

Women at Work

Removing barriers for women to professional work in the 1920s: Case Studies



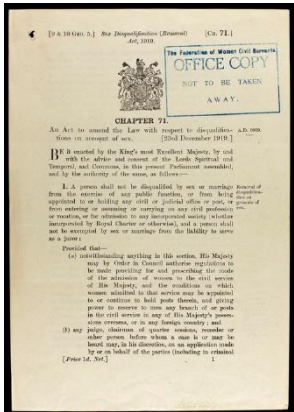
Shorthand Writers Suffrage Banner, 1908

Suffrage and WW1

When the First World War broke out in August 1918 most of the campaign groups for women’s suffrage supported the government’s war effort. More women went to work in munitions factories, on farms or doing jobs, such as being a conductor on a bus, that were considered men’s jobs. This meant men could be freed up to fight, particularly after conscription in 1916. Creches for children were set up at some factories.

Some suffrage activists campaigned for peace and / or prioritized greater support of the poor. Sylvia Pankhurst, for example, was a pacifist and ran a cut-price restaurant and children’s nursery in the East End of London.

In 1918, all men over the age of 21 and women over the age of 30 with a form of property qualification or graduates from university got the vote in General Elections. The campaign for the vote for all women on an equal basis to men continued from 1919, led by the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship.



The Polling Station poster produced by the group of artists called the ‘Suffrage Atelier’. This poster illustrates many of the important contributions women made to society but still had no vote.

The ‘Sacred Year’ 1919

The Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act

The Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act (pictured left) became law on 23 December 1919. This Act enabled women to enter many professions for the first time. Jobs in areas of the civil service and law, such as practicing as a barrister, were opened to women. Professional organisations, such as Inns of Court where training was carried out to prepare for the bar, i.e. work as a barrister in a court of law, had to allow women entry.

This Act did not ban discrimination against women. It opened the door to professions by not allowing any person ‘to be disqualified by sex or marriage from the exercise of any public function.’

A professional job is defined as one that has a specific form of activity or specialism. It is a job that requires a certain standard of education and training. These jobs can also be called ‘white collar’ jobs. The term covers work in areas such as the law, medicine, civil engineering, architecture and teaching.

Virginia Woolf described 1919 as the ‘sacred year’ because educated women could enter the professions. For Woolf this was as important a step as the vote as it meant women could earn their own money and not be reliant upon their fathers, husbands or other male relatives for an income. She describes 1919 in her essay *Three Guineas*, written in 1937, as the year the ‘right to earn one’s living’ was given to educated women and ‘the door of the private house was thrown open’.

Case Studies of Women in the Professions:

Helena Normanton

Mary Stott

Maude Royden

Mithan Tata

Women and Law

The first woman to enter an Inn of Court

Helena Normanton (1882 – 1957)

Helena Normanton achieved many ‘firsts’ as a woman in the legal profession.

After some women were given the vote in 1918, Helena Normanton applied to the Middle Temple to train as a barrister. Her application was rejected. After the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act became law, she applied the following day – 24 December 1919 – and was accepted. Helena Normanton was the first woman to be admitted to an Inn of Court. Monica Geikie Cobb was the first woman to practice as a barrister.

Helena was the first woman to obtain a divorce for a client; to prosecute a murder case; to be a counsel at the High Court of Justice and the Old Bailey. She also published clear guides to changes in the law for women in *Good Housekeeping* magazine throughout the 1930s and wrote the reference guide *Everyday Law for Women* in 1932. Helena also campaigned for divorce and marriage law reform.

The first women working in the legal profession attracted a great deal of press attention. Many women followed Helena’s career and sent letters of appreciation for leading the way in a male dominated profession.



Helena Normanton (above) was a teacher and lecturer before entering law. She campaigned for women’s suffrage and spoke at many meetings of the Women’s Freedom League.



Helena Normanton’s collar that she wore when she was a KC (King’s Counsel). This lace collar added some individuality to her austere work clothes.



Press cutting showing Helena Normanton leaving the Royal Courts of Justice after her first case (a divorce) on 21 December 1922.

Mrs. Helena Normanton (inset, right), the woman barrister, is also seen in the large picture leaving the Law Courts yesterday after appearing in the Divorce Court as counsel for Mrs. Searle (inset, left), who obtained a decree in an undefended suit. Mrs. Normanton is the first woman barrister to conduct a case in a London court.

THE DAILY SKETCH, FRIDAY 22 DECEMBER 1922

India, the LSE and Law



Mithan Tata

(1898 – 1981)

Mithan Tata came to London with her mother Herabai Tata in 1919

Herabai Tata was a social reformer based in Mumbai, who campaigned for women to have the vote in India. She and Mithan came to London to lobby the British Parliament who were debating reforms that would give men the vote in India.

Mithan studied for a Master’s Degree in Economics at the London School of Economics from 1919 until 1922. Her mother also took courses at LSE and was one of two students introduced to George V and Queen Mary when the foundation stone was laid for the Old Building at LSE on 28 May 1920.

She also joined Lincoln’s Inn in 1920 and was called to the bar (i.e. to be a barrister) in 1923. In 1924 Mithan returned to India where she became the first female barrister at Mumbai High Court and later the first female Professor of Law in India.

In addition, Mithan Tata spoke on the legal status of women in India in law. The *Times of India* records her presiding over a debate ‘Is Feminism a danger to the home?’ in 1930 and throwing ‘all the powerful weight of her personality and eloquence’ on opposition to the motion. Mithan married in 1930. She worked for social reform and greater equality for women and the poor as part of the All India Women’s Conference.

Maiden Name

Normanton still

After her marriage in 1921, Helena Normanton retained her maiden name.

In 1921 Helena Normanton married Gavin Clark. She was still a student at the Middle Temple Inn and wrote to the authorities there to inform them of her marriage and that she was keeping her maiden name.

She became ‘Mrs Normanton’ as she wanted to keep her professional identity while being recognized as married.

In 1924 she became the first British married woman to be issued a passport in her maiden name.

Dressing for Work

Shorter Skirts, Suits and Lace Collars

Skirts had become shorter during the war for practical reasons due to work and shortage of materials. During the 1920s, skirts became shorter still. The greater number of women working meant that clothes changed.

Women needed smart clothes that were also relatively easy to wear and that they could put on themselves without assistance. There were more women working in offices in skilled labour and the sale of ‘off the peg’ clothes increased.

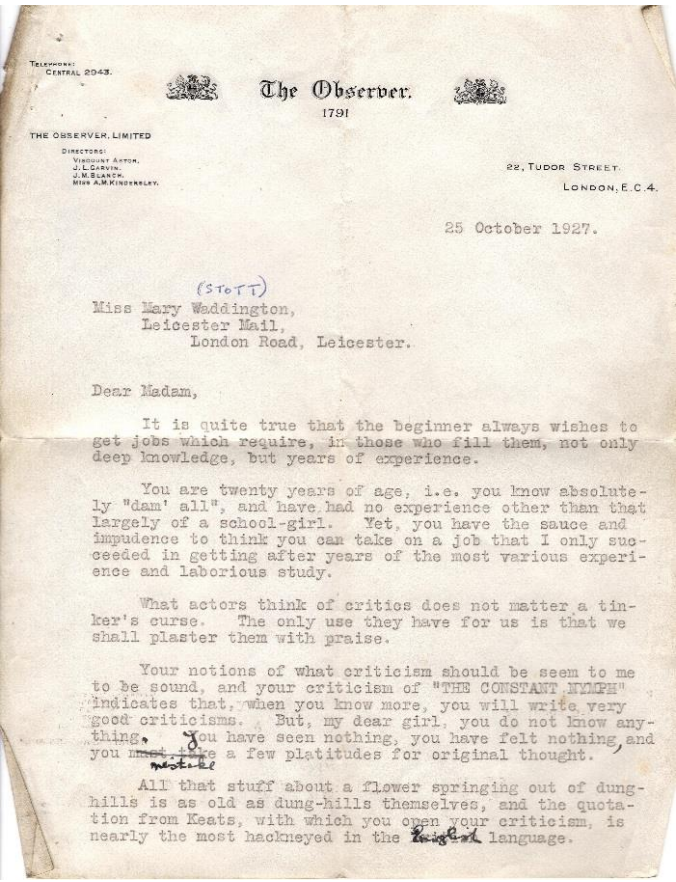
Helena Normanton adapted the austere dress code of the bar to have a white lace collar and slightly sparkly buckles. In professions such as law, where there were strict dress codes, women had to adapt men’s clothing, often wearing dark suits with mid length skirts to copy what men had traditionally worn.

Women continued the argument for the importance of comfort and practical dress as well as style. This can be seen in a wider context as a politics of appearance.

Writer Winifred Holtby made the case in the ‘Women’s Page’ of the *Guardian* in 1927 that it was not unfeminist to care about fashion:

‘We want clothes in which we can dress ourselves quickly and comfortably, and which we can wear all day if necessary without feeling awkward. We want clothes designed for the modern wife who does her own housework, for the woman on the committee, and the girl in the office. And we want to feel that in them we appear as charming, as chic and more entitled to self-respect than the ladies whose photographs we admire so wistfully in the illustrated papers.’

Quoted in Mary Stott (ed.) (1987), *Women Talking. An Anthology from the Guardian Women’s Page 1922-35 and 1957 – 81.*



Mary Scott received this negative response to her submission of a review of a play to a leading newspaper in 1927.

Women in Journalism

Mary Stott
Stuck on the ‘Women’s Page’

Mary Stott became a journalist at the age of 19 and went on to be women’s editor of *The Guardian* in 1957, after an enforced break from work in 1950 due to being replaced by a man as sub-editor on the *Manchester Evening News*.

In 1926 Mary Stott (1907 – 2002) began as a copy-holder on the *Leicester Mail* and soon moved to reporting. A new editor moved her to the ‘women’s page’. In 1931 She later moved to the *Bolton Evening News* as an editor and then became an editor for the Women’s Co-operative Press. She was appointed a sub-editor on the *Manchester Evening News* in 1945-50, until her job was given to a man.

Stott voted in the 1929 General Election and records in her memoir that she was a: ‘flapper voter – one of the first batch of women entitled to vote at twenty-one on the same terms as men. I went to the polling station in a scarlet frock, a little disappointed that putting a cross on a piece of paper was so undramatic.’
Mary Stott (1973) *Forgetting’s No Excuse*.

The impact of Women’s Suffrage on Legislation

‘What the vote has done’ from 1918 to 1927

Millicent Garrett Fawcett wrote a pamphlet in 1927 pointing out the legislation favourable to women passed in Parliament since 1918.

From 1918, around 40% of women in the UK had the right to vote in General Elections. This meant, for the first time, their voices as constituents had weight with MPs. In a pamphlet published in 1927, Millicent Garrett Fawcett, who led the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies from 1897 to 1918, pointed out how much more legislation which benefitted women had passed since then.

Before 1918 it would often take years to agree and change legislation. For example, an Act dealing with some of the problems in the 1902 Registration of Midwives Act was passed in 1918 with no delays. The previous Act took

twelve years to be agreed.
Fawcett lists this and other legislation in *What the vote has done*, including raising the age of consent for sex from 13 to 16 for girls (where men over the age of 23 are involved) in the 1922 Criminal Law Amendment Act. Women could divorce their husbands solely on the grounds of Adultery in The Matrimonial Causes Act 1923. The welfare of the infant was made most important in the Guardianship of Infants Act 1925.

Fawcett noted the difference in the attitude of politicians and civil servants towards herself and other women who lobbied for change after the Representation of the People Act in 1918 because: ‘We were no longer there on sufferance but by right.’



The campaign for the vote for all women on an equal basis with men continued from 1919 until the passing of the Equal Franchise Act in 1928.
These women are shown campaigning in 1927.

Women and the Church

The Long Battle: The Ordination of Women

There were a number of professions from which women were still excluded. The Government could decide which areas of the Civil Service women could work in and it was left to the Church of England to decide what areas women could work in the Church.

The Church League for Women’s Suffrage switched its attentions from the vote to the campaign for women to be able to preach in church. Some bishops would only let women speak in certain places in church, not from the pulpit as men did, and only to women.

Agnes Maude Royden, a suffragist and preacher, launched a campaign for women priests in 1919. The Lambeth Conference – the gathering of officials and leaders of the Church of England – had only allowed to speak in church but left where and who to up to the discretion of bishops.

Royden continued to preach, particularly on peace, the League of Nations and for embracing greater equality for women. In the 1920s she toured the world speaking on these topics.

The campaign for the Ordination of Women continued. Women were allowed to become ‘Deaconesses’ with very limited duties but not to be ordained as priests. The Church of England and other religious groups were exempt from the Sex Discrimination Act in 1975, which made it illegal to discriminate against women or men in employment.

The campaign increased in momentum after the founding of the Movement for the Ordination of Women (MOW) in 1979. The Church allowed women to become priests in 1992 but the first women priests were not ordained until 1994. Women Bishops were allowed in 2014 and Libby Lane became the first female bishop (Bishop of Stockport) in 2015.

Birth Control and Marie Stopes’ Married Love

Maude Royden did not follow the Church of England’s teaching on the use of contraception, which they condemned in 1908. In the 1920s Royden argued that sex between married couples need not just be to have children. A view very different to that of the Church, which in 1930 allowed contraception only where pregnancy may injure the mother’s health.

The issue became publicly discussed due to Marie Stopes’ (pictured right) book *Married Love* in 1918, which discussed sex and contraception. In 1921 Stopes and her husband Humphrey Roe opened the first Mother’s Clinic for Birth Control Clinic in London.



Maude Royden is pictured here at the Guildhouse Church where she regularly preached in London.