Fighting for the ‘Privileges of Citizenship’: the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), feminism and the women’s movement, 1928-1945.

**ABSTRACT** In 1928 the YWCA welcomed the introduction of the universal suffrage by declaring that women in Britain were now entitled to the full political privileges of citizenship. This article will explore the way in which the YWCA, previously omitted from histories of the British women’s movement, sought to educate and inform its members about the rights and duties of democratic citizenship. The involvement of the YWCA in citizenship education and its role in campaigning for the citizenship rights of women will be assessed, with a particular focus on worker’s rights and the appointment of women police. Despite its reluctance to be identified as overtly feminist, the YWCA was determined to ensure that women had access to social and economic rights within a democratic society. The article therefore argues that a new definition of the women’s movement is required in order to uncover the full extent of female engagement in politics and public debate in the aftermath of the suffrage.

The history of the women’s movement in the decades following the 1928 Equal Franchise Act has featured a wide variety of women’s organisations and key campaigns. These histories include post-suffrage feminist societies, women’s sections of the established political parties, women citizens’ associations (WCAs) and working-class organisations such as the Women’s Co-operative Guild (WCG).[[1]](#endnote-1) More recently this scholarship has expanded to include a wider variety of women’s groups, including professional societies, religious groups and mainstream voluntary women’s organisations.[[2]](#endnote-2) As Kirsta Cowman has observed, the inclusion of a more diverse range of women’s organisations, some openly rejecting a traditional feminist agenda, has broadened the size and scope of the interwar women’s movement considerably.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Perhaps even more significant is the fact that these new developments have required historians to revisit and reflect upon traditional understandings of the terms feminism and women’s movement. Karen Offen has written that ‘feminism is the name given to a comprehensive critical response to the deliberate and systematic subordination of women as a group by men as a group within a given cultural setting’.[[4]](#endnote-4) This useful definition can be applied to many of the post-suffrage pressure groups, for example the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC), the Women’s Freedom League (WFL) and the Six Point Group (SPG), all of whom identified with and adopted a feminist agenda throughout the interwar period and beyond.[[5]](#endnote-5)

However the inability of these overtly feminist women’s groups to attract large memberships or to bring about gender equality in the aftermath of the suffrage tends to dominate historical accounts of the period.[[6]](#endnote-6) Feminism at this time was often thought of as a radical political ideology that threatened traditional family life. In 1936 Ray Strachey articulated this view when she observed that ‘modern women…show a strong hostility to the word feminism and all which they imagine it to connote’.[[7]](#endnote-7) This apparent failure of feminism led to the prevailing view that after 1928 the women’s movement in Britain went into decline only to be revitalised by the emergence of the Women’s Liberation Movement in the late 1960s.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Within this historical orthodoxy it is often assumed that the feminist movement and the women’s movement are one and the same thing. This view is also evident amongst historians of women’s organisations not traditionally associated with feminism. Maggie Andrews has argued in her history of the National Federation of Women’s Institutes (WI) that the movement represented an ‘acceptable face of feminism’ where members were able to embrace their traditional and domestic roles but at the same time ‘use the organisation for feminist ends’.[[9]](#endnote-9) Lorna Gibson, also writing about the WI, argues that the term feminism needs to be re-defined to make sense of the campaigning activities of WI members who accepted their traditional roles as wives and mothers.[[10]](#endnote-10)

On the other hand, Cordelia Moyse, writing on the history of the Mothers’ Union (MU) has suggested that the MU was not part of the women’s movement as the organisation resisted ‘any association with the feminist label’. Moyse goes on to suggest that Andrews’s attempt to identify a feminist motive in the WI makes her guilty of ‘creating what might be called “anonymous feminists”, women who belong to a movement towards which they are at best indifferent and at worst hostile’.[[11]](#endnote-11) What emerges from these debates is the confusion caused when the terms feminist and women’s movement are conflated.

In my own work I have argued that voluntary women’s organisations such as the MU, WI, the Townswomen’s Guilds (TG) and the Catholic Women’s League (CWL) cannot be identified as part of a feminist movement when they had no desire to be associated with a feminist agenda throughout the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s.[[12]](#endnote-12) These organisations were popular and successful because they attracted mass memberships based on their non-political and non-feminist credentials and their endorsement of women’s domestic role.[[13]](#endnote-13) At the same time however these organisations did recognise the importance of democratic citizenship for their members. Moreover, they recognised that women as wives, mothers, workers and citizens must be supported and protected by the state.

Utilising the rhetoric of citizenship, with all its adherent rights and duties, voluntary women’s groups including the WI, MU, TG and CWL were able to legitimate their demands that the social and economic position of women in society be improved in the wake of the suffrage. These groups highlighted the importance of active citizenship, a view shared at this time by feminist societies, women’s sections of political parties and other voluntary associations, for example the League of Nations Union.[[14]](#endnote-14) This focus on active citizenship allowed conservative women’s groups to voice their concerns regarding the welfare and rights of women whilst at the same time successfully avoiding any ‘taint’ of feminism.

The YWCA presents an ideal case study to illustrate the argument that the history of the women’s movement must include groups not easily identified as feminist. Its history demonstrates how a conservative, mainstream, religious and non-party political organisation can be seen as having made a significant contribution to the campaign for women’s rights in twentieth century Britain. Yet despite its role in highlighting the importance of citizenship for women and its campaigning activities on a wide range of issues, for example equal pay, social policy reform and the interwar peace movement, the YWCA does not feature in major histories of the British women’s movement.[[15]](#endnote-15) This omission is even more surprising when one considers that the association was recognised internationally and that the history of the World YWCA and the YWCA in the US has been well documented.[[16]](#endnote-16)

The aim of this article is to demonstrate that the YWCA must be viewed as part of a wider women’s movement encompassing feminist, political, religious and conservative women’s groups, each united in their wish to enhance the status of women in society in the wake of the suffrage. It will be argued here that the YWCA sought to distance itself from overtly feminist and political women’s groups in order to protect its reputation as a non-partisan, traditional and respectable Christian women’s organisation. This non-party political and non-feminist stance was deemed crucial if the association was to attract a large membership and in doing so continue to provide practical and spiritual support for young women and girls. As Helen McCarthy has noted, the interwar period witnessed ‘the growth in mass membership associations of a non-party character, which met with remarkable success in engaging voters in alternative forms of activism and organised sociability’.[[17]](#endnote-17)

A common feature of associational life in the 1920s and 1930s was the promotion of active citizenship and the YWCA was fully committed to educating young women and girls in citizenship so that they would ‘take an intelligent interest and play their part in public affairs’.[[18]](#endnote-18) This was deemed essential as

women and girls are taking their places in increasing

numbers in the fields of industrial, commercial, and

professional life and are now in possession of the full

political privileges of citizenship; some knowledge of and

interest in political, social, and economic problems is

necessary if they are to play their part.[[19]](#endnote-19)

In addition to promoting active citizenship and education in citizenship the YWCA was also engaged in campaigning on issues relevant to the lives of women. Focussing on two key campaigns it will be argued here that the involvement of the YWCA in defending the rights of women workers and calling for the appointment of women police illustrates the association’s commitment to fighting for the ‘privileges of citizenship’. Although these two campaigns provide only a snapshot of the wider work undertaken by the YWCA they are useful in demonstrating that a vibrant network of women’s organisations remained active throughout the 1930s and 1940s. It is no longer possible therefore to suggest that the decades following female enfranchisement represent a time when women failed to mobilise. On the contrary the activities of the YWCA demonstrate that the women’s movement continued to effectively demand social and economic rights for women in the years following the 1928 Equal Franchise Act.

**I**

The origins of the YWCA of Great Britain date back to 1877 when two Nonconformist women's societies, a prayer union and a network of hostels for working girls, merged to 'establish under Christian influences, institutes for respectable young women to rest in, seek advice, and enjoy "genial gatherings of various kinds"'.[[20]](#endnote-20) By the end of 1878, fifteen branches of the YWCA had been set up and in 1885 the United Central Council was formed in London to co-ordinate the work of the organisation on a worldwide basis. That year two extension committees were set up oversee the development of the YWCA overseas. [[21]](#endnote-21)

Included amongst the objects of the YWCA was the desire to ‘draw together for mutual help, sympathy, and instruction Young Women of all classes’ and to ‘promote the moral, social and intellectual well-being of all through the various agencies’.[[22]](#endnote-22) Providing friendship and protection to young women, especially those moving from the countryside to towns in search of work, was another primary objective. Membership of the YWCA was open to young women of any class who agreed to unite in prayer and place themselves under Christian influence.[[23]](#endnote-23) Two other categories of membership consisted of 'ladies in sympathy with the YWCA and willing to help in association work' and honorary associates who were 'ladies…expected to take a personal interest in the affairs of the association'.[[24]](#endnote-24) This division of membership profiles signified that the organisation was to be run by educated middle-class women interested in philanthropy who would offer practical advice and moral guidance to the younger, predominantly working-class, girls. As Jane Lewis has suggested, philanthropy for middle-class women in the nineteenth century was 'an acceptable bridge to the public world of work and citizenship'.[[25]](#endnote-25)

By 1900 the YWCA had set up 1,700 branches in Britain with a membership of some 94,000 women.[[26]](#endnote-26) As a society for young working women, the majority of whom were employed in factories or as domestic servants, the YWCA quickly developed an interest in the working conditions. By 1886 the association had set up a Factory Helpers Union with YWCA leaders visiting local factories to ensure that the female employees were not subjected to either physical or moral abuse.[[27]](#endnote-27) During the early 1900s it campaigned against the practice of sweated labour and the exploitation of home workers, calling for the introduction of a minimum wage for all women workers.[[28]](#endnote-28) In 1910, a Social Service Council was convened to monitor employment and welfare legislation affecting women as well as formulating national policy on industrial and social questions. There is little evidence to suggest that the YWCA actively supported the suffrage movement throughout these years. This is most likely due to the perception that the campaign for the women’s vote was a party political issue and the fact that the association was divided on the question of female suffrage at this time.[[29]](#endnote-29) However members were kept updated on the campaign and encouraged to consider both sides of the argument.[[30]](#endnote-30)

When the Representation of the People Act (1918) extended the franchise to women over thirty, the YWCA welcomed this reform as it recognised women's right to full political citizenship. Readers of the association’s journal, *Our Outlook*, were informed in June 1918 that

women’s domestic role has given them both experience and

unique qualities to participate in public life. We shall surely

agree with Mrs Fawcett when she writes that “the domestic

experience of women is no bad preparation for the duties of

citizenship, and a mother’s love is no bad schooling for love of

country”.[[31]](#endnote-31)

Members of the YWCA were encouraged to join their local WCA and to ‘never vote for an unprincipled or immoral candidate, whatever his party’.[[32]](#endnote-32) The Christian ethos of the YWCA also clearly influenced the association’s desire to encourage its members to vote and participate actively in public life. Members were informed that ‘our special aim should be to insist that all our life, political and economic, social and individual, shall be dominated by Christian principle and inspired by Christian ideals’.[[33]](#endnote-33)

In 1921 the YWCA backed a resolution passed by the NUSEC demanding that the parliamentary franchise be granted to all women on equal terms with men. Although the YWCA continued to press for the vote to be granted to women over twenty-one during the 1920s, once again it was unwilling to actively co-operate with overtly feminist groups, for example the SPG and WFL, on the grounds that their equal rights feminist agenda was both too radical and too political.[[34]](#endnote-34)

Despite attempts to reassure members that the YWCA could take an interest in political, economic and social questions whilst remaining non-party political and non-feminist, not all were convinced. The Irish Division believed that the religious aspect of the association's work was being neglected and in May 1917 had withdrawn from the British association to concentrate on evangelical work. A second spilt occurred in 1924 when the Scottish Division broke away to form the autonomous YWCA of Scotland. As a result of these internal divisions membership of the YWCA in England and Wales fell from 80,000 women in 1918 to 33,800 in 1926.[[35]](#endnote-35) It is clear from these early splits that the YWCA in England and Wales was determined to maintain its dual role as a religious organisation capable of providing a public voice for women and girls. This view was reiterated in 1938 when the report of the National General Secretary stated that the YWCA must be seen as more than just ‘a club for girls’. This was essential if the association was to be ‘a women’s movement’.[[36]](#endnote-36)

By 1930 it was reported that the association had succeeded in attracting over 1,000 new members, many of whom worked in business and the professions and 'a small but keen element of leisured women and girls'.[[37]](#endnote-37) Physical education classes, singing, handicrafts and dramatics were listed as the most popular subjects taught at YWCA centres, but it was also noted that classes in literature, history, economics and citizenship were becoming more popular. Religious education remained an important element of YWCA work during the interwar years. Bible study classes, Sunday services, retreats and prayer circles were held regularly at the local centres to encourage members to follow Christian teaching. The YWCA is perhaps best known for its network of residential hostels and by the end of 1939 the organisation had opened ninety-eight hostels and holiday homes for women in England and Wales.[[38]](#endnote-38)

Membership of the YWCA during the interwar period included a number of well-known trade unionists, social workers and feminists. Edith Picton-Tubervill O.B.E., Vice-President of the YWCA during the 1920s, was a suffragist and feminist who had worked as a missionary with the YWCA in India before the First World War. She was involved in a wide range of women's organisations and served on the Executive of the National Council of Women (NCW), the TG and the National Council for Equal Citizenship (NCEC). Gertrude Tuckwell JP, Vice-President of the YWCA Industrial Law Bureau, was a former President of the Women's Trade Union League and Honorary Secretary of the influential Maternal Mortality Committee.

This crossover in membership between the leadership of the YWCA and other influential women's groups is significant. It helps explain the close co-operation between organisations such as the YWCA and the NCW in demanding social and economic reform to improve women’s lives. Joint membership of a number of women’s organisations also suggests a vibrant network of female activists who continued to work together after the suffrage for the welfare of women despite the sometimes very different objectives of their individual organisations.

Yet in spite of its active involvement in a wide range of campaigns, its co-operation with other women’s groups and the role played by trade unionists and feminists within the organisation, the YWCA remained consistent in its public rejection of party politics and equal rights feminism. The association’s constitution confirmed that the YWCA ‘shall take no side in party politics, but may, in its discretion, take action on questions affecting the welfare of women and girls’.[[39]](#endnote-39) Any subject deemed too political, too feminist or too divisive for its interdenominational membership was considered out of bounds for discussion by the organisation. As a result moral and political issues such as divorce law reform, the legalisation of abortion and the provision of birth control information, were not subject for debate within the association throughout the 1930s and 1940s.[[40]](#endnote-40)

The fact that the YWCA sought to distance itself from party politics and egalitarian feminist societies should not lead to the assumption that the organisation refused to engage in politics and public debate. On the contrary the association was keenly aware of the importance of voluntary associations to a healthy democracy and the advantages that democratic citizenship could bring to women’s lives. In common with other religious organisations, for example the MU and the Catholic Women’s League (CWL), the YWCA sought to promote the important contribution that Christian women could make to society. This belief led the YWCA to support the March 1928 United Equal Franchise Demonstration, organised by the NUSEC, where 50 members of the London YWCA attended bringing with them the YWCA banner and shield.[[41]](#endnote-41) It was no surprise therefore that the YWCA celebrated the passing of the 1928 Equal Franchise Act as it finally signified that women were ‘now in possession of the full political privileges of citizenship’.[[42]](#endnote-42)

**II**

Following the extension of the franchise to women in 1918 and 1928 women’s organisations became increasingly concerned about the importance of educating women in citizenship so that they would use their vote wisely. As Sue Innes has written these groups included post-suffrage feminist pressure groups, trade union and professional bodies, the three main political parties, the WCG, as well as mainstream women’s organisations.[[43]](#endnote-43) Innes argues convincingly that ‘the idea of citizenship’ invigorated the women’s movement at this time and ‘enabled a synthesis of equality and social feminisms’.[[44]](#endnote-44)

As part of the wider women’s movement the YWCA was also preoccupied with educating its members in citizenship. Moreover as a Christian women’s organisation the leadership of the YWCA firmly believed that it had a responsibility to ensure that members had an awareness of political, economic and industrial questions. Delegates attending the 1928 York Conference were reminded of their responsibility

for studying the duties of citizenship with a view to making

a more intelligent use of the franchise…One way to do this

is to study the laws affecting the welfare of women and girls,

and to bring pressure to bear not only nationally but locally

to secure legislation in the best interests of the community.[[45]](#endnote-45)

Good citizenship was defined as ‘a right ordering of our several loyalties – loyalties to home and family, church, school or college, political party, YWCA and other social movements’.[[46]](#endnote-46)

In 1929, it was noted that there ‘was a desire among members for classes in such subjects as citizenship, economics and social study’.[[47]](#endnote-47) As well as the formal classes, social service groups were set up to facilitate community work amongst the membership. For example, staffing play centres or organising parties at local hospitals. The link between citizenship and Christian faith was reiterated once again when it was made clear that education in citizenship and social work would encourage members ‘to develop their powers and their lives to the fullest’, a goal which the association considered ‘an essential part of our Christian duty’.[[48]](#endnote-48)

In 1931, the Annual Report of the YWCA declared that ‘all activities of a good YWCA Centre, physical, educational, social and religious, constitute training for citizenship and should be so regarded’.[[49]](#endnote-49) However, the association singled out the education of newly enfranchised women for special attention, so that they too would take an intelligent and active interest in public affairs.

Methods incorporated by the YWCA to ensure that members ‘had some knowledge of, and interest in political, social and economic problems’ were many and varied.[[50]](#endnote-50) Conferences, weekend study camps, lectures and study courses were organised by the association throughout the 1930s. A comparison of local centre activities between the years 1939 and 1946 revealed an increase of 128 per cent of sustained group work in citizenship education. This was in comparison to an increase of 151 per cent in drama, 31 per cent in physical education and recreation and a 27 per cent increase in religious education.[[51]](#endnote-51) Although physical education and recreational activities were most popular overall it is clear that education in current affairs, economics and citizenship remained an essential part of the work of the YWCA throughout the period 1928-45.

To inform and facilitate this interest in public affairs the association’s journal, *The Blue Triangle Gazette* and its special supplement *News For Citizens*, kept members up to date with national and international events. An article in the October 1943 edition of *News For Citizens*, advised that ‘some sort of political identity is necessary for every citizen in a democracy…politics means citizenship’.[[52]](#endnote-52) *News for Citizens* included articles on a wide variety of subjects throughout these years including ‘What is this “Beveridge Report?” (March 1943) and ‘Is Britain really the “land of the free?”’ (December 1940), demonstrating the topical and challenging nature of this publication.[[53]](#endnote-53)

The relationship between the state and its citizens was a primary concern for the YWCA, particularly at a time when the rise of fascism in Europe focused attention on the importance of active citizenship if democracy was to survive. YWCA members were reminded that membership of the association prepared them for their role within public life. All women were ‘servants of the state’ and required ‘to practice the art of citizenship’.[[54]](#endnote-54) These skills were acquired by YWCA members who as responsible committee members learned ‘to manage financial matters…deal with problems of discipline and social behaviour at our centres…administer the law…solve ethical and moral problems’. In undertaking all of these activities members confirmed that ‘the whole of our life in our centres should be a reflection of the truly democratic state’.[[55]](#endnote-55)

This desire to instil in all members an awareness of the power of the vote, along with their obligation to contribute to the life of their community and nation, was coupled with the recognition that women as citizens were entitled to certain rights. As both a Christian organisation and an association for newly enfranchised women the YWCA felt it was its responsibility ‘to arouse the conscience of the community in order to secure basic rights and privileges for all citizens’.[[56]](#endnote-56) These included efficient health services, adequate housing, freedom from war and conflict, equal pay and good working conditions. In order to secure these rights the YWCA felt obliged to use its influence as a highly respected international organisation to engage in public debates and campaigns. In doing so the association not only succeeded in bringing about legislative change but also provided a voice for young women and girls throughout the period 1928-45.

**III**

Whilst it is difficult to ascertain the impact of education in citizenship on individual members of the YWCA, there is no doubt that the rhetoric of citizenship rights informed its campaigning activities throughout the 1930s and early 1940s. Furthermore, the involvement of such a respected Christian women’s organisation representing some 42,000 women was far more likely to win the attention of government than feminist pressure groups representing only a tiny minority of women. The involvement of the YWCA in campaigning on behalf of women represents significant agency on the part of the organisation in contesting gender inequality. This evidence of activism in the YWCA in turn challenges the presumption that the women’s movement went into decline after the vote was won.

Throughout the 1920s, 1930s and early 1940s, the YWCA took an active interest in the working conditions of female employees, just as it had done since its foundation in 1877. In 1921 the association had set up an Industrial Law Bureau to explain, enforce and extend social and industrial legislation relating to women workers. The Bureau investigated complaints from women about poor working conditions and health insurance claims and made representations on their behalf to the relevant authorities.

The YWCA’s Annual Review of 1929 reported on the work of the Industrial Law Bureau and demonstrated how the Bureau engaged in case work to ensure that employers were conforming to employment law, for example the Trade Board Acts, Shops Acts and Insurance Acts. The Bureau also assisted women workers who wished to make claims under the terms of the Workmen’s Compensation Act. An example was given of a female laundry worker injured when her hand was caught in a machine. Her employers initially offered her £10 in full settlement but having consulted the YWCA and its Industrial Law Bureau, she was awarded her full weekly salary for 6 months and a lump sum of £15.[[57]](#endnote-57) In addition to its casework, the Bureau also provided women with advice regarding the National Health Insurance Act and eligibility for widows’ and old age pensions.

The YWCA’s concern about the working conditions of women and girls resulted in its active participation in campaign work. Despite its reluctance to engage with political organisations, the association had no qualms about lobbying MPs or actively campaigning for legislative reforms aimed at improving working conditions for women. In 1934 a new Parliamentary and Public Affairs Committee was set up ‘to advise the association on legislation and other public questions affecting the welfare of women and girls’.[[58]](#endnote-58)

One of the ways that the YWCA sought to improve the welfare of women and girls was to campaign for equal pay in both private and public sectors throughout the interwar years and during the Second World War. The equal pay campaign has been well documented by a number of historians, most notably Harold Smith, but the contribution of the YWCA, along with other voluntary women’s groups has tended to be overlooked.[[59]](#endnote-59) The involvement of the YWCA in the equal pay campaign dates back to the end of First World War when its Social and Legislative Committee passed a resolution calling for equal pay for equal work.[[60]](#endnote-60)

Working with other women’s organisations, and in particular the NCW, the YWCA consistently highlighted the impact that low pay had on women workers throughout the interwar years. What is interesting, however, is that whilst groups such as the National Union of Women Teachers and the National Association of Civil Servants focused on the implementation of equal pay in the public sector, the YWCA was steadfast in its desire to champion the cause of women working in the private sector. In 1933 the Executive of the YWCA argued that low wages for women would result in a general reduction in wage rates for both men and women.[[61]](#endnote-61)

During the 1930s significant numbers of young women found employment in new light industries where work was unskilled and low paid. In 1935 women’s average earnings in industry were between 37.3 and 55.9 per cent of the wage paid to male workers.[[62]](#endnote-62) That year the NCW condemned the fact that women working in the clothing and textile industries received lower rates of pay than men. One member of the Council’s Executive described this situation as a scandal, suggesting that ‘the whole status of women is kept down by inequality of pay and opportunity’.[[63]](#endnote-63)

In spite of the continued efforts of campaigners, equal pay in both the private and public sectors remained an elusive goal throughout the 1930s.[[64]](#endnote-64) The outbreak of war in September 1939 and the recruitment of significant numbers of additional women into the armed services and the workforce provided women’s organisations with a new opportunity to highlight the inequalities in pay and conditions experienced by women workers. The feminist SPG urged women to demand equal pay when registering for war work. At the same time the NCW voiced its objection to the fact that women in the Air Raid Precaution Service (ARP) were paid lower rates than men. In May 1941 the YWCA added its voice to the campaign by highlighting the injustice behind the decision to pay unskilled women working in the transport and engineering industries less than unskilled men.[[65]](#endnote-65) The YWCA’s desire to assert the rights of married women workers even extended to their public criticism of the popular wartime slogan *‘Be like Dad –* *Keep Mum’*. The slogan was condemned as offensive for suggesting that ‘married women should be kept rather than earn their living by war work’.[[66]](#endnote-66)

Any hopes that equal pay for equal work would be introduced during the war were dashed when the Chancellor of the Exchequer, addressing a National Conference of Women in September 1943, made it clear that the government had no intention of changing its position on equal pay.[[67]](#endnote-67) This was a major blow to women’s groups in attendance who, in the words of the NCW, had argued since the outbreak of the war that it would be ‘far better and more just to give women the proper rate for the job’.[[68]](#endnote-68)

Responding to the continued unwillingness of the government to introduce equal pay rates the Equal Pay Campaign Committee (EPCC) was set up in January 1944 to co-ordinate the work of women’s societies campaigning for equal pay. By 1946 seventy-two women’s societies had affiliated to the Committee including the NCW, the NCEC, the WI and the SPG.[[69]](#endnote-69) The committee focused on campaigning for equal pay amongst the common grades of the civil service where men and women performed the same work but received differential pay rates. Although not a member of the EPCC, on the grounds that it was a political pressure group, the YWCA supported the work of the committee through its membership of the NCW and continued to demand equal pay for women in the private sector. Following extensive lobbying on the part of the EPCC, an amendment on equal pay was successfully passed during the Commons debate on the 1944 Education Bill. However, when Prime Minister Winston Churchill called a vote of no confidence in the government, support for the equal pay amendment was quashed.[[70]](#endnote-70)

The controversy surrounding the equal pay debate in the Commons did result in the establishment of a Royal Commission on Equal Pay in 1944. The Royal Commission reported in October 1946, providing a stark account of the inequalities in pay in both the public and private sectors.[[71]](#endnote-71) Following the publication of this report the YWCA called on the post-war Labour Government to introduce equal pay without delay.[[72]](#endnote-72) Such hopes were, however, short lived when the government announced in June 1947 that it would not support the introduction of equal pay in the public service on the grounds that ‘it would be wholly inflationary in its results’.[[73]](#endnote-73) The EPCC continued its campaign work throughout the immediate post-war years, supported by a wide range of women’s organisations, until 1955 when the Conservative Government finally announced that it would introduce equal pay in the civil service. Although falling short of the YWCA’s demand that all women workers were entitled to be paid a fair rate for the job, the introduction of equal pay in the public sector represents a significant victory for the YWCA and the women’s movement in the 1950s.

**IV**

The outbreak of war in 1939 signified renewed interest in a second long-running campaign supported by both feminist and mainstream voluntary women’s organisations. This was the demand that women police officers, with powers of arrest, should be appointed to every police force in the country. The YWCA’s support for the appointment of women police originated during the First World War when it supported the work of the National Union of Women Workers (later renamed the NCW) in setting up voluntary police patrols to safeguard the welfare of women and girls during wartime.[[74]](#endnote-74) The first attested policewoman (with powers of arrest) was appointed in 1914 and in 1918 a women’s police force was set up in the London Metropolitan area to ‘deal with women and children: ill, destitute, homeless, and those who had been victims of sexual offences or were believed to be in danger of drifting towards an immoral life’.[[75]](#endnote-75) In spite of these developments the numbers of women involved in policing remained marginal during the 1920s. In response the NCW, supported by its constituent members, including the YWCA campaigned throughout this period to draw attention to the need for greater numbers of women police.

Louise Jackson has commented that the interwar campaign for the appointment of women police was made up of a ‘broad coalition of viewpoints’.[[76]](#endnote-76) Feminist arguments in favour of women police focused on the legal rights of women and children, whilst voluntary women’s groups such as the NCW and the YWCA emphasised the important role of policewomen in safeguarding the welfare of vulnerable women and children. It is significant to note, however that women’s organisations involved in the campaign insisted that women police officers should have the same status, powers and conditions of service as male officers.

The YWCA, working with the NCW and other women’s organisations, including the CWL, actively campaigned for the appointment of women police throughout the 1920s and 1930s. This resulted in the association lending its support to a series of lobbies and deputations to the Home Secretary calling for every police force in the country to employ women police who would work primarily with women and children caught up in the criminal justice system. Edith Picton-Tubervill, then a Labour MP and a vice-president of the YWCA, worked with fellow female MPs from all parties to put pressure on the government to implement this policy.[[77]](#endnote-77)

Yet in spite of these efforts the employment of women police was left to the discretion of individual chief constables and local watch committees who were under no obligation to appoint policewomen in their local areas. Frustrated at the low numbers of women police appointed by 1934, the YWCA joined the NCW, WI, the NUSEC in submitting a petition of 6,350 signatures calling for the employment of more women police to the Home Office. The Home Office rejected these demands on the grounds that it was unwilling to interfere with the ‘local discretion’ of individual chief constables.[[78]](#endnote-78) Undeterred the NCW, once again supported by the YWCA, MU, WI and CWL, sent a resolution to all local Police Authorities in 1935 urging them to appoint adequate numbers of attested policewomen to work with women and children. Progress was slow, however and by 1939 only forty-five out of 183 police forces in England and Wales had appointed policewomen within their ranks.[[79]](#endnote-79)

The outbreak of war in 1939 resulted in the formation of the Women’s Auxiliary Police Corps (WAPC) to supplement the regular police force during wartime.[[80]](#endnote-80) Women recruited to the WAPC had no police powers and their duties were restricted to clerical and canteen work as well as driving and maintaining police vehicles. Organisations involved in the women police campaign objected to the fact that these women were not being used for patrols. Concern about the moral welfare of young women and girls in wartime once again led women’s societies to appeal to the Home Office and local police chiefs to set up female patrols, just as they had done in the First World War.

In response the Home Office issued a circular to Police Authorities encouraging but not compelling them to employ full-time policewomen to undertake regular police duties, including patrol work.[[81]](#endnote-81) Despite this renewed request by the government, chief constables again proved reluctant to comply. Realising that more affirmative action was needed the NCW, in collaboration with twenty-two other women’s societies, including the YWCA, the MU, the WFL, the NCEC and the WI, set up the Women Police Campaign Committee (WPCC) in June 1940.[[82]](#endnote-82) The central aim of the new committee was to ‘secure justice and humanity in the treatment of women, girls and children’ by ensuring that the appointment of ‘a percentage of fully trained women police in every force should be made compulsory’.[[83]](#endnote-83)

Frustrated with the slow rate of progress and with only 47 police forces in England and Wales employing regular policewomen by 1943, the WPCC called a conference in London in March 1944 to again highlight its demand for the compulsory appointment of women police. The outcome of this meeting, which received considerable press coverage, was a triumph. The Home Secretary issued a circular to chief constables advising them that women police should be appointed to all local constabularies. In addition it was confirmed that a Woman Staff Officer was to be appointed to H.M. Inspectors of Constabulary to oversee the selection and training of women police.[[84]](#endnote-84) Having successfully achieved its objective to enforce the compulsory appointment of women police, the WPCC disbanded. The women police campaign, with the YWCA playing a central role, once again demonstrates that the women’s movement was effective in bringing about significant reform in the decades after the suffrage.

**V**

Speaking in 1928 Margery Corbett Ashby described the YWCA as a vital part of the women’s movement ‘bringing to it the great contribution of Christianity with its ideal of self-sacrificing service’.[[85]](#endnote-85) The YWCA also regarded itself as part of a vibrant women’s movement, working alongside other women’s groups to enhance the status of women in the decades following enfranchisement. Its commitment to the education of women citizens, its aim to encourage women to participate in public life and its willingness to campaign for legislative reforms to improve the daily lives of women all indicate that the YWCA warrants inclusion in histories of the British women’s movement.

At the same time historians must acknowledge that like many other popular voluntary women’s organisations the YWCA did not consider itself a feminist women’s group or part of a feminist movement. It did not identify with what was often regarded as a radical political philosophy, it never challenged traditional gender roles or the role of women in the family and sought to distance itself from overtly political and feminist societies. This refusal of popular and influential women’s organisations to be identified as feminist throughout the 1930s and 1940s is not unique to Britain also evident in other European countries.

In Ireland the Irish Country Women’s Association and in France the Catholic and conservative La Ligue Patriotique des Femmes Francaises both highlighted the social and welfare needs of women but rejected any association with feminism. Eschewing feminism these groups, like the YWCA, were able to recruit mass memberships, provide their members with educational and recreational opportunities and effectively represent the interests of hundreds of thousands of women in public life. What becomes clear therefore is that in the aftermath of the suffrage an eclectic range of women’s groups worked tirelessly to assert women’s citizenship rights. The consideration of a diverse range of women’s organisations, all fighting to secure the ‘privileges of citizenship’ allows for a new understanding of the relationship between feminism, the women’s movement and female activism.

1. [] See for example: Barbara Caine (1997), *English Feminism 1780-1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), Martin Pugh (2nd edition, 2000), *Women and the Women’s Movement in Britain* (Basingstoke: Macmillian), Sue Bruley (1999), *Women in Britain Since 1900* (Baskingstoke: Macmillian), Gillian Scott (1998), *Feminism, Femininity and the Politics of Working Women: the Women’s Co-operative Guild, 1880s to the Second World W*ar (London: UCL), Sue Innes (2004), ‘Constructing Women’s Citizenship in the Interwar Period: the Edinburgh Women Citizens’ Association’, *Women’s History Review*, 13, 4 and Pat Thane (1990), ‘Women of the British Labour Party and Feminism, 1906-45’, in Harold Smith (Ed.), *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* (London: Edward Elgar). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. [] See for example: Caitríona Beaumont (2013), *Housewives and Citizens: domesticity and the women’s movement in England 1928-64* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), Caitríona Beaumont (2000), ‘Citizens not Feminists: the boundary negotiated between citizenship and feminism by mainstream women’s organisations in England, 1928-39’, *Women’s History Review*, 9, 2, Maggie Andrews (1997), *The Acceptable Face of Feminism: the women’s movement as a social movement* (London: Lawrence and Wishart), Cordelia Moyse (2009), *A History of the Mothers’ Union: Women, Anglicanism and Globalisation* (London: The Boydell Press) and Caroline Merz (1988), *After the Vote: the story of the National Union of Townswomen’s Guilds in the Year of its Diamond Jubilee 1929-1989* (Norwich: NUTG). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. [] Kirsta Cowman (2010), *Women in British Politics, c. 1689-1979* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), p. 158. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. [] Karen Offen (2000), *European Feminisms, 1700-1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), p. 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. [] See Cheryl Law (1997), *Suffrage and Power: the women’s movement, 1918-1928* (London: I.B. Tauris) and Johanna Alberti (1989), *Beyond Suffrage: Feminists in War and Peace 1914-1928* (Baskingstoke: Macmillian). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. [] Membership of the NUSEC fell from 478 branches in 1914 to 90 in 1929 and to just 48 by 1935. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. [] Ray Strachey (Ed) (1936), *Our Freedom and its Results* (London: Hogarth Press), p. 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. [] See for example: Pugh, *Women and the Women’s Movement*, Bruley, *Women in Britain* and Deirdre Beddoe (1989), *Back to Home and Duty: women between the wars 1918-1939* (London: Pandora). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. [] Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism*, p. 14 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. [] Lorna Gibson (2008), *Beyond Jerusalem: Music in the Women’s Institute, 1919-1969* (London: Ashgate), p. 47. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. [] Moyse, *A History of the Mothers’ Union*, p. 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. [] Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens* and Beaumont, ‘Citizens not Feminists’. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. [] In the 1930s the MU had a membership of approximately 538,000 women, the WI 318,000 members by 1937 and the TG 54,000 members by 1939. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. [] See for example: Helen McCarthy (2007), ‘Parties, Voluntary Associations, and Democratic Politics in Interwar Britain’, *The Historical Journal*, 50, 4, Cowman, *Women in British Politics*, Innes, ‘Constructing Women’s Citizenship’ and Samantha Clements, ‘Feminism, Citizenship and Social Activity: the role and importance of local women’s organisations, Nottingham 1918-1969 (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Nottingham, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. [] For example there is no mention of the YWCA in Pugh, *Women and the Women’s Movement*, Bruley, *Women in Britain* or Caine, *English Feminism*. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. [] See for example: Carole Seymour-Jones (1994), *Journey of Faith: the history of the world YWCA 1945-1994* (London: Allison and Busby) and Nancy M. Robertson (2010), *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations and the YWCA 1906-46* (Illinois, University of Illinois Press). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. [] McCarthy, ‘Parties, Voluntary Associations and Democratic Politics’, p. 892. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. [] ‘Citizenship in the YWCA’, *YWCA Review 1931* (YWCA Archive, Modern Records Centre (MRC), University of Warwick, MSS 243/2/1/16), p. 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. [] Ibid., pp. 12-13. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. [] *The Times*, 3 April 1878. Both organisations were first established in 1855. For a history of the origins and early development of the YWCA see Jan Rutter (1986), 'The YWCA of Great Britain 1900-1925: An Organisation of Change', (unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of Warwick). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. [] Seymour-Jones, *Journey of Faith*, p. 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. [] ‘The Constitution of the YWCA’ (1885), (Typed document) (YWCA Archive, MRC, MSS 243/13/3/79). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. [] Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. [] Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. [] Jane Lewis (1984), *Women in England 1870-1950: sexual divisions and social change* (Brighton, Wheatsheaf), p. 92. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. [] Rutter, ‘The YWCA of Great Britain’, p. 38. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. [] Ibid., p. 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. [] Lewis, *Women in England*, pp. 58-9, 162-205. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. [] Rutter, ‘The YWCA of Great Britain’, p. 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. [] An article appearing in *Our Outlook*, February 1912 entitled ‘A Conversation on the Subject of the Day’ provided an insight into both suffrage and anti-suffrage viewpoints and readers were encouraged to find out more about this important topic. *Our Outlook*, V, 46, February 1912, pp. 28-30. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. [] *Our Outlook,* XI, 121, June 1918, p. 90. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. [] Ibid., p. 91. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. [] *Our Outlook*, XI, 122, July 1918, p. 101. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. [] Rutter, 'The YWCA of Great Britain', p. 82. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. [] Ibid., p. 124. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. [] ‘Report of the National General Secretary 1938’, (YWCA Archive, MRC, Box No. 27). [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. [] *YWCA Annual Report 1930,* (1930), p. 3, (YWCA Archive, MRC, MSS 243/2/1/15). [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. [] *YWCA Annual Report 1938-39,* (1939), p. 4, (YWCA Archive, MRC, MSS 243/2/1/21). [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. [] *Post War Planning: Our Seven Objectives* (1945), p. 7, (YWCA Archive, MRC, Box 27). [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. [] Caitríona Beaumont (2007), ‘Moral Dilemmas and Women’s Rights: The Attitude of the Mothers’ Union and Catholic Women’s League to Divorce, Birth Control and Abortion in England, 1928-1939’, *Women’s History Review*, 16, 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. [] *YWCA Bulletin,* February 1928, VIII, 2, p. 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. [] *YWCA Annual Review 1931,* (1931), p. 12 (YWCA Archive, MRC, MSS 243/2/1/16). [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. [] Innes, ‘Constructing Women’s Citizenship’, p. 624. For a discussion on Conservative, Labour and Liberal parties efforts to moblise female voters see Cowman, *Women in British Politics*, pp. 131-138. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. [] Ibid., p. 639. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. [] *YWCA Bulletin*, August 1928, VIII, 8, p. 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. [] *YWCA Bulletin*, August 1928, VIII, 8, p. 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. [] *YWCA Annual Review 1929,* (1929), p. 9 (YWCA Archive, MRC, MSS 243/2/1/14). [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. [] Ibid.

    [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. [] Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. [] Ibid., p. 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. [] *YWCA Review,* 1947 (YWCA Archive, MRC, MSS 243/2/1/28) [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. [] *News For Citizens,* October 1943, (YWCA Archive, MRC, MSS 243/1/9/10) [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. [] *News For Citizens*, December 1940 (YWCA Archive, MRC, MSS 243/1/6/6/2). [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. [] *The Blue Triangle Gazette,* August 1945, 63, 8 & 9, p. 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. [] Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. [] *Citizenship Education in the YWCA* (1949) p. 2, (YWCA Archive, MRC, MSS

    243/13/10/79). [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. [] *YWCA Annual Review 1929*, (1929), (YWCA Archive, MRC, MSS 243/2/1/14). [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. [] *YWCA Annual Review 1934*, (1934), (YWCA Archive, MRC, MSS 243/2/1/19). [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. [] See Harold Smith (1996), ‘British feminism and the equal pay issue in the 1930s’, *Women’s History Review*, 5, 1 and Smith, (1981), ‘The Problem of “Equal Pay for Equal Work” in Great Britain during World War II’, *Journal of Modern History*, 53. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. [] YWCA Memorandums: The Beginnings of Social and Industrial Work, 1939

    (YWCA Archive, MRC, MSS 243/13/3). [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. [] *Blue Triangle Gazette,* 51, 9, 1933. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. [] Pugh, *Women and the Women’s Movement*, p. 96. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. [] *NCW Report of the Council Meeting and Conference, Leicester, October 14-*

    *18, 1935* (1935). [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. [] Smith, ‘British feminism and the equal pay issue’, pp. 103-106.

    [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. [] *News For Citizens,* May 1941. (YWCA Archive, MRC, MSS 243/1/6/6/2).

    [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. [] *News For Citizens*, October 1941. (YWCA Archive, MRC, MSS 243/1/6/6/2). [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. [] *National Conference of Women called by H.M. Government, Report of*

    *Proceedings, 28 September 1943* (1943). [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. [] *Women in Council,* 30, November 1942. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. [] *Equal Pay for Equal Work: The Black Record 1914-1949* (1949) (London:

    Equal Pay Campaign Committee) (Box 262, EPCC Archive, The Women’s Library). [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. [] See Smith, ‘The Problem of “Equal Pay for Equal Work”’. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. [] Pat Thane (1991), ‘Towards equal opportunities? Women in Britain since

    1945, in T. Gourvish & A. O’Day (Eds.), *Britain Since 1945,* (London: Macmillan). [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. [] *News For Citizens* in *Blue Triangle Gazette*, November 1946. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. [] *Equal Pay for Equal Work: The Black Record*, p. 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. [] For a discussion of women patrols in WWI see Angela Woollacott (1994), ‘”Khaki Fever” and its control: Gender, Class, Age and Sexual Morality on the British Home-front in the First World War’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 29 and Louise Jackson (2006), *Women Police: Gender, Welfare and Surveillance in the Twentieth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), pp. 18-20. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. [] Edith Tancred (1950), *Women Police 1914-1950* (London: NCW), p. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. [] Jackson, *Women Police*, p. 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
77. [] Jackson, *Women Police*, p. 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
78. [] Tancred, *Women Police*, p. 18-20. [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
79. [] Cited in Barbara Weinberger (1995), *The Best Police in the World: An Oral History of British Policing* (Aldershot: Scolar Press), p. 92. [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
80. [] M.H. Cowlin (1939), *Women Police in War Time: What is the W.A.P.C.?*

    (NCW Leaflet) (Pamphlet Collection, The Women’s Library). See also Jackson,

    *Women Police*, pp. 25-27. [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
81. [] Cowlin, *Women Police in War Time*, p. 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-81)
82. [] Tancred, *Women Police*, p. 50. [↑](#endnote-ref-82)
83. [] *NCW Handbook 1940-41* (1941). [↑](#endnote-ref-83)
84. [] Ibid., p. 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-84)
85. [] *YWCA Bulletin,* September 1928, VIII, 9, p. 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-85)