

# *Women and Society*

## *Continuity and Change since 1870*

by Jane Lewis

Given the well-documented absence of women from most of the basic history texts, it is easy to understand why female historians in particular have felt the need to explore women's past. However, there has been relatively little cross-fertilisation between this work and other types of history, which makes it difficult for teachers to integrate the history of women into their modern history syllabus. Ideally, students should automatically discuss the experience of women as well as men in response to questions on subjects such as work experience or the effects of social welfare provision, although it is unfortunately far from clear whether examiners always appreciate this.

### *Evaluating change*

'A' level questions addressing the specifics of women's position in modern society pose problems for teachers. By and large they ask candidates to think about the legal, social, economic and political factors contributing to 'women's emancipation' or the 'improvement of women's status'. But the changes in women's position over time are not nearly as cut and dried as such questions imply. For while few of us, male or female, would relish a return to the kind of material conditions experienced by the majority of the late nineteenth century population, it is nevertheless impossible to see the history of women in terms of a straightforward progress towards 'emancipation'. Ivy Pinchbeck's classic account, *Women Workers in the Industrial Revolution, 1750-1850* (1930) was optimistic in its interpretations. She viewed the gradual emergence of a family wage and the increasing specialisation of male and female roles into breadwinner and housewife as a progressive development, emancipating women from the burden of waged labour and bringing them more leisure and greater comfort, as well as enabling them to pursue the childbearing and household tasks she believed them to be best fitted for. In 1931 only 11 % of married women worked: indeed, it was not until 1961 that the economic activity rate for women (excluding those in unpaid domestic work) again reached the level recorded in the 1861 Census. (See table 1.) Feminists, and in all probability a majority of the 58% of the married women who work today, would not only reject Pinchbeck's idea as to what constitutes progress and emancipation, but would also point out the astonishing continuity in the degree of sexual segregation in the work place and in the ratio between women's and men's pay.

The problem for teachers and students is to come to some balanced assessment of the continuity and change in women's position, and to question the idea that change can be seen in terms of simple linear progress. Furthermore, changes in one area of women's lives that effected greater equality between the sexes were not necessarily accompanied by similar progress in other areas. Nor should the experience of single and married women, or of working and middle class women be conflated. Thus while it is true that the range of occupations open to women increased at the end of the nineteenth century, this did not affect the

number of married women in the work force, and not until after World War I was it usual for middle class girls to work before marriage. Similarly, in respect to women's reproductive experience (one of the most important determinants of health status for women), middle class women were having smaller families by the late nineteenth century, but working class family size did not show significant fall until the interwar period. Even then contemporary surveys show that working-class married women reported as much disabling illness at the end of the 1930's as they did just before World War I.

### *Aspects of feminism*

In line with the initial desire to make women visible, a number of historians have explored aspects of nineteenth and twentieth century feminism. In her book, *Faces of Feminism* (1981), Olive Banks has identified three strands of feminism: the evangelical, equal rights, and socialist. But this is too tidy a schema properly to encompass the complex nature of feminist ideas and behaviour. For example, both Josephine Butler, an evangelical feminist, and Millicent Fawcett, an equal rights feminist, made use of the arguments of Victorian Darwinistic science that most women's talents were primarily domestic, to press for an extension of these virtues to the wider sphere beyond the home.

It is common for the influence of feminism to be questioned. For example, the increased attention paid to the education of middle-class girls during the late Victorian period is seen by some to be as much the result of the general educational reform initiative of the period as of feminist ambition, and the contribution of the suffrage movement to securing the vote has long been an issue for debate. But we should be wary of judging the importance of nineteenth and early twentieth century feminism too narrowly. In her book, *Girls Growing Up* (1981), Carol Dyhouse has argued powerfully that the new endowed and proprietary girls' schools, of which there were 200 by 1894, provided girls with different role models and access to a peer group. It also succeeded in loosening family ties. Similarly the suffrage movement succeeded in keeping the vote on the political agenda in the face of an extensive and sometimes misogynist opposition.

It is a matter of debate as to how important legislative reform has been in changing the position of women. As long ago as the 1950's, Richard Titmuss suggested that changes in patterns of pregnancy and childbirth were much more important for explaining changes in women's position in society than the acquisition of legal rights. (The

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changing trends in fertility are charted in figure 1.) Most of the recent literature on women's history has focussed on women's experience of production and reproduction in recognition of the importance of these factors. But it is possible to be overly dismissive of the legal framework within which women lived their lives; in the nineteenth century married women had no legal personality and no capacity to enter into contracts in the market place. When taken together with scientific and evangelical ideas as to the female character, capacity and place, this in large measure accounts for the acute separation of spheres experienced by middle-class women in particular. We are only just beginning to explore the effects that lack of access to divorce, and the legal obligation to provide household and sexual services to husbands, had on the meaning of marriage for women.

## Home and Family

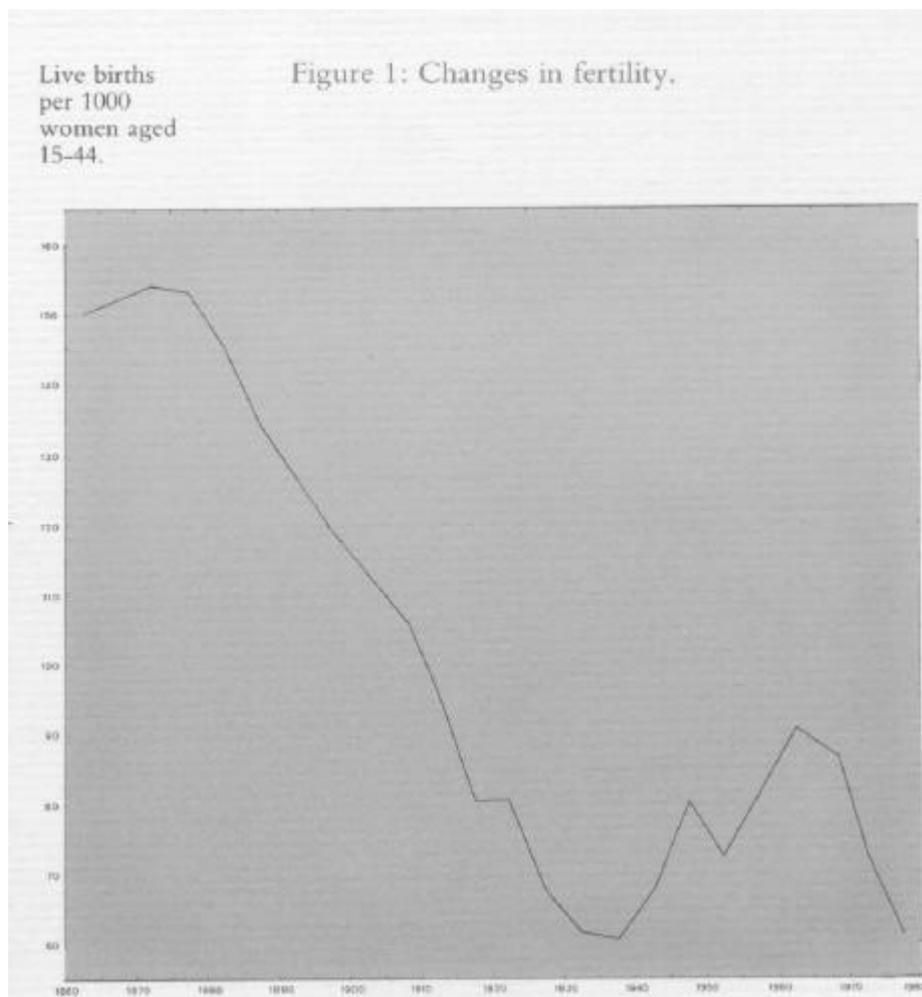
Some of the most exciting recent work in the field has sought to reconstruct women's (particularly working-class women's) experience of home and family. It is difficult to write about any inarticulate group, and many historians of women have employed the new techniques of oral history to good effect for the recent past. When interviews are used in conjunction with material from autobiographies, contemporary social surveys (such as those by Booth and Rowntree), commentaries by social investigators (such as M. S. Member Reeves and M. Spring Rice), and census data, we can begin to build up a picture of working class life. This view is considerably more realistic than that offered by some sociologists, who see husband/wife relationships developing smoothly from the

division of labour between husband and wife. Both interpretations are important and there is no way of determining which was more significant numerically. In all probability working-class women accepted and resented male domination in ways not dissimilar from those described for the present by Beatrix Campbell in *Wigan Pier Revisited* (1984).

The material conditions endured by wives and mothers during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries changed substantially for the better. During the inter-war period, working class wives of regularly employed men could begin to cook by gas and think about moving to a house with a bathroom on a new estate. For middle class women it is possible that the modern suburban house of the inter-war years, better equipped with labour saving devices, with either a resident servant or daily help and a smaller number of children, provided women with more leisure than either the large household staffs of the Victorian period or the usually servantless houses of the post World War II years. Most important was the decline in family size. As the maternity letters collected by the Women's Cooperative Guild just before World War I show so movingly, women's ignorance of their bodies and inability to obtain access to either contraceptives or the privacy necessary for the practice of female methods of birth control, led to frequent pregnancies and extraordinary suffering. Recent work has put forward a number of reasons for the increasing use of contraception, which resulted in the decline in the birth rate known as 'the demographic transition', beginning around 1870. (See figure 1.) Opinion is divided between those who emphasise women's determination to exercise their right to 'voluntary motherhood', and those who attribute prime

sexually segregated to the 'symmetrical', and mother/child relationships moving from neglectful to caring.

It is nevertheless possible for historians looking at similar evidence to arrive at very different interpretations. Elizabeth Roberts' recent book, *A Woman's Place* (1984), describes in vivid detail the number of strategies women resorted to in order to make ends meet: pawning, borrowing, bartering, taking in lodgers, sewing or washing, or going out charring. She concludes that despite the difficulties they faced, working-class women in the early part of the century were proud of the work they did and that in the vast majority of cases the work of husbands and wives was complementary. Women tended to judge their husbands according to the amount and regularity of the wage they brought home, and they in turn expected to be judged according to the efficiency with which they managed their limited resources. Yet the work of Pat Ayers and Jan Lambertz in my forthcoming volume, *Labour and Love. Women's Experience of Home and Family 1850-1940*, stresses the deceit and tensions generated by scarce financial resources and the degree to which domestic violence provided the final sanction enforcing the sexual



importance to men's desire to limit their families in order to achieve the 'paraphernalia of gentility' and upward career mobility for themselves and their sons. In all probability, family size was negotiated between husband and wife. In her study of the inter-war decline of working class family size, *Fair Sex* (1982) Diana Gittins has concluded that couples whose lives centred on the increasingly privatised world of the home, rather than on the culture of the work place or on the spouses' respective circles of friends, most frequently achieved their ideal family size.

## Employment outside the home

It has been a major contribution of the new women's history to point out the links between family and work experiences. For example, women's traditionally weak participation in trade unions should be understood in relation to the way in which young women's relationship to unions and the work place was mediated by female kin, who often found their first jobs and paid their union dues. In other words, the young female worker had an indirect relationship to her union and work place. Early twentieth-century writers often noted that women appeared to accept the idea of a woman's job and a woman's rate, apparently in anticipation of the fact that they would marry and become dependent on a male 'family wage'.

It is clear that male and female workers, as well as policy makers, believed in the concept of a family wage as an ideal. It can be argued that trade-union struggles for a family wage benefited working-class families to the extent that it raised the wages of the male breadwinner. However, the struggle was conducted at the expense of the woman worker and, within the family, the family wage system benefited men to the extent that they gained the privilege of being served at home by their wives. In addition, to the extent that the family wage was never realised, women were forced to shoulder the double burden of household and paid employment. At the same time they received little assistance from government welfare legislation, such as national insurance, which assumed female economic dependency to be the norm.

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was believed to be more respectable for married women not to work. Indeed, labour historians have begun to acknowledge the role played by wives in achieving 'respectability'. Visible manifestations of respectability included whitened doorsteps and a 'clean' rent book, although in the context of primitive domestic technology and unpredictable income, such things were hard to achieve. Single women were also often anxious to work in 'respectable' occupations; this meant that warehouse work though low paid, was much preferred to machine work because it was light and clean. As Sidney Webb commented in 1891, 'for women's work the "gentility" of the occupation is still accepted as part payment'.

The range of opportunities during the nineteenth century for women's paid work was confined largely to textile manufacturing and domestic service. It was only with the changes in the structure of occupations during the last quarter of the century that the number of (primarily single) working women increased. (See table 1.) The number of women engaged in 'white blouse' work (mainly teaching, retailing, office work and nursing) increased 161 % between 1881 and 1911. Nevertheless, some form of domestic service was still the single largest employer of women as late as 1931. The expansion of jobs for women during World War I achieved no lasting effect. But women's consciousness was changed by their war-time experiences autobiographies as different as those of Vera Brittain for

Table 1 Female Participation in the Labour Force Great Britain, 1861-1981

	Working Women as % of all women <sup>a</sup>			Women as % of total labour force <sup>b</sup>
	Single	Married	Total	
1861	..	..	42	31
1871	..	..	42	31
1881	..	..	39	30
1891	..	..	38	30
1901	..	..	36	29
1911	66	10	37	29
1921	67	9	36	29
1931	70	11	37	30
1951	72	24	40	31
1961	77	34	46	33
1971	70	49	55	37
1981	69	57	61	39

<sup>a</sup> Covers women aged 15-64 for 1861-1951; 15-60 for 1961-71; and 16-60 for 1981.

<sup>b</sup> All ages.

Source: *Census of Population*.

World War I and Nella Last (the wife of a Barrow fitter), for World War II, show that neither was able comfortably to settle back into their previous stultifying domestic routines.

To this day women's work remains characteristically low paid and sexually segregated from that of men. Even in textiles, where women traditionally received equal pay for equal work, they rarely earned the same, because they worked fewer hours, had fewer looms, and were not considered able to tune and adjust their own looms. In 1906 the average wage for all adult women textile workers was 15/5d, on the borderline of what was reckoned to be the minimum subsistence for a single woman. The average wage for women over 18 in all other industries was 12/11 d.

There are very few general accounts of women's work available, and there is considerable debate- more frequently between sociologists than historians - about the causes of women's low pay and low status. There is no doubt that male craft unions tended to exclude women workers, and that professional associations dominated by men also did so for occupations such as medicine. But employers and women themselves also shared firm ideas as to what work was appropriate for women and what women were capable of. Women's position in the labour market can only be explained by the complex changes between women and men workers, trade unions, employers and the state, and in relation to the changing nature and structure of jobs, which is in turn dependent on the scale and technique of production and methods of work organisation. Given that their work experience and expectations have been largely confined to unskilled work or monotonous clerical tasks (indeed skilled work has become by definition work that is not performed by women), it is understandable that women should have thought of their paid employment as secondary, to be undertaken at the dictates of the family economy. In their useful summary volume, *Women, Work and Family* (1978), Louise Tilly and Joan Scott have described women in the twentieth century as moving towards a more individualistic position and working for their own satisfaction. It is doubtful whether this has ever happened for the majority of unskilled, poorly paid women workers.

## Activists or victims

The major interpretative issue running through all the recent literature on women's history is the extent to which women may be regarded as 'victims' - at the hands of the state, male trade unionists, and husbands - or as active agents, controlling their own fate. Part of the problem in evaluating this stems from the fact that historians of women are often forced to rely on prescriptive literature such as domestic manuals and infant care handbooks as source material, and it is often difficult to assess how far these dictated or reflected contemporary behaviour. In the case of nineteenth-century, middle-class women, the traditional picture of the passive, idle 'angel of the house' portrayed as the ideal in contemporary literature, and

accepted uncritically in many history texts, has been subjected to searching enquiry of late. This is not to deny that women still undertook mindless and time-consuming rituals, such as calling and card leaving but, as Leonore Davidoff has shown in *The Best Circles* (1973), it would be wrong to interpret these as having no purpose. Just as working class women were guardians of domestic respectability, so women in middle class households were responsible for maintaining the differentiation between new and old wealth.

Middle-class women's lives are not today narrowly confined to the domestic sphere and working-class women no longer perform hard household labour and undergo frequent pregnancies in addition to taking on paid work, as and

when the family economy demands it. Since World War II, dwindling numbers of domestic servants and a more general ownership of household appliances, together with smaller families have acted as levellers in terms of women's experience of home and family. Furthermore, since the war there has been a revolution in terms of married women's participation in the labour market. Shirley Conran's prescription for 'Superwoman' - the middleclass woman who holds down a professional job, entertains and keeps house with maximum efficiency could not be more different from the prescriptions meted out to nineteenth-century, middle-class women. Significantly, it is still women who are expected to take

primary responsibility for the domestic sphere and they are still found in low-paid, low-status jobs.

In seeking to weigh the relative importance of continuity against change, socio-economic against legislative factors, or the portrayal of women as victims or active agents, it may help to consider possible lifecycle experiences of women in a particular social class for a specific historical period. For in my view, it helps to see changes in educational opportunities, prescriptive beliefs, legal impediments, employment structure, health status and the rest as the boundaries within women have acted. We could, for example, take the early twentieth century experience of Francie Nicol (told by Joe Robinson in the *Life and Times of Francie Nicol of South Shields* [1975]) to whom painful childbirth and a drunken husband are to be



endured, and hard times expected. The limitations imposed on Francie by class, poverty, a poor education, ignorance of her own body and marital dependency are clear to an observer. Yet she behaves with unlimited vitality and resourcefulness, opening a fish and chip shop to support her children, and when her husband returns to drink away the profits, starting again. Today, there is easier access to divorce, birth control and state welfare benefits are more readily available, yet a majority of single mothers still find themselves trapped by their sole responsibility for child care, by their poverty and their lack of marketable skills.

The illustration comes from the period of the suffragette campaigns yet possesses a broader significance than this

since the message is still pertinent today. Over the past century women have benefited from a wide variety of changes, yet boundaries still exist to limit their activity and shape their potential.

## References

Jane Lewis, *Women in England, 1870-1950* (Wheatsheaf, 1984) provides an overview of the period. Jeffery Weeks, *Sex Politics and Society* (Longman, 1981) is lucid and wide-ranging. There is no really good general account of women's employment, but it is worth starting with Sheila Lewenhak's, *Women and Trade Unions* (Ernest Benn, 1977).

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The editors would welcome comments on this issue and suggestions for topics which might be included in future issues. ReFRESH 2 will be published in the Spring of 1986 and contain articles by Sally Harvey on Domesday Book and Edward Royle on Chartism.

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