**Chapter \_: Housewives *and* Citizens: Encouraging Active Citizenship in the Print Media of Housewives’ Associations during the Interwar Years**

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When considering the print media of popular housewives’ associations during the interwar years it might well be assumed that articles and features on housework would dominate. This assumption appears even more plausible in view of the popular but now mistaken belief that the interwar years were characterised by a prevailing ideology of domesticity limiting the interests of wives and mothers to home and family (Beddoe 1989; Kent 1993). In the 1920s and 1930s the majority of women in Britain did marry and have children. Being a housewife remained the typical experience of married women in the first half of the twentieth century (Zweiniger-Bargielowska 2001: 158). However, recent historical research has revealed that the everyday lives of women in the interwar years were far more complex than previously acknowledged.[[1]](#endnote-1) Consequently, there is now a better understanding of the differing experiences of women–as wives and mothers, but also as single women, widows, workers, consumers, activists, and citizens–in the interwar years.

This chapter challenges traditional representations of the housewife during the interwar years through an examination of the print media of two housewives’ associations and by highlighting how these magazines encouraged wives and mothers to participate in public life. Active citizenship was deemed essential if the views and experiences of women were to have a positive impact on public policy. The focus here is on the content of magazines published by the two largest housewives’ associations in the interwar years, the Mothers’ Union (MU) and the National Federation of Women’s Institutes (WI). These two groups serve as useful case studies because both were respected and popular organisations with large, exclusively female memberships.[[2]](#endnote-2) At a local level they provided support, education, friendship, and leisure opportunities to members at weekly or monthly meetings. The MU, a Church of England organisation for Anglican women, had a UK membership of approximately 420,000 throughout the interwar period.[[3]](#endnote-3) By 1937 the WI, an independent non-party and non-denominational society for rural women, had recruited 318,000 members (Beaumont 2015: 27).

Both groups produced a variety of magazines during the 1920s and 1930s targeting two distinct groups of women who shared many common experiences. Their print media offer an opportunity to examine the relationship between these national organisations and their official publications and to reveal the kinds of tensions that emerged between what readers wanted from their organisational publication and the mandates of the magazines themselves. A study of the print media of housewives’ associations also contributes to the growing body of national and international scholarship seeking to reassess the experiences of girls and women in the past by analysing magazines published by and for women.[[4]](#endnote-4) This work calls into question how such sources enlighten, challenge, confirm, or even distort what we know about the dynamics of these organisations and women’s everyday lives in the twentieth century. The print media of the MU and WI have frequently been used to inform historical accounts of both organisations.[[5]](#endnote-5) Yet as Rachel Richie argues ‘a detailed exploration of these magazines as the main focus is lacking’ (2010: 37).

Adopting aspects of what Penny Tinkler describes as a holistic approach to magazine content, this chapter seeks to address such a gap in knowledge (2016: 31). The holistic approach takes into account the different types of content within magazines, including editorials, features, fiction, pictures, and advertising. As Tinkler points out, women’s magazines are not necessarily ‘coherent or tidy’ and their pages can often ‘harbour diversity, inconsistency, contradiction and tension,’ resulting in constructions of femininity that maintain continuity but also ‘respond to social and cultural change’ (31). The holistic approach requires the researcher to identify ‘threads in themes; reflecting on the impression created by magazine content; attending to the different “voices” that emerge’ (32). This assessment of the print media of the MU and WI will therefore consider how organisational magazines catered to the interests of members. The idea of different voices and whose voice dominates will be explored in terms of the ‘plurality of voices’ that may or may not have been represented in these magazines (33).

**The Mothers’ Union: The *Mothers’ Union Journal*, *Mothers in Council*, and *Workers’ Paper***

The MU began as a network of mothers’ meetings in 1876 for devout Anglican women and by 1921 had over 8,000 branches and a membership of 387,956 women (Moyse 2009: 105). The Union operated under the auspices of the Church of England and worked within the confines of its own ‘Three Objects.’ These objects were drawn up by the Executive Council during the late 1890s and defined the moral character and aims of the MU throughout the interwar years. The three objects were:

1. To uphold the Sanctity of Marriage. 2. To awaken in Mothers of all classes

a sense of their great responsibility in the training of their boys and girls

(the future Fathers and Mothers of the Empire). 3. To organize in every place

a band of Mothers who will unite in prayer, and seek by their own example

to lead their families in purity and holiness of life. (*Workers’ Paper* Aug 1918: 1).

Membership of the Union was open to women who belonged either to the Church of England or to a church in accord with the Church of England. These women were eligible to become official workers for the Union and could therefore be elected as officials in local branches, county federations, or to the national Central Council and Executive Committee. Ordinary membership was open to married women who were baptised and who undertook to have their children baptised. Unmarried women who supported the work of the Union could join as associate members, but unmarried mothers were ineligible for membership on the grounds that their actions were ‘an infringement of the duties and ideals of Christian motherhood’ (qtd in Beaumont 2015: 12). Divorced women were not permitted to join and a member who subsequently divorced was required to leave the Union, as they were deemed to have reneged on the first object.

The MU produced three magazines for members: the *Mothers’ Union Journal* (1888–1954), *Mothers in Council* (1891–1951), and the *Workers’ Paper* (1914–1949). The fact that three different magazines were published simultaneously indicates that the leadership viewed membership as being divided into three distinct categories. Class and religious status determined each grouping. The *Mothers’ Union Journal* was a magazine for working-class mothers with the aim of giving them advice on how best to care for their children and encouraging them to lead virtuous Christian lives. *Mothers in Council* targeted ladies and ‘mothers of the high classes’ who would benefit from tips on hiring domestic servants and articles on education and social work (Parker 1975: 15). The *Workers’ Paper* provided information and news to official workers who, as well as being committed Anglicans, were more likely to be financially secure and well educated so that they could take on demanding leadership roles within the MU. The organisation used different layouts and content to differentiate between its three magazines and membership categories.

The *Mothers’ Union Journal* was first published in 1888 with the intention of connecting local branches and members with one another and with the founder of the MU, Mary Sumner. After the First World War the magazine increased to twenty-four pages at a cost of one and a half pence per issue, making it affordable to most members. By 1920 it had an impressive circulation of approximately 325,000 copies and was published on a monthly basis (*Mothers’ Union Journal* Jan 1920: 11). The January 1918 edition of the magazine featured an illustration on the cover page of a working-class mother in an apron tending to her young son with the caption ‘train up a child in the way he should go.’ The cover listed the MU’s ‘Three Objects’ and the organisation’s patrons, ‘Her Majesty the Queen and Her Majesty Queen Alexandra.’ The names of the Union’s Central President, Hon. President (Mary Sumner), and Vice Presidents were also included. Endorsement by the Queen and the inclusion of a number of titled women among its vice presidents gave the magazine legitimacy and suggested to working-class readers that the MU was an esteemed and influential organisation for women.

The content of the magazine during the interwar years included Union news, articles on current affairs, fiction (often with a moral message), prayers, and religious instruction. Perhaps unsurprisingly the magazine included regular features encouraging and supporting wives and mothers in their domestic role. It is significant, however, that this focus on domesticity was just one aspect of the magazine and not its central purpose. Typical items relating to domestic skills included ‘Our Cookery Corner’ with economical recipes for readers and ‘Golden Keys: a practical page for mothers.’ This column first appeared in the January 1920 edition of the magazine and was later renamed ‘Hints for Housewives’ and, in 1932, ‘The Housewife’s Page.’ The practical advice offered in these columns was clearly intended for working-class or lower middle-class readers. These women did their own housework and looked after their children on a daily basis. The tone of the advice could be patronising, with mothers being ‘told’ how to look after their children.[[6]](#endnote-6) One example was a list of ‘Do’s and Dont’s [sic] For Mothers’ instructing mothers to breastfeed their babies for nine months and not keep them up late at ‘picture palaces’ (Jan 1920: 20). Advertising in the magazine is another indication that the intended readership was working-class, given the products promoted were basic household items such as safety matches, baking powder, tea and wool, all items that less well-off housewives would be interested in purchasing.

Practical tips for housewives were notably absent from the Union’s other two publications. In the case of the *Workers’ Paper* this is not surprising, as the magazine dealt primarily with the official business of the MU. However, the presentation of advice on domestic matters in *Mothers in Council* once again illustrates the class divide within the MU. Here any discussion of domestic work and childcare was set in the context of readers who were presumed to have domestic servants and/or nannies. As a result, the domestic advice given was less practical and more spiritual. Much of the content relating to child-care focused on how mothers could best introduce their children to Christian ideals, thereby complying with the third object of the MU. For example, in January 1918 an article advised readers on ‘How to tell a Bible story to Little Children’ (Jan 1918: 39–46). Rather than providing practical advice in the magazine, books by childcare ‘experts’ were reviewed and recommended to help young mothers adapting to their new role. A reader’s letter entitled ‘A Plea for Mothers’ by ‘A Home Maker’ asked that the needs of middle-class mothers be given greater priority, as they were less likely than their working-class equivalents to receive ‘district visits’ from nurses or midwives (Apr 1919: 68). This response suggests that at times the magazine’s decision not to provide more practical support to new mothers may have been mistaken.

The design, layout, price, and content of *Mothers in Council* reinforce the idea that the magazine was aimed at middle-class and upper-middle class members. The price for the fifty-page quarterly publication was six pence (rising to one shilling for sixty pages in the 1920s), considerably more expensive than either the *Mothers’ Union Journal* or *Workers’ Paper*. The front cover, like the rest of the magazine, did not include any illustrations apart from the MU crest. Overall the style was of the serious quarterly, with advertisements only occasionally breaking up the text. Regular content included ‘The Editor’s Pages’ updating readers on the work of the MU and news of its latest activities. More in-depth articles followed on topics relating to religious teaching, education, social work, and social policy. Although the majority of authors were women, articles penned by clergymen were featured on a regular basis. For example, a series of articles by the Reverend Francis Underhill on the ‘Problems of Home Life’ appeared throughout 1928. *Mothers in Council* also included book reviews and competition pages, presumably with the intention of offering variety and more diverting material. ‘The Book Lover’s Corner’ featured reviews of devotional literature, historical texts and contemporary works of fiction and non-fiction. By the 1930s the magazine included ‘Film Notes’ and ‘At the Theatre,’ reflecting the changing cultural and leisure pursuits of MU members (Mar 1938: 1). Advertisements for specialist religious booksellers, Prudential Assurance, French coffee, and private schools for girls appeared regularly, all which would have been beyond the means of working-class readers.

It would appear that both the *Mothers’ Union Journal* and *Mothers in Council* were published for members and not for a wider readership. This fact is illustrated in a letter published in the *Workers’ Paper* in January 1929. Here a local branch leader, M. A. Leak, suggested that in order to recruit younger women into the Union new mothers outside of the MU should be gifted copies of the *Mothers’ Union Journal*. The writer envisaged the magazine as ‘an educational and missionary force’ read not just by mothers but also by husbands and daughters (18). She also proposed that MU members should pay for and deliver copies of the magazine to young mothers, thereby promoting the Christian message of the MU and providing friendship and support to women within their communities.

The third magazine published by the MU, the *Workers’ Paper*, was aimed exclusively at an elite group of MU members, the organisation’s officials. The purpose of the new publication, which first appeared in 1914, was to ‘carry news of the work and development of the Mothers’ Union from its headquarters in London to every one of its Branches throughout the world’ (Jan 1937: 2). All official workers were urged to take a copy of the magazine deemed essential ‘if she wishes to keep in touch with our work and the organisation … a monthly copy of this useful little magazine should be part of the equipment of every enrolling member and branch worker’ (July 1918: 89).[[7]](#endnote-7) Content consisted of reports from the MU Central Council and Executive Committee, sectional committees, news from the branches (including overseas branches), notices of events, and reports on the annual conference, including resolutions passed and actions taken.

The cover page featured the MU crest and again listed the ‘Three Objects’ alongside the names of key officials and the address of Central Office. Like *Mothers in Council* no illustrations were included on the cover or in the main body of the magazine. Copies of the monthly *Workers’ Paper* cost one penny (rising to two pence in the 1920s). It was a ‘no frills’ publication seeking to ensure that Union officials were kept up to date with the activities and policy decisions of the Central Council. Advertisements were kept to a minimum and tended to promote charitable causes or consumer items such as ink and cocoa (Jan 1928: 2).

The extent to which official workers relied on the *Workers’ Paper* is debatable. In the January 1937 edition the editor expressed concern that a number of branches were not subscribing to the magazine. She wrote that they must ‘feel no need for the really important information and inspiration that it offers to them month by month’ (2). The irritation expressed here provides an insight into how the MU as an organisation viewed its print media. The editors of all three publications, answerable to the Union’s Central Council, tightly controlled the form and content of their magazines.[[8]](#endnote-8) The magazines were seen to provide an essential service to a varied membership, through the provision of practical support, news, religious guidance, and entertainment tailored to suit their presumed needs and interests. This ‘top-down’ approach, which mirrored the national and international governance of the MU,[[9]](#endnote-9) helps explain the frustration that arose when members did not seem that interested in the service being provided.

The ‘top-down’ approach of the MU had a significant influence on the key role its magazines played in encouraging wives and mothers to become active citizens during the interwar years. Despite the Union’s endorsement of traditional gender roles and its championing of family life, its magazines were never used to persuade women that they should devote their lives exclusively to home, husbands, and children. Readers of the *Mothers’ Union Journal* were told in no uncertain terms that ‘we have no use for that type [of mother] today’ (Sept 1934: 11). Instead the MU, through its print media, sought to present an image of housewifery as a fulfilling, skilled, and at times difficult job requiring training and support. Even more significant was the fact that the MU was determined to ensure that the views of Christian housewives and mothers made an impact on public life. To achieve this, members had to be educated and encouraged to engage in local and national debates and campaigns.

The extension of the parliamentary franchise to women over thirty in 1918 sparked a range of activities and initiatives among women’s organisations to educate and inform women about the significance of the vote.[[10]](#endnote-10) The MU was no exception and throughout 1918 its publications featured numerous articles and editorials on the vote and the new responsibilities that women now had as equal citizens. In April 1918 the MU Central President, Mrs Woods, wrote in the *Workers’ Paper* that the vote signified an opportunity for women not to form a ‘Women’s Party’ but instead to ‘join hand in hand with those men who have long been trying to make the country nobler and her people happier. We need two points of view which neither sex can produce alone.’ Readers were reminded that ‘if the vote is rightly and intelligently used, it can be one means by which all can fulfill the great trust to God and the community in which we live’ (47). Mrs Woods admitted that she was not ‘always impressed with the superior knowledge of all men voters’ and this highlighted how essential it was that ‘we women must educate ourselves’ (47). To this end MU members would have to familiarise themselves with the vocabulary of democracy. They needed to learn how the country was governed, identify the causes that required input from wives and mothers, and be prepared to get involved in campaigns to bring about change. All these skills were necessary if women with their ‘intimate understanding of home-life, child-life, and mothercraft’ were to succeed in making their ‘own distinct contribution’ to the public good (45).

Articles about the power of the vote appeared in all of the MU publications. In January 1918 *Mothers in Council* published the text of a lecture given at Mary Sumner House (the MU headquarters) by Rev. C. G. Langdon. Here readers were told that the vote signified ‘freedom for every woman­–not only to live her whole life unhindered by shackles that belong only to the old dispensation, but also freedom to give all she has to the service of mankind. And it is this freedom to give that has inspired the Women’s Movement’ (9). In April 1918 the *Mothers’ Union Journal* published an article entitled ‘The Vote–A Sacred Trust.’ In keeping with the patronising tone sometimes adopted for a working-class audience, the author admonished readers by suggesting ‘perhaps we women are not as a rule slothful with our bodies, but are we not sometimes rather slothful with our brains?’ The article went on to propose that due to the many problems ‘facing women and children in the Empire,’ ‘we ought all of us to take a very active share in thought and deed’ (28). A second article, appearing in October 1918 and entitled ‘The Woman’s Vote’ by ‘A Working Woman,’ may have been a more direct attempt to connect with working-class readers. This article sought to rally readers by telling them ‘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?’ (51).

The sentiments expressed in both articles undoubtedly question any suggestion that housewives’ associations endorsed an ideology of domesticity during the interwar years. Instead the MU was committed to educating and supporting members in the use of the newly won parliamentary vote. The reason for this was the belief that society would benefit as a whole from the contribution women as wives, mothers, and Christians would bring to public debate and national politics. This was particularly relevant in the case of divorce legislation. Throughout the interwar years the MU was one of the most vocal campaigners against any attempt to reform the existing law to enable quicker and easier divorce.[[11]](#endnote-11) Divorce on any terms infringed on the first object of the MU and so all members were required as a rule of membership to oppose the liberalisation of divorce law.[[12]](#endnote-12) This ‘top-down’ decision by the Central Council of the MU was not uncontroversial. There were those within the organisation’s leadership, for example Lady Maxse, who argued that members of the MU could not be expected to ‘pledge themselves in advance to oppose every bill or clause in every bill which extends the grounds for divorce’ (qtd in Beaumont 2015: 72). Central Council overruled this view and, in an article in the *Workers’ Paper*, the Central President Nina Woods explained to readers that the decision to reject any new grounds for divorce was based on adherence to the first object (Jan 1930: 4). This hard-line opposition to divorce law reform remained a significant feature of the Union’s work throughout the interwar years.

The magazines offer little evidence of an actual debate on this difficult moral issue, either in correspondence pages or articles. All three publications endorsed the view that divorce under any circumstance was morally wrong and bad for women, and they encouraged MU members to use their vote to prevent the introduction of divorce law reform. Countless articles and editorials warning of the dangers of divorce were published by the MU during the 1920s and 1930s. In the July 1918 edition of the *Mothers’ Union Journal* readers were advised to oppose divorce in every way possible by attending meetings, passing resolutions at local branch level, and making their views known to their local MP (38). In the *Workers’ Paper*, officials of the MU were given detailed advice on how to campaign against divorce reform. This included identifying Diocesan Council members who could write letters to the local press defending the position of the MU. Local officials were to ensure that their branches passed resolutions opposing divorce and that the resolutions be forwarded to the local MP and Prime Minister (Jan 1918: 7). While the Union’s position on divorce was conservative and at times even more stringent than that of the Church of England,[[13]](#endnote-13) the MU nevertheless adopted a radical approach by mobilizing its members and encouraging them to engage in political protest. The pages of its print media were crucial in supporting, informing and instructing members on how to do this thereby challenging the idea that the interwar years represented a low-point in the history of female advocacy and activism.

Divorce was not the only issue of concern for the MU during these years. The content of its magazines indicate that the organisation was also interested in a wide range of social, economic, and political issues. Housing, the payment of family allowances to mothers, widows’ pensions and maternal health care were among the many campaigns taken up by the MU. It is noteworthy that a number of these campaigns overlapped with the work of national feminist organisations such as the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC) and the Women’s Freedom League.[[14]](#endnote-14) This fact highlights the complexity and diversity of the interwar women’s movement. For the MU, its magazines played a crucial role in providing extensive coverage of campaigns aimed at improving the social and economic status of women. The objective here was to ensure that members were aware of how policy decisions affected their everyday lives and how women could bring about change through active citizenship.

**The National Federation of Women’s Institutes: *Home and Country***

In contrast to the MU, the WI published one magazine, *Home and Country* (1919-2002), for all members throughout the interwar years.This fact alone suggests a more democratic and inclusive approach, yet in both organisations well-known middle and upper-middle class women monopolised leadership positions. Lady Denman, the dynamic chairman of the WI during these years, welcomed the launch of the new WI magazine in March 1919. Writing in the first edition, she stated that the new publication would ensure ‘village will be united to village and county to county in a way which has never been possible before’ (Mar 1919: 2). Priced at two pence, the new magazine approached its layout and design to appeal to readers already familiar with popular women’s magazines, using various typesets and numerous photographs and illustrations. But it was not intended for general sale. A request to offer a discount to newsagents was refused on the grounds that the magazine ‘did not appeal to the general public.’[[15]](#endnote-15)

Looking back at the early years of *Home and Country*, the founding editor, Alice Williams, recalled how she worked with one other volunteer to produce the magazine each month during the 1920s. This contrasted with the ‘two editors, two business managers, an accountant, a secretary, three assistants, a committee and a circulation of 70,000 per issue in 1938’ (*Home and Country* Jan 1938: 1–2). The editor was answerable to the ‘Home and Country Sub-Committee’ set up in November 1920. This committee reported to the national Executive Committee and was set up to ‘advise on the policy, publication and management of *Home and Country*.’[[16]](#endnote-16) Like most organisational magazines, *Home and Country* shared news of the WI’s local, national, and international activities. Executive Committee and Standing Sub-Committee reports were published in the magazine along with detailed accounts of the Annual General Meeting (AGM) and international work with organisations such as the Associated Countrywomen of the World.

Like the MU publications, the dominant voice in *Home and Country* was that of the national leadership. There is evidence that efforts were made to ensure news from local institute branches was given adequate space in the magazine. In response to requests from members in the early 1920s, the magazine’s Sub-Committee agreed that local supplements, published by county federations, could be inserted into editions of *Home and Country*.[[17]](#endnote-17) The fact that members felt compelled to request greater coverage of local news (in addition to ‘Notes From County Federations’) is significant. It suggests that a tension existed between the objectives of the editorial team and the interests of local village members. This tension is further evident in the magazine’s circulation figures. During the 1920s and 1930s *Home and Country* sold between 50,000 and 70,000 copies per month. With a total WI membership of approximately 240,000 in 1928 growing to 318,000 in the late 1930s, it becomes clear that, like the MU, not all WI members were interested in their associational magazine.

In addition to organisational updates, *Home and Country* offered a mix of national and international news, parliamentary reports, fashion pages, and book and film reviews. Advice on domestic issues appeared in columns such as ‘The Home Page’ and ‘Common Sense Cookery’ and poems, short stories, and serials were regular additions. In 1925 the Sub-Committee reported that the well-known author and WI member, E. M. Delafield, had agreed to write a serial for the first six months of 1926 for a fee of twenty-five pounds.[[18]](#endnote-18) Handicrafts, drama, and music, all popular activities within local institutes, received significant coverage in the magazine. Advertisements for products purchased by rural housewives, for example Calor Gas, Nestle’s Milk and handicraft supplies also appeared regularly. Significantly, the magazine acknowledged that not all of its readers were or wanted to be full-time wives and mothers. Throughout 1923–4 a series of articles showcased teaching, nursing, farm work, and dairying as good career options for women.

Like the print media of the MU, *Home and Country* catered for women whose interests were diverse and extended beyond the kitchen sink. These women were not viewed as slaves to domesticity, but as individuals curious about the social, political, economic, and cultural issues of the day. With many women now entitled to vote in parliamentary elections, the WI followed the example of the MU and other women’s groups in utilising their print media to promote active citizenship. The WI welcomed the extension of the franchise to women in 1918. Ten years later, when women won the vote on equal terms with men, the editor of *Home and Country* wrote, ‘it now remains for women to show that they have sufficient political zeal and intelligence to justify the trust of the House of Commons’ (May 1928: 67). The desire to inform and educate women in citizenship was not surprising for an organisation whose membership included well-known feminist and suffrage supporters. Prominent amongst these were Helena Auerbach, Grace Hadow, Margaret Wintringham MP, and Lady Rhondda (Andrews 2015: 70).

Readers of *Home and Country* were regularly reminded to vote in national and local elections and to use their vote wisely. In the early 1920s a series of articles entitled ‘Voters Awake’ sought to inform and educate members about the democratic process and the power of the vote (Andrews 2015: 73). In addition, articles and features in *Home and Country* focused on different aspects of the electoral system. A special ‘Local Government’ edition, published in February 1922, advised that ‘women should not only vote,’ but also ‘use their influence to secure the nomination of suitable women’ (4). Detailed information about upcoming local elections and the differences between local government bodies was provided, and a former County Councillor and WI member wrote about her experience in office.

*Home and Country* published articles on the work of other women’s organisations, such as the Six Point Group and the NUSEC, which like the WI and MU promoted active citizenship for women. Aware of the NUSEC’s ‘definitely feminist character’ the Executive Committee of the WI declined associate membership and prevented local institutes from affiliating to the Union.’[[19]](#endnote-19) Lady Denman did agree, however, that short accounts of the NUSEC’s work ‘together with the work of other societies with which the NFWI co-operates’ should be published in *Home and Country.*[[20]](#endnote-20)This incident illustrates once again the tensions evident within the interwar women’s movement. While some WI members would have identified as feminist, the Executive Committee was keen to avoid direct association with feminist groups. At this time the public often viewed feminist societies as radical political pressure groups. Direct affiliation to these groups could therefore prove detrimental to an organisation seeking to attract a mass membership. Yet, in spite of this, *Home and Country* continued to report on the activities of feminist societies. This decision does appear contradictory and may have confused readers. This is turn may have been a factor in the low take up of the magazine amongst the wider membership.

The WI’s promotion of active citizenship for women, in contrast to the MU, was not motivated by the desire to uphold Christian values in public life. As a non-denominational organisation, the WI was careful to avoid sectarian issues. This is the reason the WI did not enter the debate on divorce law reform. Nonetheless, the WI and the MU shared many common concerns on matters affecting women’s lives in the interwar years. Housing, the introduction of family allowances, women police, maternity, child welfare, and the peace movement all featured in articles and editorials published in MU magazines and *Home and Country*. The objective was not just to educate and inform readers on these important questions, but also to encourage members to take action. For example, calls to appoint more women police to forces across England and Wales were supported by many women’s groups at this time.[[21]](#endnote-21) In September 1922, *Home and Country* published a letter signed by ‘A WELLWISHER’ in support of the WI campaign for women police. The writer urged local WI members to hold meetings in their villages calling for the appointment of more women to the police force, because ‘if there was ever a question which concerns mothers and their children, surely it is the question of the Women Police’ (25). Throughout the interwar years *Home and Country* published regular articles and updates on the campaign, noting in March 1928 that ‘the women police as a body have had a long uphill fight against prejudice and ignorance but it is gratifying to find that each year now they make steady progress and gain new converts’ (116). Calls for local institutes to take up this issue continued and in 1938 the Lewis WI joined with the Brighton and Hove branch of the Catholic Women’s League to press for the appointment of more women police in the East Sussex area (*Catholic Women’s League Magazine* Jan 1939: 4).

Housing, particularly rural housing, was another key issue for the WI. In August 1919 two WI members expressed their view on the postwar housing crisis. L. Walker, President of the Lampeter WI, argued that government spending on housing should be directed to the repair of houses on smallholdings so that the lives of those living in rural communities would be improved. Similarly, Mrs Perkins of the Boldre WI called on every local institute to send a housing resolution to their District and Parish Council outlining their housing needs. She explained that such action was needed so that ‘the indifference of the public to parochial affairs’ could be overcome (*Home and Country* Aug 1919: 13). The regularity of articles on the housing crisis indicated to readers the high priority the WI gave to this problem in the years between the wars. Members were asked to play their part in highlighting local shortages. For instance, in March 1938 readers were asked to gather information on how many young couples in their area were unable to afford a cottage to live in and to ‘make a list of the old cottages in the village that need renovating.’ This information was considered vital if county federations were to have any success in demanding immediate action from the local housing committee (110). For the WI and the MU on-going housing shortages proved a useful way to highlight how government policy had a direct impact on family life. This objective was well illustrated by an appeal to readers of the *Workers’ Paper*, which urged that ‘we must use our voice, that voice that has been given to us, and never rest till our local authorities have built proper houses for our people’ (Apr 1918: 48).

**Conclusion**

Promoting active citizenship among women in the interwar years can be identified as a common thread in the magazines of the MU and WI. Rather than focusing exclusively on women’s roles as wives and mothers, both organisations, through their publications, encouraged women to take an interest in national and international affairs and to participate in life outside the home. Publishing regular articles on topics ranging from politics, religion, and social policy to entertainment and leisure pursuits helped achieve this goal. While these groups did not challenge traditional domestic roles per se, they presented constructions of femininity that were also able to embrace women’s new opportunities as equal citizens. In both cases, the production of their magazines was a ‘top-down’ affair, content carefully controlled by the national leadership which mainly represented the views of middle and upper-middle class women. This may account, in part, for the discrepancy between high membership numbers and the comparatively low circulation of the magazines; it seems that for some members of the MU and WI, the information, advice, and news emanating from the leadership was not always relevant or appealing.

Nevertheless *Home and Country*, *Mothers in Council*, the *Mothers’ Union Journal* and the *Workers’ Paper* constitute a rich and detailed historical archive. They demonstrate that representations of the experience of being a housewife were more varied than is often assumed. They do so by offering evidence of the wide range of concerns that housewives’ associations considered relevant to their work in the 1920s and 1930s and of how they mediated these issues for members/readers. Although sometimes didactic in tone, these publications were instrumental in encouraging women to assume the responsibilities that citizenship brought with it. This included motivating women to vote and stand for public office and to campaign for the introduction of social reforms, such as housing policy, in practical ways. The print media of the MU and WI demonstrate, therefore, that women’s lives didn’t have to be limited by domesticity. On the contrary this was a time when many women’s organisations, including housewives’ associations, inspired women to be active citizens and to seize the opportunities that life now had to offer them.

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1. Notes

   See for example Andrews 2015; Beaumont 2015; Giles 2004; Holloway 2005; Langhamer 2000; and Zweiniger-Bargielowska 2001. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For further discussion on the history of the MU and WI see Moyse 2009 and Andrews 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. By 1940 the MU had approximately 80,000 overseas members and was active in many countries including Canada, Australia, New Zealand, India, Uganda, and South Africa (Moyse 2009: 140). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See Meyerowitz 1993; Clear 2015; Richie et al. 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See for example Andrews 2015; Beaumont 2015; Gibson 2008; and Moyse 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. This custom of working-class women being instructed on how to care for their homes and children by middle-class and upper middle-class women was well established by the early twentieth century. See Davin 1978. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. The enrolling member was an elected official who was responsible for ensuring new members complied with MU membership rules. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. In the 1930s the reports of the editors of the three magazines to Central Council were published in the *Workers’ Paper*. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For more information on how the MU was governed see Moyse 2009 and Beaumont 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See for example essays in Gottlieb and Toye 2013 and DiCenzo 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. The 1923 Matrimonial Causes Act sanctioned divorce for men and women on the grounds of adultery alone. In 1937 the Matrimonial Causes Act extended the grounds for divorce to include factors such as cruelty and desertion. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. The MU also opposed the legalisation of abortion and the use of artificial birth control during the interwar years. For a full discussion see Beaumont 2015: 68–100. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. For example the Church of England did not oppose the 1923 Matrimonial Causes Act as it did not introduce new grounds for divorce but instead made the rights of men and women equal within the law. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. For a full discussion of these campaigns see Beaumont 2015: 101–35. See also DiCenzo and Eustance chapter in this volume. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. National Federation of Women’s Institute Archive, Women’s Library, LSE, 5FWI/G/2/1/1 Box 250, Home and Country Sub-Committee Minute Book 1921–1925, 8 Jan 1923: 53. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. National Federation of Women’s Institute Archive, 5FWI/G/2/1/1 Box 250, Home and Country Sub-Committee Minute Book 1921–1925, Terms of Reference: 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. National Federation of Women’s Institute Archive, 5FWI/G/2/1/1 Box 250, Home and Country Sub-Committee Minute Book 1921–1925, 8 Jan 1923: 50. Counties that published their own supplement included Oxfordshire, Hampshire, and Monmouthshire. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. National Federation of Women’s Institute Archive, 5FWI/G/2/1/1 Box 250, Home and Country Sub-Committee Minute Book 1921–1925, 12 Oct 1925: 113. Delafield was the author of the popular novel *Diary of a Provincial Lady* (1930), extracts of which first appeared in *Time and Tide*. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. National Federation of Women’s Institute Archive, 5FWI/A/1/1/05 Box 004, Executive Committee Minutes, 9 May 1922: 170. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. National Federation of Women’s Institute Archive, 5FWI/A/1/1/05 Box 004, Executive Committee Minutes, 11 July 1922: 203. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. For more information see Beaumont 2015: 153–8 and Jackson 2006. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)