

As Wollstonecraft acknowledged, ‘The few employments open to women, so far from being liberal, are menial’ (2004: 101), and the vast majority of working women of the period spent their lives in manual occupations. The Agrarian Revolution (c. 1750–1820) brought significant changes to their status, as agriculture shifted from family smallholdings and common land, to enclosure and the growth of larger farms. For some, increasing commercialisation enhanced opportunity, as larger dairies were run by the farmer’s wife with the assistance of a substantial staff of dairymaids and domestic servants. The making of butter and cheese, alongside poultry and pig-keeping, had traditionally been a woman’s province, and the sale of these goods, Jane Humphries has argued, allowed a farmer’s wife to make impressive contributions. But the movement from smallholdings and self-sufficiency to larger farming units also produced a substantial class of landless labourers, working for wages rather than as part of a collective endeavour. For such women, the erosion of the family economy deskilled their work and reduced its prestige.

Women, like men, left the countryside in steadily increasing numbers to join the expanding urban workforces of the Industrial Revolution (c. 1760–1840). In 1760, around half of the population was employed in agriculture – an occupation often overlapping with domestic service for women – but by 1800 the proportion had shifted to about a third, declining to a quarter in 1850 (Clark 1999, 233). These changes were accompanied by migration to towns and cities. Determining the numbers of women employed in particular industries is beset with challenges. Census recording did not begin until 1841, and revealed three dominant sectors: domestic service, textiles and clothing occupied 85 per cent of all working women in 1841, and 80 per cent in 1851 (Burnette 2008: 18). Census accounts were, moreover, unreliable, since enumerators were initially instructed to ignore ‘professions &c. of wives, or of sons or daughters living with and assisting their parents’ (Higgs 1989: 81). Accordingly, although the censuses counted only 25 per cent of women in occupations in 1841, rising to 35 per cent in 1851, official figures are likely to underestimate the extent of women’s participation in the workforce (Mitchell and Deane 1962: 60).

Domestic service was a traditional occupation for women, especially between puberty and marriage. The 1841 census showed that 55 per cent of all women workers were servants in
1841, falling to 40 per cent in 1851. The work, however, was often hard and undesirable. Most servants were low paid, required to ‘live in’ in cramped quarters in their employers’ homes, and always on call. The curtailment of personal freedoms – the uniform of cap and apron and, most notoriously, the widespread prohibition of ‘followers’, or boyfriends – also made the job unappealing. Higher wages and demarcated time off made other occupations comparatively attractive, and from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, service was in steady decline. Female factory workers were particularly conspicuous in geographical areas specialising in textiles and ceramics: Lancashire, West Yorkshire and the Potteries. Working in factories alongside men, they operated new technologies of mass production. Hand-spinning had once been a major domestic employment for women, but the invention of the water frame in 1769, the spinning jenny in 1770, and the mule in 1779 shifted textile fabrication from cottage to factory (Pinchbeck 1930: 147–53). Women were usually paid significantly less than men – a result, Joyce Burnette argues, of women’s weaker physical strength and lower productivity, rather than explicit gender bias (2008: 327). Accordingly, political agitation on these women’s behalf was not on feminist grounds. Instead, commentators from all social classes argued that, ideally, women should be shielded from the strains of industrialisation.

Moral unease about women’s industrial labour was articulated across the political spectrum through a fifteen-year campaign for the restriction of the working day. Radical and Conservative opinion supported its cumulation in the 1847 Factory Act, limiting to ten the working hours of women and ‘young persons’ between the ages of thirteen–eighteen. Women and children were classed together in legislation which had ‘its root in the stern experience of the husband and the father’, explained the Conservative statesman Francis Egerton, 1st Earl of Ellesmere, as he moved for its second reading in the House of Lords (Hansard House of Lords Debates 92 c. 892). His colleague Anthony Ashley, 7th Earl of Shaftesbury, was clearer still about the implicit sexual politics of the campaign. Speaking on an earlier version of the Ten Hours Bill to the House of Commons in 1844, he deplored the ‘disorder, insubordination, and conflict’ arising from a ‘singular and unnatural’ inversion of gender roles. ‘Because on her devolves the labour which ought to fall to his share’, the working wife ‘says she will pay no attention to her domestic duties, nor give the obedience which is owing to her husband’ (Hansard House of Commons Lords 73 c. 1096). Although the legislation ostensibly sought to protect women from exploitation, it also revealed unease about how women’s paid work could threaten male authority.

Protective legislation creating different working conditions for women, and categorising them with children, was one aspect of a broader commitment to the ‘family wage’, whereby an adult man could support his family without his wife having to work. As Ivy Pinchbeck argued in 1930, this shift improved many women’s material wellbeing, enabling married women to enjoy enhanced leisure time and social status, while the regulation of factories improved conditions for other women workers (1930: 306–312). Yet ideological investment in the ‘family wage’ as a political aspiration left little room for feminism. The Chartist language of ‘protecting’ vulnerable women and children from exploitation was central to the development of respectable masculine citizenship. Although women’s involvement in Chartism was initially extensive, by the mid-1840s, organisational change had combined with a rhetoric of domesticity to marginalise them. First-wave feminism emerged not from working-class radicalism, but from anxieties and agitation about the fate of upper- and middle-class women who could not rely upon husbands for support.

**Legal reforms and the ‘surplus women’ crisis**

Feminist concerns about work were initially focused on the fate of married women estranged from abusive husbands, but soon shifted to include single women who could not expect to
marry. The notorious case of Caroline Norton, embroiled in a bitter marriage breakdown, helped to galvanise the mid-Victorian women’s movement. After separating from her husband in 1835, Caroline had supported herself through her writing, while campaigning for the 1839 Infant Custody Act which would have allowed her access to her children. But acrimony between the estranged couple erupted again in 1853, when George Norton successfully asserted his right to his wife’s earnings. Her *English Laws for Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1854) influenced the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, widening the availability of divorce and allowing a separated wife control of her own financial affairs. But Norton’s agitation for women’s property rights coincided with an emerging and more explicitly feminist campaign, established in 1857 and centred upon Langham Place in London.

The Langham Place group arose from friendships between a small number of middle-class women, mostly young, single, and frustrated by the lack of educational and professional opportunities available to them. Although the group campaigned for legal reforms and interested itself in social issues, by the end of the decade its focus had sharpened upon expanding women’s access to paid work. Three key members, Jessie Boucherett, Adelaide Proctor and Maria Rye, founded the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women in 1859, and *The English Woman’s Journal*, launched a year earlier from an office at 19, Langham Place, became its house journal. The Langham Place group’s brand of respectable feminism gained impetus from recognition of a demographic crisis. Since the 1840s, anxieties about a national imbalance between men and women, arising from a higher incidence of male mortality and emigration, had produced unease about so-called ‘surplus women’. The British censuses of 1851 and 1861 included, for the first time, information about marital status, revealing a growing ‘spinsters’ class (Levitan 2008). Asking ‘Why are women redundant?’ in *The National Review* in 1862, William Rathbone Greg observed that ‘involuntary celibates’ were ‘chiefly to be found in the upper and educated sections of society’, and suggested such women were ‘too spoiled to purchase love at the expense of luxury’ by marrying ‘beneath’ them (1862: 432). His solution was emigration to the colonies to find ‘usefulness, happiness, domestic affection’ (1862: 436). Langham Place feminists, however, energetically rebutted Greg’s diagnosis and prescription. In May 1862, Maria Rye founded the Female Middle-Class Emigration Society, set up to aid ‘distressed gentlewomen’ by sending them to Australia, New Zealand and Canada. Rye’s initiative, however, was primarily intended to assist women by finding them productive and suitable work overseas, rather than, as Greg proposed, husbands (Lewin 1864: 612–616).

Emigration was only one aspect of Langham Place feminists’ attempts to expand opportunities. Working-class women could seek work in domestic service, factories or other manual occupations, but codes of gentility limited the more affluent to only a handful of oversubscribed, poorly remunerated occupations: teaching, governessing, acting as a ‘lady companion’. Conscious of this lack of acceptable openings, Maria Rye collaborated with other members to promote new kinds of women’s employment in Britain, initially focusing on clerical work as particularly suited to ‘ladies’. After founding a law copying office in Lincoln’s Inn Fields, Rye was so overwhelmed by applicants for work that she launched two further enterprises in 1860. The Victoria Press, co-founded with Emily Faithfull in 1860, trained women in printing and type-setting, and issued *The English Women’s Journal*, among other publications. Meanwhile, Rye also launched a registry office and telegraph training school. These initiatives helped to create abiding associations between new communications technologies and women’s work.

**Fit work for women: the opening of new opportunities**

Members of the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women were pioneers in recognising how certain kinds of ‘ladylike’ occupations might be claimed as appropriate
work for the educated middle classes. Rye and Craig’s telegraph training school provided efficient staff for a growing communications sector, and when, in 1870, the telegraph network was nationalised, even the conservative *Punch* magazine was eager to lend support: ‘Why are not Persons, Females, Women, The Fair Sex, almost exclusively employed in work they could do so adroitly?’ (21 May 1870, 202). Telegraphy was soon gendered as an occupation particularly suitable to bright, educated young women, and, although the Post Office could only employ a limited number, the symbolic resonance of this new class of workers had a wider impact. First, the fierceness of competition revealed the scarcity of prospects. Second, those recruited became bywords for competence and credibility. Operating a telegraph required the mastering of esoteric technical skills: the learning of Morse Code, the transmission of messages through ticker-tape or sounder. By 1882, Post Office secretary Henry Fawcett could confidently state that ‘the experiment of employing female labour had proved a complete success’ in undermining ‘the erroneous notion of feminine inferiority’ (Anon, The London Journal, 1882). Telegraphists had become poster-girls for a practical and accessible brand of feminism.

The feminisation of telegraphy led to other opportunities. In 1884, the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women saw another prospect arising from the invention of the typewriter, setting up a Ladies’ Type-Writing Office, London’s first secretarial bureau, which trained learners of ‘sound education’ to become freelance typists. Instructor Marian Marshall presciently observed ‘there is every reason to hope that in future a large number of educated women will be able to make a living by this occupation’ (Anon, The Pall Mall Gazette, 1885). By the turn of the century, the General Post Office was establishing a national telephone network, offering further work as operators for qualified young women. Communications technology was understood to be respectable and refined – appropriate to those clinging to codes of gentility, yet required to support themselves.

The New Woman of *fin-de-siècle* media speculation sharpened and complicated debates around women and work. Gail Cunningham notes how ‘The Girton Girl and the Lady Doctor became recognised sub-groups of the New Woman species’ (1978: 2), yet the opening of higher education and the professions to women was necessarily piecemeal, engaging only a small minority of women. Pioneers included physicians Sophia Jex-Blake and Elizabeth Garrett, Philippa Fawcett of Newnham College, who in 1890 came top of the Cambridge University Mathematics tripos, and Eliza Orme, the first woman to obtain a law degree, who became a Royal Commissioner. However, the New Woman was not primarily defined by her participation in paid work. As Michelle Tusan explains, even the feminist journals that were first to celebrate the New Woman ‘viewed wage earning as no substitute for the joys of the home’ (1998: 176). New Women were more often constructed as utopian social reformers or political activists, more engaged by philanthropic ideals than mundane problems of economic subsistence.

**Social reform and the problem of class**

Middle-class feminists often found themselves in conflict with the wage-earning women they sought to protect. As Carol Smith-Rosenberg has established, it was ‘through reform organisations that bourgeois women escaped their home and familiarised themselves with urban and commercial realities’ (1985: 156). They frequently articulated a maternal feminism, predicated on the belief that the sexes were ‘equal but different’, and that the public spheres of work and commerce could be ameliorated through the re-invigorated values of motherhood. Maternal feminists engaged in the well-intentioned surveillance of working-class women, through organisations including the British Women’s Temperance Alliance, the Girls’ Friendly Society,
and the National Vigilance Association. Their protectionist activities, intended to safeguard young working women against sexual danger, created conflict with other campaigners for workplace equality. Occupations thought to encourage unregulated contact with male colleagues and customers became flashpoints for struggles between different strands of feminist thought.

During the closing decades of the nineteenth century, young working-class women were increasingly choosing work in the burgeoning retail and hospitality sectors. When, in 1859, the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women was identifying telegraphy as a promising opportunity for the intelligent, educated middle classes, it was meanwhile considering likely openings for those further down the social scale. ‘Bearded men’ monopolised ‘easy places in the great shops’ that would better suit fashion-conscious young women: accordingly, it lobbied the expanding department stores to open positions to women (Anon, English Woman’s Journal, 1859). Employment as a shop assistant, a waitress, or a barmaid was available to those with little formal education and no training: instead, good looks and style were informal qualifications. Moreover, these relatively glamorous, largely urban occupations offered higher wages, more freedom, and more social cachet than the obvious alternative. Working-class girls were increasingly unwilling to accept the restrictions and, to many, the humiliations of domestic service, to the extent that ‘the servant problem’ had become a national crisis by the turn of the century (Dyhouse 2013: 82–89).

Maternal feminists responded by attempting to extend protection and care to this class of ‘girls adrift’, often extending their surveillance beyond work to leisure. In 1878, the Girls’ Friendly Society established the Holborn Recreation Rooms to keep ‘business girls in London….safe, warm, within the reach of good influences and out of reach of evil ones’ (Houston 1878: 7). Such initiatives were often paired with attempts to lobby for differential working conditions for women. After a campaign drawing attention to occupational hazards which allegedly precipitated gynaecological disorders, the 1899 Seats for Shop Assistants Act mandated the provision of seating for women only. These activities sought to protect women workers, frequently elided with juveniles, from the perils of the public sphere, yet their efforts were in competition with other feminist attempts to obtain equality. For much of the nineteenth century, guilds and trade unions had excluded women from membership, because of fears that lower-paid women would displace men, and from an ideological investment in the ‘family wage’. But women’s unionisation increased in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, drawing many workers into political activism.

The first significant victory was the 1888 Bryant and May Match Girls’ Strike, in which around 1,400 female workers successfully obtained improved precautions against ‘phossy jaw’, a disfiguring and ultimately fatal condition arising from working with white phosphorus. Their success encouraged more radical action. The political campaigner Clementina Black had assisted the match girls, and in 1889 she founded the Women’s Trade Union Association in London’s East End. In 1894, the WTUA became the Women’s Industrial Council, a group of feminist investigators who compiled reports on the condition of working women and lobbied for changes in legislation. Their constituency, aims and activities were similar to the National Union of Women Workers, founded in 1895 to campaign for improvements in wages and conditions. These organisations were largely made up of educated middle-class women, financially secure enough to spend time campaigning, and committed to obtaining the vote. They argued that women’s suffrage would force governments to pass legislation improving pay and conditions for women workers (Hart 1994: 14–39). However, the campaign was split between conflicting feminist positions, the first pragmatic and egalitarian, the second maternal and protective.

Those divisions were sharply visible in dispute over a class of women workers who were understood to be particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment. In 1902, a subgroup of the
National Union of Women Workers formed a Joint Committee on the Employment of Barmaids to lobby for the exclusion of women workers from licensed premises. Their argument that bar work placed ‘young girls’ in sexual danger was energetically resisted, first by another subgroup, the Freedom of Labour Defence, and, from 1907, by the Barmaids’ Political Defence League. The conflict over barmaids dramatised the fissures around social class and ideology which beset feminist campaigns for working women (Mullin 2016: 187–188). Upper- and middle-class women could seem out of touch with their working sisters. As the Barmaids Political Defence League observed, although the occupation was ‘not ideal from the standpoint of a leisured class, by this standard there would be few women’s trades not found wanting’ (Gore-Booth 1903: 10).

Work and the suffrage campaign

Social reform and trade union activities offered many women their first taste of political campaigning. Margaret Bondfield, from 1923 a Labour MP and from 1929 the first woman cabinet minister, began her career as a shop assistant active in the National Amalgamated Union of Shop Assistants, Warehousemen, and Clerks, founding the Women’s Labour League in 1906. Yet working-class women were recruited to the suffrage campaign with mixed success. The largest suffrage organisation, the Women’s Social and Political Union, was established by Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters Sylvia and Christabel in 1903. Initially, it co-operated closely with the Independent Labour Party, and was energetic in targeting the working women who were often excluded from trade unions. In 1907, however, the WSPU split from the ILP over the latter’s decision to prioritise universal male suffrage. The WSPU was willing to accept votes for women under the property qualifications pertaining to male voters, and this class conflict was exacerbated by the largely upper- and middle-class hierarchies of the suffrage campaigns. Although working-class women were increasingly active and militant crusaders for the vote, they were often marginalised by those who had the leisure for leadership.

The increasingly militant suffragette campaign was abruptly curtailed in August 1914 upon the declaration of war. The WSPU suspended hostilities for the duration, encouraging its members to work together in the national interest. Women’s work in munitions factories, as farm labourers, in nursing, in occupations that soldiers had vacated, and as volunteers made the case for the vote irrefutable. Prime Minister David Lloyd-George saluted ‘the heroic patriotism of the women workers’ who had contributed to the war effort in such numbers (Adams 2014: 223). Yet the Representation of the People Act which passed into law in February 1918 was a limited victory. It enfranchised most men over the age of twenty-one, but a far smaller proportion of women: those over thirty who were property owners, wives of property owners, or graduates voting in a University constituency. The young women who had formed the majority of the war workers remained excluded.

Following the end of the First World War and the extension of the vote to around six million women, the women’s movement regrouped to define new priorities. The first was the rapid achievement of the vote for all women over twenty-one, regardless of property qualification. This would enfranchise a generation of women who made up the majority of the female workforce, and enable the pursuit of further aims – above all, equal pay. Working conditions remained a key priority, as the Women’s Freedom League underlined in an editorial published three days after Armistice Day. It was anxious that ‘the girls and women who responded so spontaneously to their country’s call for work’ would find themselves ‘thrown to the wolves’ in peacetime, and called for ‘safeguards for future employment, equal facilities and equal terms with men in every branch of industry’ (Law 1997: 49). The League’s
foreboding was well-placed. Demobilisation was accompanied by emotive calls to working women to stand aside for returning soldiers. In 1918, 750,000 women were made redundant: despite the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919, many found themselves subjected to formal or informal marriage bars (Roberts 1988: 57–58).

Women taking up ‘men’s jobs’ were regularly enjoined to return to the home, yet the 1921 census revealed a ‘surplus women’ crisis far exceeding that identified in 1851. For the age range twenty-one–thirty-four, there were 1,158 million unmarried women and only 919,000 unmarried men. Again, crisis was turned into opportunity. Cheryl Law has compellingly argued that the women’s movement of the 1920s on balance recovered from divisions arising from the granting of the vote to older women of property. The National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies renamed itself the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship [NUSEC], and acted as an umbrella organisation to manage and define post-war priorities. The extension of the franchise to all women was presented as a means to other ends: equality of access to occupations, and equal pay united most of the campaigning women’s organisations of the 1920s.

**Beyond the vote?**

The Franchise Act of 1928 finally granted equal voting rights, benefitting around five million women. Yet, despite suffrage optimism that obtaining the vote would prove key to ending economic and sexual inequalities, the struggle for employment rights remained ongoing. Employment laws, custom and practice continued to treat women differently. Marriage bars remained in many occupations, and were widely enforced across the teaching profession, the civil service, in the financial sector and at the BBC until after the Second World War (Oram 1996: 185–219). Women’s access to higher education remained patchy and subject to both formal and informal proscriptions: women graduates of Cambridge University were not permitted to take full degrees until 1948. Trade unions continued to be male-dominated, suspecting women as ‘cheap labour’, and campaigning instead for a family wage. Social and cultural prejudices against paid work for married women, particularly those with children, remained potent. And perhaps most significantly, the Equal Pay Act was not passed until 1970. Women’s achievement of the franchise marked a starting point in their journey towards professional and economic autonomy.

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