**The Mothers’ Union and the Women’s Movement: a history of female activism 1876-2017**

The history of the Mothers’ Union, from its inception in 1876 up to the present day, is infused with the energy and commitment of hundreds of thousands of women working together as part of a global women’s movement. In spite of this the Mothers’ Union rarely features in standard accounts of the women’s movement in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Why so? The fact that the Union is non-party political and avoided close affiliation with overtly feminist groups has led some to presume it never engaged in social and political activism on behalf of women. As a society for Christian women (and now men) the Union’s views on religious and moral questions such as divorce, birth control and abortion have at times been considered ‘out of step’ with those of feminist campaigners. Finally as an organisation made up of housewives and mothers it has been assumed the Mothers’ Union is concerned only with the domestic and so has little to say about the role and status of women in wider society.

Today the Mothers’ Union is actively engaged in high profile campaigns for gender equality. These include the ‘Bye Buy Childhood’ campaign, activism against gender violence and lobbying the UN Commission on the Status of Women to ensure women’s economic empowerment. Such campaigns clearly situate the Mothers’ Union at the heart of the women’s movement in the twenty-first century. Less well known is the Mothers’ Union’s long history of activism and campaigning for women’s rights in late nineteenth and twentieth century Britain.

Mary Sumner’s aim in 1876 to unite women through their common experiences as mothers, so that they could ‘love and help one another’, provided the bedrock for this new movement of women. By the early twentieth century the Mothers’ Union had become one of the largest and most influential women’s organisations in Britain with over 400,000 members worldwide. Although the Union didn’t actively participate in the campaign for the women’s vote (on the grounds that it was a party-political issue), the leadership was keenly aware of the power the parliamentary franchise gave women. When in 1918 women over thirty won the right to vote, the pages of the Union’s three magazines were filled with articles advising members on how to use their vote wisely. In October 1918 readers of the *Mothers’ Union Journal* were told ‘the vote is a duty we owe to womankind-a responsibility laid upon us by God…it is not a privilege conferred on us by men, for have not the women of this generation earned it?’

Now that women were equal citizens the Mothers’ Union encouraged members to express their opinions on social, economic and political questions. Moreover as Christian women it was believed members had a duty to use their vote to improve the lives of women and families, not only in Britain but also throughout the Empire. The Union acknowledged that a mother’s first priority was her family but frowned on the idea that women would limit their interests and activities to the home. ‘We have no use for that type today’ readers of the *Mothers’ Union Journal* were firmly told in September 1934.

Heeding its own advice the Mothers’ Union played a key role in campaigns highlighting the difficulties women experienced in everyday life. Housing is one such example. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s housing shortages meant that significant numbers of families were living in overcrowded, sub-standard homes lacking running water, indoor toilets and basic amenities. With women spending the majority of their time at home caring for their children this was an important issue for organisations representing the interests of wives and mothers. Working with other women’s groups, including the National Council of Women (NCW) and the Women’s Institutes (WI), the Mothers’ Union lobbied local housing authorities and the government throughout the 1930s and 1940s calling on them to provide better housing to improve ‘the health and happiness of the mothers of the nation’. Having given evidence to the wartime Design of Dwellings Committee in 1942 the Mothers’ Union was pleased to see that its members’ recommendations for post-war council housing, for example gas and electric appliances and ‘dining kitchens’ so families could spend more time together, were included in the final report.

Concern for the health and happiness of mothers was at the heart of a second campaign supported by the Mothers’ Union. During the 1920s and 1930s women’s groups repeatedly called upon the government to introduce family allowances (today known as child benefit). This new benefit was seen as an effective way to reduce high levels of child poverty and to give mothers, the majority of whom were housewives, some degree of economic independence within marriage. In 1944 the government finally announced that family allowances would be introduced. It soon became clear however that payments would be made to the father. Reacting quickly to this news the Mothers’ Union, NCW and the WI, along with feminist societies such as the Women’s Freedom League, lobbied MPs and government ministers insisting that the allowance be paid to mothers. Their efforts proved successful and under the terms of the 1945 Family Allowances Act mothers received the monthly payment in cash at their local post office.

During the 1950s and 1960s the Mothers’ Union continued its efforts to champion women’s rights. Joining forces once again with the NCW the Mothers’ Union campaigned to highlight the discrimination experienced by vulnerable women engaged in prostitution. Throughout the 1950s the Mothers’ Union called for the term ‘common prostitute’ to be removed from the statute book in England and Wales. This term was objected to as ‘it implied an unfair generic discrimination against the woman and was a presumption of her guilt before her case was tried’. Despite the considerable efforts of the Mothers’ Union to highlight this obvious injustice, the term ‘common prostitute’ remained as a legal term until 2009.

The Mothers’ Union continued to defend the economic rights of women in the postwar years. Concerned that widows were at high risk of living in poverty the Union called on the government in 1960 to increase the earnings limit for widow’s allowances arguing that widows had a right to go out to work to support their families without the risk of losing their allowance. In 1964 the Union welcomed the government’s decision to raise the limit to £7 although there was disappointment the earnings limit hadn’t been abolished altogether.

In June 1973 the Mothers’ Union described itself in *Mothers’ Union News* as ‘a movement of liberation for women’. Considering its long history of activism this is an accurate description. Since 1876 the Union has given voice to the needs and concerns of women from all walks of life and at different stages of their lives. It has used its influence as a popular Christian women’s organisation to support causes that have improved the everyday lives of women. It has highlighted discrimination against women and campaigned for reform. For all of these reasons the Mothers’ Union must be included in histories of the women’s movement and its role in on-going campaigns for gender equality acknowledged.

**Further Reading:**

Caitríona Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens: Domesticity and the Women’s Movement in England 1928-64* (Manchester University Press, 2015).

Cordelia Moyse, *A History of the Mothers’ Union: Women, Anglicanism and Globalisation, 1876-2008* (The Boydell Press, 2009).