

Women and the Labour Party: Gender and the Writing of British Political History

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Abstract

This article takes stock of the state of women's political history in the twentieth century and suggests new lines of enquiry, drawing on the authors' own work on the Labour Party. It identifies a number of key themes which have enriched histories of women and gender in the nineteenth and early twentieth century and considers how these might be developed. Firstly, it examines the significance of the local, and more particularly, the neighbourhood, in women's political lives. Secondly, it asserts the value of focussing on the membership, including the economic, social and cultural shifts that shaped their lives, the intersection of gender with factors such as age or ethnicity, and their own political identities. Finally, it stresses the importance of interrogating masculine cultures to understand how gendered dynamics played out. It concludes with a reminder that inserting women into established political narratives is insufficient: the point is to transform those narratives.

Keywords: women, gender, political history, Labour Party, local politics, masculinity

IN BRITAIN, the Conservative Party has had three female prime ministers but only a quarter of its current MPs are female. The Labour Party has a majority of female MPs but, outside the Scottish Labour Party, has never elected a female leader. The first female leader of the British Liberal Democrats lost her seat after 144 days in the job, but that party, too, now has a majority of female MPs. Barely a day passes without another story of sexual misconduct and bullying in Westminster, Cardiff or Holyrood, while the toxic and violent online abuse of women candidates is taken for granted. How do we make sense of this gendered political landscape, with its uneven mix of progress and stagnation, achievement and backlash? How do we understand it historically, as part of a longer account of women's involvement in political campaigns, parties and institutions? How are such histories different when scrutinised in particular settings or cultures?

Political scientists now routinely engage with these questions, using quantitative, qualitative and comparative methodologies

to consider how gendered power dynamics play out in contemporary politics. The study of women's political activism in the nineteenth and earlier twentieth century, where historians have been particularly focussed on women and gender, is also well established and exciting. But political historians of the later twentieth century have been slower to respond. Therefore, in this contribution, we take stock of women's political history in the twentieth century and suggest new lines of enquiry, considering the approaches these might take and the implications they might have. In so doing, we not only suggest *how* this could be done, but insist that it *must* be done. It should not be possible to write recent political history without analysing women's involvement, just as it is not possible to write economic history without understanding the contribution of women's work, paid or unpaid. This is an opportunity, not a challenge. The histories of inter-war party politics have been revolutionised by close attention to women and gender and there is every prospect of a similar dynamic impact for postwar

histories.¹ But, this challenge is not only relevant to postwar historians: historians of politics across the twentieth century need to think beyond standard periodisation and continue to interrogate how gender functioned.

Of course, this is not a simplistic argument for a new political history, now with added women. Historians of women and gender have long insisted that their objective is not simply the incorporation of women into existing historical narratives, but the transformation of those narratives. Attention to gender must form only one part of a sophisticated and nuanced political history, alert to the influence of other factors, including place, sexuality and race, and an understanding of how these interact. It is worth reminding ourselves of other important principles too. ‘Women’ are not a homogenous group, nor are their political concerns limited to supposed ‘women’s interests’. Women’s contribution to, and experience of, politics has often been very different from men’s. Parliament could not have functioned without the work of female housekeepers, secretaries, accountants and reporters, and the forthcoming history, by Mari Takayangi and Elizabeth Hallam Smith, of these ‘necessary women’ who worked behind the scenes, is thus very welcome.² Political historians must grapple with all this richness and complexity.

Since our own research focusses on the history of the Labour Party, we have drawn our themes and examples from this field. But no doubt the history of other parties would be enriched in different ways. There is a huge difference between a library of volumes on Margaret Thatcher and a literature on the Conservative Party that pays close attention to women and gender. Nor is it only party-political history which would benefit.

¹For example, D. Thackeray, ‘Home and politics: women and Conservative activism in early twentieth-century Britain’, *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 49, no. 4, 2010, pp. 826–848; D. Jarvis, ‘“Behind every great party”: women and conservatism in twentieth-century Britain’, in A. Vickery, ed., *Women, Privilege, and Power: British Politics, 1750 to the Present*, Stanford CA, Stanford University Press, 2001, pp. 289–314; L. Beers and G. Thomas, eds., *Brave New World: Imperial and Democratic Nation-Building in Britain between the Wars*, London, Institute of Historical Research, 2012.

²M. Takayanagi and E. Hallam Smith, *Necessary Women: The Untold Story of Parliament’s Working Women*, Cheltenham, The History Press, 2023.

For example, there is very little research on women’s contribution to, or experiences in, local government or the civil service in recent decades.³ Indeed, scholarship on women and gender within postwar formal politics as a whole is relatively neglected, certainly when compared to the literature on voluntary associations, civil society and the women’s liberation movement. In the remainder of this article, we sketch some of the themes that have characterised histories of women, gender and the Labour Party, and consider how these might enliven future work across the twentieth century.

The spaces of women’s politics

Historians of the Labour Party have long insisted on the importance of exploring the movement’s grassroots. Since the foundational work of Pat Thane and Pamela Graves, scholars of women and the Labour Party have found this approach especially fruitful.⁴ Their work has shown that Labour women’s commitment to tackling poverty, improving housing and developing more effective care for women and children was instrumental in shifting the party from a narrow focus on the rights of male workers towards a more expansive commitment to social policy. In this way, women’s efforts laid the foundations for a more comprehensive welfare state. Uncovering these developments has not only changed

³For important exceptions, see H. Glew, *Gender, Rhetoric, and Regulation: Women’s Work in the Civil Service and the London County Council, 1900–55*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2016; H. McCarthy, *Women of the World: The Rise of the Female Diplomat*, London, Bloomsbury, 2014.

⁴P. Graves, *Labour Women: Women in British Working-Class Politics, 1918–1939*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994; P. Thane, ‘Women in the British Labour Party and the construction of state welfare, 1906–39’, in S. Koven and S. Michel, eds., *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States*, London, Routledge, 1993; P. Thane, ‘Women of the British Labour Party and feminism, 1906–1945’, in H. L. Smith, ed., *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century*, Aldershot, Elgar, 1990, pp. 343–377. For the significance of the local to Labour women across the century, see K. Cowman, ‘Municipal socialism and municipal feminism: women and local labour politics from the 1900s to the 1980s’, in N. Yeowell, ed., *Rethinking Labour’s Past*, London, I. B. Tauris, 2022, pp. 119–136.

historians' understanding of the labour movement and Labour Party, but also the narratives and concepts which underpin twentieth century British history, including class, welfare and the state.

Similarly, in contrast to earlier histories of women's suffrage, which focussed on national dimensions and leadership, recent accounts have been much more attuned to the local. This work has been complemented by studies of associational culture framed around ideas of citizenship and gender.⁵ June Hannam and Karen Hunt's influential call for an archaeological approach to researching women's political lives reasserted the value of the locality and stressed the importance of looking across women's political and associational affiliations. Mapping the sites of activism (in this case tracing the effects of enfranchisement) and then excavating women's political lives (determining how women made their political choices) would capture national developments, local political cultures and the interrelationship between political and voluntary organisations from the perspective of politics as part of women's everyday lives.⁶ While the call for local perspectives is, therefore, not necessarily new, it is worth further considering the untapped potential of local studies of political parties, especially for the postwar period. Local party and voluntary association records, alongside memoirs and local newspapers, offer numerous possibilities for investigating parties and their members, but are often overlooked or underutilised.

Political issues within localities were often of paramount concern, and instrumental in politicising women. The locality shaped the meanings of women's activism for the movement and individuals. Local politics were

crucial for millions of activists who were primarily interested in issues which affected themselves, their neighbours and their families. This is not to suggest that political culture or activism was necessarily parochial or insular. Instead, it is to recognise that political change began, often literally, on one's doorstep. Ousting an MP from the opposition party, electing sympathetic councillors, challenging the actions of major local employers: these ambitions led many women into politics. Involvement in local politics was a way of performing political ambitions in a meaningful way.

Of course, some women were only ever active locally. But such geographical limits should not necessarily be interpreted as evidence of male party domination or unrealised ambition. Local politics could provide a world of fulfilment. Indeed, many women found that they could have more significant impact locally than they could ever have achieved on the national stage, especially through a powerful body like the London County Council. Labour stalwarts were rewarded by seeing their work have a genuine impact—in the opening of clinics, building of schools or improvements in housing. Local triumphs were celebrated as national successes in the monthly *Labour Woman*, newsletters and national conferences. Conference proceedings pay tribute to the many local councillors and activists like Alderman Mercer from Birkenhead or Mrs Holgate from Nottinghamshire, who 'served the Movement with loyalty and devotion in the patient, unseem, voluntary work of Section and local Party, which is the foundation of the Party's life and strength'.⁷ This commitment mattered, and not just at election times.

'Neighbourhood' might be a better way of encapsulating the worlds which shaped women's politics. Instead of looking down to the local level, examining how national trends played out, looking outwards from the neighbourhood shows not only *why* women were drawn into politics, but also *how* their worlds shaped the meanings of political activism. Neighbourhoods can be imagined as the spaces of women's daily lives—where they lived, worked and socialised—and the spaces

⁵A. Hughes-Johnson and L. Jenkins, eds., *The Politics of Women's Suffrage: Local, National and International Dimensions*, London, Institute of Historical Research, 2021; R. Davidson, 'A local perspective: the women's movement and citizenship, Croydon 1890s–1939', *Women's History Review*, vol. 29, no. 6, 2020, pp. 1013–1033.

⁶J. Hannam and K. Hunt, 'Towards an archaeology of interwar women's politics: the local and the everyday', in J. V. Gottlieb and R. Toyne, eds., *The Aftermath of Suffrage: Women, Gender and Politics in Britain 1918–1945*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 124–141.

⁷*Report of the National Conference of Labour Women, 1946*, 14, Bodleian Library Oxford.

of their political lives—the labour hall, meeting rooms, community centres and streets where they protested. Through these spaces, which were never distinct or separate, we can understand the place of politics in women's lives, as well as the contributions they made. Thinking about the neighbourhood foregrounds the multiple worlds women inhabited and, indeed, negotiated, within their political lives. The fluidity of the boundaries between home, residential streets, family networks, social networks, religious affiliations, commercial streets, political and associational branches, dependent networks, workplaces and so on, are captured by 'neighbourhood' more readily than 'local political culture'. Labour Party activism was frequently just one part of a tapestry of voluntary efforts, associational work and personal commitments which made up women's civic lives. For much of Labour's working class membership, networks were made within neighbourhoods as women formed their own political communities.

Part of the challenge of exploring women's politics within the neighbourhood is generalising from the particular. Historians of women have, therefore, stressed how the specificity of the neighbourhood nuances understandings of national trends. In her analysis of 'the political worlds of women', Sarah Richardson highlighted the different arenas in which women worked: the home, the community and neighbourhood, the national and the international.⁸ However, as Richardson acknowledged, these spaces are not 'mutually exclusive' and it is important not to compartmentalise too rigidly, losing a sense of women's activism across these boundaries. After all, Labour women understood issues affecting the home, such as food prices or the availability of consumer goods, within national *and* international contexts. Similarly, women's work for peace might take place in local community groups, in national protests or in acts of international solidarity, as in the women's peace crusade which emerged in Glasgow at the end of World War I.⁹ Labour

women, like Labour men, often understood themselves to be part of a global working class. Ellen Wilkinson believed it was as crucial to fight for justice in Spain or India as in Jarrow, and many other women shared her anti-imperialist, anti-fascist outlook. In the same period, each week women's sections across England, Scotland and Wales discussed the international situation, knitted socks for Spain, distributed petitions for Labour's rising cost of living campaign and debated domestic policy.¹⁰

Furthermore, while the Labour Party organised within clearly defined electoral borders, women's networks could cut across local wards and districts. Wider communities and friendship networks mattered. Women sometimes resisted having to switch to a new section or district when they moved house, refusing to regulate the emotional geography of their lives by arbitrary lines on an electoral map. To understand women's networks, historians must not restrict themselves to particular administrative frontiers, nor erect their own artificial boundaries. Comparative histories, or entangled histories which grapple with the interconnectedness of communities, might offer one means for historians to think across different neighbourhoods. Nor, obviously, did activists only exist in the larger urban spaces in England, though these have often been the focus of studies of suffrage and associational culture. By moving to different cities, towns, suburbs and villages, the neighbourhood politics of Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish women, as well as rural and provincial activists, will be better understood.

The lives of women members

Another distinct advantage of focussing upon the neighbourhood is, of course, that it places

pp. 8–26; L. Orr, 'Shall we not speak for ourselves? Helen Crawford, war resistance and the women's peace crusade 1916–1918', *Scottish Labour History*, vol. 50, 2015, pp. 97–115.

¹⁰L. Beers, *Red Ellen: The Life of Ellen Wilkinson, Socialist, Feminist, Internationalist*, Boston MA, Harvard University Press, 2016; Labour History Archive and Study Centre, People's History Museum, Manchester, Labour Party Archive: Labour Party Additional Women's Officer Papers, 1935–37, LP/WORG/37.

⁸S. Richardson, *The Political Worlds of Women: Gender and Politics in Nineteenth Century Britain*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2013.

⁹K. Hunt, 'The politics of food and women's neighborhood activism in first world war Britain', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 77, 2010,

the members centre stage. It is essential not to understand the history of the postwar Labour Party solely through the lives of its leaders or prominent members, nor through the policy making and political manoeuvres at Westminster. Perhaps understandably, historians have often focussed on women who achieved particular prominence within local or national arenas, since their lives can be easier to reconstruct. Yet privileging MPs, councillors or paid organisers tends to favour a particular kind of woman activist: most frequently those middle-class women who had the time, support and resources to commit to demanding and time-consuming roles in formal politics.¹¹ But these were not the only women drawn to activism by any means. Paying closer attention to the membership allows historians to understand voting patterns in local and general elections, as well as how the membership shaped the party.

Centring the membership means taking account of the broader economic, social and cultural changes which transformed women's lives in the twentieth century. Women's experiences of politics do not neatly map onto standard political chronologies. Wars, decades, party leaders or governments may not be the most useful milestones to map the narratives of their lives. Legal or social landmarks, such as the Representation of the People's Act or the introduction of the pill, are equally arbitrary. Breaking down the rigidity of the standard political periodisation of pre- and postwar is crucial to understanding women's political lives in the century after suffrage. Women's participation in politics was shaped by different factors: changing leisure opportunities, different educational experiences, the transformation of paid employment and, above all, the security provided by the welfare state. How did these social changes affect women's involvement in the Labour Party?

¹¹Indeed, June Hannam and Cathy Hunt have shown that contemporaries were often concerned about this issue: J. Hannam, 'Women as paid organisers and propagandists for the British Labour Party between the wars', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 77, 2010, pp. 69–88; C. Hunt, "'Success with the ladies": an examination of women's experiences as Labour councillors in inter war Coventry', *Midland History*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2007, pp. 141–159.

Did the meanings of Labour activism change across the twentieth century? What drew women into the Labour Party in different generations? What were their goals, how did they attempt to realise them, and why did they believe the Labour Party was best placed to achieve them? Addressing these questions will help us better understand what politics actually meant to these women.

Of course, gender was not the only factor shaping women's lives. We know, for example, that women often found it easier to engage in political work when their children were older. Yet at the same time, older women may have been dismissed for irrelevance rather than valued for their experience. Historians therefore need to think more about how age and politics interacted through the life cycle. Perhaps even more importantly, we need to ensure that membership is not always imagined as white. Black women's involvement in the party did not begin with Diane Abbott's election to Parliament in 1987. Jessica White's work on black mothers' activism in Manchester has shown that their experiences of racism and maternity were key factors shaping their politics.¹² Other women of colour came to politics through paid work and labour organisation as a consequence of racial and gendered oppression. The well-known strikes by South Asian women in the late 1970s provide a good example. But the intersection of race and gender within the party remains underdeveloped. Where, how and with what effects might such campaigning activity take women into the Labour Party itself? In turn, how did the Labour Party and other parties respond, or fail to respond?

Across the twentieth century, the Labour Party appealed to women variously as housewives, working women, mothers, consumers and young unmarried women. Indeed, it has often been criticised for focussing too heavily on women's interests as wives and mothers at the expense of their other roles. But, individual identity matters as much as external categorisation. Women could define themselves through political activism, as the writings of

¹²J. White, 'Child-centred matriarch or mother among other things? Race and the construction of working-class motherhood in late twentieth century Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2022, pp. 498–521.

women like Ellen Wilkinson, Mary Sutherland, Elizabeth Andrews, Bessie Braddock and Margaret Bondfield attest. Politics could be part of a woman's identity and intertwined with women's sense of self.¹³ It could be unproblematically integrated alongside their other roles and identities. For example, many women, including many Labour activists, were more than comfortable in self-defining as housewives: they saw it as a point of pride and a source of political legitimacy. For Labour women, as for non-partisan women in associational groups, housewifery inspired activism. Their demands for nursery provision, tax reform or equal pay were not framed as feminist claims, but as essential to their duties as citizens, contributing to the nation's economic development.¹⁴

Gendered party cultures

Historians should also think about how the spaces of politics were gendered. The leadership, Cabinet and parliamentary party were all dominated by men in the twentieth century. Despite increasing female membership, the Labour movement, too, remained male-dominated, especially at leadership levels. But the lack of studies about the relationship between masculinity and political life in this period means that this male culture is obscure or abstract: assumed rather than interrogated. Further investigations are needed to deconstruct the male experience of politics in order to better unearth the impact of a masculine political culture for men as well as women. In what ways was party activism for men linked

to masculine identity? Did the male domination of leadership reinforce particular performances of masculinity? Answering these questions might further explain how radical social policies, like the welfare state, were ultimately socially conservative in their gendered ethos and expectations, seeing women as 'equal but different'.

Certainly, there were elements of party culture heavily shaped by traditional trade unionist values which prioritised the wages of the breadwinner and often held relatively conservative attitudes towards gender and the family. Union funds were, understandably, directed to their own members as candidates for election. Women candidates who lacked such connections were less attractive to selection committees and frequently consigned to marginal seats. Union culture functioned in other exclusionary ways. As the MP Jean Mann described in her memoirs: 'Labour men, particularly in the unions, meet together often. Friendships are made, sometimes around the bar; introductions to those who have influence in the safe seats follow.'¹⁵

Yet we might speak of Labour Party cultures rather than culture. Consider, for example, the social scientists who shaped Labour's policies in the 1950s, who also held a certain set of assumptions about gender, and who made limited space for women as thinkers and policy makers. Or, the particular form of the old boys' network which operated within the upper echelons of the party: where Clement Attlee felt able to appoint a young Harold Wilson to his Cabinet on the basis of their shared Oxford college. Such cultures might be equally exclusive, even hostile, to women's presence, but evidently operated in different ways.

On the other hand, many men consciously encouraged women within the party. Sometimes this took the form of marital relationships in which each supported the other in their political work.¹⁶ Yet that support itself was shaped by gendered norms. Few women would have felt able to put their party

¹³S. Ward, 'Labour activism and the political self in inter-war working-class women's politics', *Twentieth Century British History*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2019, pp. 29–52.

¹⁴C. Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens: Domesticity and the Women's Movement in England, 1928–1964*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2013; M. Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism: The Women's Institute as a Social Movement*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1997; K. Hunt, 'Labour woman and the housewife', in C. Clay, et al., eds., *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1918–1939*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2018, pp. 238–251. See also L. Jenkins, "'The voice of the true British housewife': The politics of housewifery at Labour's women's conferences, 1945–1959", *Women's History Review*, forthcoming.

¹⁵J. Mann, *Woman in Parliament*, London, Odhams Press, 1962, pp. 44–5.

¹⁶E. Lowe, "'To keep it in the family": spouses, seat inheritance and parliamentary elections in post-suffrage Britain 1918–1945', *Open Library of Humanities*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2020; <https://olh.openlibhums.org/article/id/4659/>

commitments before their domestic duties, and the support they could expect from their husbands was very different to that which male activists took for granted from their wives. Indeed, as Cathy Hunt has argued, ‘for overworked activists who were also wives and mothers, there was always more work to be done, even if there was domestic help in the household.’¹⁷ Deconstructing the gendered spaces of party politics and understanding how gender identities were performed through party work might reconcile how the specifics of party cultures and the generalities of broader social expectations all formed part of women’s political worlds.

Conclusion

The Labour Party is a party preoccupied with its own history, traditions and myths, and the extent to which its present incarnation reflects these. It is interesting—and important—that Labour women themselves have played crucial roles in documenting, recovering and interpreting their own history. These histories are undoubtedly enriched by their insider perspectives and are often particularly accessible, designed to reach wider audiences with contemporary concerns about women’s participation in politics.¹⁸ But these histories inevitably have limitations—not least because they often take a celebratory or heroic tone, and tend to focus on so-called ‘exceptional’ women.

Historians of women and gender have been arguing for decades that gender is as foundational a category as class, and that histories of labour and class cannot be written without an

understanding of gender. Yet political historians have not always been attuned to this insight. Elaine Chalus has argued that ‘our understanding of women and politics has suffered from an understanding of politics that placed Parliament at the top of a hierarchy of political venues and tacitly equated politics with “high politics.”’¹⁹ To move forward as a discipline, political historians must be confident and imaginative enough to ask different questions, trial different approaches and centre different perspectives. That also means drawing on different sources: the membership records of women’s sections and branches which remain untapped, the extensive tradition of life-writing, and, increasingly, rich oral history projects like Women’s Archive Wales.²⁰

The history of the Labour Party is not only the history of its male leaders and members. But nor is inserting women activists into pre-existing histories enough to counter established historical narratives. Histories of power, citizenship and democracy are all transformed when examined from women’s perspectives. Exploring their political lives beyond positions of leadership, beyond the metropole and beyond narrow ethnic, age and sexual identities, is crucial to understanding not only women’s contribution to the party, but the meanings of party politics for women who believed it had the power to create change.

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¹⁷C. Hunt, *Righting the Wrong: Mary Macarthur 1880–1921 The Working Woman’s Champion*, Alcester, West Midlands History, 2019, p. 162.

¹⁸R. Reeves, *Women of Westminster: the MPs Who Changed Politics*, London, Bloomsbury, 2019; R. Reeves and R. Carr, *Alice in Westminster: The Political Life of Alice Bacon*, London, I. B. Tauris, 2017; N. Sloane, *The Women in the Room: Labour’s Forgotten History*, London, I. B. Tauris, 2018.

¹⁹E. Chalus, *Elite Women in English Political Life, c.1754–1790*, Clarendon, Oxford, 2005, p. 78.

²⁰Women’s Archive Wales; <https://www.womensarchivewales.org/en/news?id=124>