

The influence of women on the British Labour Party in the 1920s

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Giessen 2004

Giessener Elektronische Bibliothek (GEB) April 2004

Women in the Labour Party¹

The first section of the article explores the struggle of women members in the 1920s to find their place within the Labour Party. By examining the party structure, it analyses whether women were able to influence the party discourse. Party publications, unpublished primary sources and official records, such as TUC files and conference minutes from the Labour Party, have been used to provide insights into the struggle of Labour women.

From 1906 onward, women interested in the Labour Party were organised in the Women's Labour League (WLL), an independent organisation with a relatively small membership of about 5,000. Already in 1915 League women declared their interest in joining the Labour Party, but the party did not agree to this request until 1917. By that point party leaders had recognised both the potential of women as a group of voters and its own strength as an emerging major British party. In order to integrate women and previously excluded male adults in greater numbers, a broad reorganisation was necessary. So far membership had only been possible through affiliated organisations such as the trade unions, but most women would not have been able to join the Labour Party in that way. It was therefore necessary to introduce a local party structure with individual membership.²

When the League finally merged with the Labour Party in 1918, i.e. in the year when women were partly enfranchised,³ women were assigned a separate sphere and thus the gender separation, which had been characteristic of the labour movement since the foundation of the WLL, was preserved. Former League branches were turned into women's sections of the Labour Party. Each section was represented on the executive committees of the local constituency parties and women could join as individual members. Women received four seats out of the initial twenty-three on the National Executive Committee (NEC) as well as the position of a chief woman officer and a women's advisory committee. The party constitution, which

¹ I am grateful to Marion Gymnich and David Howell for excellent suggestions and constructive criticism on this article. Thanks also go to Ellen Carpenter for her proof-reading.

² David Howell (2002) *Mac Donald's Party. Labour Identity and Crisis, 1922-1931*, p. 339 (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press).

³ The enfranchisement of the female population took place in two steps: when women got the right to vote in 1918, this right was limited to women who were married or qualified as householders in their own right and who were at least thirty years old; their husbands had to fulfil the criteria of the local government franchise by owning or occupying land or premise of an annual value of at least 5 pounds. Ten years later, in 1928, the enfranchisement was extended and all women who were 21 years or older were granted the right to vote (Charles Loch Mowat (1955) *Britain between the Wars, 1918-1940*, p. 1 (London: Methuen & Co Ltd).).

was written in 1918, provided women with full membership and followed the notion that they could participate on equal terms with their male comrades. However, the decision-making bodies for the women members, such as women's conferences and the women's advisory committee, did not have any binding consequences for the Labour Party. Women representatives on the NEC were not elected by the women's sections but at the annual conference of the Labour Party, which was dominated by male trade unionists, who had traditionally provided about 90 percent of the rank and file and who considered the party to be the political wing of the labour movement.⁴ Women thus had to find their place and to construct their political identity within structures that strongly favoured men. The "essential 'maleness' of the proletarian struggle" also reflected a gender division in family and society.⁵

During the war, women entered those trades in large numbers, which had previously been male preserves, such as engineering. When the war ended in 1918, women had to quit their jobs for returning servicemen and they could only retain their positions in such sectors where female employment was well established, like for example cotton textiles.⁶ However, what was propagated as a "return to normality" and as an effort to restore the position of men as breadwinners⁷ through imposing the pre-war structure of the labour market failed. In 1919, when the British economy boomed, there was a positive development for male employment, which meant, however, that hardly any of the 1.3 million women who had entered the workforce during the war could retain their jobs. But the following economic recession put an end to the idea of the "return to normality" and Britain had to cope with two phases of high unemployment in the periods from 1921 to 1922 and from 1929 to 1933.⁸ The

⁴ cf. Pamela M. Graves (1994) *Labour Women. Women in British Working-Class Politics 1918-1939*, pp. 22-23 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). Pat Thane (1994) Visions of gender in the making of the British welfare state: the rise of women in the British Labour Party and social policy, 1906-1945, in Gisela Bock & Pat Thane (Eds.) *Maternity and gender politics: women and the rise of the European welfare states, 1880s-1950s*, p. 94 (London & New York: Routledge).

⁵ Eric J. Hobsbawm (1984) *Worlds of Labour. Further Studies in the History of Labour*, p. 97 (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson).

⁶ Pilcher, Jane (1999) *Women in Contemporary Britain. An Introduction*, p. 33-34 (London & New York: Routledge).

⁷ The model of the male breadwinner emerged at the beginning of the century and was paralleled by an exclusion of married women from the labour market. The male breadwinner marked a gendered division of labour, in which men were predominantly responsible for earning the 'family wage' and in which women were responsible for the domestic duties. As Crompton (1997) argues, the male-breadwinner model was part of those policies of the trade unions, which aimed for the principle of the family wage – a wage earned by a man and sufficient to support wife and children (Crompton, Rosemary (1997) *Women and work in Modern Britain*, p. 8 (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press).).

⁸ Unemployment differed widely with respect to occupation, location, gender, age and duration and was heavily concentrated in so-called old industries such as coal mining, heavy engineering,

re-establishment of the domestic sphere as the appropriate domain for most working-class women had a significant impact on the politics of Labour women.⁹ They recognised that the multiple deprivations of home-based women were connected to both the gendered division of labour and the relative deprivation of women within the economy as a whole. The targets of criticism were not only gender divisions in society, but also the role of the state and the labour market, which perpetuated and reinforced such divisions. Labour women were of the opinion that most women wanted to be mothers and wives and they saw marriage as a partnership and the home as a potential base for the empowerment of women. It was assumed that mothers did not necessarily have to remain in the home; both domestic and paid labour were seen as acceptable goals. On the agenda of Labour women there were issues like equal pay, protective legislation and birth control. But within the Labour Party these topics had to compete with interests that emphasised economic and social policies and defined anything as relevant or irrelevant on the basis of its relation to this focus.¹⁰

Labour women had varying social, educational and professional backgrounds, which led to differing views and interests. What seems particularly significant is that women attaining leading positions within the Labour Party differed from the activists at the grass-root level in several respects – they were predominantly middle-class, well-educated and unmarried. Working-class and less educated women, who constituted the majority of the target group, remained underrepresented and marginalised in the party process of decision-making. Consequently, the women who helped to shape policy decisions and who dominated discourses had experiences at times radically different from those shared by the women those very policies were aimed at. Beatrice Webb commented on this problem when writing about Susan Lawrence, who was one of the first three Labour women MPs in 1923: “In order to keep in touch with what she imagines to be the proletarian mind she has lost touch with facts as they are (...) It is a bad case of the occupational disease so common among high-strung men and women who come out of a conservative environment into proletarian politics. By continuously talking to

shipbuilding and textiles (Ross McKibbin (1998) *The Evolution of the Labour Party. 1910-1924*, pp. 111-113 (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press).).

⁹ Susan Pedersen (1993) *Family, Dependence and the Origin of the Welfare State. Britain and France, 1914-1945*, p. 106 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

¹⁰ Thane, 'Visions of gender in the making of the British welfare state', pp. 95-99. Howell, *Mac Donald's Party*, p. 378.

another class in the language they think that class speaks instead of in their own vernacular, they deceive themselves and create distrust in their audience".¹¹ Furthermore, the spectrum of political orientation among Labour women at all levels ranged from anti-communist and anti-feminist to feminist and socialist convictions.¹² Those women who expressed themselves in terms of class loyalty, who were opposed to feminist ideas and more radical forms of socialism reached the highest positions women could attain within the Labour Party at that time – like Dr. Marion Phillips, chief woman officer and MP, and Margaret Bondfield, the first woman cabinet minister in Britain.¹³

The identity of Labour women was determined by their different social backgrounds, by the way male party members perceived them and in relation to women of other social movements. The idea of partnership favoured by Labour women was not confined to the private sphere, but was also projected onto the public one, because they wanted to be partners in the class struggle and fight shoulder to shoulder with their male comrades in a mixed-sex organisation. This was the motivation for the 1918 merger of WLL and Labour Party and it also influenced the relationship to the women's movement, which had been co-operative and supportive before 1918. As Labour women struggled to define their position within the party, they also began to reconsider their relation to the women's movement, and the gendering of the Labour Party caused tensions between the feminists and Labour women throughout the 1920s.

While Labour women discussed women's equality versus their "special needs", middle-class feminists of the women's movement were divided over "difference" versus "equality".¹⁴ The new feminists assumed that discriminatory social welfare

¹¹ Norman MacKenzie & Jeanne MacKenzie (Eds.) (1985) *The Diary of Beatrice Webb. Volume Four, 1924-1943*, p. 81 (London: Virago).

¹² cf. Joyce M. Bellamy & John Saville (Eds.) (1972) *Dictionary of Labour Biography, Vol. I*, p. 97-98 (London: Macmillan). Joyce M. Bellamy & John Saville (Eds.) (1974) *Dictionary of Labour Biography, Vol. II*, p. 41-44, 256-257 (London: Macmillan). Joyce M. Bellamy & John Saville (Eds.) (1979) *Dictionary of Labour Biography, Vol. V*, p. 119-121, 173 (London: Macmillan). Joyce M. Bellamy & John Saville (Eds.) (1987) *Dictionary of Labour Biography, Vol. VIII*, p. 215-217 (Basingstoke: Macmillan).

¹³ Another interesting aspect about leading Labour women is that Labour women MPs of that period mostly remained unmarried and had to face intense competition in order to win a seat in parliament. This pattern differs from the one for Liberal and Conservative women MPs, who in most cases inherited a seat previously held by their husbands. Nancy Astor, for instance, became the first woman MP in Britain by winning her husband's seat when he inherited a title (Sheila Rowbotham (1999 [1997]) *A Century of Women. The History of Women in Britain and the United States*, p. 121 (London: Penguin).).

¹⁴ Eleanor Rathbone, who became president of the NUSEC in 1920, challenged the dominant egalitarian assumptions within the women's movement. She emphasised women's difference and

legislation was necessary for the achievement of equality for women. After 1925, the new feminists had an agenda that was almost indistinguishable from that of Labour women, but this did not lead to cooperation. Many women members of the Labour Party lacked any interest in a working relationship with the feminist movement because they emphasised class more than gender identity. They were sceptical about stressing the needs of women and did not share the idea of the feminist movement that all women were united by a common oppression across class barriers. Feeling closer to men from the labour movement than to middle-class feminists, Labour women did not believe that they had much in common with them. This attitude was not simply caused by class loyalty, but also by a shared experience of poverty and inequality. Although some of the leading Labour women had a middle-class background, many Labour women activists thought that middle-class feminists, enjoying privileges of wealth and opportunity, were unable to understand the problems faced by working-class women.¹⁵

Through its alliance with the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) in 1913 Labour was the only party giving official support to the suffrage campaign, but after 1918 Labour withdrew from this cooperation. The Labour Party adopted a new position towards the middle-class feminists after it had become the mass party of the working-class. In fact, Labour policy even deliberately sought to distance its women members from the feminist movement. At every annual conference between 1919 and 1925 Labour leaders warned the women members against approaches from the feminist movement. In 1921, the NEC denied the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC) representation at Labour women's conferences, and in 1925, a resolution that would have forbidden Labour women to be members of NUSEC was only narrowly defeated.¹⁶ Marion Phillips, Chief Woman Officer, asked Labour women in 1921 „to have nothing to do with those who come to them in the guise of friends and ask them to co-operate in regard to certain individual parts of the Labour Party's programme“.¹⁷ There was mutual distrust between the Labour Party and the feminists, who increasingly disapproved of

based her demands on social needs rather than equal opportunities with men. However, this approach caused conflicts within the movement and eventually led to a split in 1927. Whereas the new feminists remained, the egalitarians left the NUSEC and joined the Open Door Council, an off-shoot of the NUSEC which was established in 1926 in order to fight for equal economic opportunity (ibid., p. 126-129.).

¹⁵ Graves, *Labour Women*, p. 118-119.

¹⁶ ibid., p. 120.

¹⁷ Johanna Alberti (1989) *Beyond Suffrage. Feminists in War and Peace*, p. 181 (Basingstoke: Macmillan).

Labour's motives and actions. Additionally, the establishment of closer links with women from the Liberal Party seems to have been seen by Labour activists as an anti-Labour position. The conflict between Labour women and the feminist movement weakened the impact on post-suffrage initiatives, for in order to empower women and to strengthen their influence within the public sphere, an effective and cross-class feminist alliance would have been essential.¹⁸ By focusing on class, Labour women ultimately limited their chances and options.

Encouraged by the increasing number of women members, Labour women began to reconsider their position and actively tried to shape their place within the Labour Party throughout the 1920s. Although the first official individual membership statistics of the Labour Party was only undertaken in 1928 (without breaking down gender figures), it is possible to estimate the number of women members, based on data collected from issues of *Labour Woman*, the party magazine for its women members, and various conference minutes. In the 1920s the membership of women grew significantly; it can be assumed that in 1921 about 60,000 women were members of the Labour Party. By 1925, the number had risen to about 200,000 and by 1930 to approximately 250,000. The women members were aware of the unequal distribution of power and claimed both their own sphere and a greater chance to participate. This was first discussed at the beginning of the 1920s and then again in the second half of that decade. Labour women undertook several attempts to increase their power by moving resolutions at the women's conferences. They asked that their decisions should have a binding character for the entire party. In 1921 a resolution was passed to amend the constitution of the Labour Party in order to change the mode of election of the four women representatives of the NEC by nominating and electing them through the national conference of Labour women. This attempt was followed by a demand for a revision of the party constitution to guarantee greater female representation, but both attempts remained unsuccessful.¹⁹ In the second half of the 1920s, part of the Labour women's debate on their position in the party was focused on how to secure a greater number of women candidates for parliament. There was an awareness of the difficulties and obstacles they had to face. Two different options to improve the situation were under consideration, the arguments evolved around the alternatives of a national or a local scheme. The local scheme, or the so-called Durham scheme, decided on a candidate in the county,

¹⁸ Graves, *Labour Women*, pp. 138.

¹⁹ *Labour Woman*, June 1921, p. 91. *Labour Woman*, June 1922, p. 86.

circularised this to all women's sections and asked them to agree to guarantee a certain sum per year for the constituency. However, at the conference, the decision was made in favour of a national scheme and it was added that every section should make a small financial contribution to a candidate's fund.²⁰ Labour women also recognised that, if nominated at all, women candidates ended up running for difficult seats. At the 1928 women's conference, Dorothy Jewson, a very committed feminist and one of the first three Labour women MPs to enter the House of Commons in 1923, moved four resolutions demanding a greater share of power for women. Her resolutions contained the following claims: (1) that the national conference of Labour women should only consist of delegates affiliated to the Labour Party, (2) that the conference should last three days and be entitled to discuss all matters affecting policy and organisation, (3) that the conference should have the right to put down three resolutions on the agenda of the annual conference of the Labour Party, and (4) that the four women members of the NEC should be elected by ballot at the conference of Labour women. In the ensuing discussion it became clear that women members objected to their weak position at the decision-making level and asked that the resolutions passed by the women's conference went into both the agenda of the Labour Party conference and the party programme. There was also consent concerning the idea of electing the four women to the NEC directly in the women's conference. In the following vote, only the first resolution was defeated and the others were adopted.²¹

The Labour Party also debated the women's place within their ranks. At the annual conference of the Labour Party in Brighton in 1929, amendments to the constitution were adopted. The alterations affecting women were, (1) five instead of four women members on the NEC, (2) since 1918 constituencies with 500 women members - both individual and affiliated - had been permitted an additional woman delegate at the national conference. The qualifying membership was increased to 2,500. The other alterations were, (3) the institution of a national membership card and the increase of the fee, (4) the definition of the status and functions of a women's section and its further direct representation on divisional Labour Parties. The alterations affecting women were made in the context of overall changes in the Party structure,

²⁰ *Private Business Conference on Organisation*, May 1927, p. 75-82.

²¹ *The Year's Work of the Labour Party in Women's Interests at Home and Abroad*, May 1928, pp. 61-64.

such as a drastic cut in the total number of delegates at the conference.²² Those constitutional changes did not increase the women's general influence and were not according to their demands and ideas. In fact, alteration (2) must be interpreted as an obstacle and (1) only increased the number but did not change the election mode, which was what was demanded by Labour women. Labour women expressed their discontent with the alterations at the women's conference in 1930. The criticism raised by the delegates focused on various issues, such as the under-representation of housewives, the insufficient representation of women at Labour Party conferences and the status of decisions taken at women's conferences. A resolution was moved and carried which asked that the Labour women's conference be recognised as an official gathering, its resolutions to be accepted within the Labour Party.²³

The party's initial claim to offer women support and to integrate them on equal terms had not become reality. The organizational structures and the actual party policy did not reflect this intention, and instead, they reproduced "gendered identities central to the culture of labour".²⁴ The analysis has shown that most women members recognised that they were not equal partners and they were not content with the position they had accepted in the 1918 merger. Labour women wanted to be partners of their male comrades, but in the 1920s their status did not reflect this aspiration.

The issue of family allowances

This section explores the issue of family allowances in order to deepen the analysis of the impact of women members on the Labour Party discourse, and it further suggests that in the 1920s the ideas and demands of Labour women were shaped by gender, but were even more affected by class.

After the First World War the discussion of wages and family needs reached a peak in Britain and by the middle of the 1920s the debate had manifested itself in various forms.²⁵ Throughout the decade family allowances were discussed within the

²² *The Year's Work of the Labour Party in Women's Interests at Home and Abroad*, June 1930, pp. 14-15, 59.

²³ *ibid.*, pp. 59-61.

²⁴ Howell, *Mac Donald's Party*, p. 378.

²⁵ Family allowances were proposed by the Family Endowment Society, which was headed by the feminist Eleanor Rathbone, who campaigned for the implementation of any kind of cash payments. The issue was also featured as a central theme through Seebohm Rowntree's interest in a minimum wage, combined with family allowances, the State Bonus Plan, Beatrice Webb's brief interest and her proposal of equal wage and child endowment; in addition it was reflected in the ongoing discussion

women's sections of the Labour Party, and in the second half of the decade, the debate also permeated into the trade unions and the Labour Party. Although Labour women campaigned for this policy from an early stage on, it seems that family allowances eventually made their way to the top of the agenda only by way of an Independent Labour Party (ILP) proposal in 1926.

Labour women's interest in financial provisions for women and children arose before the First World War. Already in 1907 and in 1909 the London branches of the WLL had promoted such provisions by discussing various schemes for the endowment of motherhood. Whereas some activists pleaded for cash payments, others favoured services in kind. In 1913, the debate widened, and later the war stimulated members of the WLL to develop a policy of family endowment, which offered separation allowances as a model, when cash payments were given to wives or mothers of servicemen. League activists recognised the government's acceptance of a financial responsibility for women and children who were unable to support themselves and concluded that this wartime measure could be extended as a general national benefit. They considered mothers' pensions as a first step towards family allowances and wanted financial support to be extended to unmarried mothers.

Whereas widows' pensions became official Labour Party policy from 1918 onward, the party remained opposed to the support of unmarried mothers. Unsuccessful parliamentary bills for the introduction of widow's pensions were to be followed. At women's conferences of the early 1920s, schemes of endowment were discussed and resolutions passed. Although Labour women favoured cash payments, in 1922 and 1923 they eventually accepted the report of a special committee of the Trade Union Congress (TUC) and the Labour Party, which pleaded for services in kind. There was no gender conflict over the issue yet, but it was already obvious that Labour women wanted more radical forms of endowment than the majority of men in the labour movement would support.²⁶ Labour women continued their campaigns, and when the ILP eventually produced a socialist family allowance proposal as part of an ambitious economic policy in 1926, the issue gained increasing prominence. Labour women then adopted a position similar to that of the ILP and abandoned the

within TUC and the Labour Party (John Macnicol (1980) *The Movement for Family Allowances, 1918-1945. A Study in Social Policy Development*, p. 9 (London: Heinemann)).

²⁶ Thane, 'Visions of gender in the making of the British welfare state', pp. 108-110. Graves, *Labour Women*, pp. 99-104.

demand for services in kind. With “Socialism in Our Time“, the ILP introduced ideas of a wage for all workers which should be supplemented by children’s allowances and financed from direct taxation. The proposal was considered by the Labour Party and investigated in a joint committee with the TUC.²⁷ In the face of increasing unemployment and poverty, the idea appeared to provide a possible solution. But several TUC leaders were opposed to this type of distributive policy and disapproved of the ILP, which they associated with a left that was unacceptable to them. Trade union leaders, among whom the family wage still was the prevailing assumption, were especially worried about the impact of cash payments. The family wage was considered an essential element in wage negotiation tactics and seemed to constitute an aspect of the workers’ masculine identity. Therefore, cash payments were regarded as a threat to existing gender roles. An interim report of the joint committee was published in September 1928 and sent to the member unions for discussion, asking them whether they were in favour of further financial provisions for children. Fifty-three unions with an aggregate membership of 2,127,965 replied in the affirmative pleading for further provisions, whereas two unions with a membership of 366,514 were opposed to any such measure. Out of the fifty-three unions nineteen, with 1,146,774 members, opted for cash payments and thirty-three unions, speaking on behalf of 980,786 members, preferred extensions of social services.²⁸ Subsequently, TUC leaders exerted their influence on the joint committee not only by removing socialist policies, but also by preventing this body from giving a definite recommendation, even after some of the trade unions had expressed their support for cash payments. When the relationship between the diverging groups became increasingly strained, calls for unity became louder. The political and industrial wings feared a split within the labour movement, and since both partners wanted an electoral success, they had no intention of sacrificing their alliance for the sake of

²⁷ The joint committee consisted of seven representatives of the TUC and seven members of the Labour Party and invited a number of witnesses from different sections of the labour movement as well as external experts. Walter Milne-Bailey (TUC) was appointed secretary of the committee. In 1927 the joint committee was composed of the TUC representatives Margaret Bondfield (chair), John Beard, H.H. Elvin, John Hill, R.T. Jones, Ben Turner and Walter Citrine. The seven members of the Labour Party were Arthur Henderson, George Lansbury, Oswald Mosley, Herbert Morrison, Ellen Wilkinson, F.O. Roberts and George Lathan (Pedersen, Family, *Dependence and the Origin of the Welfare State*, p. 197). The members changed over time; initially Dr. Dalton was nominated as chair before Bondfield was appointed. By 1928 G. Lansbury had left, Ms Adamson had joined (*TUC Report*, September 1928, p. 289) and by 1929 J. Bromley had substituted B. Turner whereas Hugh Dalton had replaced H. Morrison (*TUC Report*, September 1929, p. 258). By 1930 the composition had changed almost entirely (*TUC File*, MSS 292/117/1).

²⁸ *TUC Report*, September 1929, p. 258. *TUC File*, MSS 292/117/7, 26 February 1929. *TUC File*, MSS 292/117/7, 19 November 1928.

social policies. Pressure for unity was especially important in the face of a minority Labour government which had to deal with an economic recession and a massive rise in unemployment that were paralleled by demands for cuts in public expenditure. Therefore, the TUC eventually put an end to the struggle in September 1930 by adopting the minority report of the joint committee, which favoured services in kind and rejected the idea of cash payments that was propagated in the majority report.²⁹ The Labour Party made the same decision one month later, at its annual conference when the delegates voted in favour of the minority report by 1,740,000 to 495,000 votes. The major motivation for this decision was the aim of maintaining the movement's unity. Labour women still had some hope: "Family endowment is coming. Perhaps not this year or next, but sometime soon."³⁰ But family allowances were not discussed within the Labour Party after 1930, until the implementation was achieved in a second wave of interest in the matter at the end of the Second World War.

Although Labour women initiated the issue of family allowances and considered it as a means of achieving the independence of married women, the discussion which arose through the ILP proposal did not touch upon any gender-related issues raised by Labour women activists. The emphasis and the language of the debate were influenced by a discourse of class and poverty. Labour women seem to have accepted this shift in emphasis and, consequently, after 1926 feminist arguments played only a marginal role, while the themes of poverty and class were predominant. Although it was criticised for its socialist orientation, the ILP proposal received more attention within the labour movement than the previous resolutions and demands by Labour women, and the issue of family allowances was placed at the top of the agenda. Graves argues that the simplicity and specificity of the ILP proposal functioned both as clarification and polarisation of opinions within the labour movement.³¹ Several conflicts arose out of the issue of family allowances and caused disagreement between and within the two wings of the movement. The issue also produced considerable gender tensions, because dissent between Labour women and men over how family allowances would affect wages was a vital consideration.

²⁹ "For the sake of the future of the movement, we ask you to stand by Trade Unionism and adopt the Minority Report and turn down cash allowances" (*TUC Report*, September 1930, p. 383). A long and controversial debate ensued and the delegates eventually voted – with 2,154,000 against 1,347,000 votes – for the minority report (*TUC Report*, September 1930, p. 409.).

³⁰ *Labour Woman*, February 1931, p. 19.

³¹ Graves, *Labour Women*, p. 105.

Even if women members did not have an adequate share of power, Labour women's commitment to the extension of social measures had an impact on sharpening the party's interest in establishing a welfare state. Women initiated the debate about family allowances, made an effort to keep the topic alive and also played a significant part in modifying dominant normative constructions of gender roles by questioning the role of the male breadwinner – a questioning that acquired additional emphasis in a devastating economic depression. The development of the debate about family allowances further reveals the structurally strong position of the trade unions and demonstrates that they were able to determine the discourse as well as the outcome of the debate about family allowances.

Conclusion

The study has analysed the influence of women members on the Labour Party in the 1920s and suggests that Labour men and women were unable to create an effective working partnership. The reluctance of the male members to share power and the failure of most men and women to overcome the prevailing traditional gender roles entailed that women were not on equal terms with men in policy and decision-making. Decisions concerning party discourse were made within party institutions where women had hardly any influence. Women were assigned to a separate sphere, which was marked by powerlessness, and the issues they discussed were considered to be of special interest to them because they focused on "women's experiences".³² By discussing the issue of family allowances, this article has sought to demonstrate that Labour women were unwilling to accept their marginalisation, and actively tried to increase their influence, to push their policies. Although they were marginalised, women members contributed to the formation of the party discourse.

³² *ibid.*, p. 220.