

HOUSEWIVES AND CITIZENS

DOMESTICITY AND THE
WOMEN'S MOVEMENT
IN ENGLAND, 1928-64

Woman
APRIL 27, 1963

**HE'LL THINK
YOU'RE
WONDERFUL...**

IF his meal is ready when he comes in (cloth laid, kettle on—he's happily convinced!)

IF his food is good (smooth custard, tasty gravy, egg just so—it's the simple things that count!)

IF his clothes are ready to wear (buttons on, shirts clean, trousers pressed—sorry, no short cuts!)

IF the house is tidy (that means dusted, his chair ready, the kids' toys cleared away; you can leave his gloves, paper, books, clutter—that's not neat!)

IF you make him think he's wonderful (by looking neat, smiling often, talking sometimes, under-standing always—you're the girl that he fell in love with).

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**WHAT IS
A WIFE?**

A girl who works from nine to five and whips up apple pie for supper.
A woman who sets jam to jell, children to rights and her hair for a Saturday night out

**How does
she do it?**

With a magic mix of instinct, effort, wit, ways learned from Mam and wily wrinkles discovered in desperation

**Why does
she do it?**

Because somebody thinks she's wonderful—and she wants to go on keeping it that way

And here—collected, tried and trusted, polished up and packed in tight—**WOMAN'S** treasury of jet-age hints, ideas and recipes for Mrs. 1963.

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HOUSEWIVES
AND CITIZENS
DOMESTICITY AND THE WOMEN'S
MOVEMENT IN ENGLAND, 1928-64

✚ Caitríona Beaumont ✚

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The expansion of research into the history of women and gender since the 1970s has changed the face of history. Using the insights of feminist theory and of historians of women, gender historians have explored the configuration in the past of gender identities and relations between the sexes. They have also investigated the history of sexuality and family relations, and analysed ideas and ideals of masculinity and femininity. Yet gender history has not abandoned the original, inspirational project of women's history: to recover and reveal the lived experience of women in the past and the present.

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Housewives and citizens

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For my parents
Piaras and Margaret Beaumont

For my family
Patrick, Dónal, Rosa and Martha McDonnell

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List of Abbreviations

AEC	Association for Education in Citizenship
AGM	annual general meeting
ALRA	Abortion Law Reform Association
ARP	Air Raid Precaution
BCL	Birmingham City Library
BFBPW	British Federation of Business and Professional Women
BFUW	British Federation of University Women
BHL	British Housewives League
BL	British Library
CMW	Council of Married Women
CWL	The Catholic Women's League
ECCC	Equal Compensation Campaign Committee
EPCC	Equal Pay Campaign Committee
GFS	Girls' Friendly Society
LMA	London Metropolitan Archive
LPL	Lambeth Palace Library
MRC	Modern Records Centre
MSH	Mary Sumner House
MU	Mothers' Union
MWA	Married Women's Association
NBCA	National Birth Control Association
NBCW	National Board of Catholic Women
NCEC	National Council for Equal Citizenship
NCW	National Council of Women
NHS	National Health Service
NUSEC	National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship
NUWSS	National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies
NUWW	National Union of Women Workers
NWCA	National Women Citizens' Association
ODC	Open Door Council
PRO	Public Record Office
SCWO	Standing Conference of Women's Organisations
SJCIWO	Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women's Organisations
SJCWWO	Standing Joint Committee of Working Women's Organisations
SPG	Six Point Group
TG	National Union of Townswomen's Guilds
WAHC	Women's Advisory Housing Council
WAPC	Women's Auxiliary Police Corps
WCA	Women's Citizens' Association
WCG	Women's Co-operative Guild
WFL	Women's Freedom League

ABBREVIATIONS

WGPW	Women's Group on Public Welfare
WI	The National Federation of Women's Institutes
WL	Women's Library
WLM	Women's Liberation Movement
WPCC	Women's Police Campaign Committee
WVS	Women's Voluntary Service
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association.

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Introduction

For many housewives women's organisations provide the best access to cultural or educational pursuits ... resolutions are frequently passed by the branches to the national headquarters urging government intervention in matters where their particular knowledge and experience has shown that reform is both necessary and possible, and they exercise an undoubted influence upon the trend of domestic affairs.¹

In 1964, *Women in Britain*, a survey published by the Central Office of Information, reported that there were 120 national organisations for women active within the UK. These groups were made up of a mixture of philanthropic, voluntary, feminist, political and religious women's groups.² Of the 120, only fifteen were classified as overtly feminist, reflecting the fact that groups openly espousing a feminist agenda were somewhat marginalised at this time.³

Historians of women in the twentieth century have explored the history of a wide variety of women's organisations active throughout the century.⁴ These histories have included suffrage and post-suffrage feminist societies, women's sections of the established political parties and working-class women's organisations such as the Women's Co-operative Guild (WCG), all of whom engaged in political campaigns to extend female equality.⁵ In the last two decades the scope of this scholarship has expanded to include voluntary women's organisations, religious groups, service clubs and professional societies seeking to bring women together over a wide variety of issues.⁶

Histories of the women's movement have however tended to focus predominantly on the trials and tribulations of suffrage and post-suffrage feminist societies. This has resulted in a narrative suggesting that after the passing of the 1928 Equal Franchise Act the movement lost momentum in the 1930s. Following a brief revival during the Second World War the movement once again slipped into decline, only to be revitalised by the emergence of the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) in the late 1960s.⁷ This orthodox interpretation has been challenged by a number of historians who have demonstrated that a vibrant and successful network of women's organisations remained active throughout the post-suffrage years and well into the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s.⁸

The inclusion of a more diverse range of women's organisations, for example middle-class housewives' associations such as the Women's

Institutes (WI) and the Mothers' Union (MU), has opened up debates amongst historians about the meanings of feminism and how the terms 'feminist movement' and 'women's movement' should be defined and applied.⁹ Maggie Andrews, in her history of the WI, has argued that the organisation represented the 'acceptable face of feminism' allowing members to 'work out alternative meanings for the structure of their lives'.¹⁰ In doing so it is suggested that WI members embraced their domestic roles but at the same time contested 'social constructions of gender'.¹¹

Lorna Gibson argues that to include the WI in the history of the women's movement the term 'feminism' needs redefining. Feminism, Gibson suggests, 'is assumed to originate from women's dissatisfaction with domesticity'.¹² Moreover the concept of feminism also assumes some recognition of the imbalance of power between men and women and the desire to achieve equality between the sexes. As Karen Offen writes, 'feminism is the name given to a comprehensive critical response to the deliberate and systematic subordination of women as a group by men as a group within a given cultural setting'.¹³ Such definitions make it difficult to comprehend the role played by voluntary women's groups who embraced domesticity, never challenged established gender roles and were reluctant to be associated with feminist beliefs.

To deal with this problem Gibson proposes a new definition of 'moderate feminism' or 'empowerment' so that organisations such as the WI can be included in the history of the women's movement. This is justified on the grounds that they allowed women to 'have fulfilled lives within the traditional social constructions of gender and acceptance of patriarchy'.¹⁴ Offering a contrasting view, Cordelia Moyse, in her history of the MU, questions whether 'the lack of shared motivation and analysis of gender politics undermine the inclusion of some women's groups into the feminist movement?'.¹⁵

Whilst the arguments put forward by Andrews and Gibson are persuasive it is important to remember that the five voluntary women's organisations included in this study, the MU, Catholic Women's League (CWL), National Council of Women (NCW), WI and National Union of Townswomen's Guilds (TG), never questioned traditional gender roles, nor did they ever envisage themselves as feminist throughout the years 1928–64. It would be wrong therefore to attempt to reconceptualise these groups so that they take on a more recognisable feminist identity. It would be equally misconceived to alter our understanding of feminist theory and the concept of patriarchy in order to secure a 'fit' for voluntary women's organisations, who it must be remembered were outspoken in their endorsement of women's domestic role and the centrality of mothers to family life.

Moyses's assertion that housewives' associations cannot therefore be included in the feminist movement appears logical but once again highlights the underlying confusion surrounding the terms 'feminist movement' and 'women's movement'. In most cases the two terms are conceived to be one and the same thing. However, when the diversity of the hundred or so organisations actively representing the interests of women throughout the years 1928–64 is considered, it is far too limiting only to view those with obvious feminist tendencies as part of the 'women's movement'.

Instead of attempting to locate feminist principles within all of these groups or developing a new understanding of feminism and patriarchy, what is argued here is that the term 'women's movement' needs to be revised. In a sense the women's movement needs to be liberated from its exclusive association with feminism. This will allow the movement to be recast as a social movement encompassing all women's organisations, including feminist, political and conservative women's groups, who campaigned to improve the position and status of women in society throughout the twentieth century.

Adopting this new, more inclusive definition, this book will assess the contribution of five mainstream and conservative voluntary women's organisations to the women's movement between the years 1928 and 1964. The five groups selected, the MU, CWL, NCW, WI and TG, were amongst the largest and most influential organisations representing housewives and mothers in twentieth-century Britain. Each group recognised the primary roles that women had as housewives and mothers. In doing so they set out to provide members with support and advice on domestic matters, marriage and motherhood. The origins and aspirations of each group will be outlined and discussed in Chapter 1.

In spite of their endorsement of domesticity, the MU, CWL, NCW, WI and TG insisted that housewives and mothers would be mistaken to devote themselves exclusively to family life. On the contrary this study will reveal that voluntary women's groups acknowledged the status of women as equal citizens and continually sought to inform and educate their members about the importance of democratic citizenship. Focusing on citizenship rights instead of feminism, these groups encouraged members to participate in local and national politics and campaigned to ensure that women benefited from the rights of equal citizenship bestowed upon them in 1928.

Publicly rejecting feminism made sense for these organisations as they wished to attract mass memberships through their recruitment of housewives and mothers. At this time the term 'feminism' was often used

in a pejorative sense and feminist societies were assumed to be radical groups seeking to undermine traditional family life. Vera Brittain, writing in 1928, articulated these prejudices when she wrote that feminists were often portrayed as 'spectacled, embittered women, disappointed, childless, dowdy and generally unloved'.¹⁶ Writing in a similar vein, Ray Strachey stated in 1936 that modern women 'show a strong hostility to the word feminism, and all which they imagine it to connote'.¹⁷

Chapter 2 will explore the ways in which voluntary women's organisations successfully utilised the rhetoric of citizenship, with all its adherent rights and duties, to articulate the needs of their members and to provide an effective public voice for women. The woman citizen was defined as a homemaker, but this did not mean, as Barbara Caine has suggested, that the housewife was 'not seriously involved in attempting to change the political and social framework in which she lived'.¹⁸ Chapter 3 will discuss the ways in which these groups attempted to represent the views of women on the controversial and potentially divisive issues of divorce, birth control and abortion. Here it will be argued that despite the conservative views expressed by some groups, most notably the MU and CWL, the overall objective of housewives' associations in debating these issues was to protect the stability of the family and the role of the mother within the home. In doing so, voluntary women's organisations called upon the state to provide adequate public services so that women would be supported in their work as wives and mothers.

The involvement of the MU, CWL, NCW, WI and TG in a number of specific campaigns relating to social policy, for example the payment of family allowances to mothers, improved maternity services and the provision of social welfare benefits will be discussed in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 explores the contribution of these organisations to the war effort and their participation in two key wartime campaigns, the demand for equal pay and the employment of women police. The role played by voluntary women's groups in post-war reconstruction and their ability to successfully influence government policy on housing reform, as well as protecting the interests of women as housewives, workers and citizens, will be discussed in Chapter 6.

Chapter 7 considers how these mainstream women's organisations challenged traditional constructions of domesticity in the 1950s and early 1960s. It is argued that the MU, CWL, NCW, WI and TG, in continuing to highlight the importance of citizenship for women, presented a new, alternative and modern interpretation of women's domestic role. Rejecting the ideal of the 'perfect housewife' so pervasive during the 1950s and 1960s, voluntary women's groups argued that wives and mothers had more to

offer society than just knowing 'how to keep a husband happy'.¹⁹ Instead of condemning the increasing numbers of mothers going out to work in the 1950s, these groups focused their attention on the duty of the state and employers to provide more flexible work patterns and extended child-care facilities, allowing women to balance paid work with their domestic responsibilities.

This final chapter provides further evidence of the effectiveness of female agency during these years. Engaging in a wide range of campaigning activities, voluntary women's organisations were successful in bringing about legislative reform and influencing public policy. This presents a challenge to longstanding assumptions that the 1950s and early 1960s witnessed a women's movement overpowered by an ideology of domesticity. Accordingly, this study suggests that by 1964, the MU, CWL, NCW, WI and TG had proven themselves effective in providing housewives with opportunities to participate in social, leisure and educational activities. These groups campaigned on behalf of their members and informed women about the rights and duties of democratic citizenship. In doing so they did indeed exercise 'an undoubted influence upon the trend of domestic affairs'.²⁰ In light of all of these achievements, and their success in creating dynamic networks of women, these conservative women's organisations must now be included in any history of the women's movement.

In terms of methodology, the research for this book has been confined to England as the MU, CWL, NCW, WI and TG had separate administrative arrangements for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Although reference is made to the work of local branches, the principal objective here is to focus on the work and policy decisions of the five national organisations that represented the interests of hundreds of thousands of women throughout the years 1928–64. Sources used include the organisational archives as well the records of other societies, governmental departments and church bodies.

The archival material for each organisation is rich in detail. Annual reports, minutes of annual general meetings (AGMs), public questions committees, executive and sectional committees, all provide an excellent and insightful record of activity and achievement. In addition, the organisations produced their own journals, published reports and pamphlets and gave written and oral evidence to a large number of public enquiries and royal commissions. These records and the history of the five organisations included in this study have ensured that stories previously untold about the nature of female activism, and the agency of housewives and mothers, can now be heard.

Notes

- 1 Central Office of Information, *Women in Britain Reference Pamphlet 67* (London: HMSO, 1964), p. 25.
- 2 Cited in E. Meehan, 'British Feminism from the 1960s to the 1980s', in H. Smith (ed.), *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* (London: Edward Elgar, 1990), p. 192.
- 3 See B. Caine, *English Feminism 1780-1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 234-240.
- 4 For a list of women's organisations see C. Law, *Suffrage and Power: The Women's Movement, 1918-1928* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1997), pp. 232-238. See also P. Gordon and D. Doughan, *Dictionary of British Women's Organisations 1825-1960* (London: Woburn Press, 2001).
- 5 See for example: Law, *Suffrage and Power*, G. Scott, *Feminism, Femininity and the Politics of Working Women: The Women's Co-operative Guild, 1880s to the Second World War* (London: UCL, 1998), K. Hunt, 'Negotiating the Boundaries of the Domestic: British Socialist Women and the Politics of Consumption', *Women's History Review*, 9:2 (2000), pp. 389-410, P. Thane, 'Women of the British Labour Party and Feminism, 1906-45', in Smith (ed.), *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* and I. Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Explaining the Gender Gap: The Conservative Party and the Women's Vote', in M. Francis and I. Zweiniger-Bargielowska (eds), *The Conservatives and British Society, 1880-1990* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996).
- 6 See for example: C. Beaumont, 'Citizens not Feminists: The Boundary Negotiated between Citizenship and Feminism by Mainstream Women's Organisations in England, 1928-39', *Women's History Review*, 9:2 (2000), L. Perriton, 'Forgotten Feminists: The Federation of British Professional and Business Women, 1933-1969', *Women's History Review*, 16:1 (2007), M. Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism: The Women's Movement as a Social Movement* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1997), C. Moyse, *A History of the Mothers' Union: Women, Anglicanism and Globalisation* (London: The Boydell Press, 2009), C. Merz, *After the Vote: The Story of the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds in the Year of Its Diamond Jubilee 1929-1989* (Norwich: NUTG, 1988), H. McCarthy, 'Service Clubs, Citizenship and Equality: Gender Relations and Middle-class Associations in Britain between the Wars', *Historical Review*, 81 (2008) and P. Thane, 'Women and Political Participation in England, 1918-1970', in E. Breitenbach and P. Thane (eds), *Women and Citizenship in Britain and Ireland in the Twentieth Century: What Difference Did the Vote Make?* (London: Continuum, 2010).
- 7 See for example: S. Bruley, *Women in Britain since 1900* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), M. Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain* (2nd ed.; Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), D. Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty: Women between the Wars 1918-1939* (London: Pandora, 1989) and J. Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950: Sexual Divisions and Social Change* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1984).
- 8 See for example: Caine, *English Feminism*, C. Beaumont, 'The Women's Movement, Politics and Citizenship, 1918-1950s', in I. Zweiniger-Bargielowska (ed.), *Women in Twentieth Century Britain* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2001), C. Beaumont, 'Housewives, Workers and Citizens: Voluntary Women's Organisations and the Campaign for Women's Rights in England and Wales during the Post-war Period', in N. Crowson, M. Hilton and J. McKay (eds), *NGOs in Contemporary Britain: Non-*