

Introducing Professional Women: the public, the private, and the political.

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Introduction

This special issue celebrates the 2019 Women's History Network conference 'Professional Women: the public, the private, and the political' which marked and commemorated the centenary of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act in Britain. Receiving Royal Assent on 23 December 1919, this enabling legislation opened all 'civil professions or vocations', including the civil service and legal profession, to women. Although the Act has been much maligned and criticised, it was a material improvement on women's ability to work and participate in the public sphere.¹ Prior to this enactment, women had only made significant inroads in the medical profession. However, after the 1919 Act women could finally become lawyers, vets, chartered surveyors, jurors, magistrates, and graduate from Oxford. Therefore the magnitude of 1919 Act should not be underestimated, even if it was not the ideal legislation desired by feminists.

One hundred and thirty delegates attended the 2019 conference of which seventy-three gave papers. Dr Mari Takayanagi delivered the first keynote speech on the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act² which set the tone of the conference and two further plenaries by Dr Helen Glew on 'Professional women, the marriage bar and the question of married women's right to work c.1920-1950' and Professor Angela V John on 'Looking at Lady Rhondda: businesswoman, campaigner, journalist' provided

examples of how the lives of professional women worked in practice.

Many of the conference papers explored women's involvement in a range of professions, including law, civil service, writing, engineering, politics, arts, broadcasting, nursing, film, and accounting. The vast majority of these consisted of case studies of individual women offering an insight into how women's lives were both symptomatic of wider social, cultural and political influences, but also driven by their own personal motivations and subjective experiences. Other papers explored themes and topics relevant to women's history such as gendered identities, gendered spaces, emancipation, activism, and the usefulness of oral histories for accessing women's voices.

The literature on professional life and identity is vast and varied and many articles and books have been published since the 2019 conference. One to highlight, in particular, is [*Precarious Professionals: Gender, Identities and Social Change in Modern Britain*](#), edited by Heidi Egginton and Zoë Thomas, and published in 2021. This is an excellent volume of essays which uses the analytical tools of gender and marginality to investigate the politics of professionalism to help redefine concepts of professional cultures and identity. Furthermore, the introduction

to this volume has an outstanding historiography which covers the classic texts on the professions and professionalisation, the rise of women's history as a contributing factor to this field, gender as a tool of analysis, trends in recent scholarship regarding women in the professions and, finally, it considers the international context. Another publication that celebrated the effect of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919 on the legal profession, was the *Women's History Review*, Volume 29, 2019 - Issue 4: Special issue: Challenging Women.

We offer this special issue as a contribution to our understanding of the politics of professionalism in the wake of the 1919 Act. Above all, these five articles demonstrate the need for the continued exploration of the relationship between gender and professionalism by looking at women who broke barriers in the workplace, women who faced discrimination in their professional lives and consider how we need to redress the ease to which the work and lives of professional women become mere footnotes in history. The articles also remind us that, unfortunately, unequal pay, sex discrimination, prejudice, the 'glass cliff' and the 'glass ceiling' still present serious challenges to the lives of women today.

Judith Bourne's article examines contemporary newspaper predictions of future women lawyer's working lives and compares it with the reality of the actual lived working lives. Certain themes dominate: that the legislation warranted huge celebration because it ended inequality, which of course was a false narrative; that men were chivalrous, a narrative that disguised continuing discrimination; that society should exercise caution as women may not be wanted in the workplace or indeed, 'up to' the rigours of professional life; and that the Act would open the 'floodgates', which of course we know did not happen, in fact, women still fail to reach the higher echelons of the workplace in the numbers that men do. The article concludes that the legislation could not be expected to rectify the discrimination or inequality faced by women in one fell swoop, that was an unrealistic dream.

Continuing the theme of representation, Kate Murphy explores the BBC's early radio programmes for women to analyse the ways in which professional women were represented to its listening public, over a period of thirty-two years. In May 1923, the fledgling BBC launched its first daily programme to be aimed at a female audience, the short-lived Women's Hour. A popular feature was talks on careers: museum curator, almoner, optician, solicitor, athletics organiser, were amongst the newly possible professions that were discussed. By the 1930s, female politicians,

lawyers and childcare specialists were discussing their work as established experts, while during the Second World War, naval architects, photographers, and life insurance underwriters were lauded as novel female jobs. Woman's Hour, which was launched in 1946, as well as frequently featuring expert female guests, grappled with a post-war landscape where a return to a career was becoming a possibility for women, once children were grown.

Carrie de Silva introduces Irene Barclay, the first woman to qualify as a chartered surveyor, in 1922. It focusses on Barclay's work in the public and private sector (simultaneously) over a career lasting from just after the First World War until her retirement as managing partner of her own practice in 1972 and finds that, after the opportunities opened from 1919, the progress of women in the profession of chartered surveying was, into the 21st century, still very slow and continues to be low (with on 15% female in 2020).

Sharon Thompson examines the life of Edith Summerskill, an important feminist reformer of the twentieth century, but an arcane figure in the history of the Labour Party and a mere footnote in family law history. Her role was a significant, albeit unacknowledged role, in law reform, particularly through her campaigns for greater legal protection of married women. The

article challenges previous interpretations of Summerskill, drawing upon previously unaccessed sources such as letters written to Edith Summerskill by deserted wives. These sources bring new meaning to Summerskill's concerns about divorce reform, enabling Summerskill's view to be re-evaluated. It is concluded that dismissing Summerskill's role in divorce reform results in a failure to properly understand a landmark moment in family law history, while oversimplifying feminist debates about the recognition of married women's rights in the 1960s.³

In the final article, Laura Noakes looks in detail at two prominent women lawyers. It examines the relationship between first-wave feminist political activism and the professional identities of early women lawyers through detailed contextual consideration of two women: Elsie Bowerman and Chrystal Macmillan. Bowerman was a keen member of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) and was called to the Bar in 1924, practising until 1938. Chrystal Macmillan was a leading member of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), the first woman to plead her case in the House of Lords, and a successful barrister whose feminist politics extended beyond the granting of suffrage to women. The article illuminates the multiple links between Bowerman and Macmillan's roles as barristers and political activists, by exploring the ways in which complex societal

expectations of women's behaviour interacted with their wish to challenge gendered inequality. Consequently, it complicates our understanding of women entering the professions, feminist activism, and the relationship between law and politics during the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Conclusion

This issue not only presents a detailed study of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919, but it furthers our understanding of the women's movement after the passing of the Act, especially inter-war attitudes towards women in the professions. Feminist history expands knowledge about women's lives and alters the framework within which we interpret historical experience.

We would like to thank all the authors for their enthusiasm and commitment to this project. We would also like to thank the many women who acted as anonymous referees: all the articles have been improved by your thoughts, suggestions, and observations. We are also very grateful to the Editor of the *Women's History Review*, Professor June Purvis.

Finally, it was a great privilege for LSE Library to host this Women's History Network conference especially as so many of the papers referred to the archives held in The Women's Library at LSE or the presenters or those attending are supporters of The Women's Library. It was deeply moving for us to have so many historians of women's history under one roof at LSE.

¹ Mari Takayanagi, 'Sacred year or broken reed? The Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919', *Women's History Review* 29:4 (2019): 563-582, DOI: 10.1080/09612025.2019.170278; Judith Bourne and Caroline Morris, 'Introducing Challenging Women', *Women's History Review* 29:4, (2019): 549-554, DOI: 10.1080/09612025.2019.1702779

² Takayanagi 'Sacred year or broken reed?'

³ For recent scholarship on Edith Summerskill see Sharon Thompson, *Quiet Revolutionaries: The Married Women's Association and Family Law* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022) and Mary Honeyball, *Edith Summerskill: The Life and Times of a Pioneering Feminist Labour MP* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022).