Gender, Welfare, and Citizenship in Britain during the Great War

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Who is a citizen? It was during and after World War II that the classic theorists of the British welfare state—Richard Titmuss, Sir William Beveridge, and T. H. Marshall—answered this question by positing a community bound by social as well as political ties. The citizen, they said, not only participates in the political life of the community and holds political rights but also contributes to its social and economic well-being, drawing from it social and economic entitlements.1 Their definition of citizenship was expansive, but it was also functionally based. And, by imagining a polity in which social rights stem from social functions, they begged the question of which forms of activity would properly be considered citizenship functions. If soldiering and working are to bring with them citizenship entitlements, will housekeeping or mothering do so as well? What are the gender implications of social citizenship?

When Beveridge addressed these questions in his famous report of 1942, he insisted that while the new welfare state would differentiate sharply between men and women, it would nevertheless treat women fairly. Welfare provision would be separate but equal: men and women would be granted an insurance status appropriate to their functional roles of, respectively, wage earner and mother. Yet, as feminist critics argued then and have argued since, the welfare state imagined by Beveridge and implemented by postwar planners treated the sexes not only differently but unequally. Rather than insuring each individual independently, the state determined the entitlements of entire families primarily by the economic status of the husband and father, independent of the work, waged or otherwise, of the wife and mother. For example, while men received benefits for their presumed dependent families as well as for themselves when they were ill, incapacitated, or unemployed, married women wage earners were exempted from the compulsory employment insurance covering men and single women. A nonearning wife's access to state benefits was mediated by her husband's status, and she drew independent benefits only for childbirth or in the event of his absence or death.2

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2 An early and perspicacious feminist critique of Beveridge appeared during the war itself; see Elizabeth Abbott and Katherine Bompas, The Woman Citizen and Social Security (London, 1943). On
TABLE 1
Cost of Army Allowances and Pay
(pounds)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Separation Allowance</th>
<th>Total Pay</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apr. 1, 1914–Mar. 31, 1915</td>
<td>15,107,180</td>
<td>44,246,908</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr. 1, 1915–Mar. 31, 1916</td>
<td>52,870,267</td>
<td>107,270,449</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr. 1, 1916–Mar. 31, 1917</td>
<td>77,845,411</td>
<td>144,916,273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr. 1, 1917–Mar. 31, 1918</td>
<td>113,287,606</td>
<td>200,167,123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr. 1, 1918–Mar. 31, 1919</td>
<td>124,571,016</td>
<td>289,426,746</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr. 1, 1919–Mar. 31, 1920</td>
<td>31,072,604</td>
<td>163,231,582</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td>414,752,084</td>
<td>949,267,081</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The figures for separation allowances exclude the additional 8 million pounds expended by the National Relief Fund, the War Pensions Etc. Statutory Committee, and the Special Grants Committee of the Ministry of Pensions to supplement the basic rates in cases of hardship. Separation allowance figures for 1914 also exclude the small amound expended before the outbreak of war. The figures for total pay include the figures for separation allowances.


The state that theoretically guaranteed a minimum standard of life to all in practice channeled that minimum through the hands of men, thus making its equal enjoyment by women and children subject to men’s good will.

Examined from the point of view of gender, the Beveridgian welfare state appears less the harbinger of social equality than the guarantor of the domestic rights and status of men. This is the case not merely because the social entitlements of male citizens were different, better, or more plentiful. Rather, in Beveridge’s model, such entitlements included the maintenance and representation of women and children and, by that very fact, made the possession of comparable rights for women impossible. Ironically, at a time when women were gaining civil and political equality, the construction of a welfare state assuming male maintenance of women and children excluded them from full social citizenship.

But the Beveridge Plan is, in a sense, the end of the story. Beveridge, as José Harris has argued, was an able synthesizer but no innovator. By 1942, the principles embodied in his plan had become so widely accepted that opponents found themselves armed with little more than the shield of Treasury parsimony.3

But, if the accomplishment of Beveridge was largely to systematize and extend an already familiar logic of welfare provision, at what point did the assumptions about gender roles that he so perfectly articulated become embedded in British social policy?

It was, I would argue, only during World War I that the British state made a decisive commitment to the articulation of this gendered system of welfare.

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provision. It did so almost inadvertently, through the extension and administration of universal, need-blind benefits—known as “separation allowances”—for the wives and children of soldiers and sailors. Although virtually unnoticed by historians, Britain’s wartime allowance system was remarkable for its scale and scope. It cost the government almost half a billion pounds, or almost as much as the pay given to the soldiers themselves (Table 1). By the Armistice, allowances were absorbing some 120 million pounds per year, a figure roughly comparable to two-thirds of the total annual expenditure of the central government in the pre-war years. At the height of the army’s strength, 1.5 million wives and several million children were receiving separation allowances at rates bordering on subsistence, while smaller amounts were doled out on more stringent terms to another 1.5 million dependent relatives.

Yet the size of the allowance system was, by its very nature, temporary: more significant—because lasting—was its impact on the shaping of British social policy. Allowances were important for the way they committed the state to a “logic” of social citizenship structured around maintaining the domestic rights of the male citizen. For the wives, who were the most important recipients of allowances, the state became a surrogate husband: it paid them benefits because of their husbands’ citizenship status and rights, not their own work or needs, and the conditions of receipt included fidelity to their absent husbands.

The experiment with separation allowances left its mark on postwar social policy, which gradually came to reflect more clearly the ideal of a male breadwinner and dependent wife. Yet this outcome was in some ways accidental. Only the unique political circumstances of the war, in which a temporary suspension of the usual restraints on government spending coincided with a pressing need to recruit working men, made such massive social spending possible. The emergence of this logic of welfare will be traced here through three convergent processes: the privileging of the status of the citizen-soldier as a consequence of the pressures of

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4 Allowances were paid to the wives and dependents of officers and men in both the army and navy, and varied by rank and service. Wives of private soldiers constituted the vast majority of recipients, however, since four-fifths of the army’s soldiers in 1917 were privates, and this essay will focus on their case. Allowances for “dependents” (usually mothers), paid through different administrative channels upon proof of pre-war dependence, were far less generous and cost the state only one-third as much as those for wives. Numbers in receipt of army separation allowances are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Wives</th>
<th>Dependents</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nov. 30, 1914</td>
<td>509,000</td>
<td>22,500</td>
<td>531,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb. 20, 1915</td>
<td>675,000</td>
<td>306,000</td>
<td>981,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr. 30, 1915</td>
<td>723,167</td>
<td>480,250</td>
<td>1,203,417</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jul. 31, 1915</td>
<td>836,498</td>
<td>721,441</td>
<td>1,557,939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 31, 1915</td>
<td>916,714</td>
<td>871,669</td>
<td>1,788,383</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 31, 1916</td>
<td>977,657</td>
<td>1,041,653</td>
<td>2,019,310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jul. 1, 1916</td>
<td>1,115,451</td>
<td>1,293,979</td>
<td>2,409,424</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 1, 1917</td>
<td>1,345,427</td>
<td>1,556,107</td>
<td>2,901,534</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 1, 1918</td>
<td>1,550,827</td>
<td>1,434,715</td>
<td>2,985,542</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jul. 1, 1918</td>
<td>1,525,000</td>
<td>1,539,000</td>
<td>3,064,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 1, 1919</td>
<td>1,456,020</td>
<td>1,497,100</td>
<td>2,953,120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jul. 1, 1919</td>
<td>354,556</td>
<td>578,985</td>
<td>933,541</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 1, 1920</td>
<td>127,514</td>
<td>201,755</td>
<td>329,269</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

war; the development of a state administration that incorporated the work of private charities; and the enforcement of the sexual and economic rights of men through the operation of moral tests of wives’ eligibility for benefits. Yet the logic of welfare that developed during World War I was not so unproblematically transmitted. A final section will look briefly at the ways in which recipients and feminists attempted to subvert and recast its principles and to develop a new concept of social citizenship for women.

The notion of separate spheres of work and politics for men and women has a long and complex genealogy, in Britain as elsewhere. The articulation of an idealized vision of a family organized around male maintenance and female dependence appears in both the nineteenth-century evangelical revival and trade-union campaigns for a male family wage; political radicals also stressed working men’s support of women and children as a sign of their worthiness for wider citizenship rights. Nevertheless, in the period before World War I, no particular model of family relations had received the unambiguous endorsement of the state. Social policies were by no means uniformly organized around the presumption of male maintenance and female dependence, and even the embryonic “rights-based” social programs introduced by the Liberal governments immediately before the war varied in their approach to the working-class family. True, the unemployment and sickness insurance schemes were intended primarily to maintain the earnings of working men, but other innovations such as old-age pensions and school meals bypassed these male breadwinners to approach deserving nonearners directly.

Pre-war social policies, then, reflected no one master plan by the state to shape family structure and gender roles. Furthermore, in the period before the war, major responsibility for the relief of distress remained in the hands of local Poor Law authorities and private charities, both of which tended to distribute aid without reference to “rights” at all but on the condition of recipients’ attempts at self-help and moral reform. “Welfare” before the war thus not only lacked the status of a citizenship right, it was often not in the hands of the national state.

In no area was the lack of a uniform state policy toward family welfare and the family wage more evident than in that central arena of state employment, the army. When the war broke out, marriage in the army was regulated by a system known

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6 On the Liberal reforms, see Bentley B. Gilbert, The Evolution of National Insurance in Great Britain (London, 1966). Gilbert laid great stress on the significance of school meals as a prototype for later welfare measures, but I would argue that school meals represent a vision of direct welfare provision that was bypassed after 1919 in favor of the alternative policy of bolstering the position of the male wage earner. School meals were controversial precisely because they challenged the absolute responsibility of the father to maintain his family, while social insurance benefits helped him to do so even when earnings failed.

as “marriage on the strength,” which had developed gradually during the Victorian period. Under this system, the army allowed a small proportion of men—fixed at 4 percent in 1876—to marry, usually as a reward for loyalty and long service. Their wives and children were designated as “on the strength” of the regiment and were entitled to housing as well as educational and welfare benefits. The policy of restricting marriage had real advantages for the army: it was cheap; it provided men with an incentive for good behavior; it gave the army the benefit of a specific amount of female labor for the “women’s work” of laundry and sewing; and it left the bulk of the army a theoretically celibate force, deemed more efficient, mobile, and single-minded.

Pre-war army regulations in no way accepted that the state had an obligation to allow men to marry, much less to pay a “family wage.” The marriage restrictions were vulnerable to serious criticism, however, being incompatible with a domestic ideology that identified marriage as the normal human condition and as central to the health and morality of an imperial society. Victorian and Edwardian sexual purity advocates objected that the army was encouraging “vice” (prostitution), and even military reformers impervious to moral pressure recognized that endemic venereal disease and drunkenness were sapping the “efficiency” of the army. The credibility of the restrictions was further undermined by the simple fact that soldiers did marry, with or without permission, helping their officially nonexistent families out of their own meager pay and rations. Wives of overseas troops were a particular problem. Only “on the strength” wives were eligible—from 1871—for separation allowances; those “off the strength” were at the mercy of the labor market, private charities, and the Poor Law.8

The marriage restrictions came under renewed attack from feminists, military reformers, and representatives of working men during the period of rearmament immediately prior to World War I. In 1913, the War Office responded by asking May Tennant, a former factory inspector and the wife of the undersecretary to the War Office, H. J. Tennant, to conduct an inquiry into the conditions of soldiers and wives “off the strength.” Written in consultation with many “ladies” active in philanthropic work among the troops, May Tennant’s report confirmed that unofficial marriage was widespread and inimical to the health and character of both the soldiers and their families. It did not, however, recommend that the army significantly expand the married establishment or extend allowances for wives. Rather—consistent with War Office practices—Tennant favored greater military collaboration with philanthropic societies, who would train the “off the strength” wives in needlework and child care, in an attempt to make them both self-supporting and better mothers.9

Tennant’s exposition of the evil effects of marriage off the strength won a favorable reception in the House of Commons; less welcome was her suggestion to meet the current poverty and distress by philanthropic visiting, training, and employment for wives. Labour member of Parliament George Roberts argued that the army’s restrictive policy on marriage was both an impediment to recruiting and a serious infringement of men’s rights. “After all,” he said, “I take it everybody will admit that a young man has a right to contemplate entering into the married state when he reaches a certain age.” Furthermore, once married, “[i]f a man is

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8 The summary in the above two paragraphs is drawn from Myna Trustram, Women of the Regiment: Marriage and the Victorian Army (Cambridge, 1984).

rendering good and necessary service to the State, he ought to be assured of such a reward as will enable him to maintain himself and his family in a state of decency and comfort.” A liberalization of marriage regulations would, he concluded, “tend to greater morality”—a coded way of saying that married men would no longer resort to prostitutes.10

In the conflict between Roberts and Tennant is encapsulated the debate between statist and voluntarist visions of the aims and appropriate limits of both economic assistance and state intervention. Roberts’s claim was that the exercise of certain social and economic activities—including marriage and the support of a family—were fundamental rights of the male citizen. The state was thus required to provide the conditions under which such activities were possible for all men who fulfilled the basic duties of the citizen, usually seen as soldiering or working. L. T. Hobhouse, the quintessential philosopher of New Liberalism, expressed this opinion most succinctly in 1911 when he defined the state’s responsibility toward its citizens (posited automatically as male) as follows: “It is not for the State to feed, house or clothe them. It is for the State to take care that the economic conditions are such that the normal man who is not defective in mind or body or will can by useful labour feed, house, and clothe himself and his family.”11 And, if the state’s obligation extended to the economic oversight of society as a whole, surely it had a special responsibility for its own employees—its soldiers.

Hobhouse’s point of view might have been accepted by most Liberal and Labour members of Parliament by 1914, but it would have been contested by many of those who often had the greatest jurisdiction over those in need: members of the philanthropic societies. Voluntary social workers influenced by the principles of the Charity Organization Society certainly agreed that men should support their wives but contended that they should do so through their own exertions. If they failed, they had no “right” to the benevolent assistance of the state.12 In contrast to Liberal and Labour rhetoric, which posited a rights-based claim to social entitlements for men in particular, philanthropic workers tended to recognize not rights but needs and to insist that such needs be met not by universal provision but by self-help and the discriminating intervention of voluntary social workers. Even those settlement workers and home visitors who were receptive to an increase in state intervention stressed the importance of cross-class contact and “moralization” and feared the curtailment of their sphere of social action. Philanthropic organizations active among soldiers and sailors were—as Tennant discovered—particularly jealous of their privileges.

In the pre-war debate over the boundaries of voluntary and state authority, state bureaucracies by no means inevitably supported their own expansion. During the 1913 conflict over the degree to which the army should permit men to marry, for example, the War Office and Treasury showed themselves implacably opposed to costly extensions of government responsibilities. The presence of an organized network of philanthropic organizations made War Office intransigence possible, and the Liberal government—despite parliamentary protest—was quite willing to delegate the task of organizing the support and relief of soldiers’ families to officers’ wives, charitable groups, and social workers.

11 L. T. Hobhouse, Liberalism (1911; rpt. edn., Westport, Conn., 1980), 83; my emphasis.
12 The prominent social theorist and charity worker Helen Bosanquet argued, for example, that families were weakened by any reliance on state aid; see Helen Bosanquet, The Family (London, 1906), esp. 315, 339–40.
The war intruded on this political settlement and annulled it. Briefly, the war brought about three key changes in the structure of political opportunity. First, it swept away the usual political restrictions on government spending and expansion, as Parliament voted virtually unlimited credits for the war. Treasury control was supplanted by only the most cursory of actuarial estimates, and proliferating government bureaucracies found little check on either their spending on their extension of public control.13 Second, the war created a massive need for industrial and military manpower. In the absence of conscription (not introduced in Britain until 1916), such needs could be met only by voluntary enlistment from a wide range of age and social groups—a process that, in turn, dramatically altered the character and composition of the wartime army.14 Finally, this quest for increased production and recruits placed the representatives of working men in positions of some influence. Both the 'Trade Union Congress and the War Emergency Workers’ National Committee came to act as coordinating bodies, pressuring and negotiating directly with the government in matters affecting the Labour movement.15

In this new political climate, arguments stressing the social obligations of the state and the male right to maintain a wife and family gained new resonance and power. Respectable male workers would only join up, M.P. s argued and recruiting officers corroborated, if their wives and children were adequately cared for in their absence—and by the state, not by the charities.16 The liberal government shared their view: although the War Office hedged for a few days, on August 10, 1914, Prime Minister H. H. Asquith announced that separation allowances would be paid for all wives, including those "off the strength."17 Concessions on rates followed in 1914 and early 1915, demonstrating the government’s acceptance of the contention that, as one Liberal M.P. put it, there would be "a more speedy and more general rally to the Colours, if you relieve the minds of the men who, for many reasons, anxious to serve their country, have justly felt that their first duty was to their home, their wives, and their children."18 Nor was political pressure isolated or shortlived. The Workers’ National Committee launched a successful campaign for higher rates after the introduction of conscription for married men; a major back-bench revolt and considerable resentment in the army wrung further concessions out of a reluctant Treasury in 1918. In surveying the decisions on rates, it appears that the defenders of soldiers’ rights won their argument: the Cabinet

14 P. E. Dewey showed that while the age structure of different industries can account in part for differential enlistment rates, the wage levels of those industries cannot: poorer workers were not necessarily more likely to enlist—P. E. Dewey, “Military Recruiting and the British Labour Force during the First World War,” Historical Journal, 27 (1984): 199–225. And by 1917, some 40 percent of soldiers in the army were married.
16 For typical examples of this type of argument, see the following letters, all in The Times: G. E. Underhill, “Married Men and Enlistment” (September 7, 1914), 4; Austen Harrison, “Provision for Soldiers’ Dependents” (September 7, 1914), 4; Robert Edgcumbe, “The Separation Allowance” (September 8, 1914), 9; Lord Derby, “Keep the Home Going” (September 10, 1914), 5.
TABLE 2
Army Separation Allowances
Rates for Privates
(shillings/pence)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Size</th>
<th>Wife only</th>
<th>Wife and children numbering</th>
<th>Each add'l child</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1/2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-war—Sep. 30, 1914</td>
<td>11/1</td>
<td>12/10</td>
<td>14/7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 1, 1914—Feb. 28, 1915</td>
<td>12/6</td>
<td>15/-</td>
<td>17/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar. 1, 1915—Jan. 14, 1917</td>
<td>12/6</td>
<td>17/6</td>
<td>20/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 15, 1917—Oct. 6, 1918</td>
<td>12/6</td>
<td>19/6</td>
<td>21/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 7, 1918—Nov. 3, 1918</td>
<td>12/6</td>
<td>22/-</td>
<td>23/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>from No. 4, 1918</td>
<td>12/6</td>
<td>23/-</td>
<td>31/-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Upon the outbreak of war, allowances included a compulsory allotment from the soldiers' pay of 7 pence per child and 3 shillings 6 pence for the wife. The government met the cost of the allotment for children from November 9, 1914, and for the wife from September 29, 1917. The increases granted from January 15, 1917, only applied to children under fourteen; those between fourteen and sixteen received lower rates. The wife's allowance was never increased (evidence of the growing War Office disinclination to subsidize the 26 percent of wives without eligible children), but from November 4, 1918, the childless wife was granted an additional 6 shillings 6 pence by the local War Pensions Committee, provided she was not earning a wage.

Sources for rates: "History of Separation Allowance," PRO, WO 32/9316; for distribution of children, see "Increase of Children's Allowances: Memorandum by the War Office," Paper No. 73, July 2, 1918, War Cabinet, Soldiers' and Sailors' Pay Committee, PRO, CAB 27/21.

accepted, albeit reluctantly, that basic allowances must be universal, met entirely by state funds, and at least marginally adequate for subsistence needs (see Table 2 for rates).

As the political landscape changed, a rhetoric linking men's citizenship status to their role as heads of households became the dominant idiom of wartime discussions of separation allowances. It was not the only paradigm available, however; some alternative definitions of "social citizenship" could be found in the early twentieth-century debate over the "woman question." Many pre-war feminists, for example, pointed to women's domestic work when arguing for greater rights; H. G. Wells and a few like-minded socialists even contemplated direct payments to mothers for their "service to the state." Such claims were controversial for their insistence on mothers' individual rights, but even a more conventional ideal of


The 1918 increases, granted in two stages, owed much to both parliamentary pressures and fears of unrest in the army. See Parliamentary Debates (H.C.), 5th series, vol. 107 (June 18, 1918), cols. 276–83; vol. 108 (July 24, 1918): cols. 1825–30; vol. 109 (August 2, 1918): cols. 793–843; (August 5, 1918): cols. 1054–70; (August 8, 1918): cols. 1710–27; vol. 110 (October 17, 1918): cols. 290–94; the Sixth and Seventh Reports of the War Cabinet's Soldiers' and Sailors' Pay Committee, Paper G-217, July 17, 1918, and Paper G-231, November 13, 1918, PRO, CAB 24/5; Cabinet Minutes, Cabinet 449, July 19, 1918, pp. 35–36, PRO, CAB 23/7, Cabinet 486, October 15, 1918, pp. 28–29 and Cabinet 498, November 6, 1918, p. 64, PRO, CAB 23/8; and the records of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Pay Committee, especially "A Summary of the Principal Grievances Given Expression to at the Present Time by Associations Representing the Men, or by the Men Themselves," Appendix to the 29th Meeting, September 27, 1918, PRO, CAB 27/21.
interdependent family roles was sometimes characterized not as a system of male maintenance and female dependence but as an economic partnership of the citizen-couple. The opinion current in many working women’s organizations—that the housewife was just as much a “worker” as her husband and hence had equal claim on his wage—while perhaps not orthodox thought in the pre-war Labour movement was at least paid lip service.\textsuperscript{20} Separation allowances, from this point of view, could be seen as a right owed to the wives themselves because of their equal contribution to a household unit now disrupted by war.

These alternative understandings of social citizenship were expressed when the war broke out, but they proved no match for the rhetoric of soldiers’ rights. Feminists, divided over support for the war, became defensive or silent about women’s claims, while Labour women found their arguments undercut by the Workers’ National Committee’s own propensity to identify wives simply as “dependents” in its campaign for higher rates.\textsuperscript{21} The Leicester branch of the Women’s Labour League protested: “For a hard-working wife to be called a ‘dependent’ is offensive and even insulting,” they resolved, “and is so regarded by most intelligent working-women [housewives].” In sending off the resolution, Louisa Donaldson, the branch president, astutely added, “Believe me, it is far more than a matter of words that I am objecting to—it is the beliefs often unwittingly betrayed by the words, and so perpetuated.”\textsuperscript{22} In a telling admission of the power of established discourse, Workers’ National Committee Secretary J. S. Middleton wrote back, “I see your point and have some sympathy with it, but we have to be guided in this matter by the forms and phrases already in use, otherwise we may be misunderstood.”\textsuperscript{23} The “forms and phrases already in use”—at least in use by male politicians—stressed female dependence and the male right to maintain a family, and they remained central to the statist argument. They were not challenged until the middle of the war, when suffragist Eleanor Rathbone and a group of feminist social reformers began in earnest to elaborate a rights-based theory of social citizenship for women.

\section*{The establishment of universal, rights-based separation allowances, paid by the state at uniform rates, was a victory for the Liberal and Labour representatives of working men. It was, however, initially only a rhetorical victory, for the government that accepted these new responsibilities had, in 1914, no means of making them good. At the outbreak of the war, only 1,100 soldiers’ wives were receiving allowances; in the wake of Asquith’s announcement of universal eligibility and the first wave of recruiting, the number of women due allowances jumped to half a million.\textsuperscript{24} No adequate machinery existed to cope with either verification or payment of the claims that deluged the army pay office. Furthermore, since the army had never recognized “off the strength” wives, no lists existed of those entitled

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Donaldson to J. S. Middleton, November 17, 1914, Workers National Committee Papers, Labour Party Archives (Harvester Microfilm, Series III, Pt. 3, Reel 11, Item 24/1/3).
\item Middleton to Donaldson, November 25, 1917, \textit{ibid.}, Item 24/1/5.
\item \textit{Parliamentary Debates} (H.C.), 5th ser., vol. 68 (November 12, 1914): col. 70.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
to allowances.\textsuperscript{25} Even when the appropriate claims were established, there were long delays in payment, and many women were left virtually penniless. Such government incapacity, relief committees in Birmingham discovered, caused “far more distress than the disturbed state of trade.”\textsuperscript{26}

In this lacuna, the early work of administering, advancing, and supplementing allowances necessarily devolved on the voluntary organizations that had monopolized much of the work of relieving distress before the war. Especially important was the Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Families Association (SSFA), a prominent philanthropic society with much royal patronage that had administered allowances to “off the strength” wives during the Boer War. In August of 1914, the SSFA’s viable local chapters were primarily in port and garrison towns, but new chapters were rapidly set up, often by simply incorporating new local war relief committees. In Liverpool, the suffrage society led by Eleanor Rathbone took over the local SSFA, divided the city into twenty-nine districts, enrolled some 1,000 voluntary workers, and soon established a “caseload” of 17,000 families.\textsuperscript{27} Local appeals across the country brought forth an avalanche of women volunteers. By 1915, the SSFA counted 900 branches staffed by some 50,000 voluntary workers.\textsuperscript{28}

For the first two years of the war, and in the face of government incapacity, the SSFA acted as the administrative agent of the War Office. Some of this work was, essentially, client advocacy, with SSFA “ladies” clearing up administrative muddles and badgering paymasters about delays. More problematically, they were also responsible for investigating claims, a process that often involved “searching enquiries” into family life and income, which left one visitor “declaring that the only work left for them after the war would be to qualify as detectives.”\textsuperscript{29} Although, after October of 1914, the basic allowance was paid out through the post office, the SSFA continued to operate a system of “friendly visiting” and to pay out supplementary allowances, which were distributed in person, conditional on good behavior, and given in kind if the applicant was deemed unreliable. The visitors’ functions of administration and surveillance were inextricably mixed: they acted as the advocates, disciplinarians, troubleshooters, and morality police of soldiers’ wives.

The beliefs that motivated many of the SSFA workers, like the wartime rhetoric of soldiers’ rights, reflected a complex tangle of class and gender interests. As did other charities and much of the women’s movement, the SSFA placed voluntary social work, especially by women, at the center of a wider vision of social and moral reconstruction. Female home visitors claimed that a “warm feeling of regard and even affection” grew up between themselves and their beneficiaries; they believed that “a sympathy born of kindred anxiety and sorrow . . . touching all hearts and homes in like manner” forged links between class and class.\textsuperscript{30} Often motivated by

\textsuperscript{25} Evidence of Sir Charles Harris, November 26, 1914, Select Committee on Naval and Military Services (Pensions and Grants), \textit{Minutes, PP 1914–16}, vol. 4, p. 1.


\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 594; Helen Anstey, “The Home-Side of Wartime,” \textit{Contemporary Review}, 108 (August 1915): 238. For a sensitive account of the ideas and development of middle-class women’s social work, see
religious convictions and ideals of public service, they saw their work as a mission with a feminist tint, from woman to woman. While they denied any intent "to preach or criticize," they accepted without question that they were, simply by social position, fit to offer guidance on everything from child care to soupmaking, and that such advice would be "taken in good part by the wife and mother." They congratulated themselves "that numberless homes have become better, happier, cleaner, through the tactful efforts of the visitors" and looked forward to the day when the soldier would return to find "a real home, money in the bank, and a sober affectionate wife—all through the influence of the SSFA."

The SSFA may have been the only organization capable of taking over the administration of allowances at a moment’s notice, but its independence, class composition, and explicit moral agenda did nothing to endear it to politicians already critical of the vesting of administrative powers in the hands of a private charity. Having established that allowances were not charity but a "right," politicians across the political spectrum argued that their administration must be taken over by local government committees operating under ministerial and parliamentary supervision. They bolstered their case by charging the SSFA with inefficiency, parsimony, and especially with "inquisitorial methods," which were "a disgrace to everybody concerned." Charges of inefficiency were not, in fact, entirely fair, since, despite its hasty mobilization, the SSFA had managed to aid more than 300,000 wives and 700,000 children by the end of 1914, with a speed unmatched by the Old Age Pensions Committees responsible for the task of processing the claims of mothers and other dependents. Incensed by the charges, the SSFA leadership defended their visitors’ competence stoutly. Liverpool branch secretary Eleanor Rathbone turned the tables by charging "a considerable section of the House of Commons, and especially . . . the Labour Party" with blocking effective administration through their "doctrinaire dislike . . . [for] any form of volunteer effort and their craze for piling every conceivable new function upon the already overworked town councils." By the end of 1914, battle lines were clearly drawn, the administration of allowances had become something of a cause célèbre, and the government turned the matter over to a high-level parliamentary select committee for solution.

It was in these hearings that the conflict between the "voluntarist" and "statist" agendas—and between women and men—emerged most clearly, particularly in the vitriolic exchanges between George Barnes, the committee’s Labour representative, and the witnesses for the SSFA. While Barnes, the Workers’ National Committee, and the Women’s Labour League all argued for a generous flat rate, administered through the local Old Age Pensions Committees, and free of all charitable


34 Figures on wives and children aided are given in SSFA, Annual Report 1914–15, 32, 200. Evidence of the difficulties faced by the Old Age Pensions Committees—which were forced to enlist Customs and Excise officers as interviewers—is found in PRO T172/509.


supervision, the SSFA representatives and other social workers argued for lower rates administered by the voluntary organizations, which would also use home visitors to monitor children for neglect. Rathbone gave a ringing defense of voluntary administration, arguing that women visitors had been more sympathetic and more competent than the male officers employed by the Pensions Committees. She urged that, at least, any new public committees should be required to coopt "a reasonable number of women, by which we do not mean one woman on each committee."37

The Select Committee's two reports on separation allowances, issued in February and April of 1915, did not raise rates to the levels urged by the Labour representatives, but they did take administration out of the hands of the charities. Acting on their recommendations, the government passed the Naval and Military War Pensions Bill later that year, which divested the SSFA of its responsibilities and placed these powers in the hands of a new statutory committee composed of military, political, and philanthropic representatives. Lack of parliamentary oversight aroused the criticism of the House of Commons, however, and, after a year of operation, the Statutory Committee's functions and local committees were transferred to the newly created Ministry of Pensions, headed by George Barnes, who by this time had become something of an expert on pensions. By the end of 1917, charitable administration would seem to have been entirely superseded.38

But had it? When the Statutory Committee prepared to take over administration of allowances in the spring of 1916, Walter Hayes-Fisher—a junior minister, long-time SSFA officer, and a member of the new committee—met with SSFA branch representatives to quiet their fears of being made redundant. The new local pensions committees, he said, would probably have to appoint subcommittees to deal with allowances, and he hoped "that they will largely delegate the matter of looking after the separation allowances of wives and families to those who have so ably looked after them till now."39 Eleanor Rathbone also viewed state expansion as a chance to win new authority for female social workers. "I think we must make it quite clear," she told her fellow SSFA representatives, "that we are not a party of kindly busybodies who will do odd jobs that the local committees cannot find time to do for themselves, but that we have the experience on which they ought to draw."40 In fact, the SSFA claim to continue its work under state aegis met with little resistance from the new state bodies, which found themselves unable to take over their duties on schedule and repeatedly appealed to local SSFA branches to continue their work.41 Indeed, in May of 1916, the Statutory Committee wrote to the local authorities that, "unless there is any strong reason to the contrary," the existing SSFA branches administering allowances should simply be appointed as subcommittees, an arrangement that survived under the Ministry of Pensions.42

Although the SSFA managed to retain the rights to much of their day-to-day

37 Select Committee, Minutes, PP 1914–16, vol. 4, 98.
38 For the recommendations of the Select Committee, see their Report cited above. Parliamentary debate over and criticisms of the War Pensions Bill are found in Parliamentary Debates (H.C.), 5th ser., vol. 72 (June 29, 1915): cols. 1832–93; vol. 73 (July 6, 1915): cols. 212–38; SSFA protests at its exclusion are in Annual Report 1914–15, 2002–04. For a history of the short-lived Statutory Committee, see the War Pensions Etc. Statutory Committee, Report for the Year 1916, PP 1917–18, vol. 17, Cd. 8750. Discussions and memos concerning the establishment of the Ministry of Pensions are in PRO, CAB 37/155, nos. 29 and 30; PRO, CAB 37/159, no. 10; and PRO, PIN 4/111.
40 SSFA, Annual Report 1915–16, 1794.
work, they were, as Rathbone had feared, to some extent marginalized. The Statutory Committee was happy to recommend their summary appointment because, it noted, separation allowances were a temporary issue less central than war pensions and thus could presumably be safely delegated to subcommittees of women. Furthermore, while SSFA workers continued to register claims, they now operated under regulations not of their own making and with which they occasionally disagreed. They were, for example, distressed to find that government regulations disqualified them from supplementing allowances out of charitable funds for women with high rents. Their authority as an alternative institution with sweeping powers over relief had been effectively neutralized. Incorporated into the state, they had to play by its rules.

The bitterness of the debate over charitable control was not only a disagreement over access to (unpaid) work, although volunteer social workers were understandably protective of the profession they had created. Something more fundamental was at stake: the question of who could “speak for” working-class women and on what terms they would be incorporated into the state. Labour representatives denounced the inquisitorial methods and colonizing vision of the SSFA, but their hostility stemmed in part from the perception that, by bypassing working men to approach wives directly, the charities attacked Labour’s claim to represent women’s interests. While Labour leaders routinely stressed that allowances were a “right,” granted in recognition of men’s struggle to support their families on inadequate wages, Rathbone said men were sometimes simply selfish, keeping a disproportionate amount of the “family wage” for their own use. Yet, while SSFA visitors were able to uncover the presumption of male domestic control hidden in Labour rhetoric, they did so largely to defend their own professional status, itself riddled with assumptions about middle-class women’s qualifications as moral exemplars. The SSFA was at this stage unable to hear or to produce any egalitarian theory of working women’s own legitimate and unmediated claims on the state. Raised in a philanthropic tradition that stressed the performance of reciprocal duties rather than the possession of rights; voluntary workers fell back on their defense of cross-class sympathy and moral reform—a vision deeply out of step with wartime democratic sentiment.

This conflict between parliamentarians and voluntarists, men and women, was quickly cast in terms of progress and reaction. Having captured the rhetorical high ground of rights-based claims, the parliamentary spokesmen for the soldier-citizen went on to argue that “rights” must necessarily be enforced in the public sphere, through state action. Labour in particular distinguished sharply between public control (good) and private control (bad), thus eliding the question of whether state control was any more “democratic” for voteless women than that of the charities. But the identification of allowances as a right guaranteed by the state could only be read as a victory for women if one assumed (as Labour did and as Rathbone hotly denied) that wives’ interests could automatically be collapsed into those of their husbands. In the absence of such an assumption, the new recognition of male social citizenship merely opened the relationship of the couple to official scrutiny, as bureaucrats attempted to determine when, in the absence of husbands, wives were entitled to support by his surrogate, the state.

The major motives behind the extension of public control was the desire of many politicians and reformers to end the surveillance of women by charitable visitors. Labour leaders in particular reacted with outrage to the SSFA's early use of moral "tests" for benefits, arguing that such tests were inappropriate and even odious when receipt of this income was a fundamental citizenship right. But the shift to state control failed to end the surveillance of wives and the use of moral tests. A comparison of the administration of allowances during the two years of SSFA and War Office collaboration with the system operated by the Ministry of Pensions in the period of state control reveals that moral tests were revised and extended by the Ministry of Pensions, even though army morale, public order, and rational administration replaced moral reform as the aim of such intervention. Both the charities and the state took their role as surrogate for the husbands seriously, replacing them as the breadwinners while also making benefits contingent on the temperance, diligence, and chastity of their wives.

When the SSFA began organizing the payment of benefits to wives in the fall of 1914, they did so in a political climate in which claims for generous benefits conflicted with a widespread "moral panic" about the behavior of working-class wives in their newly endowed and unhoused condition. Early in October of 1914, a range of social workers and SSFA volunteers wrote to The Times to complain that, while women insisted their children were starving, they were "all the time puffing into our faces fumes of whisky, gin and the like." Writers proposed combating drinking among women by restricting public house hours and by paying allowances in kind, not cash, already SSFA policy in such cases. Yet letters did not hold women entirely responsible for such dissolute behavior; rather, consistent with the charities' propensity to view working women as moral minors, writers blamed the atmosphere of "abnormal excitement" and the absence of the husband's restraining hand. His place, these letters implied, must be taken by the volunteer social worker, who, in alliance with the state, could convert the wife to the cause of moral uplift.

The letters to The Times fit easily into contemporary critiques of the charitable agenda and help to explain the hostility to SSFA administration. The SSFA's policies on wives were not reached in isolation, however, but were supported—and even preceded—by central government plans to supervise wives. A mere month after the outbreak of war, the War Office produced guidelines identifying "cases of immorality definitely established, conviction on criminal charges, or gross neglect of children" as grounds for cessation of allowances; the public furor about drinking among women merely served to add drunkenness to the catalog of bad behavior. Nor was the War Office content to leave the supervision of wives to charity visitors alone; it also forwarded its guidelines to all chief constables, urging police cooperation in War Office investigations.

When the War Office's plans to place wives under police supervision were leaked to the press, they aroused an immediate outcry. Labour's War Emergency Committee lost no time in protesting them, and on November 12 Arthur Henderson, chairman of the Labour party, exploded in the Commons. It was bad enough, he

45 Margaret Taylor, "A Teetotal War," The Times (October 3, 1914), 9.
46 See the correspondence concerning drinking among women in The Times, October 5, 6, 7, and 9, 1914.
47 War Office, "Cessation of Army Separation Allowances and Allotments of Pay to the Unworthy," no. 192, September 9, 1914, PRO, HO 158/16; Home Office to Chief Constables, no. 191, October 20, 1914, PRO, HO 158/16.
said, that the War Office had let the charities administer allowances and badger soldiers' wives, but police surveillance was "the limit." Separation allowances were part of the soldiers' pay, and, if wives did not always spend well, the same was true of other husbands and wives.\textsuperscript{48} The "New Liberal" periodical \textit{The Nation} angrily attacked the War Office assumption that allowances were relief, not pay: 

Relief! Then we do not \textit{pay} our soldiers and sailors for fighting for us. We give them relief. And if the Local Relief Committee or the branch of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Fund is satisfied that Policeman Smith, who has been shadowing Mrs. Jones, who is in the highly suspicious position of a soldier's wife, has caught her drinking, the War Office may and will stop the relief.\textsuperscript{49}

In response, the Home Office and the Army Council tempered the language of the circular, recommending lenient treatment of wives "deprived of the company and guidance of their husbands." Yet they left its essential message unchanged: allowances would be cut off for offenses of a moral nature.\textsuperscript{50}

War Office intransigence crystallised public opposition. Both Sylvia Pankhurst's East London Federation of Suffragettes and Charlotte Despard's Women's Freedom League held demonstrations protesting state surveillance of soldiers' wives, and the two leaders formed a "League of Rights" to help women press their claims.\textsuperscript{51} More surprisingly, when police were furnished with lists of all soldiers' wives, the chief commissioner of the London police himself opposed the policy, stating that he could not "understand why anybody should assume that the wife of a soldier is necessarily a person who required the police to look after her."\textsuperscript{52} Even the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children intervened on behalf of the wives, concluding their own investigation of drunkenness and neglect of children with the finding that "no greater slander has ever been circulated . . . than the assertion that soldiers' wives as a class were lacking in the spirit of self-restraint, or that they were given to neglecting their children."\textsuperscript{53}

Critics of state surveillance stressed, once again, that the allowance was a "right." As Liberal M.P. Robert Outhwaite told the Commons: "This [separation allowance] is an amount paid by the state as part of the wage of the soldier. That is what it amounts to; and he [sic] has no right to be debarred from the receipt of it because the police may think that his wife is not conducting herself in a fit and proper manner."\textsuperscript{54} Yet the demand that allowances be treated not as a "dole" but as "a national obligation for services rendered"\textsuperscript{55} only underscored the fact that the allowance was the rightful property of the man "rendering services," and that the woman was eligible to receive his income only by virtue of her relation to him as "wife." Labour and Liberal politicians opposed any surveillance—charitable or state—of soldiers' wives, but investigation of women's marital status flowed inevi-

\textsuperscript{48} Workers National Committee Minutes, November 9, 1914; Parliamentary Debates (H.C.), 5th ser., vol. 68 (November 12, 1914): cols. 50–52.

\textsuperscript{49} "The Soldier's Wife," \textit{The Nation}, 16 (November 14, 1914): 189.

\textsuperscript{50} Home Office to Chief Constables, no. 226, November 28, 1914, PRO, HO 158/16.


\textsuperscript{52} Women's Advisory Committee, Central Control Board (Liquor Traffic), Minutes of Evidence of Sir Edward Henry, p. 3, PRO, HO 185/258.


\textsuperscript{54} Parliamentary Debates (H.C.), 5th ser., vol. 68 (November 12, 1914): col. 160.

tably from their own definition of allowances as the husband's right. The state, paying out income in the absence of men, thus could not avoid a peculiar question: under what conditions, and for how long, would a woman be considered a "wife"? Legally, the marriage contract entitled the wife to maintenance and enjoined fidelity and cohabitation, although the bargain was often popularly understood as maintenance for housework.\(^5\) The War Office, like the charities, endorsed both definitions, scrutinizing legal and economic ties and moral behavior when determining wives' eligibility.

When state administration replaced charitable control, then, the use of moral "tests" continued. Indeed, when the Statutory Committee took over the administration of allowances, it showed itself particularly eager to enforce the domestic regularity of wives. In drawing up new guidelines for forfeiture, it used a report by the Liquor Control Board's "Women's Advisory Committee" to revive the campaign against the excessive use of alcohol by wives. The Advisory Committee contended that a range of social ills—including crime, "race suicide," improvidence, "feeble-mindedness," "reckless procreation," and "immorality and faithlessness . . . to their absent husbands"—could be traced to drinking among soldiers' wives. The Statutory Committee appeared to believe the committee and, in order to deal with such social deviants, happily endorsed a wide range of restrictions and reforms, including the payment of allowances through trustees for a probationary period when the woman was felt to be using the money improperly.\(^5\) The probationary system was deemed, in the words of Mrs. H. F. Wood, honorary secretary of the London SSFA, "the most powerful weapon with regard to women in receipt of allowances . . . where an undue proportion of the income is spent on drink."\(^5\) Judged successful by the Statutory Committee, the probationary system was maintained when responsibility for forfeiture was transferred in 1917 to the Ministry of Pensions, under which investigations and forfeitures reached an all-time high.\(^5\)

The Ministry of Pensions also took its role as the husband's sexual surrogate seriously, investigating accusations of infidelity with care. In a rather bald admis-


\(^5\) Women's Advisory Committee, Central Control Board (Liquor Traffic), *Report*, February 18, 1916, PRO, HO 185/258. There is no evidence to sustain the committee's conclusions of overall temperance among the moral majority and utter dissolution among the drunken few. To the contrary, some social investigators found that moderate social drinking by young working women became acceptable for the first time during the war, but that overall drunkenness declined. See "Report of the Committee Appointed to Enquire into Excessive Drinking among Women in Birmingham," August 10, 1916, PRO, HO 185/258; Pankhurst, *Home Front*, 98–101.

\(^5\) The quote is from materials sent to the War Office by the Central Control Board (Liquor Traffic), May 25, 1916, PRO, PIN 15/3304.

\(^5\) For forfeiture regulations under the Statutory Committee, see Home Office to Chief Constables, October 4, 1916, PRO, PIN 15/3304; War Pensions Etc. Statutory Committee, "Forfeiture of Separation Allowance," Circular No. 19 to Local Committees, December 1916, PRO, PIN 15/3304.
TABLE 3
Forfeiture of Allowances by the Statutory Committee and the Ministry of Pensions, October 1916–March 1920

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Cases considered</th>
<th>Allowances forfeited</th>
<th>Decided by</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 1916–Dec. 1916</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>Statutory Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 1917–Jun. 1917</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>Statutory Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jul. 1917–Aug. 1917</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sep. 1917–Mar. 1918</td>
<td>10,151</td>
<td>4,292</td>
<td>Ministry of Pensions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr. 1918–Mar. 1919</td>
<td>16,983</td>
<td>6,302</td>
<td>Ministry of Pensions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr. 1919–Mar. 1920</td>
<td>8,702</td>
<td>2,824</td>
<td>Ministry of Pensions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>41,836</td>
<td>13,418</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It has proven impossible to locate reliable figures on forfeiture for the period before October 1916, when responsibility for deciding cases was transferred to the War Pensions Etc. Statutory Committee, although information sent by the War Office to the Women’s Advisory Committee to the Liquor Traffic Control Board states that a total of some 4,500 cases were considered by the army authorities in cooperation with the SSFA during the period from September 1914 to November 1915.


sion that marriage was, in legal terms, a contract exchanging the obligation to maintain a woman for exclusive sexual access, the ministry stated "[t]hat the woman by her infidelity has forfeited her right to be supported by her husband. Separation allowance being a payment by the State in lieu of the civil maintenance of which the wife is deprived by reason of her husband's military service, there is no obligation on the State to continue this payment if the husband would no longer be under a duty to maintain her if he were now in civil life."60 Since the wife's infidelity would give the husband the right to claim a divorce, the ministry claimed to make every effort to contact the soldier and ask whether he condoned his wife's misconduct; if he did not, they stopped the allowance, "the woman's repentance and present good character notwithstanding."61 Between October of 1916 and March of 1920, the Statutory Committee and the Ministry of Pensions investigated at least 40,000 women (between 1 and 2 percent) for misconduct of various types and cut off the allowances of more than 13,000 of them (see Table 3). This was not in itself a high number, but it served to deter other women. As the Women's Advisory Committee to the Liquor Control Board noted, the stoppage of an allowance had a "good effect" on the offender's entire neighborhood.62

The system of surveillance, probation, and forfeiture operated by the Ministry of Pensions was deeply influenced by the ideology and administrative practices of the charities. Yet, although both the SSFA and the Ministry of Pensions made

61 Ibid. Despite these claims, parliamentary spokesmen for the Ministry of Pensions and the War Office admitted that, although the husband was always informed, forfeiture could not be delayed until he replied. See Parliamentary Debates (H.C.), 5th ser., vol. 98 (November 6, 1917): cols. 1966–67; vol. 123 (December 16, 1919): col. 257.
62 Central Control Board (Liquor Traffic) to War Office, May 25, 1916, PRO, PIN 15/3904.
allowances conditional on moral “tests,” the logic and purpose of these tests differed. The SSFA visitors hoped to reform the home life of the nation by raising the standard of housework and “mothering”; they therefore made aid conditional on tests of cleanliness, temperance, and child health. The War Office, on the other hand, was principally concerned with the viability of the war effort, the Ministry of Pensions with justice for soldiers. They approached women essentially through their husbands, probably interfering less in their lives but nevertheless acting as the guarantors of domestic regularity and wifely chastity through their forfeiture rules. The shift in administrative control from the charities to the state thus strengthened the alliance between the emerging welfare state and the citizen-soldier. As the soldier’s surrogate, the ministry made aid conditional on the wife’s fulfillment of her obligations, contractual and moral, to her absent husband.

The role of the Ministry of Pensions as the arbiter of domestic morality went virtually unnoticed—with the exception of a blistering protest sent by Nina Boyle of the militant Women’s Freedom League to the ministry in December of 1917. Why were women investigated, she asked, since no inquiries were made “in regard to the husbands or male relations of these women and their moral conduct at the front, either in relation to alien women or the houses of ill-fame tolerated in the military areas”? Compelling as Boyle’s criticism was, it was not really relevant. Forfeiture for infidelity was not an isolated and egregious case of administrative prudence; it was central to a benefit system structured around marital status insofar as marriage was defined, legally and conventionally, as a contract exchanging male maintenance for female chastity. In view of the amount of attention paid by feminist historians to the ways the state sanctions the paradigm of the male breadwinner and dependent wife, it is worth underscoring the centrality of these issues of sexual morality to the governmental and parliamentary concept of the marital bargain. Members of Parliament did not object to allowances being cut off for immorality, only to forfeiture without the husband’s consent. Issues of sexual control and sexual access underlay both the “right to maintain” rhetoric and the state’s sanctions. Bluntly, it was women’s bodies and not women’s labor that were to be “bought” by the state and safeguarded until the husband’s return.

By 1917, the pressures of war had led the state to accept the introduction of benefits for soldiers’ wives on an unprecedented scale. The logic underlying this program assumed not only that male maintenance of women and children was desirable but also that state recognition of economic and sexual rights over wives and children was a right of the male citizen. Women’s access to state benefits was made independent of their own work or need and mediated entirely by men. From this viewpoint, the provision of separation allowances appears as a key moment in which the presumption of male maintenance was implanted at the heart of an incipient welfare state.

But how, precisely, could allowances influence the later development of social

Boyle to Hodge, December 8, 1917, PRO, PIN 15/3305.
Parliamentary Debates (H.C.), 5th ser., vol. 98 (November 6, 1917): cols. 1966–67; vol. 123 (December 16, 1919): col. 257. Similarly, the government was able to quiet objections to the Statutory Committee’s rights to declare allowances forfeited by agreeing to limit forfeiture to pensions and allowances of wives, widows, and dependents, excluding those of the men themselves. The clause was then agreed to without discussion; Parliamentary Debates (H.C.), 5th ser., vol. 73 (July 6, 1915): cols. 310–30.
policy, since they would not, to any significant extent, outlast the war? The answer to this question can be found in part in the central government's response to demobilization, labor dislocation, and popular unrest immediately after the war. Ironically, the shift toward a gender-based model of welfare provision was also unwittingly aided by the responses of feminists and Labour women, who misunderstood the administrative logic underlying the allowance system but welcomed its practical effects. Their confusion was understandable, since the beneficial consequences of the direct payment of almost half a billion pounds to women and children were far more visible than the Ministry of Pension's attempt to mediate receipt by the husband's consent. Before turning to the administrative legacy of allowances, it is worth looking briefly at the impact on the women who received or administered them, because only in such a context does the course of social policy in the interwar period become fully comprehensible.

Recipients and observers disagreed heartily among themselves about the adequacy and impact of allowances; wartime tales of wives "spending freely on gold watches and bracelets, fur coats and gramophones" coexisted with outraged protests that rates were far below the level necessary to live decently.\(^65\) Reactions varied in part because the flat rates of benefit meant very different things to different people. A comparison of allowances to male wages (as in Table 4), shows that, while "soldier's pay" meant real privation for most families of skilled workers,

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\(^65\) Compare, for example, Recruiting Officer, "Separation Allowances," The Times (December 28, 1916), 7, with the Workers' National Committee and Women's Labour League evidence to the Select Committee, Minutes, PP 1914–16, vol. 4, 34–64.
it could be something of a windfall for women with many children or with low-paid or unreliable husbands.66

Such a strict comparison between male wages and allowances is misleading, however, for even though politicians invariably discussed allowances as a pure alternative to wages, the vast majority of soldiers' households counted on both allowances and wages from other family members. Some employers also paid pensions to wives of their enlisted workers; in other cases, wives fell back on other strategies of casual earning such as taking in lodgers.67 Even where allowances were lower than wages, the absence of the family's costliest member and the nature of the payment system would inevitably affect the distribution of income within the family. Allowances, being regular, proportional to the size of the family, and at the entire disposal of the wife, could thus have safeguarded living standards for women and nonearning children.68

The contention that women benefited as much if not more from even moderate allowances paid to them as from wages paid to their husbands was upheld by an investigation undertaken in 1915 and 1916 by the Liverpool Women's Industrial Council, of which Eleanor Rathbone was a prominent member. The council consulted health, housing, police, school, and charitable authorities and found "preponderating evidence that the effect of separation allowances has been good, especially as regards the health and general well-being of the children."69 Crime, drunkenness, infant mortality, and convictions for child abuse had all declined, and pawnshops reported a substantial fall in business. Restrictions on pub hours and the expansion of social work were partly responsible, admitted the council, but credit was largely due to "the regular and more adequate income, and the greater economic independence of women."70 While subsequent historical research has confirmed the council's finding of a broad improvement in civilian health during the war, it is impossible to isolate allowances from the other factors responsible for that improvement. The most that can safely be said is that families on separation allowances shared in the general rise in working-class living standards during World War I and that high wages, increased employment of women, allowances, and the absence of men all helped to ensure that those improvements were felt especially by women and children.71

66 Contemporary accounts confirm this judgment. Robert Roberts, writing of life in Salford during the war, recalled that "[m]any wives of fighting men discovered that they could manage far better on government allowances than they ever did on their breadwinner's meagre wage": his recollections are corroborated by the detailed evidence presented by social workers to the Select Committee on Naval and Military Services (Pensions and Grants), which showed that allowances were often roughly equivalent to the housekeeping money given to wives by unskilled laborers. See Robert Roberts, The Classic Slum (Harmondsworth, 1973), 203; Select Committee, Appendices, PP 1914–16, vol. 4, 186–237.

67 In June of 1918, one government committee collected budgets from 231 service families and found that there were 90 wage earners for every 100 such families. Working Classes Cost of Living Committee 1918, Report, PP 1918, vol. 7, Cd. 8980, 14. For a discussion of how women supplemented allowances by taking in lodgers, see Elizabeth Roberts, "Women's Strategies, 1890–1940," in Lewis, Labour and Love, 233.


70 Ibid., 198. For corroboration of the council's findings on pawnbroking, see Melanie Tebbutt, Making Ends Meet: Pawnbroking and Working-Class Credit (Leicester, 1983), 138–40.

71 On the general improvement in civilian health and living standards, see Richard Wall, "English and German Families and the First World War, 1914–1918," in Richard Wall and Jay Winter, eds., The
This cautious conclusion takes no account, however, of the more elusive but important psychological consequences for wives of their new status as claimants on the state. Although government ministers might define allowances as soldiers' pay, for the vast majority of women who received them directly through the post office and did not attract investigation, these payments felt like their money. While relatively few wives may have shared the sentiment expressed by one—"It seems too good to be true, a pound a week and my husband away"72—even those unhappy at the rupture of a companionable marriage were forced by circumstances to take on new responsibilities. Soldiers' wives learned to intervene in the public sphere in their own interest: they responded angrily to charges of drunkenness, lobbied Labour organizations for increased rates, and kept up a constant stream of letters to their M.P.s.73 The experience of receiving allowances, presumably conditional on being a "dependent" of a man, forced wives beyond such "dependent" roles. In the absence of men, and in direct contrast to their administrative logic, allowances created a new direct relationship between the state and the working-class wife.

This new relationship of both independence and political activism raised the hopes of feminists and Labour women eager to transform women's status in domestic and public life and suggested to them a new model of social citizenship for women. In 1916, Eleanor Rathbone wrote:

The difference which the Separation Allowance system has made to many [dependent wives], the sense of security, of ease, of dignity that they are tasting for the first time in their lives, is one of the very few good things that the ill-wind of war has brought ... It will be interesting to see how these women will take it when the war is over and they are asked to go back to their old status of dependency. I confess to hoping that the seeds of "divine discontent" will have been implanted in them too deeply to be eradicated, and that we feminists will then find our opportunity.74

Rathbone hoped that wives would demand a new social order for mothers and children or, more practically, the continuation of separation allowances in peacetime and to all women. As early as February of 1916, Rathbone began arguing that, although separation allowances may have originated in military needs, in practice they functioned as "a system of State endowment of maternity" and could easily be seen as "a statutory payment to a woman in respect of her functions as wife and mother."75 Such an interpretation would, Rathbone felt, be entirely appropriate,

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73 On protests by soldiers' wives against charges of drunkenness, see "A Soldier's Wife," "Drinking among Women," The Times (October 8, 1914), 9; "The Soldier's Wife: Protest against Police Inspection," The Times, (December 11, 1914), 5; "The Revolt of the Soldier's Wife," The Nation, 16 (December 12, 1914): 926–27. Labour recognition of wives' militancy is found in WNC Minutes, December 14, 1916, and in William Adamson's speech to the Commons, in which he warned Minister of Pensions George Barnes that "very large associations of the dependents of our soldiers and sailors ... feel that they are not being treated fairly and justly"; Parliamentary Debates (H.C.), 5th ser., vol. 110 (October 31, 1918): col. 1711.
since the "service" of motherhood was undoubtedly a citizenship function that merited social rights.

Allowances were never intended to serve as a system of payment for motherhood, however, since they were contingent on the soldier's fighting, not the wife's mothering. They were paid directly to women because no other option was possible (the men being at the front), but the effects on wives' own health and independence were largely unintended and unforeseen. The feminist "misreading" of allowances did have consequences, though, especially for the shift toward maternalism within women's politics in the postwar period. Between 1916 and 1918, arguments for the endowment of motherhood were revived by women in feminist organizations and on the Labour left and placed before politicians and government committees. These women abandoned the moralizing model of the charities to argue that social and economic benefits for women were a "right" due women themselves, because of their own distinct contribution to the state: motherhood. Social policies, rather than votes or wage work, would be the means of freeing the nation's mothers: with that claim, feminists began a campaign for cash benefits for mothers that ended only with the passage of the Family Allowances Act in 1945.76

In arguing that mothering was a citizenship "function" equivalent to that of soldiering, feminists produced a rhetoric capable of sustaining demands for independent social rights for mothers. But they also allowed a dangerous analogy between the national obligations of the soldier and those of fertile women and betrayed their naivé about the malleability and disinterestedness of the British state. Like many other early twentieth-century politicians, Rathbone clung to a concept of the state as, in the phrase favored by socialists, "the community organized," unproblematically translating democratic sentiment into policy; she thus viewed the prospect of state-supervised reproduction without apprehension.77 Nevertheless, while the wartime state proved to be a porous entity, absorbing and expelling public and private bodies when faced with new needs, the question of which needs were recognized was by no means popularly determined. Separation allowances went through on the scale they did only because they were seen as a military necessity; even then, the nerve centers of government—the Treasury and the War Office—consistently showed themselves less than enthusiastic over rate increases and widening state control.78 The ability of soldiers to force the hand of the state was strictly contingent on their ability to muster parliamentary support for wage for housework"; 45. She avoided the problem of the conditions tied to allowances by simply claiming that popular protests forced the government to grant them with "no strings attached" (46)—an appealing assertion quite at odds with the historical record.


77 Rathbone did in fact justify some degree of state surveillance of mothers. Discussing wartime pensions and allowances for women, she wrote, "surely if the state is acting in loco parentis it has a right to be satisfied that they [the children] are properly looked after. It seems to me a pseudofeminism which assumes that all mothers are good mothers and denies or ignores the principle that to take money from the State for discharging a certain duty involves a responsibility to the State and justifies such supervision as is necessary to see that the duty is being properly carried out"; Rathbone, "Pensions and Allowances," 664.

78 For War Office and Treasury objections, see the evidence of Sir Charles Harris to the Select Committee, Minutes, PP 1914–16, vol. 4, 1–18; and the dissenting notes by H. W. Forster (War Office) and Stanley Baldwin (Treasury) to the Sixth Report of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Pay Committee, July 17, 1918, Paper G-217, PRO, CAB 24/5.
their case and, ultimately, on their power to withhold their essential service in wartime. Unorganized and scarcely represented in party politics, mothers had no such power.

**By the end of the war,** the lines for the political battle over the nature of citizenship and the structure of the postwar welfare state had been redrawn. The Labour and Liberal representatives of working men had won their campaign for state recognition of universal, need-blind welfare benefits for those fulfilling the functions of the (male) citizen. They had also successfully routed the charities, which would never again seriously challenge the state monopoly of the means and conditions of relief and entitlement. Most critically, by establishing wives’ dependency as not merely normal but as a male right, and by introducing welfare benefits that presumed that dependency without tests of the woman’s own economic status, Labour and Liberal politicians constructed a logic of welfare administration that has remained at the heart of the British state ever since.

The state shed its network of economic controls in the years after the war, but the administrative logic developed in allowances held. The government had developed plans during the war to ease the impact of demobilization on servicemen and their families by extending separation allowances in the form of an “out of work” donation, but such aid was intended as a temporary expedient only. However, the failure of wartime plans to extend unemployment insurance to new classes of workers, and fears of labor unrest, led the government to respond to the immediate postwar dislocation by introducing a comparable scheme for civilian workers. Although the inclusion of dependents’ allowances in such benefits was roundly denounced by experts and by parliamentary committees as contrary to the principles of insurance, they proved impossible to abolish. At first only part of the temporary “dole,” they were extended to insured men with the passage of the Unemployed Workers’ Dependents (Temporary Provision) Bill in 1921. The interwar period saw a piecemeal extension of this logic, as other social programs, however parsimonious, incorporated benefits for wives and children on the assumption that men had a right to have their families maintained during legitimate interruptions of earnings.79

That these benefits were considered the property of male citizens rather than their wives was reiterated during the debate over an analogous policy to separation allowances: pensions for widows. Widows’ pensions were one costly consequence of this most idealistic and sanguine of wars; by 1921, some 259,000 widows and 395,000 children had been awarded war pensions.80 Politicians had won extended eligibility and increased rates for these women during the war by employing the

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familiar rhetoric of soldiers' rights, but, as with allowances, such a language was not easily containable. If soldiers' widows deserved aid, politicians asked soon after the war, why not the widows of miners or railwaymen? Rhys Davies, a Labour member, put the case perfectly in 1924:

I have always held that there is no duty that a man could ever perform of greater value to the state than that of being a miner, a bricklayer, a farm labourer, or anything else of that kind; and we shall not be satisfied on these benches until the man is dealt with as generously by the State in his capacity as a worker as he is when he dons khaki or wears a naval uniform.\footnote{Parliamentary Debates (H.C.), 5th ser., vol. 161 (March 6, 1923): col. 382.}

Such arguments were successful, with pensions for civilian widows incorporated into the insurance system in 1925 and 1929. Yet the women receiving these pensions were, by such rhetoric, almost entirely effaced: they merited concern only as the residual legatees of their citizen-husbands. Policy makers, while granting men's claims on behalf of dependent wives, limited women's independent access to wages and welfare by unequal pay, discriminatory insurance legislation, and the selective use of the marriage bar. In this twofold manner—by collapsing family benefits into an insurance system structured around the male wage and by limiting women's economic opportunities—the emerging welfare state helped to create the very gender relations it took as normative. Separation allowances contributed to the construction of a linkage between male domestic authority and social policy that reached its ultimate expression in the Beveridgian welfare state.

Feminists, drawing on an uncomfortable rhetoric of motherhood as national service, continued to expose the restrictive and gender-based assumptions underlying British social policies. Motherhood, they argued, should be seen as a form of service to the state, rewarded by “separate but equal” welfare rights. Yet, while the feminist development of a rhetoric of social citizenship posited an ethical equivalence between male and female forms of “service,” this theoretical equality was traduced and undercut by institutional structures and political forces able to define women's role as reproductive but private, of concern to the state only in the absence of men. Feminists spent the interwar years mired in pro-family rhetoric, while looking vainly to the state to iron out domestic inequalities of wealth and power.