

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/117366/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Ward, Stephanie 2019. Labour activism and the political self in inter-war working-class women's politics. *Twentieth Century British History* 30 (1) , pp. 29-52. 10.1093/tcbh/hwy047

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/hwy047>

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies. See <http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.



## **Labour Activism and the Political Self in Inter-War Working-Class Women's Politics**

*This article explores working-class women's experiences of political activism in the Labour Party in the 1930s. The article focuses upon the relationships formed with leaders, the bonds with fellow women and the emotional fulfilment politics could bring, rather than considering the policies and campaigns which drew women into the party. It suggests how working-class women performed a political self which was shaped by but distinctive from a domestic self. Official political party materials from across Britain are drawn upon to uncover how working-class women in the years after equal franchise was won carved out a political space and the meanings of activism. Party members' private and public portrayals of women's activism are considered. Although the focus is upon working-class women's political experiences, the conclusions drawn here have implications for how the creation of a political self can be considered in studies of other political parties and voluntary organisations.*

*Key words: political self, working-class women, Labour Party, activism*

In October 1937 members of the Attercliffe women's section of the Labour Party gathered at St Mary's Parish Church in Handsworth alongside the family and friends of Lucy Ramsden to pay tribute to a comrade who had done much for the movement locally. Lucy Ramsden's impressive record of public service included serving as secretary of the Attercliffe women's section, executive member of Sheffield Trades and Labour Council, member of Sheffield Hospital Council and the Sheffield secretary of both the Prince of Wales Distress Fund and miners' relief fund.<sup>1</sup> As well as attending the funeral, Ramsden's husband and daughter were

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Daily Independent*, 4 October 1937, 7.

sent floral tributes and a letter of sympathy by the section. Fearful that Ramsden's vast contribution would be overlooked, given her more recent withdrawal from public life, the secretary, Mrs Clark, wrote to the chief woman's officer to highlight Ramsden's achievements. Clark argued Ramsden's death was the consequence of 'a long illness brought on by the hard work done for our movement'. In a hurried hand that suggests the emotional weight under which she was writing, Clark documented how Ramsden 'has surely given her life to our cause' as she neglected her own health during 'the anxious days of 1926' in order that she 'do her duty to all in need'. Clark was at pains to ensure that it was the political work of Ramsden's earlier life which was remembered and not the largely domestic life she had been rendered to following a serious stroke.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, *The Labour Woman* posted a short notice of Ramsden's death as the loss of a 'valiant worker ... [who] had a long record of devoted service in the Movement'.<sup>3</sup>

Mrs Clark's championing of Lucy Ramsden's achievements and the acts to mark her passing by local Labour Party women suggest the value politically active working-class women placed upon a political self. Clark stressed that while Ramsden had 'to live so quietly in the last years of her life she [did] what she could while able to do it'. Activism and the public performance of politics were crucial to the perception of a political self by Clark.<sup>4</sup> Histories of working-class women within the Labour Party have tended to focus upon their party impact and the achievements of women like Ramsden. This work has been crucial in revealing how women carved out a space within the party and became active citizens in their own right.<sup>5</sup> However, the experiences of active Labour women in the rank and file and the

---

<sup>2</sup> Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Manchester [LHASC], LP/WORG/131/i-ii, Correspondence from Mrs Clark to Mary Sutherland, 3 October 1937.

<sup>3</sup> 'In Memoriam', *The Labour Woman*, November 1937, 164.

<sup>4</sup> Correspondence from Clark to Sutherland, 3 October 1937.

<sup>5</sup> June Hannam and Karen Hunt, *Socialist Women: Britain, 1880s to 1920s* (London, 2002); Karen Hunt, 'Making politics in local communities: Labour women in interwar Manchester', in Matthew Worley (ed.),

meanings of such activism for newly enfranchised working-class women remain largely underdeveloped. The purpose of this article is to explore how working-class women in the Labour Party negotiated a political identity which was both part of, but separate from, domestic and maternal identities. The transition to political activism and what allowed women to remain party activists will be considered through an examination of their relationships with leaders and peers, as well as the structures and rituals of the women's sections. In so doing, I suggest how working-class women performed a political self in the years after equal enfranchisement in 1928.

From 1918, women could become individual members of the Labour Party and were organized through local women's sections which were overseen by regional women's organizers and a national chief woman's officer.<sup>6</sup> Women operated in different spaces within the women's sections as members, elected officers, and paid officials. In the 1930s women's membership varied between 250,000 and 300,000, and women were well represented at a local level, even outnumbering men in some localities.<sup>7</sup> At an executive level, however,

---

*Labour's Grass Roots: Essays on the Activities of Local Labour Parties and Members, 1918-45* (Aldershot, 2005), 79-101; Cathy Hunt, "'Everyone's poor relation': The poverty and isolation of a working-class woman local politician in interwar Britain", *Women's History Review*, 16 (2007), 417-30; June Hannam, 'Women and Labour politics', in Matthew Worley (ed.), *The Foundations of the British Labour Party: Identities, Cultures and Perspectives, 1900-39* (Farnham, 2009), 171-91; June Hannam, 'Women as paid organizers and propagandists for the British Labour Party between the Wars', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 77 (2010), 69-88; June Hannam, "'The victory of ideals must be organized': Labour Party women organizers in the inter-war years", *Management and Organizational History*, 5 (2010), 331-48.

<sup>6</sup> The first chief woman's officer was Marion Phillips. Mary Sutherland was her successor following her death in 1932, and she served in this role until 1960. The local women's section often came under divisional advisory councils, and women were entitled to representation on divisional party meetings as well. In the 1930s there were nine regional women's organizers; one for Scotland, one for Wales, and the remaining seven covered England.

<sup>7</sup> Pat Thane, 'The women of the British Labour Party and feminism, 1906-1945', in H.L. Smith (ed.), *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1990), 125; Neil Evans and Dot Jones, "'To help forward the great work of humanity': Women in the Labour Party in Wales", in Duncan Tanner, Chris Williams and Deian

women were neither well represented nor were their skills fully utilized; this in part explains the long absence of considerations of the role of women in party life within the historiography.<sup>8</sup> Local and neighbourhood histories have been most successful in documenting how, within sections, women's activities stretched far beyond tea-making and fundraising. As recent studies of Scottish Labour women have convincingly concluded, this was not a period of political dormancy for women and, if we re-evaluate our understanding of what constituted feminist politics, women's issues were often well promoted within the local arena.<sup>9</sup> This is not to suggest that either feminist policies or women officers were embraced in local parties. Rather, as argued by Duncan Tanner, it is to recognize the complexity of internal party culture and the variety of ways in which we should consider women's political experiences and impact.<sup>10</sup>

While the shift to local and neighbourhood studies of Labour women has better unearthed the histories of women at a grass-roots level, the place and fulfilment of political activism within the broader context of working-class women's 'everyday' political experiences and lives are worthy of greater attention.<sup>11</sup> What inspired women like those in the

---

Hopkin (eds), *The Labour Party in Wales, 1900-2000* (Cardiff, 2000), 220-1; Matthew Worley, 'Building the party: Labour Party activism in five British counties between the wars', *Labour History Review*, 70 (2005), 77.

<sup>8</sup> The work of Pat Thane and Pamela Graves did much to recover the record of Labour Party women in the inter-war years. Thane, 'The women of the British Labour Party', 124-43; Pamela Graves, *Labour Women: Women in British Working-Class Politics 1918-1939* (Cambridge, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Annemarie Hughes, *Gender and Political Identities in Scotland, 1919-1939* (Edinburgh, 2010), 4-6; Esther Breitenbach and Valerie Wright, 'Women as active citizens: Glasgow and Edinburgh c.1918-1939', *Women's History Review*, 23 (2014), 415. Karen Hunt has also shown this to be the case in Manchester. Hunt, 'Making Politics', 96.

<sup>10</sup> Duncan Tanner, 'Gender, civic culture and politics in South Wales: Explaining Labour municipal policy, 1918-1939', in Worley, *Labour's Grass Roots*, 170-2.

<sup>11</sup> On the importance of the 'everyday' within working-class politics see, Worley, 'Building the party', 75; Karen Hunt and June Hannam, 'Towards an archaeology of interwar women's politics: The local and the everyday', in Julie V. Gottlieb and Richard Toye (eds), *The Aftermath of Suffrage: Women, Gender and Politics in Britain, 1918-1945* (Basingstoke, 2013), 126-7.

Kirkaldy Burghs section in Scotland to battle against inclement weather, illness and bus strikes to turn up to meetings month after month can only be addressed through a deeper analysis of the meanings of 'everyday' political activism.<sup>12</sup> One way of uncovering such experiences is to consider how women performed a political self. Examining performances of a self provides a framework for recovering working-class women's experiences in the absence of life stories and a more abundant local political archive. It focuses the discussion more purposively on the political journeys of the rank and file from apathy to activism rather than upon the leadership within the party.

Studies of 'the self' have tended to focus on middle-class subjects, given the greater proliferation of self-reflective narratives for this group. However, it is possible to explore identity construction for working-class political women through a reading of performances of activism in the bureaucratic papers of political parties. Local Labour Party minutes, correspondence, and reports are a rich and underutilized source for historians of the political self.<sup>13</sup> Listening more closely to women's voices within these sources shifts our attention away from the appeal of policy and national organization to the everyday life of working-class activists: those who regularly attended meetings, organized social events, knitted socks for Spain, responded to questionnaires on diets and living standards, canvassed on doorsteps, urged others to sign petitions, participated in day schools, supported rallies, and mass canvassed unorganized women.<sup>14</sup> The appeal of 'maternalist' policies such as infant and maternal welfare, housing reform or family allowances was, of course, a starting point for many dedicated activists. But to understand the deeper meanings of their relationship with the

---

<sup>12</sup> LHASC, LP/WORG/37/520, Agnes Lauder, Organiser Report, Kirkaldy Burghs, 11 March 1937.

<sup>13</sup> For the richness of party minutes see, S. Ball, A. Thorpe and M. Worley, 'Researching the grass roots: The records of constituency level political parties in five British counties, 1918-45', *Archives*, 110 (2004), 72-94.

<sup>14</sup> For the importance to the 'feminist project' of listening to women's voices, see Katie Barclay, 'Composing the self: Gender, subjectivity and Scottish balladry', *Cultural and Social History*, 7 (2010), 338.

party and the emotional environment and vibrancy of the women's sections, the framework of maternalism needs to be complicated.<sup>15</sup> Reading performances of selfhood enables the tension between domestic and political identities and the emotional spaces of women's politics to be more fully considered.

Constructions of working-class women's political identities are understood here as being produced through performances of the political self. Focusing upon performance shows how the self is, in part, determined or shaped by audience. James Hinton in *Nine Wartime Lives* concludes that 'in making masks appropriate for the performance of our various roles, we make ourselves'.<sup>16</sup> Political activism was a performance which required various masks (different to those of domestic or private worlds) and one that was shaped by audience responses within and outside of the party. In performing the role of activist, women made a political self. As Penny Summerfield convincingly argues, focusing upon 'performance' rather than 'roles' is important as 'audience reactions are crucial, since the fronts we present must convince others; hence their production is social or even co-operative'.<sup>17</sup> Although focusing upon postcolonial women's life writings, Annie Devenish's point about the 'intersubjective or relational nature of identity construction' is also relevant.<sup>18</sup> The identity of political activist was the performance of one version of the self, the political self, in addition to many other identities women could perform (including mother, wife, worker, carer, and friend), and it was shaped by wider social relations and the political culture of the period.

---

<sup>15</sup> Hannam, 'Women and Labour politics', 180-83.

<sup>16</sup> James Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives: Mass-Observation and the Making of the Modern Self* (Oxford, 2010), 3-11.

<sup>17</sup> Penny Summerfield, 'Concluding thoughts: Performance, the self and women's history', *Women's History Review*, 22 (2013), 346-7.

<sup>18</sup> Annie Devenish, 'Performing the political self: A study of identity making and self representation in the autobiographies of India's first generation of parliamentary women', *Women's History Review*, 22 (2013), 281-3.

Using what are essentially bureaucratic materials to explore how working-class women became political activists and performed a self outside of the home, family and workplace is particularly important given the dearth of life stories on political journeys which are more common for middle-class women. The minutes of women's sections, where they survive, have been primarily drawn upon to uncover how women interacted with the divisional party or the kinds of fundraising activities undertaken.<sup>19</sup> But, just what the women's sections chose to record, the language they used to do this, and the kinds of social interactions and activities undertaken can also be read as performances of the political self. The sociability of women's sections helped to form political identities and were, in turn, expressions of political identities. The daily regional organizer reports of the women's sections, which survive only from late 1936 until early 1938, are a particularly valuable source in charting women's friendships, feelings towards the party and political ambitions.<sup>20</sup> They also offer insight into public and private accounts of party activism. The monthly periodical *The Labour Woman* was also a space where women negotiated and performed political and domestic identities.<sup>21</sup> Together, reading the self within these materials helps build a richer picture of newly enfranchised women's activism and the fulfilment they gained from such work.

The article begins with a discussion of the political self within the context of the gendered culture of the party and in relation to a domestic self. I next explore the relationship between rank-and-file women and female leaders to show how the structures of the party were designed to best allow women to gain confidence, develop their political voices, and

---

<sup>19</sup> For example, Hunt, 'Making politics in local communities'.

<sup>20</sup> Pamela Graves and Duncan Tanner have both drawn upon these materials, but the richness of the sources in accessing the emotional context and leaders' views of members have been neglected. Graves, *Labour Women*, 204-7; Tanner, 'Gender, civic culture and politics', 177-83.

<sup>21</sup> Lowri Newman, "'Onward the women!': The formation of a counterpublic in *The Labour Woman* magazine, 1911-1945', PhD thesis, University of South Wales, 2015.

maintain their identity as activist. The structures and sociability of the women's sections follows to reveal how the culture of the neighbourhood shaped women's performances of the political self. The fulfilment of performing a political self and the potential tensions between domestic and political identities are considered in the final section. The lens of selfhood, as employed here, better allows for the importance of the environment of the sections and the personal fulfilment of political activism in constructing an identity separate from the home to surface. It also shows the disputes, disagreements and disappointments which privately existed within the movement. Exploring the rich life of the sections in this way helps further understandings of the lives of working-class women who were dedicated to the ideology of socialism and attempted to carve out a political space within an often wider masculine political culture, during Labour's years in opposition and against the backdrop of the depression. The conclusions drawn here on the importance of reading performances of a political self in bureaucratic sources have the potential to open up new lines of enquiry in other fields by enriching our understanding of the popular appeal of particular parties and organizations.

### Working-class women's worlds and the political self

For working-class women, without trade union activity, and for a generation who may not have been active in suffrage organization, performing a political self in a male-dominated organization and political culture could be a difficult process. The development of the many organizations aimed at encouraging women to become active citizens after equal franchise spoke of the need to politicize women and develop their political confidence.<sup>22</sup> The regional organizer for Wales, Elizabeth Andrews, recalled how, 'I had to try and teach women not to

---

<sup>22</sup> Breitenbach and Wright, 'Women as active citizens', 405-7.

be afraid of freedom'.<sup>23</sup> Labour men were, in some instances, part of this process. In Scotland, regional organizer Agnes Lauder noted the strategies of male officers to encourage women to form sections in Ayr, Bowhill, and Kirkaldy Burghs.<sup>24</sup> In a bid to reopen the Melksham women's section in England, local Labour Party men arranged, prepared, and served a tea for women, 'providing serviettes and small tables daintily set'.<sup>25</sup> Women's politicization may have been stimulated by some of these efforts, and in smaller divisions women did not always organize separately. However, this more complex picture of gender relations should not detract from the fact that for many female political activists the male domination of the party served as a hindrance to their developing political activism and identity.<sup>26</sup> In the Pontypridd Division, for example, Elizabeth Andrews felt the wards in the later 1930s were 'not playing the game with our women', while in Aberaman 'the very silly' and 'foolish' ideas about the work of the women's sections hampered the organization of women in the area.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to the barriers which could be created by the male domination of the party, working-class women also faced practical obstacles such as childcare and domestic or paid work. Moreover, political activism was, of course, one element of a woman's life, even when it absorbed all of her leisure time, and one aspect of her identity; a political self competed and co-existed with domestic identities. The identity of housewife or mother was also created

---

<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth Andrews, *A Woman's Work is Never Done*, ed. Ursula Masson, 2006 (London, 1957), 56.

<sup>24</sup> LHASC, LP/WORG/37/356, 360, 359, Agnes Lauder, Organiser Reports, Auchinleck, 24 February, Bowhill, 28 February, and Kirkaldy Burghs, 11 March 1937.

<sup>25</sup> LHASC, LP/WORG/37/31, Annie Townley, Organiser Report, Melksham, 7 July 1937.

<sup>26</sup> Tanner, 'Gender, civic culture and politics', 174; Lowri Newman, "'Providing an opportunity to exercise their energies": The role of the Labour women's sections in shaping political identities, South Wales, 1918-1939', in Esther Breitenbach and Pat Thane (eds), *Women and Citizenship in Britain and Ireland in the Twentieth Century: What Difference Did the Vote Make?* (London, 2010), 30.

<sup>27</sup> LHASC, LP/WORG/37/422, 282, Elizabeth Andrews, Organiser Reports, Pontypridd, 19 May 1937 and Aberdare, 23 November 1937.

through the performance of another self, the domestic self. As Judy Giles has noted, ‘Becoming a housewife was never simply the case of slipping effortlessly into a ready-made role imposed from without, but required an active self-assembling’.<sup>28</sup> While working- and middle-class housewives challenged domesticity, the popular image of the housewife in the inter-war period focused very much on traditional domestic roles and this shaped political engagement.<sup>29</sup> Women had to negotiate an audience expectation of performing a part rooted in domestic worlds – that is an idealized version of mother and wife – and, conversely, reshaping ‘acceptable’ femininity to step onto the male dominated stage of politics.<sup>30</sup>

The politics of maternalism allowed women to combine in a meaningful way the interests and identities of domestic and political worlds. However, the actions of women in meetings, the campaigns they adopted and even the venues of the meetings all highlight the tensions often, but not always, inherent in working-class women’s performances and constructions of domestic and political selves. Like the earlier generation of suffragettes, working-class women needed to ensure that they did not challenge certain codes of feminine behaviour while performing a fulfilling version of a political self.<sup>31</sup> Even the female-only space of the women’s sections was not immune to the potential for neighbourhood gossip to damage the reputations of members. The recurring issue in minutes and organizer reports of having a comfortable meeting place in part originated from concern that respectable feminine identities might be tainted. Meeting in some of the Labour halls or other working-men’s clubs

---

<sup>28</sup> Judy Giles, ‘A home of one’s own: Women and domesticity in England 1918-1950’, *Women’s Studies Int. Forum*, 16 (1993), 239-40.

<sup>29</sup> Catriona Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens: Domesticity and the Women’s Movement in England, 1928-64* (Manchester, 2013), 8.

<sup>30</sup> For a further discussion of the tension between maternalism and activism see Ruth Davidson, ‘“Dreams of Utopia”: The infant welfare movement in interwar Croydon’, *Women’s History Review*, 23 (2014), 239-55.

<sup>31</sup> Ryland Wallace, *The Women’s Suffrage Movement in Wales 1866-1928* (Cardiff, 2009), 184-218.

was not seen as conducive to women's respectable appearances, and some meetings were even held in women's houses as a consequence.<sup>32</sup>

How women performed a political self was shaped by the often highly masculinized internal party culture and the cultural codes of the neighbourhood. But, if women's performances were shaped to suit the audience of party men or neighbourhood networks, they were not necessarily defined by them. The evidence drawn upon here suggests that working-class women were able to negotiate a political space and perform a political self while also convincingly performing a self as mother or housewife. Moreover, while family life and the neighbourhood created potential obstacles, it also provided a mechanism for supportive networks amongst working-class women. Extended family and neighbours operated as an almost informal welfare state providing medical assistance, childcare, financial assistance, home repairs and food. Such networks also provided women with their friendship circles and close bonds developed in streets and neighbourhoods.<sup>33</sup> The practices of supporting neighbours through times of strife could translate into social action as Temma Kaplan has shown in the case of Barcelona.<sup>34</sup> The inter-relationship between audiences set within the culture of the neighbourhood and party needs to be considered when exploring how women constructed a political self. It shaped the emotional environment of the sections and relationships with leaders, and it was fundamental in how women shaped a political self.

### Leadership in Labour women's politics

---

<sup>32</sup> LHASC, LP/WORG/37/331, Elizabeth Andrews, Organiser Report, Ton Pentre, 15 February 1937; Modern Records Centre, Coventry, MSS.11/1/1, Coventry Borough Labour Party, All Saints Women's Section Minutes, 21 April 1938.

<sup>33</sup> Claire Langhamer, *Women's Leisure in England, 1920-60* (Manchester, 2000), 157-9.

<sup>34</sup> Temma Kaplan, 'Female consciousness and collective action: The case of Barcelona, 1910-1918', *Signs*, 7 (1982), 547.

The success of the Labour Party relied on the enthusiasm, loyalty and co-operation of its membership. Active members willing to give up hours of free time to promote party propaganda were crucial to local and national electoral gains.<sup>35</sup> The sense of *belonging* to a movement, rather than simply being part of it, was fundamental to ensuring members gave more than their weekly subscription. In her June 1937 editorial for *The Labour Woman* Mary Sutherland, chief woman's officer, cautioned 'we shall not achieve our purpose by merely appealing to mass emotion'. An informed and active membership fully versed in the policies and ethos of the Labour Party was required, she argued, to build a new social order.<sup>36</sup> Sutherland knew the Labour Party had developed a programme which appealed to many working-class women; the rights for domestic workers, the Children's Charter, the development of infant welfare clinics and nursery schools, peace and the ongoing issue of the rising cost of living were a particular draw.<sup>37</sup> The challenge was to transform women interested in such issues into active and regularly attending members who could help restore Labour to power following its crushing defeat in 1931. A deep ideological commitment in itself did not necessarily lead to such activism, and especially in an age where working-class women faced considerable barriers, inside and out of the party, to active political participation.

National and regional leaders within the Labour Party's women's sections attempted to offer a form of leadership that encouraged women to develop confidence and carve out a political space. It must be borne in mind that working-class women lacked prominent role models which were much more apparent for men. There were voluntary organizations which

---

<sup>35</sup> Mary E. Sutherland, 'Editorial', *The Labour Woman*, October 1937, 146; Stuart Ball, Andrew Thorpe and Matthew Worley, 'Elections, leaflets and whist drives: Constituency party members in Britain between the wars', in Worley, *Labour's Grass Roots*, 13.

<sup>36</sup> Mary E. Sutherland, 'Editorial', *The Labour Woman*, June 1937, 82.

<sup>37</sup> *The Labour Woman*, 1932-1939.

provided working-class women with opportunities to develop organizational skills or leadership roles, such as the Co-operative Women's Guilds, but in the context of the neighbourhood, political, religious, and business leaders were overwhelmingly men.<sup>38</sup> For the chief woman's officer of the Labour Party, establishing a persona which could allow members to feel some kind of connection to her and the party was important in gaining trust and support. Marian Goronwy-Roberts equates the success of the first chief woman's officer, Marion Phillips, with the 'deep respect and affection' the rank and file and regional officers had for her.<sup>39</sup> Yet, the importance of the role of the chief woman's officer has primarily been considered from the perspective of policy and impact, despite the part they played in helping women to perform a political self.<sup>40</sup>

The relationship between the chief woman's officer and women members was established in person and in print. At a time when the activities of Labour women could rouse little interest in the press, the visibility and the idea of the availability of the chief officer was very important. She was expected to visit local sections, give speeches at rallies, offer lectures, represent women's views at a national level, and lead campaigns. Her editorial role for *The Labour Woman* reinforced the presence and support of the chief officer. Mary Sutherland used humour and the image of the working-class housewife as hero to present herself as a sympathetic ally who recognized the struggle working-class women faced.<sup>41</sup> Her

---

<sup>38</sup> Pat Thane has argued for the importance of voluntary associations in giving women the opportunities to organize collectively. Pat Thane, 'The impact of mass democracy on British political culture, 1918-1939', in Julie V. Gottlieb and Richard Toye (eds), *The Aftermath of Suffrage: Women, Gender and Politics in Britain, 1918-1945* (Basingstoke, 2013), 56-7.

<sup>39</sup> Marian Goronwy-Roberts, *A Woman of Vision: A Life of Marion Phillips, MP* (Wrexham, 2000), 95.

<sup>40</sup> Graves, *Labour Women*, 181-218.

<sup>41</sup> Mary E. Sutherland, 'Editorial', *The Labour Woman*, November 1937, 162; Mary E. Sutherland, 'Class distinction in health', *The Labour Woman*, May 1936, 72-3; Mary E. Sutherland, 'Editorial', *The Labour Woman*, January 1936, 1. Pat Thane, 'Sutherland, Mary Elizabeth (1895-1972)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004) [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/39184>, accessed 16 March 2016.]

own working-class background was also important in a period where the motives of middle-class socialists and intellectuals could be met with suspicion by the rank and file.<sup>42</sup> Although her university education, paid employment, and single and childless status would have differentiated her from the majority of members, Sutherland had matured in the household of her crofter father, and at fifteen she took over maternal responsibilities for her younger siblings following her mother's early death.<sup>43</sup> By establishing her authenticity as one who understood the hardship working-class women endured, Sutherland was able to earn the trust and respect of members.

The surviving correspondence between Sutherland and the women's sections is revealing of the eagerness of women to ask for advice on developing their political voices. Mrs R. Brown, secretary of the Abertillery women's section, wrote to Sutherland for help after being asked to speak at a meeting for the cost of living campaign as 'we want this meeting to be a big success and although I am no speaker I want to do my best'.<sup>44</sup> Elsie Mann from Wakefield was anxious for advice as 'I have done very little public speaking for some time, I feel it is essential that I should have up to date information on matters concerning women in order to give useful help to my listeners'.<sup>45</sup> Sutherland was careful to offer prompt and full replies, and for section members she tended to sign off with affectionate greetings.<sup>46</sup> Her supportive correspondence was reinforced with her actions towards those she felt were attempting to introduce division into the ranks.

---

<sup>42</sup> Matthew Worley, 'The fruits on the tree: Labour's constituency parties between the wars', in Worley, *The Foundations of the British Labour Party*, 207-8; Hannam and Hunt, *Socialist Women*, 84.

<sup>43</sup> Thane, 'Sutherland, Mary Elizabeth (1895-1972)'.

<sup>44</sup> LHASC, LP/WORG/37/449-50, Correspondence from Mrs R. Brown to Mary Sutherland, 3 November 1937.

<sup>45</sup> LHASC, LP/WORG/37/144, Correspondence from Elsie Mann to Mary Sutherland, 10 June 1937.

<sup>46</sup> LHASC, LP/WORG/37/167, Correspondence from Mary Sutherland to Elsie Mann, 14 June 1937. See also, LHASC, LP/WORG/37/135-6, Correspondence between Mrs M. Longmore (secretary, Shiregreen women's section) and Mary Sutherland, 9 and 10 June 1937.

Sutherland rallied to support members she felt had been unjustifiably criticized by their fellow activists. Pat Thane has suggested that Sutherland's renowned criticism of others and moodiness might have been an indication of depression, but her actions should also be seen in the context of her desire to retain unity within the women's sections.<sup>47</sup> Her response to a complaint from Mrs F. Johnson about the conduct of the Mexborough women's section is particularly illuminating. Mrs Johnson outlined her frustration that the Mexborough section's 'sole interest seems to be in trips & cups of coffee etc.' and that she had 'never [been] in any section where less interest was shown in propaganda'.<sup>48</sup> The perceived attack against the Mexborough women roused Sutherland's anger, and she later hinted that she might have lost her temper.<sup>49</sup> Although Johnson said she was a longstanding member of the party, Sutherland questioned her belief in the works of Labour and her claims to activism within her local section, finishing with the defence that, 'The suggestion that Mexborough women have no interest in political work is ridiculous to anyone who has any knowledge of the splendid work done by Mexborough women and women in other parts of South Yorkshire'.<sup>50</sup>

Further outbursts from Sutherland came in her defence of regional organizers and even in *The Labour Woman* against an anonymous author of a critical letter.<sup>51</sup> For members, the support given by the chief woman's officer must have helped generate and sustain

---

<sup>47</sup> Thane, 'Sutherland, Mary Elizabeth (1895–1972)'; Graves, *Labour Woman*, 216.

<sup>48</sup> LHASC, LP/WORG/37/171, Correspondence between Mrs F. Johnson and Mary Sutherland, 8 July 1937.

<sup>49</sup> LHASC, LP/WORG/37/186, Correspondence between Mary Sutherland and Mrs Whipp, 10 August 1937.

<sup>50</sup> LHASC, LP/WORG/37/181-182, Correspondence between Mary Sutherland and Mrs F. Johnson, 23 July 1937.

<sup>51</sup> For example, LHASC, LP/WORG/37/216, Correspondence from Mary Sutherland to Mr Tippins (Brecon and Radnor Divisional Labour Party), 28 July 1937; LP/WORG/37/312-5, Correspondence between Mr D.B. MacKay (secretary, Central Edinburgh Divisional Labour Party) and Mary Sutherland, 25 May 1937 and 4 June 1937; LP/WORG/37/483, Correspondence between Miss Williams (secretary, Wrexham Divisional Labour Party) and Mary Sutherland, 11 November 1937, 18 November 1937; Mary E. Sutherland, 'Editorial', *The Labour Woman*, April 1937, 50.

feelings of loyalty towards the party as well as giving women, who were often politically isolated, the confidence to stand their ground. The Mexborough section was 'delighted' with Sutherland's reply to Johnson who, tellingly, had not since been to a meeting.<sup>52</sup> Letters to Sutherland from Labour women were full of personal affectionate messages which are not a feature of party correspondence generally. Whipp's letter ends: 'We all wish you a very happy holiday, and hope you are lucky enough to have some of this glorious weather, so that you will come back to work feeling all the better for your rest'.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, Elizabeth Grounds, the secretary of the South Newington and St Andrews joint women's section, finished her letter on the work of her section for the year 'With every good wish to you from the Section & myself for the New Year'.<sup>54</sup>

At a local level, this form of almost familial support was further encouraged by regional women's organizers. With responsibility for covering hundreds of sections, the regional organizers played a vital role in supporting the work of sections and ensuring they followed party policy. Organizers attended section meetings and events, gave talks, mediated with divisional parties, intervened to end disputes, and helped orchestrate campaigns to draw in new members.<sup>55</sup> While organizer reports were designed to give a picture of activity in the sections, the private freedom of the writings meant organizers used the medium as an almost diary-like exercise. The reports can be seen as performative in that the organizers could portray themselves as idealized versions of what a good organizer was: a tactful mediator and inspiring leader. Agnes Lauder and Lilian Anderson Fenn (Midlands) were particularly keen to stress their role in encouraging members and rousing interest. After members of the

---

<sup>52</sup> LHASC, LP/WORG/37/135-6, Correspondence from Mrs Whipp to Mary Sutherland, 8 August 1937.

<sup>53</sup> Correspondence from Mrs Whipp to Mary Sutherland, 8 August 1937.

<sup>54</sup> LHASC, LP/WORG/37/92, Correspondence from Elizabeth H. Grounds to Mary Sutherland, 15 January 1937.

<sup>55</sup> For a fuller account, see Hannam, 'Women as paid organizers'.

Auchinleck women's section confessed to feeling isolated, Lauder reported how her intervention helped the women to 'feel very pleased' and that the section had more direction.<sup>56</sup>

While some commonality can be discerned in the qualities organizers admired in members, the reports are ultimately highly subjective. Elizabeth Andrews who had held ambitions of becoming a teacher and Margaret Gibbs (North-East) who was trained as a teacher, reserved particular praise for the 'very efficient and very business like' meetings and for those teachers or headmistresses who stood as officers.<sup>57</sup> Similarly to Sutherland, the regional organizers were in a socially ambivalent position: they could draw upon their own working-class background to empathize with members, but they might also distance themselves through their position in the party hierarchy.<sup>58</sup> The use of personal pronouns in reports shows how organizers positioned themselves in the power relationship. Annie Townley's use of 'I' and 'they' contrasts to the 'we' and 'our' consistently used by Elizabeth Andrews.<sup>59</sup> Andrews crafts a narrative of her role as a fellow comrade sharing the disappointment of a poor turnout to a social event, or bad weather spoiling an outing, and standing united with section members in the fight against the Communist Party in south

---

<sup>56</sup> Agnes Lauder, Organiser Report, Auchinleck, 24 February 1937; LHASC, LP/WORG/37/45, Mrs L. Anderson Fenn, Organiser Report, Stourbridge, 28 January 1937.

<sup>57</sup> LHASC, LP/WORG/37/439 and 221, Elizabeth Andrews, Organiser Reports, Newport, 6 April 1937 and Llandovery, 1 June 1937; LP/WORG/37/99, Margaret Gibb, Organiser Report, North Newington, 28 September 1937.

<sup>58</sup> Hannam, 'Women as paid organizers', 74; LHASC, LP/WORG/37/21, Annie Townley, Organiser Report, Swindon, 1 February 1937.

<sup>59</sup> Annie Townley, Organiser Report, Swindon, 1 February 1937; LP/WORG/37/712, Elizabeth Andrews, Organiser Report, Wrexham, 14 June 1937.

Wales.<sup>60</sup> These subtle distinctions in how organizers positioned themselves should be borne in mind when considering relationships with section members and narrations of it.

Unlike the chief woman's officer, the regional organizers had a much more interactive role with the membership. In areas where the Labour Party struggled to make progress, managing members' expectations helped women to develop their political voices and maintain enthusiasm for political activism. While in public organizers were keen to stress the unity within the movement, in private the frustrations and disappointment with the running of particular sections was evident. Margaret Gibbs wrote angrily of the 'backward mind' and 'incompetent' running of the Hull East Divisional Labour Party. Like Elizabeth Andrews, who complained about 'two difficult personalities' in the Ystrad Women's Section, Gibbs feared such leaders stalled the progress of other women members.<sup>61</sup> The difference between public and private assessments of members is perhaps also indicative of the fragility of political identities. Organizers wanted to maintain harmony in the sections and a supportive atmosphere, whatever their own personal feelings or assessments. Women who were less confident or secure in their performance of activist could draw upon the support of regional organizers, including positive accounts in *The Labour Woman*. The efforts to expand the women's sections in Chippenham highlight this point.

In the Conservative dominated South-West region, Labour lacked a definite heartland.<sup>62</sup> While Annie Townley's reports in *The Labour Woman* presented her close work

---

<sup>60</sup> LHASC, LP/WORG/37/712 and 254, Elizabeth Andrews, Organiser Report, Women's Month Rallies, 14 June 1937 and Cardiff, 5 December 1937.

<sup>61</sup> LHASC, LP/WORG/37/135-6, Margaret Gibb, Organiser Report, Hull East, 29 December 1936; LP/WORG/37/341, Elizabeth Andrews, Organiser Report, Ystrad (Rhondda), 10 May 1937.

<sup>62</sup> Andrew Thorpe's reasoning that the lack of industrial base and the low density of population accounted for Labour's poor position in Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, and Somerset is applicable also for Wiltshire. Andrew Thorpe, "'One of the most backward areas of the country": The Labour Party's grass roots in south west England, 1918-45', in Worley, *Labour's Grass Roots*, 216-8.

with Labour women in the area as an attempt to encourage greater membership, her private reports suggest she was much more focused on maintaining the commitment of existing local activists. In *The Labour Woman*, Townley reported how efforts to expand the movement in Box resulted in a ‘small meeting, but the committee are determined to carry on’.<sup>63</sup> The positive and confident characterization of the women here stands in stark contrast to Townley’s private record. After only three new potential members turned up to the meeting at Box, Townley reported how she ‘had to talk very gently to them all to get the committee to feel it worth while going on’. The secretary felt ‘disheartened’ and Townley ‘tried to encourage those present to go on trying’.<sup>64</sup> Townley herself confessed that organizing ‘is not an easy task in these Wiltshire lovely villages, and I know how hard the secretaries have to work with little result’.<sup>65</sup> The positive public portrayal was, therefore, crafted to attempt to showcase the fulfilment of activism and present women activists as confident, pioneering and fearless. Indeed, other monthly reports from organizers in *The Labour Woman* drew upon positive language to describe the work of women as ‘magnificent’, ‘very gratifying’, providing ‘excellent service’ and an ‘inspiration’.<sup>66</sup> While in reality, the political identities of some working-class women were fragile, the performance of political selves in public through the narratives of the organizers showcased the autonomy of women and the fulfilment they drew from their party work.

The response of Wiltshire working-class women to further efforts by the Chippenham section is revealing of the political isolation of some women and just how important such positive portrayals and personal support could be. In July 1937, a mass canvass was organized at Castle Coombe; propaganda materials were distributed door-to-door, a picnic

---

<sup>63</sup> *The Labour Woman*, June 1937, 95.

<sup>64</sup> LHASC, LP/WORG/37/130, Annie Townley, Organiser Report, Chippenham, 22 April 1937.

<sup>65</sup> Annie Townley, Organiser Report, Chippenham, 22 April 1937.

<sup>66</sup> *The Labour Woman*, June 1937, 95.

held for committee members, and speeches given by Townley and Labour's prospective candidate Mr Chilcott.<sup>67</sup> The day's efforts unfortunately attracted only a few older men from the village. Tellingly, when the speeches were taking place, Townley noted how 'we had all the women peering from their windows and doors, but they would not come near us'. Although the women were interested, they did not participate. In contrast, while the Chippenham Labour women 'felt a bit discouraged' at the poor show, they were reminded of the benefits of visiting houses and distributing information.<sup>68</sup> Here, the tension between the political and domestic self is also apparent. While the distributed propaganda appealed to the women, the physical and ideological move from the home and into the political space of the party required the performance of a political self some lacked the commitment or confidence to make. In this respect, the efforts of leaders could only do so much in bringing women into the movement, and other factors were equally important in women's constructions of a political self.

### Emotional bonds and women's political spaces

While the work of an earlier generation of activists gave women a foundation to build upon, Labour's position in the 1930s, the crushing reality of the depression for many, and the new experience of citizenship for others still made public performances of a political self a potentially challenging process. The chief woman's officer and regional organizers helped women to overcome some obstacles and provided leadership where there was often a dearth of working-class women representatives. However, the performance of a political self was not only down to leaders' efforts and members did not always work closely with regional

---

<sup>67</sup> Annie Townley, 'South-West: Women's work in the districts', *The Labour Woman*, August 1937, 127.

<sup>68</sup> LHASC, LP/WORG/37/4, Annie Townley, Organiser Report, Castle Coombe, 1 July 1937.

organizers or share their vision.<sup>69</sup> What was of even greater significance were the rituals and routines of the women's sections which allowed for bonds with fellow activists and the expression of collective female political identities. For working-class women without the experience of workplace organization June Hannam and Karen Hunt have shown how organizing separately was particularly important in developing confidence.<sup>70</sup> The absence of men ensured women assumed positions of leadership and established control, within the parameters of party lines, over a section's direction. Most importantly, women-only spaces and the activities favoured within the sections replicated the familiar social interactions of the neighbourhood.

Following marriage, women primarily socialized with other women.<sup>71</sup> This is not to suggest that women operated within a closed world, rather it is to highlight the importance of feminine interactions and spaces. Voluntary organizations primarily focused upon domestic identities as a way of attracting women and encouraging them to become active citizens.<sup>72</sup> In the later 1930s, the Labour Party's campaigns also tended to target 'the housewife'. The cost of living campaign in the winter of 1937-38 which was orchestrated around the image of housewife is a good example of the appeal of such campaigns.<sup>73</sup> The political self was not divorced from a domestic or maternal self. Indeed, the ideological commitment to what were viewed as women's issues – welfare policies, education and peace – are revealing of how women saw the moral authority of the home as a basis for political action. Political and

---

<sup>69</sup> Annie Townley, for example, was very frustrated at the low turnout to a series of lectures she was asked to give. LHASC, LP/WORG/37/15, Annie Townley, Organiser Report, Corsham, 23 February 1937.

<sup>70</sup> Hannam and Hunt, *Socialist Women*, 90-1.

<sup>71</sup> For women's experiences of leisure see Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women, 1890-1940* (Oxford, 1985), 187-92.

<sup>72</sup> Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens*, 8-9.

<sup>73</sup> In total 700,000 signatures were collected as part of the campaign. Labour Party, *My Family's Food Costs More and More Says the Housewife* (1937); Mary E. Sutherland, 'Editorial', *The Labour Woman*, March 1938, 34.

domestic worlds were often entangled not only in policy but also in environment, even when the subjective performance of a political self was distinctive from a domestic self.

Encounters within the women's sections must be seen as replicating, reinforcing, and developing other aspects of working-class women's identities and culture. The recording of life events in the party minutes shows the personal bonds between women and the importance of celebrating the individual. Mixed-sex branches of the Labour Party did mark the deaths of members' relatives and central office advised members to maintain contact with those who could not attend through sickness or family illness.<sup>74</sup> What the minutes of divisional parties do not record are the debates over what gifts to send or who should visit. These discussions within the women's sections and the decision to record it, as well as the noting of significant personal events, suggest a more genuine affective gesture than merely ensuring numbers were maintained.<sup>75</sup> In the St George West women's section in Bristol, members would stand in silence to mark the death of a member's relative.<sup>76</sup> The gifts sent to ill members were clearly well appreciated, and members' husbands would write thank you letters when their wives remained too ill to do so.<sup>77</sup> Happier occasions were also marked. Gifts were given for birthdays placing working-class women at the centre of festivities. Retirements were a particular moment of celebration. In total, 100 people attended an evening social to pay tribute to three members from the Kirkcaldy Burghs; the resigning president was given a bedroom mirror, and the two retiring members, handbags.<sup>78</sup> Such events acknowledged and

---

<sup>74</sup> Bristol Record Office [BRO], 39035/49, St George West Labour Party General Council Minutes, 24 November 1937 and 26 January 1938.

<sup>75</sup> The Gorton Labour Party Women's Advisory Council sent out letters of sympathy in June 1937 for the loss of one member's sister and another's daughter. Manchester City Library Local Studies Collection, Gorton Labour Party Women's Advisory Council Minutes, 7 June 1937.

<sup>76</sup> BRO, 39035/52, St George West Women's Section Minute Books, 28 January 1936.

<sup>77</sup> St George West Women's Section Minute Books, 26 October 1937 and 9 November 1937.

<sup>78</sup> LHASC, LP/WORG/37/517, Agnes Lauder, Organiser Report, Burntisland, 23 April 1937.

celebrated political women and their achievements; the expensive gifts were, alongside the pomp and ceremony, symbolic to other women of the significance of their contributions. It marked them from their peers and celebrated the political self.

Many sections developed rituals surrounding food which further cemented the bonds between women. Again, the domestic origin of such activities should be seen as central to how women constructed a political space. The mixing of ‘politics with pleasure’ is noted in most studies of Labour women, but the wider implications of occasions involving food have not been fully considered.<sup>79</sup> The preparation of food and the act of serving others was at the heart of celebrations, and a mechanism for developing relationships with new members. Again, these examples cannot be found in the divisional parties and appear to have been specific to the women’s sections. In the All Saints Women’s Section in Coventry, members’ birthdays were marked with a ‘free and easy’ afternoon and cake served.<sup>80</sup> The section also set aside a day every month for each member to bring along one friend whose husband was unemployed to participate in a social afternoon. The member was responsible for providing refreshments for them both.<sup>81</sup> In areas still recovering from the lingering effects of the depression, sharing meals and being served by others had an even greater significance. Cakes and sandwiches at garden parties and trips out were rare treats for working-class women who often survived on monotonous or inadequate diets.<sup>82</sup> Officers minuted in detail the fillings of sandwiches and the types of cake eaten. While the praise for such efforts could reinforce women’s domestic skills, it also hints at the enthusiasm for such events. Sharing meals

---

<sup>79</sup> Evans and Jones, “‘To help forward the great work of humanity’”, 223-5; Newman, “‘Providing an opportunity to exercise their energies’”, 38.

<sup>80</sup> All Saints Women’s Section Minutes, 27 August 1936.

<sup>81</sup> All Saints Women’s Section Minutes, 27 February 1936.

<sup>82</sup> Margaret Mitchel, ‘The effects of unemployment on the social condition of women and children in the 1930s’, *History Workshop Journal*, 19 (1985), 105-20; Steven Thompson, *Unemployment, Poverty and Health in Interwar South Wales* (Cardiff, 2006), 227-42.

created a space for developing personal relationships which could not take place in the course of a structured meeting, or when listening to a lecture. The re-opening of the St George West's section after a temporary closure was always marked with a fish and chip supper.<sup>83</sup> Such personal connections made at these events were vital to developing feelings of belonging which helped women become regular and active members.<sup>84</sup>

Working collectively to organize events, prepare food, and acknowledging personal events in each other's lives could lead to close relationships. Mary Anderson (North-West regional organizer) felt that she was only able to get through months of long illness because of the 'loving messages from my friends and fellow-workers'.<sup>85</sup> Friendships created within the Labour Party had longevity, and Mary Sutherland reflected with pleasure of how it was 'good to "remember" occasionally with comrades with whom work and hopes and experiences were once intimately shared'.<sup>86</sup> These friendships and the emotional environment of the sections had a wider significance. The surviving minutes of women's sections suggest a largely collaborative environment operated where many women became and remained politically active unless illness or caring responsibilities overwhelmed them. Most importantly, the emotional environment of the sections gave women the confidence to perform a political self both within and outside of the section. The final part of this article considers the fulfilment of Party activism and the performance of a political self based upon an independent political identity.

---

<sup>83</sup> St George West Women's Section Minute Books, 14 July 1936.

<sup>84</sup> Correspondence from Mrs A. Barber, *The Labour Woman*, October 1936, 157.

<sup>85</sup> Mary Anderson, 'North-West: Women's work in the districts', *The Labour Woman*, October 1936, 158.

<sup>86</sup> Mary E. Sutherland, 'Editorial', *The Labour Woman*, April 1937, 50. See also Mary Anderson on the 'quite happy reunion' at the annual meeting of the North-West Lancashire advisory council. Mary Anderson, 'North-West: Women's work in the districts', *The Labour Woman*, May 1937, 78.

### Political activism, emotional fulfilment and the political self

Regional organizers often referred in reports to the ‘spirit’ shown amongst women; those women thought to be ‘keen’, ‘anxious’ to organize, and ‘determined’ to help the forward march of Labour were celebrated.<sup>87</sup> Aside from noting the youthfulness of members, personal characteristics such as education, marital, or maternal status are rarely mentioned. Whereas party literature refers to ‘housewives’, the organizers never describe members in this way and they are always referred to as ‘the women’. The regard for such personal qualities suggests the difference between executive and local party culture. Locally, political activism was a social leveller: anyone with the right spirit and drive could become a Labour Party stalwart.<sup>88</sup> While the women’s sections were shaped by domestic and neighbourhood cultures, and many section members readily championed maternal causes, domestic and political identities were not always entwined. It is important to recognize how some women performed a political self separate from a domestic self and the fulfilment they gained from this. As Hunt and Hannam stress, there was no homogenous political experience for women in this period.<sup>89</sup>

Within the sections, the syllabus of activities included lectures on wide ranging topics. The Maltby women’s section requested for discussion groups the pamphlets *Up with the Houses*, *Women in Industry*, as well as, *Hawkers of Death and Coal*.<sup>90</sup> The St George West Section had speakers in the mid-1930s on the international situation and the need for peace, H. M. Hyndman’s *The Evolution of Revolution*, modern art, reflections on recent visits to

---

<sup>87</sup> Such praise and characterization is particularly evident in Agnes Lauder’s reports for Scotland. LHASC, LP/WORG/37/613, Agnes Lauder, Organiser Report, Old Polmont, 10 March 1937.

<sup>88</sup> In the absence of detailed Party records and the 1931 census, it is very difficult to gauge the profile of those in positions of local leadership within this period. The addresses of officers submitted to head office certainly suggest many of the women were at least from working-class neighbourhoods. LHASC, LP/WORG/37, Labour Party Additional Women’s Officer Papers.

<sup>89</sup> Hunt and Hannam, ‘Towards an archaeology of interwar women’s politics’, 136.

<sup>90</sup> LHASC, LP/WORG/37/194-5, correspondence from Mrs J. A. Jones (Rotherham) to Mary Sutherland, 5 April 1937.

Germany and Russia, and, the issue which dominated in all sections, Spain.<sup>91</sup> While party hierarchy was keen to focus on women's status within the home, at a local level women challenged this characterization in subtle but important ways, revealing the tension between the performance of a domestic self and a political self. For some working-class women, the transformation from unorganized to politically active woman exuding keenness and the spirit to work for the party allowed for the development of an exclusive identity which separated them from their peers. The fulfilment of the performance of this political self helps further explain the vibrancy of women's party life.

Labour women revered their exclusive identity as political activist. In the interviews she conducted, Pamela Graves notes how many women stressed their radicalism and difference from their peers.<sup>92</sup> Those women who were politically unorganized could be characterized as apathetic, the antithesis of political woman. In a letter to *The Labour Woman* in December 1936, Alice Barber from the Bradford women's section outlined her 'bitterness' at the actions of a 'young comfortable married woman' who could not be bothered to vote in the local elections despite Barber's best efforts. Barber angrily questioned 'What ARE we to do with this type of person? This is not an isolated case, and may I be forgiven for coming away regretting the law which prevents the use of such things as bludgeons?'<sup>93</sup> Exercising political independence as an activist was important to how women narrated their political identities. It was not only unorganized women who were challenged, and Labour women positioned their independence against the perceived lack of autonomy of political activists in other parties. In Wales, the women who infiltrated Labour meetings in Tonypanyd with Communist Party propaganda were described as being 'influenced by their husbands'.<sup>94</sup> The

---

<sup>91</sup> St George West Women's Section Minute Books, January 1936 – January 1938.

<sup>92</sup> Graves, *Labour Women*, 56.

<sup>93</sup> *The Labour Woman*, December 1936, 183.

<sup>94</sup> LHASC, LP/WORG/37/340, Elizabeth Andrews, Organiser Report, Tonypanyd, 31 May 1937.

Mexborough women who encountered difficulties with Communist Party women also believed they were wives of Communist members.<sup>95</sup> While female Communist Party members were often the wives of activists rather than recruits in their own right, this was also true of many Labour women.<sup>96</sup> The distancing from domestic identities and influences was important in the construction of Labour women's assertion of their political identity. The women did not deny their own identity as housewife, but in demonstrating their socialist credibility, and therefore credibility as activist, their independently formed opinions were narrated.

Members of the Gorton Labour Party's Women's Advisory Council showed a considerable degree of confidence and autonomy in their opposition to the Divisional Party. In April 1938 the women issued a resolution stating their refusal to attend the city's May Day demonstrations if the Borough Party and Manchester Council of Labour insisted on carrying a Union Jack flag at the head of the march.<sup>97</sup> In south Wales, the women's section in Cardiff faced a long battle against the influence of the Communist Party within the Trades and Labour Council. Despite women forming the majority of Labour members in the area, the male dominated Trades Council tended to ignore their views. Matters came to a head at a meeting between the two organizations in the summer of 1937. Section members Mrs Kerrigan and Mrs Wellington 'took courage in both hands and took the leading part in the discussion' challenging the leaders of the Trades and Labour Council, who finally adhered to their request.<sup>98</sup> Elizabeth Andrews' expressions of pride and admiration in her report signal how unusual such contributions were, and the shared appreciation formed another layer of the

---

<sup>95</sup> Correspondence from Mrs Whipp to Mary Sutherland, 8 August 1937.

<sup>96</sup> Sue Bruley, 'Gender, class and party: The Communist Party and the crisis in the cotton industry in England between the two world wars', *Women's History Review*, 2 (1993), 19; Hunt, 'Making politics in local communities', 85.

<sup>97</sup> Gorton Labour Party Women's Advisory Council Minutes, 20 April 1938.

<sup>98</sup> LHASC, LP/WORG/37/258, Elizabeth Andrews, Organiser Report, Cardiff, 2 July 1937.

supportive atmosphere of the women's sections. Andrews' response also highlights the fulfilment of political activism.

When reflecting on why they joined Labour Party, May Worley (Swanage women's section) noted how 'the Labour Party has become so much a part of my very being' and Mrs M. Purves (Blyth women's section) that 'I have learned to love my work in the Labour Party until it has become part of myself'.<sup>99</sup> It was perhaps the making of political identities within an external culture which was not conducive to political activism that helps to further explain the strength of women's feelings towards the party. That they had, as newly enfranchised voters, been able to find a political space and perform a political self gave women emotional fulfilment. The constant negotiation of these co-existing and competing identities of domestic and political was neatly conveyed by Mrs Purves:

Before I joined the Labour Party I was of a very shy, retiring nature, and very house-proud. I am still house-proud, but with a difference. I have even done my washing on a Sunday night, so as to be able to attend a Conference or Summer School test on the Monday. I have learned that Labour women do not neglect their homes (as many people think), but we work much better and are happier, than when we stayed at home, as we know we are working for the common good for all.<sup>100</sup>

Purves in creating a narrative of the political self conveys how her political identity was grounded in a domestic self, but the qualities of independence, intellectualism, and self-fulfilment produced her political self. Expressing these qualities in public was fundamental to how many Labour women performed a political self. Indeed, escaping domestic duties was an

---

<sup>99</sup> 'Why I joined the Labour Party', *The Labour Woman*, August 1936, 120.

<sup>100</sup> 'Why I joined the Labour Party', 120.

appeal to the party in itself and reinforces the importance of a political self independent of a domestic self. S. Johnson (Ashington women's section) felt that women would be 'more content' if husbands were 'trained ... in the arts of domesticity' to look after children one night a week so women could attend political meetings.<sup>101</sup> The obituaries of those like Lucy Ramsden take on an additional significance when viewed as a final way in which working-class women attempted to celebrate and commemorate women's roles beyond the home in an era where, after all, domestic roles remained the most prominent characterization of wives and mothers.

### Conclusion

The Labour Party's ethos, policies, and the promise of a better future undoubtedly drew many working-class women into the movement but, as I have demonstrated here, it was the friendships, feelings of belonging, and fulfilment of political activism which ensured that they stayed. Working-class women's performance of a political self was shaped by neighbourhood and domestic cultures; many of the activities of the women's sections replicated the familiar interactions of female networks around the home. However, while a domestic self helped shape the performance of a political self, women revered the separate or independent political self. Within the women's sections, women acknowledged home and family life, but their individual achievements as activists were celebrated. The opportunity to perform a self outside and alongside housewife or mother, for those women without workplace or trade union activity, must be viewed as emotionally fulfilling. While individual women subjectively shaped a political self, the lived experience of the relationships with leaders and fellow comrades undoubtedly aided women in developing their performance of political activist. The caution women displayed over where to hold a meeting or how to

---

<sup>101</sup> *The Labour Woman*, November 1936, 171.

challenge male-dominated divisional parties reinforces the importance of such personal and, often, emotional bonds.

Although I have focused primarily upon how a positive environment was fostered within the women's sections, Labour Party women, like people in any organization, included lazy members, those only interested in frivolity, and those bent on domination. As Margaret Gibbs commented of the Glocar women's section, 'the Secretary talks far too much and I am just afraid that some of the very nice women will get tired of her incessant talking'.<sup>102</sup>

Understanding women's performance of a political self in the usually hidden worlds of the sections offers new insights into the difference between private and public performances of political identities. It highlights the role of emotion and personality as well as the potential tension between domestic and political worlds. Working-class women's political experiences are best understood through the framework of maternalism, but examining women's construction of a political self further stresses the complexity of their experiences of activism.

To move beyond narratives of those women who became key players locally or nationally, party papers, as I have shown here, offer a window into the culture of political life which can help to explain the importance of activism for working-class women. Furthermore, it shows the vital work of the often overlooked Mary Sutherland and regional organizers who, while not universally admired, offered personal support and a form of mentoring.

Adrian Bingham has shown how the inter-war 'cult of domesticity' was challenged in a number of ways, including politically.<sup>103</sup> While women's performance of a political self developed alongside a domestic self, their autonomous activism provides an interesting counterpoint to popular portrayals of the housewife. Good housing, an adequate diet and the

---

<sup>102</sup> LHASC, LP/WORG/37/152, Margaret Gibbs, Organiser Report, Glocar, 26 May 1937.

<sup>103</sup> Adrian Bingham, "'An era of domesticity'?" Histories of women and gender in interwar Britain', *Cultural and Social History*, 1 (2004), 225-33.

welfare of children were high upon the agenda for working-class women in the Labour Party, and yet, their interests did not end there. The majority of Labour Party women were housewives and mothers, but it would be limiting to see these roles as defining them. For some working-class women, the independent identity of political activist brought emotional fulfilment and allowed for the performance of a political self. A consideration of how marginalized groups engaged with political activism in this way can potentially open up new areas of research for understanding the socially diverse lives and experiences of the electorate after 1918.

**Word count: 9,999**