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WHAT HAPPENED TO FEMINISM?: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF FEMINISM IN IRELAND AND GREAT BRITAIN FROM 1919-1939

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From 1919-1939, the feminist movements, including those of Britain and Ireland, saw a decrease in activity and level of success to differing degrees. Many scholars, such as T.W. Moody and Diarmaid Ferriter, in the past have argued that this is due to the fact that some British and Irish women received limited suffrage in 1918.¹ Previous historiographical works that discuss the interwar period tend not to discuss this major political movement or they group all feminist movements together. There is a focus on the “Roaring 20s,” flappers, and new social conventions, and there is a misconception that all western countries experienced the same movement. This is not the case at all. Each feminist movement is dependent on the context of its nation, as is every other political and social movement. After the parliamentary act that granted limited suffrage, the feminist movements and the status of women in Britain and Ireland took divergent paths due to the uneven developments in those two countries after the First World War.

This divergent path can be clearly seen in the careers of three feminists. Vera Brittain, an English feminist, experienced greater success within England and internationally than her Irish counterparts Louie Bennett and Hanna Sheehy Skeffington. Brittain is still relatively well-known today, while Bennett and Sheehy Skeffington are usually discussed only in Irish feminist histories and are often left out of major historiographical texts. Brittain aided in some legislative success, while Bennett and Sheehy Skeffington were thwarted of such success on several

¹ British and Irish women had to be over the age of 30 and property owners in order to be qualified to vote.

occasions. This difference in outcome was not due to drastic changes in their respective agendas as feminists, but rather due to their national contexts.

The nation-building that occurred in Ireland during the 20th century permanently caused the divergent paths of the two feminist movements. In Great Britain, social constraints for women slowly loosened throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The opposite occurred in Ireland, where due to the political and social views of those in charge of developing the new nation, conservatism was adopted, which is a common occurrence in new nations after a major revolution. This conservatism was brought about by the revolutionaries' vision of a Romantic agrarian Ireland that was untouched by Great Britain and by the growing influence of the Catholic Church on the social policies of the new Irish country. The feminists of Ireland were greatly affected by this development. The agenda they were fighting for did not match the popular vision of the new Irish government. The government and the Catholic Church supported keeping women in the private sphere, while women like Bennett and Sheehy Skeffington were fighting for women's place in the public sphere. Due to this difference the feminists were often treated with hostility. The values of these feminists were squashed in favor of the values of the new Irish state. While Ireland was nation-building, Great Britain was dealing with the fallout of First World War. Despite the destruction and trauma the people of Great Britain suffered, the British government was still transitioning smoothly between Conservative and Labour governments. Due to this context, Britain still experienced opposition to her viewpoints but was able to gain some success. Bennett and Sheehy Skeffington

faced an extremely strong opposition that was in control of the entire government, which caused them to be less successful politically than Brittain.

Brittain, Bennett, and Sheehy Skeffington do not represent the views of all British and Irish women at the time. However, they can serve as a means to evaluate the various feminist issues of the time and how the issues were dealt with in Ireland and Great Britain. They allow for a comparative study because they were all affected by the same suffrage policy from 1918 and held many similar beliefs in reference to feminism. Louie Bennett and Hanna Sheehy Skeffington experienced less long-term political success than Vera Brittain. Despite their shared ideology and political, economic, and social agendas, these women experienced different successes and failures.

This research differs from previous work done by scholars of early 20th-century Britain and Ireland, including Irish feminist historians, such as Margaret Ward. Other Irish historians such as, Moody, Ferriter, and R.F. Foster, have stated in some form that the feminist movements in Britain and Ireland lost traction and began to fail because limited suffrage was given. I would be arguing against that notion. The issue was more complex than that, and the feminist movements did not disintegrate due to this new suffrage, but rather changed shape to focus on other issues. The previous arguments fail to acknowledge that, like other movements, the feminist movements occurred in a historical context that could help explain the trends of campaigns, why certain issues were the focus, and why others were ignored.

Even Margaret Ward, a prominent Irish feminist historian, sometimes focuses solely on the inner workings of the Irish feminist movement and forgets to place them within the political context of the time. She will allude to other events, such as the World Wars and major policy changes that affected Irish women, but she does not connect the feminist movement in detail to other events within Ireland, such as the War of Independence and the new Irish Free State. This paper would demonstrate that Brittain, Bennett, and Sheehy Skeffington experienced different levels of success that were not due to extensive internal problems or ideological differences within feminism, but rather to each country's political context. This would place an aspect of the feminist movements of Britain and Ireland within a greater historical context that has been lacking in past scholarly work.

It is necessary to establish the definition of feminism that will be used throughout this paper and to establish the type of feminisms that Bennett, Sheehy Skeffington and Brittain practiced. Karen Offen has created an excellent cohesive definition:

A feminist, therefore, is one who: 'advocate(s) the elimination of that injustice by challenging through efforts to alter prevailing ideas and/or social institutions and practices, the coercive power, force, or authority that upholds male prerogatives in that particular culture. Thus, to be a feminist is necessarily to be at odds with male-dominated culture and society.'²

² Quoted in Margaret Ward. "Nationalism, Pacifism, Internationalism: Louie Bennett, Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, and the Problems of "Defining Feminism"." In *Gender and Sexuality in*

This definition is broad enough to serve the purpose of this paper, as well as the fact that it includes the concept that this notion will change based upon individual cultures. There is no one type of feminism, a concept that is often left out of scholarship when discussing the feminists from 1919-1939, such as our three feminists.

Ward, due to her background as an Irish historian, breaks down feminism into two types; “nationalist feminist” and “essentialist feminism.”³ “Nationalist feminism” “emphasizes the centrality of the colonial relationship and links the struggle for women’s emancipation to the movement for national liberation.”⁴ According to Ward, “essentialist feminism” emphasizes what it considers the essential qualities of feminism, to the exclusion of external political issues.”⁵ According to Ward, this feminism needs to operate not within political parties or other political struggles but must chart its own course at times. There is a lack of militancy within “essentialist feminism” that is almost required in “nationalist feminism.”

Bennett was a staunch conservative feminist and pacifist who focused upon women labor issues within Ireland. In this instance, Bennett, according to Ward, is the “essentialist feminist” due to her wish to stay out of other areas of politics and focus upon women’s labor rights. Sheehy Skeffington was a nationalistic feminist who pushed for a liberal feminist agenda in the political

Modern Ireland, edited by Anthony Bradley, & Maryann Gianlanella Valiulis, 60-84. (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 60.

³ Margaret Ward. "Nationalism, Pacifism, Internationalism: Louie Bennett, Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, and the Problems of "Defining Feminism," 61.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

arena while also supporting Sinn Fein during the early 20th century. Sheehy Skeffington was constantly trying to combine her republican sentiments with her feminist beliefs. She hoped that the new Irish republic would include freedom from British oppression and gender equality. In an article in 1921 Sheehy Skeffington wrote,

The women of Ireland have been peculiarly the guardians of the soul of Ireland and the torch-bearers in each generation to pass on her spiritual light undimmed through ages of oppression and misrule. It will be for women's hands free and unshackled to build up our new state to make it truly progressive.⁶

This passage is a prime example of how Sheehy Skeffington combined her nationalism and feminism.

Finally, Brittain was a VAD nurse during the First World War and an Oxford graduate who focused on social and political issues for women. After the war, there is no possible way for Brittain to be categorized as a nationalistic feminist. All sentiment of nationalism was left behind in the Great War. However, it is difficult to actually classify herself as an "essentialist feminist" due to her frequent involvement in other political movements. It is important to acknowledge that these women were all feminists, but practiced feminisms through different perspectives.

Ward used these two definitions in her comparative study of Sheehy Skeffington and Bennet. However, having two separate definitions does not allow

⁶ Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington. "The Torch-Bearers: Women in Ireland, 1921." *The Survey*, November 26, 1921: 296.

for a cohesive comparative study in this case. Feminism, like all other political and social movements, operates within a greater context and must be analyzed within a greater historical context, not as something separate from the rest of the world. It is necessary to understand that there are multiple feminisms in use, but for our purposes, the solid definition of feminism offered by Offen is useful for establishing the main beliefs of each of these women.

Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, Louie Bennett, and Vera Brittain were all feminists during the interwar period and shared similar ideals and campaigned for similar issues. The way they approached their activism was similar in nature. Louie Bennett, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington and Vera Brittain used writing as their main means of getting their message across to a wider population. Writing was always their main occupation, while they all gave public lectures and participated in the leadership of important feminist organizations during the interwar period. Professionally these women occupied similar positions in the Irish and British feminist movements from 1919-1939. All three women came from families that were well off and could send their daughters to schools where they gained essential educations that would serve them throughout their careers. Bennett and Brittain both grew up in Protestant families, which had a greater impact on Bennett due to the context of Irish nationalism. However, while Bennett and Brittain share many similarities, there were some differences, the main difference being nationality. Vera Brittain was born and raised as an Englishwoman. Bennett, while part of an Anglo-Irish family, considered herself Irish and lived in what would become the Republic of Ireland until her death in 1956. On the other

hand, Sheehy Skeffington was born into an Irish Catholic family that had a tradition of nationalism and activism.

Due to their upbringing, Bennett, Sheehy Skeffington, and Brittain often had slightly different feminist agendas. Given these differences, we might have expected greater political success for Bennett and Sheehy Skeffington; however, we find these expectations disappointed. For example, Bennett was more conservative than Brittain and Sheehy Skeffington on social and gender norms. However, as will be demonstrated later, that should have aided Bennett in the long run in Ireland and should have increased her level of success in interwar Ireland due to the conservative nature of the nation-building in Ireland and the dominance of the Catholic Church. It did not. Another difference between these women that should have worked in Bennett's favor of having greater success was a prime focus on women's labor in Ireland during 1919-1939. While Brittain and Sheehy Skeffington were pushing for a difficult progressive social policy for women, Bennett was working within a well-established and previously successful labour movement in Ireland and was asking for more conservative reforms. Again, this did not work in Bennett's favor. At the time, Sheehy Skeffington's nationalism should have worked in her favor in some manner. However, due to the social and political agenda she was promoting, she was not able to gain support.

The political status of two nations from 1919-1939 and the relation to each other throughout a 700-year history helped determine the success (or lack thereof) of these women.

The political context of Ireland and Britain from 1919-1939 is based upon the repercussions of the Age of Imperialism. The concept of colonialism and imperialism governed the relationship between Ireland and the United Kingdom for 700 years. One could argue that Ireland was England's, and then Britain's, first colony. It is a complicated relationship to be sure. Many historians are in constant debate about whether Ireland was a true colony. However, it can be agreed upon that Ireland was under British government control until 1922. This is the world that Brittain, Bennett, and Sheehy Skeffington were born into. Bennett and Sheehy Skeffington came of age during a time in Ireland when Home Rule was at the forefront of politics and could be no longer ignored.

The British Empire was extensive and had developed policies, systems, and means to deal with maintaining colonies in the periphery. With the growth of imperialism, which involved the competition over resources, markets, and territory and a belief in a "civilizing mission," a growth of nationalism occurred not only in Great Britain, but in other countries that were colonial powers or wished to become colonial powers. This encouraged militarism and military alliances, which ultimately aided in the beginning of World War One. This was the British Empire that all three women came of age in. The women were surrounded by sentiments of nationalism, propaganda, and a growing support for violent actions to solve issues. It is not hard to imagine why they developed a strong sense of anti-militarism and internationalism. The violence these women saw from 1914-1918 was devastating.

The problems that became apparent because of the Age of Imperialism and/or were created by imperialism were only going to be solved, according to Bennet, Brittain, and Sheehy Skeffington, through a feminist agenda and perspective. Whether it was a labor issue brought on by the industrialization of their nations, education, militarism, or social policy, these women worked to solve these issues using feminism. Success in resolving these issues depended on their nation. In Ireland the idea of nation-building was at the forefront, thus pushing the work and ideals of Bennett and Sheehy Skeffington to the back. Feminist issues were not allowed a spot in the main political arena because of the strict conservative values of the new Irish government backed by the Catholic Church. Brittain encountered some resistance in England, but due to the overall stability of a British government that was not as closed off to the changing roles of women in society, her agenda was allowed its day in the political arena. These women were focused on gaining equal rights in the work place, institutions of education, and in society in general, how successful they were on achieving that was determined by their home nation.

Women and Work

The concern about women workers was shared by all three women from 1919-1939. Equal pay, fair working conditions, and the ability to work after marriage were the fundamental issues for women in both England and Ireland.

Louie Bennett was at the forefront of this issue throughout her career and in her work with trade unions in Ireland, in particular the Irish Women's Worker Trade Union (IWWU). According to historian Ellen Hazelkorn, Bennett's true

ideas on women in the work place came through in her articles and especially during her time in charge of the *Irish Citizen* in 1920.⁷ *The Irish Citizen* was an Irish feminist newspaper that had been established in 1912 by the Sheehy Skeffingtons alongside the fellow feminist couple, the Cousins. From 1919-1920 Bennett ran the paper alongside Hanna Sheehy Skeffington. During her tenure as editor of *The Irish Citizen*, Bennett gave the newspaper a focus of women's labour issues. For example, on why she chose to organize the IWWU on a single-sex basis, she stated in a typical article for the *Irish Citizen*,

It is futile to deny a latent antagonism between the sexes in the world of industry. There is a disposition amongst men workers not only to keep women in inferior and subordinate positions, but to even drive them out of industry all together...in mixed trade unions the men are practically always the dominant element.⁸

She believed that women deserved to be treated better in the workplace and deserved equal pay. Bennett suggested that women join the IWWU and remain active members until equal pay with men in their respective fields was achieved.⁹ She did not just write about the need for equality and better working conditions for women, but worked for it through various organizations in addition to the IWWU.

In 1921 Louie Bennett was a founding member of the Irish Women's Labour Council. According to a letter that Bennett wrote it was founded to

⁷ Ellen Hazelkorn. "Labour Lives No. 2 Louie Bennett." *Saothar* 25 (2000): 100.

⁸ Louie Bennett. *The Irish Citizen*, Nov. 1919: 44.

⁹ Ellen Hazelkorn. "The Social and Political Views of Louie Bennett, 1870-1956." *Saothar* 13 (1988): 36.

“protect the interests of women and children.”¹⁰ She also attended the Convention of Irish Women Workers in 1922.¹¹ It was at the convention where Bennett two ideologies of feminism and pacifism came together. The women who attended the convention declared in their manifesto that the lack of peace in Ireland due to the Civil War was discouraging the economy, giving rise to unemployment, and in general was not a positive event for the female worker.¹² When the violence from the Civil War ended, the economy did not come back to life instantaneously. Instead, the Free State government under Sean Lemass created several pieces of economic legislation that they felt would aid the new Irish economy, but often it ignored female workers and gave preference to male workers.

In 1935, Bennett opposed the passage of the Conditions of Employment Bill. Section 16 of the bill discussed female workers directly when it stated:

The Minister may in respect of any form of industrial work, after consultation with representatives of employers interested in such form of industrial work and with representatives of workers so interested, by order make regulations either (a) prohibiting the employment of female workers to do such form of industrial work, or (b) fixing a proportion which the

¹⁰ Louie Bennett. Dublin, May 6, 1921.

¹¹ Louie Bennett and Helen Gannon. "Manifesto from the Convention of Irish Women Workers." Dublin, Oct. 15, 1922.

¹² Ibid.

number of female workers employed by an employer to do such form of industrial work may bear to the number of other workers so employed.¹³

This is just the beginning of what the Conditions of Employment Bill outlined regarding female workers. The bill was popularity supported throughout many trade unions in Ireland, except the IWWU.¹⁴ Louie Bennett and her colleagues did not support the bill. She began to move against the bill and joined forces with other feminist organizations. According to historian Mary McAuliffe, “No Government, she [Bennett] wrote, should be given the power to exercise complete control over ‘the working lives of human beings who are neither criminal, not mentally deficient.’”¹⁵ Bennett could be considered an “apologetic feminist”¹⁶ due to her arguments for women’s equality in the work place.

According to Hazelkorn,

Her views on the economic, educational, and legal rights of women echoed the concerns of independently minded, bourgeois women such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Harriet Taylor Mill; the latter also sought to reassure men that women did not desire to ‘take out of the hands of men any occupation which men perform better than they.’¹⁷

Bennett’s feminism was a conservative feminism, a feminism that should have been accepted a bit more by the conservative nature of the new Irish

¹³ Mary McAuliffe. "The Irish Woman Worker and the Conditions of Employment Act, 1936 Responses from the Irish Free State Women Senators." *Saothar* 36, Women: Special Issue (2011): 37.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁶ Ellen Hazelkorn. "The Social and Political Views of Louie Bennett, 1870-1956." *Saothar* 13 (1988): 41.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

government. However, it was accepted as much as Sheehy Skeffington's version of militant feminism. This demonstrates just how strong the influence of the Romantic vision of Ireland was, how strong the influence of Catholic Church was in regards to the role of women and how narrow the government viewed the role of women in the new nation-state. Women were meant to stay in the home, despite what Bennett, Sheehy Skeffington, and many other women fought for.

Bennett and Sheehy Skeffington did not frequently agree on feminist issues or on how to run the *Irish Citizen*. However, they agreed on equality for women in the work place. During the interwar years, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington campaigned for equality for women in the work place, especially regarding civil and public service. Sheehy Skeffington believed that a woman had a right to work regardless of her marital status. According to Sheehy Skeffington's biographers Leah Levenson and Jerry H. Natterstad:

Feminism...was an enduring movement that would grow in strength regardless of current difficulties. She took no hard-and-fast stand on whether women should work after marriage, believing that this had to be decided on an individual basis. It seemed a pity to her, though, for a woman to abandon a profession or a career upon a marriage and it was surely unjust that women should be denied employment simply because they were married.¹⁸

From the inception of her activism to her death, Sheehy Skeffington fought for a woman's right to work. For example, in 1919, she campaigned for an increased

¹⁸ Leah Levenson and Jerry H. Natterstad. *Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington: Irish Feminist*. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 170-171.

pay rate for part-time teachers, a position that was mostly held by women at the time. In 1919, Sheehy Skeffington was elected to the Dublin Corporation. In this position she encouraged women's involvement in civil service. She felt that women should not be kept from their civic duty simply because of their gender. For example, she was determined to make more women clerks for the government within the Dublin municipality. She believed that women should be employed by the government on an equal basis with men.

Along with Bennett, Sheehy Skeffington also opposed the Conditions of Employment Bill. In a letter to the editor of the *Irish Press*, Sheehy Skeffington called for the eligible women of Dublin to register to vote against the current government of Ireland. She believed that the government had several "anti-woman proposals" and the Conditions of Employment was just the most recent in a long line of legislation. She wrote, "The new Employment Bill out-Hitlers Hitler; under section 12 it gives the Minister for Industry (already well-known for his anti-suffrage views) the power to limit the number of women in industry, or to remove them altogether."¹⁹ Despite the campaigns of Bennett and Sheehy Skeffington the bill passed. This was not the last time that Sheehy Skeffington directly countered a policy of the new Irish government.

One of her main points of contention with the government of Ireland during the Interwar period was the constitution that came into existence in 1937. Many feminists in Ireland, including Sheehy Skeffington, wished for the new

¹⁹ Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington. *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington: Suffragette and Sinn Feiner Her Memoirs and Political Writings*. Edited by Margaret Ward. (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2017), 331.

government to work under the promises of the 1916 Proclamation. The proclamation addresses both Irishmen and Irishwomen.²⁰ In the eyes of the proclamation, men and women were equal. "Until our arms have brought the opportune moment for the establishment of a permanent National Government, representative of the whole people of Ireland and elected by the suffrages of all her men and women."²¹ They all had been oppressed by their English rulers and this new country they created was to be based upon equality, not a majority and a minority population. Many feminists also wished to include some aspects of the 1922 Constitution, despite some of their wariness towards the Anglo-Irish Treaty. However, this was not the constitution that was created in 1937.

The new constitution lowered the status of women in Ireland, a demotion the women of Ireland are still fighting against.²² 41 and 45 were the main articles that outline the status of women and regulated them away from the public sphere and back to the private sphere. According to this section of the constitution, mothers are not "obliged" to work so they do not neglect their housework. Divorce was not allowed and, if a person was divorced in another country, they could not remarry in Ireland. People (women) were not be forced into work that

²⁰ "The Irish Republic is entitled to, and hereby claims, the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman. The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally, and oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien Government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past." Thomas J. Clarke, Seán Mac Diarmada, Thomas MacDonagh, P. H. Pearse, Éamonn Ceannt, James Connolly, and Joseph Plunkett. "The Proclamation of 1916." Dublin, April 1916.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Catriona Kennedy. "Women and Gender in Modern Ireland." In *The Princeton History of Modern Ireland*, edited by Richard Bourke, & Ian McBride, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016) 373.

was deemed “unsuited” to their sex, which allowed for the interpretation that certain work could be off-limits to women.²³ Bennett did not disagree with the articles as much as Sheehy Skeffington and other feminists did, but she still did not support the 1937 Constitution on the basis that if women were not to work, then there should be state aid provided to them to support themselves.²⁴ In general, feminists were able to change some of the wording of the articles after several protest efforts but not enough to change the effect they had on women’s everyday lives.²⁵

According to Ferriter, the feminists were protesting in a “hostile environment” that wanted the Constitution and wished to weaken women’s position outside the home.²⁶ This “hostile environment” was one in which republican nation-building politicians oversaw the government. Eamon De Valera and his supporters felt the need to create a distinctly Irish nation, which included an idea of Ireland that was connected with and to an extent dominated by the values of the Catholic Church. According to Irish historian Mary McAuliffe,

As Dermot Keogh noted ‘a Gaelic Utopia did not arise from the ashes of 1916, 1919, or 1923.’ The new Ireland was an under-industrialised, rural, agricultural state recovering from years of war...The Cumann na

²³ Government of Ireland, "Constitution of Ireland", Dublin: 1937.

²⁴ Ellen Hazelkorn. "The Social and Political Views of Louie Bennett, 1870-1956." *Saothar* 13 (1988): 41.

²⁵ Catriona Kennedy. "Women and Gender in Modern Ireland," 374.

²⁶ Diarmaid Ferriter. "De Valera's Ireland, 1932-58." In *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 678.

nGaedhael government was socially conservative and ideologically wedded to traditional Catholic values.²⁷

McAuliffe did not stop there and continued to describe the ideal view of Irishwomen that was held at this time. It was not just a social construction, but a construction based upon the new ideals of an emerging nation in the early 20th century. [Women] were to serve as the “moral cornerstone of the new Catholic nation, without which the nation would not and could not develop morally, politically, or socially.”²⁸ In the eyes of the new government, if the women were in the workplace and not their homes then they were not doing their duty to the state. They were not “serving as the moral cornerstone.” They were viewed as not putting their families first, which is a major value of the Catholic Church. In England, Britain was fighting for similar policies regarding women in the work place, but within a context that did not place women so extremely and restrictively at the center of the nation’s morality.

After the First World War Britain was campaigning for the same issues as Bennett and Sheehy Skeffington, in regards to women in the work place. Much of this work Britain accomplished on her own, but also through her membership in the Six Point Group. The organization was established in 1921 by Lady Rhondda. Its main purpose was to serve as a feminist group that supported and argued for “pensions for widows, equal rights of guardianship for parents, improvements of the laws dealing with child assault and with unmarried mothers,

²⁷ Mary McAuliffe. "The Irish Woman Worker and the Conditions of Employment Act, 1936 Responses from the Irish Free State Women Senators." *Saothar* 36, Women: Special Issue (2011): 42.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

equal pay for teachers, and equal opportunities in the Civil Service.”²⁹ Brittain’s own ideals matched the group’s agenda and she began to work for them in 1922.

Through her work there Brittain focused on women receiving more economic equality and independence. Several articles stated her beliefs that women should be paid based on work done and not based upon gender. This also applied to married woman in the workplace who were discriminated against due to their status as women and their status as married women. Brittain agreed with Sheehy Skeffington. She believed that married women should not be banned from working due to their marital status:

Married women are at present discouraged from entering or continuing precisely those professional occupations, which recent statistics have shown to employ the largest number of women--teaching, nursing, medicine and the Civil Service. The dismissal of women civil servants in marriage is a State regulation, which operates through service. ...only a few have seen fit to revise the conventional opinion that a wife’s time should be entirely at the disposal of her husband and children.³⁰

Brittain was able to write many articles similar to this one and maintain a popular and successful career in journalism. Brittain was able to live off much what she earned from her articles. While many of her articles were written for the *Time and Tide* (the feminist paper for the Six Points Group), most of her articles were for major daily newspapers such as the *Manchester Guardian*. This was not the

²⁹ Muriel Mellow. "Lady Rhondda and the Changing Faces of British Feminism." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 9, no. 2 (1987): 10.

³⁰ Vera Brittain, Winifred Holtby, Paul Berry, and Alan Bishop. *Testament of a Generation: The Journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby*. (London: Virago, 1985), 124.

case for Bennett and Sheehy Skeffington. Bennett lived off her personal wealth and Sheehy Skeffington did use journalism as one means of income, but had to use other means as well. The political environment in England versus Ireland allowed for this difference to occur. The stability and longevity of the government of the English government allowed for various political agendas to have their spot in newspapers, debates, and general elections. Legislation was also moving in Britain's favor. The Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act was passed in 1919. In 1925 women could be recruited into the administrative class of the civil service for the first time. Even though there was a marriage ban on women workers, it was not used as often as in Ireland. The emerging nation-state of Ireland did not allow for such breathing room. A cohesive national identity had to be established according to William Cosgrave, Lemass, and De Valera. This national identity could not entertain feminist ideals that did not agree with its vision. Therefore, legislation did not allow for more equality in the workplace for women, but rather placed women in the private sphere. While all three women were campaigning towards similar goals for women in the workplace, their level of success was different based on the political atmosphere of their respective nations.

Education

Education for women was also a major concern for all three women. Some education reform occurred during the early formative years for Britain, Bennett, and Sheehy-Skeffington. They knew the knowledge and power that an education could give a young woman trying to make her way in the world.

Bennett focused her work on education for women workers during the interwar years. She believed in education for the working class, especially for women. During her tenure as the leader of the IWWU she promoted the raising of the school-leaving age, adult education, meals for students unable to go home for lunch, and a limit on employment of children.³¹ According to Hazelkorn, Bennett even campaigned for a working class education scheme that would work within the various trade unions.³² Due to her focus on the needs of women in the work place, Bennett tended to focus her education initiative on education as it related to labor.

Sheehy Skeffington took a slightly different approach. She felt that the reforms that were made before she received her education were not enough. Total equality, in her eyes, still needed to be achieved. In 1902 Sheehy Skeffington joined the Women's Graduates' Association and continued to be active in the organization throughout the interwar years.³³ Until 1922, Irish women had been under the same educational legislation as British women. Eventually, women were allowed to receive their university degrees, similar to British women. However, it was in lower education were much of the inequality still existed. Much of their grade school education was being conducted by denominational schools where the education the girls continued to receive gendered education based upon Catholic social values. Over the course of the 20th century, not much

³¹ Ellen Hazelkorn. "The Social and Political Views of Louie Bennett, 1870-1956." *Saothar* 13 (1988): 40.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Sheehy-Skeffington. *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington: Suffragette and Sinn Feiner Her Memoirs and Political Writings*, 309.

changed for young Catholic girls in Ireland when it came to their grade school education.³⁴ The story was a slightly different one in Great Britain after the First World War.

Immediately after the war, Brittain focused on the equality of women at universities during her time at Oxford. At this time, women were not given university degrees, despite the fact that they had completed the same work the men had completed.³⁵ Brittain disagreed with this idea and felt that she and other women deserved their degrees. After the war in 1919, she joined the movement for gaining degrees for women. For the *Oxford Outlook* she wrote an article, titled "The Degree and *The Times*," in defense of women receiving degrees from universities.³⁶ According to Brittain, this was the "fiercest polemic that I ever contributed to that shining organ of undergraduate opinion."³⁷ Brittain felt that women needed to go to university, but also grow and expand out into the real world. She wrote, "Finally, she will both claim and deserve the right to grow out of her corner till, side by side with Oxford's new manhood, she will inherit that wider future which the university owes to its living and dead."³⁸ To an extent she saw this goal accomplished with the passage of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act. The same popular act that allowed for more equality in the work place allowed for more equality in education. The act stated: "A person shall not be

³⁴ Aideen Quilty, Mary McAuliffe, and Ursula Barry. "Complex Contexts: Women and community-higher-education in Ireland." University College Dublin, 2016: 32-33.

³⁵ Deborah Gorham. *Vera Brittain: A Feminist Life*. (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 174.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 144.

³⁷ Vera Brittain. *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900-1925*. (New York: Macmillan Company, 1933.), 504.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 483.

disqualified by sex or marriage from the exercise of any public function, or from being appointed to or holding any civil or judicial office or post, or from entering or assuming or carrying on any civil profession or vocation.”³⁹ This was passed in 1919 in Great Britain. This is the exact opposite of articles 42 and 45 in the Constitution of 1937 in Ireland. This was passed eighteen years later than the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act, but the earlier was more progressive than the later one.

Brittain did not just focus on education in the public arena, but made it a focus in her personal life. She educated her own children, both son and daughter, by the same principles of equality that she called for in the public world. She made it a priority that the children were sent to extremely good schools. Brittain did not want her daughter to simply go to a finishing school. She wanted her daughter to be academically challenged every school year, learning the same material as her brother. A well-rounded education was deemed necessary for both children, especially an education that showed them the real world.⁴⁰ More and more day schools for girls that were actually academically challenging were being established. The concept that young girls needed an education and employment was becoming more mainstream. Brittain’s daughter Shirley went into politics just like her parents and became a Member of Parliament.

Social Policies

³⁹ Ibid., 504.

⁴⁰ Gorham, *Vera Brittain: A Feminist Life* 207.

Social policy was difficult to push for in both England and Ireland. Due to the more conservative nature of the newly independent Irish government that was influenced greatly by the Catholic Church and a need for an “idyllic Ireland”, our two Irish feminists had a more difficult time promoting their agenda and gaining any legislative ground. To an extent, they lost ground despite their campaigns.

As stated previously, Bennett’s feminism was more conservative than Sheehy Skeffington’s. Her biographer Ellen Hazelkorn even referred to it as an “apologetic” form of feminism. It did not completely fit the vision of women that the new Irish government and the Catholic Church had at the time, but it did not completely go against it either. She believed that the traditional family unit needed to be maintained, women only needed to work if necessary, and that men should still be the main breadwinners of the family. Her social policies were not close to the liberal social policy of Sheehy Skeffington and Brittain. Again, this should have worked in her favor with the Irish government and made her slightly more successful than Sheehy Skeffington. It did not due to the fact that her feminism was different enough from the vision of the “docile Irishwoman” that she was not able to gain enough influence. She was still advocating for equality in the work place and education. She was not militant, but she certainly was not a “docile Irishwoman.”

Sheehy Skeffington and Brittain would not have been considered docile by any means either. They both pushed a rather liberal social policy at this time in British and Irish history. Both women believed in family planning, feminist

parenting, equality in marriage, and agreed that sexual education was needed for children and adolescents. The difference for these two women was how the same ideas were received in Ireland and Great Britain.

For example, Sheehy Skeffington campaigned against the Censorship of Publication Act of 1929. This act was meant to keep certain information from women that was deemed to be too sexually explicit, a standard surely set by the Catholic Church. Sheehy Skeffington stated: "This legislation was to be imposed upon women by the 'other sex,' by a group of 'prudish' men."⁴¹ The men believed that they were keeping "delicate women" from "literature which would excite sexual passions."⁴² Sheehy Skeffington did not believe the idea that they were "protecting" the women and instead called attention to the fact that important information was being withheld from women. Magazines that had advertisements of birth control or had medical information on venereal diseases were to be banned under this act.⁴³ In a speech to the Women's Freedom League in 1928, Sheehy Skeffington spoke against the censorship:

'Such legislation...is fostered or suggested by the monastic, celibate type, to whom women are not only dangerous and explosive, but a rather indecent quantity...They linger on the shortness of women's hair or her skirts, and seem to regard such things as just a little immoral...What we

⁴¹ Levenson and Natterstad. *Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington: Irish Feminist*, 161.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Sheehy-Skeffington. *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington: Suffragette and Sinn Feiner Her Memoirs and Political Writings*, 255.

want is free, pure air to blow over Ireland as it does in other countries, instead of the hothouse atmosphere prevailing at present.⁴⁴

In this passage she is directly calling out the fact that social policy of Ireland is being dictated by the Catholic Church. The control on social policy was so strong and continued to be strong despite the work of feminists such as Sheehy Skeffington.

Social policy in favor of women continued to be nonexistent in Ireland for most of the 20th century. The traditional vision of the family was made absolutely important and anything that was considered socially deviant was frowned upon and legislated against. Due to older legislation of Great Britain, abortion was considered illegal in Ireland. The Censorship of Publication Act of 1929 banned advertisements of contraception, but under the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1935, contraception was not allowed to be sold or imported into Ireland. Article 41 of the Constitution supported this act due to the importance of the family as the cornerstone of Irish society. All of these policies were based on typical doctrine of the Catholic Church, doctrine that became legislation and led to many issues for women in Ireland. Many of these issues would not be acknowledged by politicians until the 1990s. Magdalen Laundries for “deviant” young girls were all over the country, a women’s right to choose was not on the table until 2018, divorce was not legal until the 1990s, and the pill was slowly allowed beginning in the 1970s. The fact that these policies lasted so long shows the strength of

⁴⁴ Ibid., 255.

opposition Sheehy Skeffington and Bennett were facing in Ireland from 1919 to 1939. The picture was not the same in Great Britain.

Great Britain did not move along at lightning speed towards a progressive feminist social agenda, but it was a less hostile environment that allowed for some progress, actual debate to exist amongst feminists about the next course of action, and some success for Britain. Sheehy Skeffington agreed with Britain's social agenda. They agreed on marriage and sexual morals. They agreed upon the need for sex education for the young.⁴⁵ According to Levenson, "[Sheehy Skeffington] believed the other issues important too and supported the author's liberal position on them, urging all feminists to become familiar with Britain's work."⁴⁶ While Sheehy Skeffington was met with great opposition that was not up for any kind of nuanced debate on the issues, Britain was able to engage in debate with other feminists and successfully reach an male and female audience with her ideas on feminist social policy.

In Ireland where Sheehy Skeffington and Bennett were campaigning for general equal rights, there was a great debate amongst feminists in England. In a general sense the debate can be broken down into two groups, the Six Point Group and the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC). NUSEC was an organization based upon the concept of "new feminism."⁴⁷ Britain, Lady Rhondda, and the Six Point Group were considered "old"

⁴⁵ Levenson and Natterstad. *Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington: Irish Feminist*, 162.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Sophia Van Wingerden. *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain, 1866-1928*. (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 1999), 172.

feminists.⁴⁸ Both “new” and “old feminists” discussed issues surrounding birth control, marriage, and motherhood.⁴⁹ However, there was a key difference. “Old feminists” felt that equality was still a struggle and that women were still not equal with men politically, economically, or socially.⁵⁰ “New feminists” felt that equality in the public sphere had been achieved and that women needed to concentrate on the private sphere again. They were reverting to traditional roles for women in society.⁵¹

“Old feminists” wished to focus on the similarities between men and women, the similarities that make them both human and equal. Brittain believed that the “new feminists” focused on the opposite. Brittain was quite candid in her criticism of “new feminists:”

“They were leery of the ‘tendency of fertility-worship to degenerate into the belief that women have no social value apart from their reproductive functions—a belief which immediately removes them from the category of human being.’”⁵²

For Brittain this was leading to a worship of women as mothers and not recognizing them as people. It was creating more inequality with men and reinforcing traditional gender roles of women belonging to the private sphere.

The existence of this debate and split amongst feminists in England is important.

Many might argue that this is the disintegration of the feminist movement during

⁴⁸Susan Kingsley Kent. “The Politics of Sexual Differences: World War I and the Demise of British Feminism.” *Journal of British Studies* 27, no. 3 (1988): 244.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁵⁰ Van Wingerden, *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain*, 176.

⁵¹ Susan Kingsley Kent. “The Politics of Sexual Differences: World War I and the Demise of British Feminism.” *Journal of British Studies* 27, no. 3 (1988): 240.

⁵² Quoted in *Ibid.*, 244.

the interwar years.⁵³ It is the opposite. This lively debate, a constant back and forth through speeches and articles in newspapers, shows how alive the feminist movement was at this time in England. Was it as popular as the major debates between the Conservative and Labour parties? Most likely not. But the issues were being given their due. Feminist issues were being discussed, not constantly legislated against. Brittain was able to have her success as a feminist journalism because what she was writing about was being debated, not shoved into the corner for decades.

For example, she constantly wrote on the matter of feminist motherhood. In an article for the *Manchester Guardian* on nurse schools, Brittain stated, "Nursery schools are of the greatest possible assistance to women who wish or are obliged to combine motherhood with work. To be able to leave a child in good hands from nine to four is an inestimable boon to the mother and an advantage to the child."⁵⁴ In a conservative Ireland that concept of motherhood was discouraged legally in the constitution.

Brittain's idea of marriage and gender equality in marriage would not have even been entertained in Ireland, let alone given print space in major daily newspapers.⁵⁵ The Sheehy Skeffingtons had a marriage of equals before the 1916 Rebellion and Hanna Sheehy Skeffington supported such a marriage for other women, including her son Owen and his wife. However, she was seen as

⁵³ Maria DiCenzo. "Our Freedom and Its Results': measuring progress in the aftermath of suffrage." *Women's History Review* 23, no. 3 (2014): 423.

⁵⁴ Vera Brittain, Winifred Holtby, Paul Berry, and Alan Bishop. *Testament of a Generation: The Journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby*. (London: Virago, 1985.), 138.

⁵⁵ Paul Berry and Mark Bostridge. *Vera Brittain: A Life*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1995), 221.

odd. Brittain was seen as odd as well for having a semi-detached marriage, but was still able to achieve success. In an article for the *Evening News*, she wrote of her 'semi-detached' marriage,

But, at any rate until circumstances can be manipulated unto suiting both parties, it has been found by those who have practiced it to be by no means the worst of evils. The complete waste of a woman's training and the frustration of her ambitions is a far greater threat to the success of many marriages.⁵⁶

This is not the only place where Brittain discusses her semi-detached marriage. It takes center stage in her memoir *Testament of Experience*, which became a best-seller as did her more famous *Testament of Youth*. Her feminist ideas often encouraged the sales of the books. She talks often about how she raised her children and how she planned her pregnancies with her husband George.⁵⁷ In her articles, she would discuss how it was necessary due to economic constraints.⁵⁸ She supported the use of birth control in public through articles and work with political organizations and used it in private. She deemed it a necessity for the economy of her family, but also so that neither spouse's career was hurt due to the expansion of their family.⁵⁹ Women in Ireland were not able to see advertisements concerning birth control or use any type of contraception, let alone have a successful writing and political career that was based upon the discussion of birth control and other social policy issues for feminists.

⁵⁶ Brittain, Holtby, Berry, and Bishop. *Testament of a Generation*, 132.

⁵⁷ Gorham, *Vera Brittain: A Feminist Life*, 213.

⁵⁸ Berry and Bostridge, *Vera Brittain: A Life*, 223.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 233.

The feminist movements in Ireland and England during the interwar period were alive. Despite the lack of attention they receive in the historiography, feminists were still quite active. Campaigns against legislation such as the Conditions of Employment Bill of 1935 were organized. Articles were written to support acts like the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919. Feminists in both Ireland and England threw their support behind equal pay and the use of contraception. However, all this gets lost in mainstream monographs and textbooks due to a focus on the beginning of the Second World War. The feminist movements in both countries were active, but they were different due to their national contexts. Feminist movements can get lumped together despite their national differences. British and Irish feminists get discussed together as if they were one. However, after 1919 their paths diverged leading to very different careers for Brittain, Bennett, and Sheehy Skeffington and different lives for the women of Ireland and England. Brittain became more successful and was able to engage with a wide audience in Great Britain through her articles in major dailies and her best-selling memoirs, one of which was adapted for film twice. Bennett and Sheehy Skeffington, well-known amongst historians of Irish feminists, were rather unsuccessful and unknown to the rest of the world. Their feminist newspaper the *Irish Citizen* folded in 1920. The readership had disappeared in favor of other newspapers that were more focused on the issues of self-government. The feminism was similar, their strategies were similar, the campaigns and causes were similar. What was different was their national context. Brittain was more successful due to the stability of the British

government and its lack of the strict social policy that was found in Ireland. The influence of the Catholic Church and the vision of an “idyllic” Ireland held by many of those in control in crafting the identity of the new Irish Free State caused to be set in place an extremely traditional view of women and what their role in society should be. This caused major problems for both Sheehy Skeffington and Bennett. Their agendas were looked down upon and constantly legislated against:

These women, many motivated by the 1916 and 1922 promises of full and equal citizenship, kept fighting for the rights of the Irish woman in spite of the continuing erosion of her rights. The social conservatism of the 1920s and 1930s found full force in the legislative actions against the female worker, gendered legislation which was to affect the position of the female worker in Ireland, legally and ideologically, until late into the twentieth century.⁶⁰

This legislative and social force was not as present in Great Britain at the time, which allowed for more debate within the British feminist movement, for legislation to pass, and for individual feminists, such as Vera Brittain to find success.

⁶⁰ Mary McAuliffe. "The Irish Woman Worker and the Conditions of Employment Act, 1936 Responses from the Irish Free State Women Senators." *Saothar* 36, Women: Special Issue (2011): 45.

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