CHAPTER THREE

Feminism: Women, Work, and Politics

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Feminism as a social movement and as a set of ideas has played a prominent part in the political and social development of most countries of the world during the twentieth century. The term itself first appeared in France during the 1890s, but was not used widely in Europe until after World War I. Suffrage campaigners, for example, referred to themselves as suffragists, suffragettes, or advocates of women’s rights rather than as feminists. Feminism posed a challenge to the status quo and therefore provoked a very negative reaction from its critics. Feminists were described as a “shrieking sisterhood,” as “mannish” and unattractive in appearance, and as neglecting homes and children. They were characterized as extreme in their attitudes – waging a war against men or seeking to undermine “traditional” sex roles within the family. It is little wonder, therefore, that even those who explicitly sought to challenge women’s subordinate social position could be reluctant to describe themselves as feminists.

This poses something of a dilemma for historians. Should the term feminism or feminist be used to describe organizations and individuals who did not use this word themselves? In general historians have employed the term as a useful shorthand. It conveys a set of meanings that are widely recognized and enables links to be made, and comparisons to be drawn, between individuals and organizations operating in
very diverse contexts. Although feminist theorists and historians differ in what they see as lying at the heart of “modern feminism,” it is possible to adopt a broad working definition that is flexible and inclusive.

1 At the heart of being a feminist is the recognition that there is an imbalance of power between the sexes and an intention to do something about it. Central to feminist arguments is the belief that women’s condition is socially constructed, rather than rooted in biology, and therefore is open to change. Thus feminists question conventional wisdoms about the roles played by men and women and contest the assumption that there is a boundary between “private” issues (sexuality, the family, marital relationships) and the public concerns of work and politics. They emphasize that women’s voices need to be heard – that they should represent themselves and achieve autonomy in their lives.

Any definition of feminism is inextricably linked to the ways in which its history is written and understood and there have been shifts over time in the interpretation of its main features. Members of the Women’s Liberation Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s played a key role in developing a framework for analyzing the history of feminism. They were keen to trace the origins of their movement and to establish themselves in a feminist tradition and therefore tended to focus on well-organized women’s movements that espoused explicit feminist goals. Reflecting divisions in contemporary feminist theory, historians identified distinct strands in the nineteenth and early twentieth-century women’s movement and emphasized the tensions between ideas based on equality and those on difference.

2 They highlighted a key period of activism: “first wave” feminism ca. 1860s–1914, in particular the highly visible
suffrage campaigns in Europe and North America in the immediate prewar years, when solidarity among women appeared to be at its height. In contrast the interwar years were seen as a time of fragmentation in feminist politics and of setback for women as they faced war, fascism, and unemployment. Indeed, it was assumed that feminism as a movement only revived with “second wave feminism” in the 1960s and 1970s.

More recently, however, the interpretive framework for understanding feminist history has shifted. Changes in feminist theory and politics, and the publication of a number of histories of feminism that compare different European countries, have drawn attention to the diversity of the movement. Thus historians are far more likely now to write about feminisms rather than feminism and to point to the interconnections between ideas and movements that were once seen as “separate” and distinct.

3 Emphasis is placed on the complex ways in which women developed a political identity. Studies of women’s involvement in imperialism and colonialism, for example, have highlighted the different meanings of women’s citizenship and the difficulties in constructing a “universal sisterhood.” They point to the ethnocentrism and racism of white, European feminists who saw themselves as having a “civilizing mission.”

4 Thus suffrage campaigners argued that if women had the vote they could use this to push forward women’s emancipation in the colonies and to introduce social reforms for women and children that would in turn strengthen the empire.
Differences between women, whether of class, race, nation, or religion, were a central feature of the histories of feminism written in the 1970s and 1980s. Now, however, historians are less likely to write about these in terms of binary oppositions, such as sex versus class, but to look instead at how individual women and their organizations juggled between conflicting loyalties and at how the boundaries between them were shifting and permeable. In her challenging study, Denise Riley raised doubts about how far it was possible to talk about “woman” as a political category at all.

Thus historians have questioned women’s attempts to create a “universal sisterhood” and have emphasized the class and race dimensions of European feminists’ claims to speak for all women. An approach that emphasizes complexity has led to a reassessment of the extent to which feminists were active in periods that fell outside the two “waves” of high profile campaigning. It has been argued that a focus on “ebbs and flows” means that we can “miss the variety of ways in which feminisms can flourish,” for example the “pragmatic feminism of women fighting for survival” in the hostile climate of the interwar years.

It has been recognized, too, that women pursued their feminist objectives in a variety of spaces and not just in overtly feminist organizations.

It is clearly important that women’s attempts to challenge gender inequalities in “quieter” periods should be rescued from obscurity and be seen as part of feminist history. Nonetheless, there is a danger that the core of what it means to be a feminist can be lost if we stray too far from a definition that includes an explicit challenge to gender roles and inequalities. By acting together in a collective campaign, whether from the basis of a women-only group or from within
mixed-sex political parties, women could develop a feminist consciousness that had the potential to affect the ways in which women and men thought about themselves and their place in the world.

It is impossible in a short chapter to provide an overview of the history of feminism in Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. Instead, the approaches and issues raised here will be examined through a focus on three areas: the women’s suffrage movement; feminism, peace, and war; and the relationship between work, family, and politics in the interwar years. Throughout, attention will be drawn to key themes. Firstly, whenever women challenged gender inequalities they faced a dilemma: should they be seeking equality with men or should they seek to value “feminine” characteristics and roles and to celebrate difference, or indeed to look for a way of bringing the two together? These questions were made explicit when feminists debated the complex interrelationship between women’s economic independence, their position within the family and the workplace, and their involvement in public life. Secondly, it is important to explore how far women’s campaigns had an impact on their social position and how far change has come from other directions. In examining these questions it is crucial to make comparisons between European countries. These can reveal the complexity of feminist ideas, methods, and strategies and highlight the changes that took place over time.

Women’s Suffrage

The women’s suffrage movement has, understandably, received a great deal of attention both from contemporaries
and from historians. In most European countries sex was a key factor in deciding who was able to exercise the vote. Women’s exclusion from the franchise, therefore, highlighted the extent to which they shared common interests that could cut across class, religious, and political differences. It was the one issue that brought women together from very varied backgrounds in highly public campaigns that challenged conventional notions of a “woman’s place” and contested the separation of the private and public spheres. In no country did women have the right to vote before men and when they finally achieved the franchise it was usually on a more restricted basis than their male counterparts. The one exception was Finland, where universal suffrage was introduced in 1906.

In most European countries the demand for women’s enfranchisement was first made during the nineteenth century, but it was until the decade before World War I that suffrage movements increased the range of their activities and had a greater impact on national politics. New organizations were formed, the basis of support began to widen, and women developed different tactics and methods of campaigning. In this period the British movement took center stage as “militant” actions caught the imagination of women throughout Europe. Militancy was initiated by members of the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU), formed in 1903 under the leadership of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst. At the same time the “constitutionalist” organization, the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), established in 1897, was also inspired to develop different forms of campaigning and began to organize demonstrations and processions. Support grew rapidly. By 1913 the WSPU had 88 branches and its
newspaper had a circulation of 30,000–40,000, while the NUWSS had 380 affiliated societies and over 53,000 members.

The size and flamboyance of the British movement has tended to overshadow women’s struggle for the franchise elsewhere, but this should not be underestimated. In Germany, France, Denmark, and Sweden new suffrage groups were formed and membership increased. In Denmark, for example, the two largest groups had 23,000 members by 1910, a significant proportion of the small female population of 1.5 million. The German Union for Women’s Suffrage grew slowly and had only 2,500 members in 1908 but, when the ban on women’s participation in politics was lifted in that year, membership expanded rapidly and reached 9,000 by 1913. Individual women engaged in acts of militancy. In France Hubertine Auclert entered a polling booth and smashed the ballot box which led to her arrest, while Madeleine Pelletier received a fine for breaking a window. In general, however, in countries where there was a strong emphasis on women’s role as wife and mother, moderate suffrage campaigners were reluctant to take unconventional actions that could be seen as a challenge to traditional notions of “femininity.” The German Union for Women’s Suffrage, for example, held only one street demonstration in which women stayed in their carriages rather than walking. In contrast, the women’s section of the Social Democratic Party organized demonstrations in favor of women’s suffrage on the first International Proletarian Women’s Day in 1911, when women walked through the streets carrying placards and banners.
The continuing fascination that the suffrage movement has had for historians means that there is a vast historiography on the subject, in particular on the British campaign.

7 Recent texts have raised new questions and have reinterpreted familiar narratives. For example, attention has been drawn to the importance of culture and propaganda, including suffrage plays, novels, poems, and art in the conduct of the campaign. In her pioneering study of the striking imagery of the movement, Lisa Tickner has argued that posters, banners, and other visual material were not just a “footnote” to the “real political history going on elsewhere, but an integral part of the struggle to shape thought, focus debates and stimulate action.”

8 She has suggested that it promoted the image of the suffrage activist as a new type of political woman who was “womanly,” well dressed, attractive, and caring, but also brave, intelligent, and prepared to suffer for her cause. The ways in which the “new political woman” was depicted varied in different countries and across organizations. In Austria and Germany, for instance, where mainstream suffragists were anxious to counter arguments that women would become too masculine if they entered politics, the images reflected a more “traditional view of femininity,” although socialist women were prepared to use women of strength in their propaganda.

Historians are far more likely now to point to the complex ways in which women took part in suffrage politics and to challenge the view that there were rigid distinctions between organizations or between “constitutionalists” and “militants.” Biographies of a wide range of participants and detailed local studies, for instance, have shown the extent to which suffragists made different political choices over the course of
the campaign, moved from one organization to another, and in many cases continued to belong to a number of different organizations at once. Even in Germany, where there was hostility between socialist women and the moderate suffrage movement, cooperation took place between them at a local level. Militancy itself has also been the subject of extensive reinterpretation. Hilda Kean and Laura Nym Mayhall have drawn attention to the way in which suffragettes, through their own histories of the campaign and through their autobiographies published in the interwar years, constructed a particular view of militancy. Suffragettes emphasized the destruction of property, imprisonment, and hunger striking as the hallmarks of militancy and this view had a long lasting influence on historians. Sandra Holton and Krista Cowman, however, have pointed to the diverse nature of militancy and to the changes that took place over time. Even in an overtly militant organization such as the WSPU not all members engaged in actions that would lead to arrest and women could choose to confine their activities to disrupting meetings or to raising money. Moreover the Women’s Freedom League, which described itself as a militant group, carried out less violent acts such as tax resistance or refusal to fill in the 1911 Census forms.

Recent texts on the suffrage movement in Europe focus on the complexity of the ideas put forward during the campaign and explore what citizenship meant to women. Suffragists had long expressed the view that women should be able to exercise the vote as a natural right based on their ability to reason and on their common humanity with men. They also argued that exclusion from the franchise
reinforced women’s subordinate status in other areas of their lives, including the workplace and the home, as well as denying them a voice in legislation that affected their lives. At the same time they suggested that women’s enfranchisement would benefit the community, since they would bring different qualities to politics because of their role within the home. This argument was reinforced after the turn of the century. In a context in which motherhood was seen as vital for the strength of the nation, suffragists increasingly used their position within the family, and the qualities associated with domesticity and motherhood, as the basis for their claims to citizenship. They suggested that women, as active citizens, would contribute to a moral regeneration of society, would purify politics, and would support social reforms to improve the lives of women and children.

The demand for the vote, therefore, was never just about the principle of women’s right to formal equality with men. It was also about challenging male-defined priorities and values and was always linked to broader debates about the meaning of women’s emancipation. Suffragists agreed that women acting together as women could make a difference, but they disagreed about what they hoped to achieve and in their analysis of the causes of women’s oppression. For example, for Christabel Pankhurst and many other members of the WSPU, the campaign for the vote highlighted the significance of male power over women and therefore the importance of women’s solidarity with members of their sex. Christabel argued that women were economically, politically, and sexually subordinate to men and drew a link between their exclusion from political power and forms of social degradation such as prostitution and venereal disease. Indeed, she claimed there was a parallel between women’s economic
dependence on men within marriage and prostitution and coined the famous slogan, “Votes for Women and Chastity for Men.”

Other committed suffrage activists, however, continued to work with men within mixed-sex political parties, although they might also be involved in all-female suffragette groups. They often suffered real tensions between their pursuit of sexual equality and their support for party political causes and in specific contexts might choose not to prioritize women’s suffrage if it threatened party unity. Socialist women, for example, focused on class as well as sex oppression. This led some to question the importance of the vote for working-class women, in particular if they were likely to be excluded from proposals for a “limited” franchise where the demand was for votes for women on the same terms as men. Others argued that the principle was all-important and that women could only take a full part in the struggle for socialism, and in shaping a new society, if they were on an equal footing with men.

A cause of conflict within the socialist movement was over the basis on which the vote should be demanded. At the Second International meeting in Stuttgart in 1907 a resolution was passed calling on members to “struggle energetically” for women’s suffrage as part of a general demand for universal suffrage. This caused difficulties in two directions. In some countries, such as Austria, it was argued that the demand for an adult male franchise should be pursued before that of women as the only realistic course in the context of that country’s politics. This position was supported by Adelheid Popp, leader of the country’s socialist women. When manhood suffrage was introduced in 1907, however, women formed a separate organization within the Social Democratic
Party and campaigned for their own inclusion in the franchise. In countries such as Britain, where not all men could vote, socialist women feared that the demand for adult suffrage was both unrealistic and might also disguise a commitment to manhood suffrage. One socialist group, the Independent Labour Party, was unusual in supporting the demand for a limited franchise, that is votes for women on the same terms as men. It led to a fierce debate between those who prioritized the demand for “adult suffrage” and those who campaigned, on the grounds both of principle and political expediency, for a “limited franchise” as a first step to universal suffrage. Disagreements about which demand to support could divide the suffrage movement itself. In Germany, for example, the Women’s Suffrage League supported socialist women in their call for a universal franchise, whereas the right-wing German Alliance for Women’s Suffrage and the older, moderate group, the German Union for Women’s Suffrage, supported a propertied franchise.

Despite differences between them – whether of religion, class, party politics, or nationality – exclusion from the franchise did prompt women to work together both within their own countries and also across national boundaries. International friendships developed after women met each other at conferences and were sustained through copious letter writing. The establishment of new transnational organizations provided more formal international links. A key group was the International Woman Suffrage Alliance. Based largely in countries in Europe and North America, its moderate, well-educated, middle-class membership held conferences every two years and kept in touch through their journal, Jus Suffragii. They were committed to the concept of internationalism, while at the same time having a strong sense
of identification with their own nation-state. Before 1914 members of the IWSA saw their demands for suffrage and for peace as universal issues that could transcend differences between women, but their notions of “sisterhood” and female solidarity were harder to sustain when the outbreak of World War I raised different questions about what it meant to be an active citizen and placed a greater emphasis on loyalty to nation.

Feminism, Peace, and War

By the outbreak of war women had achieved the vote in only two European countries, Finland and Norway. Elsewhere, prewar suffrage organizations diverted their energies into activities related to war, although suffrage campaigning did not cease altogether. The war itself raised important new questions about the meaning of women’s citizenship – whether or not they had the vote, women were increasingly called upon to “serve” their nation, either as paid workers or as volunteers to deal with the social problems faced by the community. Women took part in employment directly related to war, in particular the production of munitions and the nursing of wounded soldiers either at home or at the front. In the latter they shared to some extent the physical dangers and discomforts of soldiers themselves. It has been suggested that women’s extensive participation in the war effort of their respective countries led to lasting gains in their social and economic position and that they developed self-confidence and new expectations. Recent studies, however, have modified this view by highlighting the complex and paradoxical impact of the war. Gail Braybon and Penny Summerfield suggest that we must be careful to look at the different ways in which women experienced the war.
according to their age, class, and marital status. They also note the ambivalence of the British government to women’s war efforts and argue that prewar assumptions about women’s responsibilities for the domestic sphere affected the nature and extent of women’s participation in the war, as well as the possibility of long-term change.

13 This was certainly the case in Germany, where prewar patterns of employment coupled with the resistance of trade unions ensured that the proportion of women in factory work during the war was the lowest in Europe.

The state’s need for women to contribute to the war effort, which opened a range of possibilities for women, sat uneasily alongside a competing narrative that emphasized the importance of motherhood for the future of the nation and that could simultaneously curtail their activities. These contradictory messages were reflected in the complex ways in which women were represented. They were praised for their bravery and heroism, in particular in famous cases such as the execution of Nurse Edith Cavell, and also for their contribution and flexibility as paid workers. And yet these portrayals could go hand in hand with more traditional images of women as caring, self-sacrificing, or in need of protection. The entry of women, in particular middle-class women, into unfamiliar areas of work, and the increased pay and freedom enjoyed by many working-class girls, created anxieties about an increase in sexual immorality and the threat that this posed to stable family lives. Susan Grayzel argues that this affected notions of citizenship and placed a new emphasis on gender differences, since motherhood was seen as the prime patriotic role for women in the way soldiering was for men.

14
Where did feminists at the time stand on these questions? In most European countries they were divided in their attitudes towards the war and disagreed about the role that feminist organizations ought to play. The situation was complicated in countries such as Ireland where nationalism was also a consideration and where there were tensions about whether nationalist demands should take precedence over gender issues. The main prewar suffrage organizations in Britain, France, and Germany gave support to the war effort, although individual leaders and members of the rank and file had varied reasons for doing so. Many were of course patriotic and wished to do all they could to support their respective governments, but they also saw the potential for women to play a different public role and were hopeful that if women demonstrated their capacity to serve the nation as responsible citizens this would help their claims to enfranchisement. A minority, however, saw the core of their feminism as lying in a commitment to solve disputes by peaceful means – for them, the whole point of having the suffrage was so that women could advocate moral, rather than physical, force. These differing views came to a head in 1915 when the Dutch suffragist, Dr Aletta Jacobs, convened a meeting of the IWSA at The Hague with the aim of rallying women to seek a peaceful end to the conflict and reawakening a sense of internationalism.

Mainstream feminist organizations refused to send representatives, but individual members supported the initiative. Not all of them were able to attend the Congress – in Britain, for example, the government at first refused to issue passports and then cancelled shipping in the North Sea. Nonetheless, the Congress led to the formation of a new organization, the Women’s International League (WIL),
which provided a focus for peace campaigning. Supporters included women who had expressed radical views about suffrage and other political causes before the war, including the German activists Anita Augspurg and Lida Gustava Heymann, Gabrielle Duchêne from France, and Rosika Schwimmer from Hungary. In Britain members were drawn from all the suffrage groups and included Helena Swanwick, Maude Royden, and the ILP socialist Isabella Ford, as well as many activists from the labor movement. Approximately half of the executive of the NUWSS resigned over the issue. Peace campaigners used arguments that had been prevalent before the war and mixed equal rights issues with notions of women’s difference. They pointed out that women, as non-voters, bore no responsibility for the outbreak of war. They also assumed that women’s caring roles within the family, in particular as mothers, meant that they were naturally inclined towards peace and felt solidarity with other women that crossed national boundaries. Isabella Ford, for example, claimed that “the destruction of the race is felt more bitterly and more deeply by those who through suffering and anguish have brought the race into the world” and suggested that “as the mothers and the educators of the human race, the bond which unites us is deeper than any bond which at present unites men.”

The WIL aimed to bring the war to a speedy end through a negotiated peace settlement that would not contain the seeds of future wars. Members held numerous meetings and also disseminated their propaganda through publications such as newspapers and pamphlets. A group of WIL leaders also visited the heads of neutral states in an effort to persuade them to put their weight behind a negotiated peace. All peace
activists came under criticism for their views, but those socialist and revolutionary women who took a more radical stand in opposition to the war were labeled as subversive and faced arrest and imprisonment. Clara Zetkin and Rosa Luxemburg from Germany, the French schoolteacher Hélène Brion and Nellie Best, who was associated with the British suffragette and revolutionary Sylvia Pankhurst, were all imprisoned for their anti-war activities.

The war, therefore, highlighted differences between women who disagreed about what active citizenship meant for feminists in a context of international conflict. Both supporters and opponents of war, however, saw opportunities for women to take part in, and to make an impact on, public life, while also emphasizing women’s difference from men. As Grayzel notes, peace campaigners used gender stereotypes that depicted women as non-aggressive and caring for others for their own purposes, since it was easier for them as non-combatants to speak out against the war.

During the war itself, therefore, feminist campaigning was diverted away from the suffrage cause either to the peace movement or else towards voluntary committee work to safeguard the interests of women as workers and as mothers. Feminists sought improved healthcare and protection from high prices and food shortages and were also at the forefront of caring for refugees. And yet during and after the war many European countries enfranchised women for the first time, including Denmark and Iceland in 1915, and Austria, Germany, and Britain in 1918, followed by Czechoslovakia and the Netherlands in 1919, Sweden in 1921, and Ireland in 1922. How important was the war in explaining women’s
achievement of the vote? A commonly held assumption is that women achieved the vote as a reward for their war services, but this is no longer regarded as a convincing explanation, in particular when comparisons are made between different countries. In France and Italy women were not enfranchised until the 1940s despite their contribution to the war effort, while in Britain politicians were at first reluctant to include women in their plans for extending the franchise. Those who did gain the vote in 1918 were aged over 30 and had been far less involved in war services than their younger counterparts. In some countries, including Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia, the upheavals brought by war led to the downfall of authoritarian regimes and the introduction of liberal democracies. Here it was the changed political context that favored the enfranchisement of women, since they were seen as a bulwark against extremism from the left and the right. Gisela Bock suggests that the timing of women’s enfranchisement was linked to the “various national paths to manhood suffrage.”

17 Thus, she argues that women had to wait so long for the vote in France and Switzerland because all men had enjoyed the franchise since the early nineteenth century and did not need women’s support to get the suffrage for themselves.

But where does this leave women’s agency and the long campaigns that had preceded enfranchisement? Clearly, on its own the existence of a strong suffrage movement was not enough, in particular when, as in France, the political context was unfavorable. On the other hand highly visible suffrage campaigns did keep the issue to the forefront of politics and helped to ensure that women would be included when changes were made to the franchise. Sandra Holton, for example, suggests that the continuation of suffrage activity
during the war, which has often been overlooked, made it difficult for the British government to leave women out of the Representation of the People Act (1918), despite their continuing reservations.

18

Work, Family, and Politics in the Interwar Years

In the postwar world the feminist movement appeared to be much more fragmented. In countries where women had gained the franchise, feminists differed among themselves about their goals, their priorities, and about how best to achieve their aims. It was difficult to agree on a common outlook and to act together. This was exacerbated as women pursued their feminist goals through a variety of different organizations, including prewar suffrage groups, many of which had changed their name to reflect their broader agenda, single-issue organizations, and mixed-sex political parties. Although the war had provided opportunities for women to become involved in public life, Susan Kingsley Kent suggests that fears about the disruption of gender relationships led to a desire to get back to normal in the interwar years and to an emphasis on an ideology of domesticity in which women were once again primarily identified with the home.

19 This was reinforced by a widespread economic depression and the development of conservative and fascist governments that created a context that was not conducive to feminist demands. Thus, women’s role as wives and mothers was thought to be the basis from which they would engage as active citizens. Feminists themselves were affected by these changes and began to focus on women’s role within the home. In the interwar years, therefore, they debated the relationship between women’s role within the family and their
economic and personal independence that raised broader questions about the nature of their citizenship.

Throughout Europe feminists continued to demand equal rights for women. In France, for instance, the campaign for the vote grew in strength and by 1929 the French Union for Women’s Suffrage had 100,000 members. Many governments passed equal rights legislation after women had been enfranchised – the new constitutions of the Weimar republic in 1919 and the Irish Free State in 1922, for instance, declared that all citizens were equal under the law regardless of sex. Nonetheless, in the absence of a strong, united feminist movement, and in the climate of economic depression, it was difficult to ensure that formal equality would be put into practice. In Ireland, for example, the Catholic church opposed women’s employment outside the home and legislation was introduced to restrict female work opportunities in 1935. This provides a useful reminder that gains for women could also be lost – in Spain, for example, women were successful in their campaign to ensure that the new constitution of the Second Republic would include women’s enfranchisement, and other reforms were introduced that benefited women, including a secularized marriage law and civil divorce. But when Franco came to power in 1936, women were disenfranchised and emphasis was placed on their role within the home that was reinforced by legislative changes that made divorce illegal and restored male authority within marriage.

Alongside the continuing campaigns for equal rights many feminists also turned their attention to improving women’s position within the home through social welfare reforms. This was a controversial issue for feminists since it raised questions about the meaning of women’s emancipation. It led
in particular to a consideration about the relationship between work, family, and the nature of women’s citizenship, both within feminist groups and also among feminists who pursued their goals through mixed-sex political parties. In Britain, for example, members of the Six Points Group, led by Lady Rhondda, emphasized the importance of equal rights and women’s common humanity with men as the basis of their citizenship. In contrast, many members of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship, successor to the NUWSS and led by Eleanor Rathbone, argued that women could never achieve equality unless the economic independence of married women, and the special needs of mothers, were addressed. In recent years historians have suggested that differences between these groups should not be exaggerated, since they all supported equal rights legislation and sought to improve women’s social and economic position.

Nonetheless there were differences of emphasis. Those who focused on social welfarereforms referred to maternity as “the most important of women’s occupations,” whereas “equality” feminists expressed the fear that a focus on motherhood would make it difficult for women to escape from traditional roles.

Conflicts arose over specific demands, in particular protective legislation at the workplace. On one side it was argued that women’s role in the family meant that they needed protection at the workplace, whereas on the other it was contended that if barriers were removed to women’s employment they would no longer be seen as marginal workers and changes in the family would follow. Conflicts over protective legislation spilled over into international feminist organizations as laws regulating women’s labor became an international issue. It divided feminist organizations from each other and also drove
a wedge between them and feminists within socialist and labor groups who generally supported protective legislation. This issue was particularly contentious because it raised the difficult question of whether women and men should be treated differently. In the case of other social welfare measures disagreements arose about the form that they should take rather than over whether they should be introduced at all.

Feminists who campaigned for social welfare reforms were working within a general context in which governments, pressure groups, and health professionals were all concerned with the health and welfare of the population. This raises the question, therefore, of what was distinctively feminist about their demands and whether there was a danger that their feminist perspective would be lost within general reform campaigns. Welfare feminism could provide a means to challenge women’s subordinate position in the home and to give women more choices about what to do with their lives. Two demands in particular, for family allowances and access to birth control, appeared to have a radical potential for contesting traditional structures since they raised issues about women’s autonomy and personal freedom. Feminists in several countries, including Britain, Germany, and Scandinavia, added their voices to a general demand for economic assistance to mothers.

They were not just concerned to alleviate poverty, but also argued that allowances should be set high enough to give married women greater independence. They disagreed among themselves, however, about how such reforms should be financed and what they hoped to achieve by their introduction. In Norway, for example, liberal feminists thought child allowances would enable women to pay for childcare and therefore to continue with paid employment,
whereas socialist feminists saw it as a means to free women from work outside the home, enabling them to spend more time with their children.

After World War I there was a change in attitudes towards sex and morality that made it easier for feminists to raise the importance of birth control. Nonetheless, its association with “free love” in the early days of the Bolshevik revolution and the emphasis of many governments on the need for an increased population meant that feminists played down the importance of women’s sexual autonomy and freedom. Instead, they stressed the health and welfare aspects of birth control, with socialist women arguing from a class perspective that working-class women needed local authority clinics to provide free contraceptive advice that was only available otherwise to wealthy women who could consult private doctors.

Feminists found it difficult to have an influence on social policy unless their aims coincided with those of the party in power. In Scandinavian countries, for example, where social democratic parties were in power during the 1930s, women played an important part in shaping the social welfare measures that were introduced. In Sweden these included job protection for married women, the legalization of contraception, and maternity benefits paid to mothers, while in Denmark and Sweden abortion based on a restricted set of criteria was also made legal. Elsewhere it was difficult to achieve reforms and the measures that were introduced did not necessarily shift the power relationships between men and women or challenge gender divisions. For example, when family allowances were introduced in Britain at the end of World War II, the intention was to reduce wage inflation and...
the amount paid was far too small to ensure the economic independence of married women.

The involvement of feminists in international issues, in particular the movement for peace, also raised concerns that feminist goals could become subsumed within a broader movement. Within the International Alliance of Women (successor of the IWSA) Nina Boyle argued that pacifism and social reform diverted feminists away from a focus on women’s legal and material subordination to men, whereas the veteran American campaigner Carrie Chapman Catt claimed that she had moved on since achieving the vote and had become a humanist, but that she still wanted to protest against women’s wrongs. Offen argues, however, that as feminists increasingly put their energies into working to protect democracy in the interests of both sexes, so campaigns around women’s subordination became more marginal.

For these reasons too, feminism could appear to be more fragmented and diffuse than in the prewar years.

Nonetheless if the interwar years are looked at in their own right, rather than through the lens of very active periods of high-profile campaigning, then it can be seen that feminists did continue to make an effort to challenge gender inequalities. In a hostile political and economic climate it was difficult for them to make their voices heard and to develop a feminist consciousness, but they worked across multiple sites, including single-sex feminist organizations and mixed-sex political parties. This has drawn attention to the importance of exploring what is meant by feminist activity. Many women campaigned for social and political reforms from within women’s organizations that refused to accept the label
“feminist,” and yet in several ways their work coincided with feminist goals.

23 In Denmark, for example, housewives’ associations and women’s sections in political parties drew an increasing number of women into political activity and some of their members supported demands for contraceptive advice. This was also the case in the British-based National Council of Women. In countries where women had the vote, feminists debated what it meant to be a citizen and began to address the issue of how women could benefit from equal rights when their social and economic position was different from that of men. They generally supported women’s right to work, but the emphasis of the period was on women’s role within the home as the basis for their active citizenship, rather than their waged labor.

Conclusion

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century feminism, as a theory and a practice, has been a key feature of European politics. It has been argued here that at the heart of any definition of feminism is the recognition of an unequal power relationship between the sexes and the desire to challenge this and to change it. Nonetheless, it should be recognized that the goals and strategies of feminists varied in different countries, and also over time, and that it is important not to exclude the activities of many women from a history of feminism through the use of prescriptive or narrow definitions. The suffrage movement has received a great deal of attention because it provided an opportunity for women to work together and to develop a sense of solidarity that was difficult to sustain once they left that environment. And yet women were rarely concerned only with improvements in the social position of
their sex. In some contexts they prioritized the peace movement, party political issues, or the needs of the working class even if this meant that it was difficult to sustain a sense of their own autonomy.

To what extent was an active women’s movement responsible for changes in women’s lives? Feminist campaigns were crucial for ensuring that women’s needs were not neglected, and also, in some periods, for raising consciousness of gender inequalities. On the other hand it was difficult to make headway in political and social contexts that were not conducive to radical politics and in these periods women’s own demands and priorities could shift – for example in the interwar years, when a social welfare agenda came to the fore. The strength of the ideology of separate spheres and women’s identification with domesticity was so embedded that it remained a central feature of social and economic life and social policy, despite the upheavals of two world wars. After World War II, for example, married women were expected to give a full-time commitment to family life and their domestic position was then reinforced by social policies, government propaganda, and popular magazines. Nonetheless, the restrictions on their lives after a period of raised expectations provided fertile ground for a continuing debate about gender roles and about the complex relationship between equality and difference. Women’s organizations also persisted in their efforts to achieve equal rights and welfare reforms. It was from this ferment of ideas and activities that feminists in the 1960s and 1970s were able to make a sustained challenge to women’s identification with the home and to put to the test contemporary assumptions about appropriate male and female roles.
NOTES


2 For example, see Olive Banks, Faces of Feminism: A Study of Feminism as a Social Movement (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1981).

3 For example, see Offen, European Feminisms; Caroline Daley and Melanie Nolan, eds, Suffrage and Beyond: International Feminist Perspectives (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1994).


5 Denise Riley, “Am I That Name?” Feminism and the Category of “Women” in History (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988).


11 For example, see Offen, European Feminisms.


14 Susan Grayzel, Women’s Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood and Politics in Britain and France during the First World War (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).


GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

Gisela Bock, Women in European History (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002). Explores debates over the “woman question” from the middle ages to the present; a thought-provoking section on the interwar years.

Caroline Daley and Melanie Nolan, eds, Suffrage and Beyond: International Feminist Perspectives (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1994). A pioneering collection of essays that compares the suffrage movement in a variety of countries throughout the world. Critical of using an Anglo-American model as a lens through which to view suffrage elsewhere.

Ian C. Fletcher, Laura E. Nym Mayhall, and Philippa Levine, eds, Women’s Suffrage in the British Empire: Citizenship, Nation and Race (London: Routledge, 2002). A stimulating collection of essays on feminist involvement in the project of Empire that reveals the multiple ways in which the local, the global, and the international intersect.

Gabrielle Griffin and Rosie Braidotti, eds, Thinking Differently: A Reader in European Women’s Studies (London: Zed Books, 2002). One section has essays on the women’s movement in various European countries.


