Votes for Mothers

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VOTES for MOTHERS

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Abstract

Between 1866 and 1918, suffragists in Britain campaigned to acquire the vote for women. Opposition to women’s suffrage derived mainly from separate spheres ideology – the belief that the genders are inherently different and must fulfill different roles in society. Many scholars claim that the suffragists challenged separate spheres ideology. By comparing the writings of Millicent Fawcett and Frances Cobbe, two prominent suffragists, with the writings of Mary Ward and Violet Markham, two prominent anti-suffragists, this work demonstrates similar themes within the opposing campaigns. More importantly, the similarities indicate that suffragists argued within the context of separate spheres ideology and did not seek to significantly alter traditional gender roles.
# Table of Contents

Introduction 1

1. Women’s Suffrage and Separate Spheres 4

2. Millicent Garrett Fawcett: Suffrage in Both Spheres 25

3. Mrs. Humphry Ward: Rights not Votes 45

4. Frances Power Cobbe and Violet Markham: On Women’s Duties, Women’s Citizenship, and Gender Differences 66

Conclusion: The Persistence of Separate Spheres 99

Illustrations 108

Bibliography 112
Introduction

In 1866, Barbara Bodichon formed Great Britain’s first women’s suffrage committee in order to facilitate the collection of women’s signatures for a petition on women’s suffrage to be presented to the House of Commons. John Stuart Mill, the well-known philosopher and then a Liberal Member of Parliament, presented that petition to Parliament and in the following year, proposed an amendment to a suffrage bill that would have allowed women to vote in Parliamentary elections on the same terms as men. Most other MPs, as well as much of Britain, found the idea of women’s suffrage absurd and the Commons failed to pass the amendment. For the next fifty years, MPs would propose diverse bills to allow for some form of women’s suffrage and until 1918, these measures were all unsuccessful. Yet, by 1918 when women over 30 years of age did achieve the Parliamentary franchise, fewer MPs and fewer people in Britain considered the idea of women’s suffrage completely ridiculous.

Much of the opposition to women’s suffrage resulted from popularly held beliefs derived from separate spheres ideology, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 1. Opponents of women’s suffrage relied on “common sense” notions of gender differences and gender roles in society. Most Englishmen (and women) believed that innate female qualities, such as excitability and heightened emotions, as well as their “natural” mothering capacity, necessitated that women perform drastically different roles in society. Women were to remain in the home and care for their families; men were to possess employment and provide for the family as well as represent the family in political life. In reality, economic necessity had ensured that many working-class women worked outside the home. Middle-class women, many unwilling or unable to marry, began to demand increased educational and professional opportunities. Some of these women also began to demand the right to vote in Parliamentary elections. As a result,
some scholars believe that large segments of the women’s suffrage movement challenged the idea of separate spheres.

To what extent did suffragists challenge separate spheres ideology? To what extent did they seek to alter women’s societal role of homemaker, wife, and mother? To what extent did most suffragists believe the genders were similar to each other? Though a few radical suffragists hoped that women’s suffrage would lead to dramatically different roles for women in society, most suffragists accepted popularly held conceptions of gender based on separate spheres ideology. Many suffragists stressed that women’s suffrage was compatible with such “innate” feminine qualities as compassion and nurture. Furthermore, they claimed that women needed the Parliamentary franchise precisely because gender differences ensured that men could not adequately represent them. Most importantly, suffragists emphasized that women’s suffrage posed no threat to separate spheres ideology, nor to women’s societal roles. Most suffragists did not regard women’s suffrage as a means to free women from the confines of motherhood or the home; nor did they consider such an alteration of women’s societal role desirable. Because most suffragists did not dramatically challenge traditional conceptions of gender, by 1918, most Britons were able to accept the limited measure of women’s suffrage that enfranchised women over 30.

In order to demonstrate most suffragists’ adherence to separate spheres ideology and traditional conceptions of gender roles, this work compares the speeches and writings of two prominent suffragists with two prominent opponents of women’s suffrage. As the leader of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies, the largest women’s suffrage organization in Britain, Millicent Garret Fawcett’s reasons for supporting suffrage may reasonably be regarded as representing those of many suffragists. Likewise, the opinions of Frances Power Cobbe, a
prominent journalist and member of many women’s rights campaigns, may also be considered representative of suffragist opinion. Mrs. Humphry Ward (Mary Arnold) was a prominent novelist and leader in the anti-suffrage campaign. Violet Markham, the youngest of the four women who will be discussed, was an avid traveler and prominent speaker for the anti-suffrage cause. Both of these women actively supported other women’s rights campaigns and in this regard, they may be considered representative of many women who did not desire the franchise, but nevertheless wanted to improve conditions for women. This work will demonstrate that Fawcett, Cobbe, Ward, and Markham shared similar views in regards to gender differences and gender roles. As a result, this work will question the accuracy of claiming that most suffragists sought to challenge separate spheres ideology or alter gender roles.
Chapter 1

Women’s Suffrage and Separate Spheres

In tracing the advance of the feminist movement in Great Britain in the 1970s, during which women entered the workforce in large numbers and demanded equal rights, many historians placed great significance on the women’s suffrage movement that began formally in 1866 and reached an initial triumph in 1918. Because the achievement of the Parliamentary franchise for women over the age of 30 in 1918 constituted an important recognition of political rights for women, its importance should not be disparaged. Nevertheless, there has been a tendency to overemphasize the degree to which the suffragists desired to achieve full political, social, and legal equality between men and women. In fact, support for women’s suffrage did not necessarily indicate a desire to substantially alter women’s role in society as wives and mothers. As in most large movements, the leaders of the campaign for women’s suffrage varied widely from the more radical, who sought something approximating modern gender equality, to the more conservative, who sought to achieve limited suffrage for married women who owned property in order to maintain the influence of the propertied class.

In other words, historians have tended to minimize the importance of conservative suffragists as well as the presence of traditional ideas about gender roles in the writings and speeches of prominent figures in the women’s suffrage movement.1 But in terms of ideas about gender roles, many suffragists held views similar to those held by female anti-suffragists. Moreover, contrary to the historians who would paint all anti-suffragists as misogynists, some anti-suffragists supported women’s rights in other aspects of life. Female leaders of both the pro-suffrage and anti-suffrage movements supported women’s rights and sought to modify women’s

place in society. To understand why simply desiring the improvement of women’s condition in the context of Victorian England did not automatically make suffragists radical proponents of gender equality seeking to overturn women’s societal role, one must first understand how women lived in the 19th century.

I. Women’s Lives in the 19th Century

Amidst the brilliance of the Crystal Palace, Queen Victoria presided over the opening ceremonies of the Great Exhibition in 1851. With a female monarch on the throne of the most powerful nation in the world at the time, Great Britain was an anomaly in a male-dominated world. However, as a limited monarch, Queen Victoria actually had minimal political power and she deferred to her husband, Prince Albert, while he lived. The two houses of Parliament performed the real work of government. The House of Commons, which supposedly represented the people of England, was hardly based on a democratic franchise. Before the expansion of the franchise in 1867, only those in the middle and upper classes could vote. Of these, only men could vote and members of Parliament were exclusively male and unpaid. Thus, a politically minded middle-class woman taking in the wonders at the Exhibition might take pride in a female monarch, but her only recourse for political involvement consisted of telling her husband her opinions over dinner, and he could listen seriously or nod condescendingly as he pleased.

In 1851, the vast majority of men in Great Britain, in fact the vast majority of women as well, did not question the logic that females were excluded from a franchise exclusively based on gender. In Victorian Britain, males received the education appropriate to their social class; ideally they earned enough money so their wives could stay at home. Women’s societal role consisted of marrying and rearing the next generation. During the 19th century, these gender roles rigidified under the doctrine that has become known as separate spheres. According to the idea
of separate spheres, women inhabited the domestic sphere, caring for children and ensuring that the household remained a refuge for husbands who must contend with earning the family bread in the chaotic public sphere. As a result, society regarded it as unseemly for middle- and upper-class women to enter the public sphere by attending higher educational facilities, possessing a career, or even speaking in public. In contrast to men, women’s lack of contact with the public sphere supposedly rendered them angelic, pure, and unsullied. The widespread support for the doctrine of separate spheres especially helps to explain why women were largely complacent in their lack of political and legal rights.

II. Legal Situation of Women to 1857

Women before the middle of the nineteenth century not only possessed few opportunities to enter the public sphere but also were considered the legal possession of their nearest male relation. A woman wishing to initiate a lawsuit had to elicit the support of her nearest male relative, who had to sue on her behalf. The legal subjugation of women, however, was particularly pronounced for married women. As Mrs. Fenwick Miller, a leader in the women’s suffrage movement, would later write, “A wife in the eye of the law simply had no existence.” The husband had to jointly sign the contracts a married woman desired to enter for the contract to be legally binding. More importantly, women did not even possess a legal right to their own bodies. Because a woman’s body belonged to her husband, the law did not recognize instances of rape in marriage. Divorce—which was prohibitively expensive and almost impossible to obtain, required an act of Parliament, and could only be initiated by the husband—likewise reflected the

2 Because of necessity, lower-class married and unmarried women often had to work and this aspect of separate spheres only applied to middle- and upper-class women.
3 For a thorough discussion of separate spheres ideology as it relates to separate spheres, see Brian Harrison, Separate Spheres: The Opposition to Women’s Suffrage in Britain (London: Croom Helm, 1978), 56-84.
husband’s ownership of his wife. In order to obtain a divorce, a husband first had to establish that his wife had committed adultery. He did this by suing the man she was accused of committing adultery with for “criminal conversation” with his wife. If the husband won, he was entitled to receive compensation from the adulterous man, indicating that legally a husband owned his wife’s body; he received compensation for damages to his property. A husband’s adultery did not constitute sufficient legal grounds for a divorce, but required desertion or cruelty as well, a condition which acknowledged the sexual double standard.

Further disabling married women, even more so than single women, English law did not recognize married women’s claims to their children, earned wages, or inherited property. The Infant Custody Act of 1839 provided the first means by which mothers could counter fathers’ absolute control over their children. Under this act, mothers could petition the Court of Chancery for custody of children under seven and the right to see children under sixteen. English law also did not recognize married women’s right to own separate property. Upon marriage, the entirety of a woman’s property fell to her husband to manage and use, except he could not sell it without her consent. Any real property that a woman acquired during marriage legally belonged to her husband. Likewise, a husband also possessed the legal rights to all of his wife’s earnings. Even upon a husband’s death, a man could will his property away from his wife, whereas if she died, the husband maintained her property. Thus, before the middle of the 19th century, married women did not possess their wages, their inherited property, the children they had given birth to, or their own bodies.

III. Changes in Women’s Legal and Social Status, 1857-1900

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By 1851, almost 60 years had passed since Mary Wollstonecraft had written *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, the first major English work calling for better education for women and a reevaluation of the characteristics considered desirable in women. In those 60 years, very little progress had been made to alter women’s legal or social status in society. Observing essentially the same conditions that Wollstonecraft had, in 1851, Harriet Taylor Mill explained that women’s subjugation to men persisted because “It is agreeable to them [men] that men should live for their own sake, women for the sake of men.”6 Her husband, the Liberal John Stuart Mill, wrote *The Subject in of Women* in the 1850s, though it was not published until 1869. Most of John Stuart Mill’s suggestions, including a call for the Parliamentary franchise, proved too radical for most people to accept. Yet, the injustices and abuses of women’s legal and economic subjugation were leading some to consider some of Mills’ ideas and modify women’s legal position.7

By the middle of the nineteenth century, increased leisure time among middle-class women (and for some, economic necessity) contributed to their desire to pursue higher educational opportunities as well as to engage in philanthropic enterprises. In 1864, Emily Davies wrote *The Higher Education of Women* to argue for increasing advanced educational opportunities. Throughout her life, Davies devoted herself to fighting for women to be admitted to the examinations at Oxford and Cambridge. In 1873, she founded a women’s college at Cambridge University.8 Her wish to expand women’s educational and professional opportunities inspired Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, Britain’s first female physician. Anderson in turn inspired

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8 For more information on Emily Davies, see Daphne Bennett, *Emily Davies and the Liberation of Women: 1830-1921*, Ann Murphy, ed. (London: Andre Deutsch, 1990) or Emily Davies, *Emily Davies: Collected Letters, 1861-1875* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2004).
and helped other women to become doctors through the establishment of her hospital, staffed entirely by women, and her co-founding of the London Medical School for women.

By the 1850s, middle- and upper-class women were also challenging the doctrine of separate spheres by engaging in philanthropic work outside the home, which proved to be a wedge for women’s advancement in society. Initially, women faced obstacles to entering the public sphere, on the grounds that working outside the home and speaking in public were unseemly for women. Nevertheless, women’s fervent desire to engage in such work, the extent of poverty and absence of public services, necessarily led to their increased participation in charitable work; actions that they justified as an extension of their domestic duties. Some charitable activities, such as working with orphans or caring for the sick, were regarded as a natural extension of women’s nurturing role. Other philanthropic work did not conform as well to society’s image of what was proper to women. For example, Elizabeth Fry’s visiting program, in which female volunteers visited prisoners met with criticism that women should not enter prisons.9

As women began to serve in managerial roles on charitable boards, the traditional idea of femininity as naturally subservient was challenged as well. However, many of the charitable organizations run by women centered on women’s or children’s issues and in this way could be viewed as an extension of the domestic sphere, a larger form of household management that middle-class women already engaged in. This at least provided a “respectable” means for women to work outside the home. The necessity of acquiring skills required to help the unfortunate also provided women with a justification for pursuing educational opportunities.10 The organizational skills women acquired in charitable work would also prove useful for other campaigns on

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women’s issues. More importantly, by providing women with experience in speaking in public and challenging the belief that such action was improper, philanthropic work established a necessary condition for a widespread women’s suffrage movement.\(^{11}\)

Well-publicized abuses resulting from married women’s complete subjugation to their husbands provided the first instance in which women needed to utilize their organizational skills to attract publicity for a campaign to improve in women’s condition. Through the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, originally conceived to modernize and simplify English law, reformers sought to modify women’s legal position.\(^{12}\) Barbara Bodichon who along with the ladies of the Langham Place group, wrote pamphlets and even testified before a government committee about the abuses in the current divorce procedures.\(^{13}\) Caroline Norton’s divorce tragedies and her publications about them directly resulted in four clauses of the act.\(^{14}\) More importantly, the Matrimonial Causes Act allowed a court to grant divorces and women to sue for divorce. It provided the first legal means by which a woman could reclaim her body from her husband’s possession. However, as we have seen, the terms by which men and women could receive divorces were not equal. Whereas a husband only had to prove a wife’s adultery, a husband’s adultery did not constitute sufficient grounds for divorce. Women only received divorces for cases of cruelty, bigamy, or prolonged desertion. In this manner, the new divorce law reflected

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12 In the 1850s, the Parliamentary advocates of reforming the divorce law did not do so from a desire to improve the condition of women. Instead, they sought to modernize the archaic law that gave jurisdiction of divorce cases to ecclesiastical courts and required an act of Parliament.


14 Caroline Norton was a successful writer who was married to George Norton. They had an extremely unhappy marriage and in 1836 George Norton left Caroline, taking their children, which was his right under English law, with him. In order to obtain a divorce, George sued Lord Melbourne for criminal conversation with his wife. Because the suit failed, the couple could not legally divorce and George was able to prevent Caroline from visiting her children. As her husband, he was also entitled to all of her earnings. As a result of her situation, Caroline Norton wrote numerous pamphlets demanding change in English law.
the Victorian sexual double standard. Likewise, under the Infant Custody Act of 1886, also
influenced by Caroline Norton’s tragedies, mothers and fathers possessed for the first time an
equal right in the award of custody after a legal separation, but this had little effect upon the
balance of parental power within an intact family, where the father’s wishes still received legal
defERENCE.\textsuperscript{15} In this manner, the male’s position as the head of the household remained largely
intact.

In the 1860s, Parliament’s passage of the Contagious Diseases Acts, a public health law
aimed at curbing the spread of venereal diseases, attracted the attention of women’s rights
advocates, who detested the law for its complete rejection of women’s sovereignty over their
own bodies and its promotion of the sexual double standard. This law authorized the police to
arrest women suspected of prostitution and force them to undergo a medical examination, against
their will, to test for venereal diseases; the male clients, however, were not subject to the
invasive examination. In 1869, Josephine Butler became the leader of a campaign to repeal these
acts. From her previous charitable work aimed at helping prostitutes, Butler sympathized with
prostitutes, who she believed were forced into this work by insufficient wages. She, along with
other advocates of women’s rights, also believed that the law, which did not in any way punish
the men who were engaging in this immoral activity, was unjust. A skilled public speaker, she
traveled the country making speeches demanding the repeal of the acts.\textsuperscript{16} A woman speaking in
public on sexual matters caused quite a shock to Victorian cultural values. Nevertheless, largely
through her efforts, Parliament repealed the acts in 1886. In addition to the public speaking and

\textsuperscript{15} Shanley, Feminism, 131.\textsuperscript{16} For more on Josephine Butler, see Nancy Boyd, Three Victorian Women who Changed Their World: Josephine
Butler, Octavia Hill, Florence Nightingale (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) and Glen Petrie, A Singular
organizational experience the movement for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts provided women, suffragists benefited from the recognition of women’s ownership of their own persons.\textsuperscript{17}

Women’s rights advocates, among them leaders of the women’s suffrage movement, including Lydia Becker and Elizabeth Wolstenholme, also worked zealously for legal reform of married women’s property. The Married Women’s Property Act of 1882 was largely a victory for women’s rights advocates and was possibly the most important nineteenth century change in women’s legal status.\textsuperscript{18} The law finally recognized “separate property” for married women, who were allowed to enter into contracts, sue, and make wills without the legal consent of their husbands. Henceforth, the wages married women earned remained their own. Parliament had decided to support legal reform, but they did so out of a belief that the law should protect women from abusive husbands. As Shanley explains, these legal reforms protected women, rather than giving them independence from men, and did not imply an endorsement of gender equality.\textsuperscript{19} These reforms of the law as applied to women drew support from those who simply sought to reconcile common law and equity law rather than significantly advance women’s rights.\textsuperscript{20} The changes in the law also reflected changing economic conditions. Most importantly, these advances in women’s legal and economic rights resulted from the widespread societal belief that women needed protection and in this manner the advances enhanced, rather than diminished the importance of the doctrine of separate spheres. The demand for women’s suffrage, by contrast, was viewed as a direct threat to the doctrine.

IV. Background of the Women’s Suffrage Movement

\textsuperscript{17} For more information on the connection between the movement for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts and women’s suffrage, see Judith Walkowitz, \textit{Prostitution and Victorian Society, Women, Class and the State} and Kent, \textit{Sex and Suffrage}, 7-11.

\textsuperscript{18} Shanley, \textit{Feminism}, 103.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, 130.

\textsuperscript{20} Equity and common law courts both had jurisdiction over these issues and the decisions issued by the two different types of courts occasionally differed. Some supported the modifications that brought changes to women’s legal situation because they wanted more unified standards of law. See Shanley, \textit{Feminism}, for more information.
Ironically, the legal and economic reforms that advanced women’s conditions in Great Britain proved to be a major argument against extending the franchise to women. Those opposed to women’s suffrage could point to the reforms passed by Parliament as proof that an exclusively male electorate was capable of promoting women’s interests. By the end of the century, with the most egregious inequities in the legal system reformed, many people did not see the need for the franchise in order to ensure that women’s interests were represented. Moreover, many women believed that their husbands, or nearest male relations, did adequately represent them. Even after the extension of the franchise to include over half of all working-class men in 1867, not all men possessed the vote and the idea of virtual representation persisted. According to this idea, the male head of household represented not only his interests but also those of the entire household so there was no need for more than one member of the same household to vote.

In spite of the obstacles posed by the heavily entrenched belief in separate spheres and virtual representation, the demand for women’s suffrage in Parliament increased steadily through the end of the nineteenth century. One of the earliest leaders of the women’s suffrage movement, Barbara Bodichon, who had previously campaigned for the reform of married women’s property, contended that married women’s absolute dependence on their husbands was demeaning. In 1858, she had co-founded the *Englishwoman’s Review*, which became an important vehicle for promoting women’s suffrage as well as other women’s causes. In 1866, Bodichon and the ladies of the Langham Place circle asked John Stuart Mill to raise the issue of extending suffrage to women in Parliament if he received a petition demonstrating support. In turn, Bodichon collected signatures for a petition, and formed the London Suffrage Committee, the first women’s suffrage organization. Receiving a petition signed by 1499 women, Mill duly called for women’s suffrage
in Parliament and was soundly defeated and belittled, as the measure would be until the next century.\footnote{For more information on John Stuart Mill, see Ellery, \textit{John Stuart Mill} and Tulloch, \textit{Mill and Sexual Equality}. For more information on Barbara Bodichon, see Herstein, \textit{A Mid-Victorian Feminist}.}

Despite the Parliamentary setbacks and little serious consideration it received, the women’s suffrage movement in the nineteenth century attracted numerous capable women and continued to expand, setting the basis for later achievements. Hearing one of Bodichon’s lectures on women’s suffrage, Lydia Becker, with Elizabeth Wolstenholme, formed the Manchester Women’s Suffrage Committee; similar organizations soon emerged in Edinburgh, Bristol, and Birmingham.\footnote{For further information on Lydia Becker, see Audrey Kelly, \textit{Lydia Becker and the Cause} (Lancaster: Centre for North-West Regional Studies, 1992).} In addition to supporting other women’s causes, each of these women became an influential figure in the women’s suffrage movement of the 1870s and 1880s. As Parliamentary agent, Lydia Becker coordinated the work of sympathetic politicians and regional societies and became the leader of the movement until her death in 1890. However, she lacked the degree of charisma necessary for leadership and until 1900 the movement had no single leader.\footnote{Martin Pugh, \textit{The March of the Women: A Revisionist Analysis of the Campaign for Women’s Suffrage 1866-1914} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 11.} As a result, by the 1870s, the women’s suffrage movement was organized in a loose federation, with the London organization coordinating the Parliamentary appeal. Because of the independence and activism of the regional centers, a strong central organization failed to emerge.\footnote{Ibid, 13.}

One of the major obstacles to achieving women’s suffrage was the practical consideration of how to implement it. In the nineteenth century, political rights in Great Britain were inextricably linked with the ownership of property. Until 1882 and the Married Women’s Property Act, however, married women could not own property. In view of this consideration,
the women’s suffrage movement was split as to whether to advocate the extension of property only to single or widowed women, who could own property, or to include married women. Because the extension of the suffrage to married women caused considerable problems in reference to the property qualification, some women, like Lydia Becker, believed that only suffrage for unmarried women was possible. Others, including Mrs. Wolstenholme Elmy and Emmeline Pankhurst, insisted upon the inclusion of married women; in 1889 these suffragists formed their own organization, the Women’s Franchise League. As a result, the movement and sympathetic members of Parliament divided over the issue of supporting Parliamentary Bills that did not extend to married women. This division was partially responsible for the difficulties of the women’s suffrage movement in the later-nineteenth century.

In addition to the debate over the inclusion of married women in the franchise, the women’s suffrage movement was plagued by other divisions, which ultimately hindered its success, until the advent of World War I ended the campaign. The presence of both Conservative and Liberal (and later Labour) Party supporters also prevented the women’s suffrage movement from uniting behind a single strategy to achieve the franchise. In fact, the refusal of the movement’s leaders to consistently align with one party plagued the movement because it provided neither party with an incentive to endorse the cause and fight for its implementation after the party formed a government. Because the women’s suffrage movement did not consistently support one party, both parties feared that implementing women’s suffrage would benefit their rival. Conservative, Liberal, and eventually Labour supporters within the movement also tended to disagree over tactics and the form that suffrage should take when enacted. As a result, the women’s suffrage movement had great difficulty in uniting behind a single organization to promote the cause.
After 1900, the women’s suffrage movement became larger, more diverse, and more vocal in pressuring Parliament and brought the cause into greater public attention. In 1897, the seventeen largest and most influential suffrage organizations united to form the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS).\(^{25}\) Millicent Garrett Fawcett, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson’s sister, quickly emerged as the leader of this federated organization, along with other influential women, including Lady Frances Balfour, Helen Blackburn and Eva Gore-Booth. Though this organization remained prominent, continued the practice of exerting pressure on Parliament to grant women’s suffrage, and was very influential in finally bringing about limited success in 1918, other suffrage organizations after 1900 tended to overshadow it. To some extent, this was due to the enthusiasm these newer organizations drew to the cause. In 1903, Eva Gore Booth and Esther Roper formed the Lancashire and Cheshire Women’s Textile Workers’ Representation Committee, which promoted women’s suffrage among working class-women in northern England.\(^{26}\) Influenced by Esther Roper’s work and further desiring to increase working-class women’s support for suffrage, Christabel Pankhurst with her mother, Mrs. Emmeline Pankhurst, formed the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) in Manchester in 1903.

After the attention Christabel and her friend Annie Kenney received for disrupting a Liberal Party meeting in 1905, refusing to pay the fine imposed on them for disturbing the peace, the movement turned increasingly towards militant tactics. The Pankhursts left Manchester for London and pursued more militant tactics--such as heckling speakers and disrupting Parliament--that sometimes led to arrests. Though some, including Gore-Booth and Roper cautioned against such tactics, other suffrage organizations, including Millicent Garrett Fawcett’s NUWSS,

welcomed the publicity and renewed attention the women’s suffrage campaign received as a result.

For the British public after 1908, the most notorious aspect of the women’s suffrage movement was the violence engaged in by the WSPU and the suffragettes. To an extent, their violence has been exaggerated; the suffragettes primarily attacked property, but the police often used excessive violence against them. Because of the sensationalism of violence, especially violence committed by largely well-dressed middle-class women, newspapers focused on the numerically fewer militant suffragettes when discussing the issue of women’s suffrage. Newspapers were attracted by the spectacle of women engaging in hunger strikes, only to be force fed in prison, and eventually released for ill health. After Parliament passed the “Cat and Mouse Act” in 1912, the police were able to re-arrest prisoners who had been released due to poor health caused by hunger strikes and force feeding. After 1912, the WSPU’s violence and destruction of property increasingly discouraged the public, other suffragists, and members of Parliament from supporting women’s suffrage and the suffragettes arguably had little to do with bringing about the extension of the franchise. In fact, by the time Britain became embroiled in war in 1914, the WSPU had few supporters and the Pankhursts welcomed the opportunity to postpone the cause of suffrage in favor of ardent patriotism.27

V. Historiography

The initial accounts of the women’s suffrage movement, recounted in autobiographies or general histories by those who had participated in it, were written soon after the franchise was achieved in 1918 and were inherently partisan. Mrs. Pankurst and her daughter Sylvia were both early writers on the subject and focused undue attention on their own achievements. Yet, partly due to the sensationalism of their violence, much of the early discussion of the women’s suffrage

27 For a comprehensive biography of the Pankhurts, see Martin Pugh, The Pankhurts (London: Allen Lane, 2001)
movement in Britain focused on the suffragettes. Similarly, following the lead of the Pankhursts, who dismissed the Victorian suffragists, much initial scholarship on women’s suffrage focused on the movement after 1900, overshadowing the very important work done in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Martin Pugh in his comprehensive analysis of the women’s suffrage movement, The March of the Women, seeks, among other goals, to correct the perception that the Victorian suffragists accomplished little. He argues that the suffragist work prior to 1900 provided the basis for the movement’s later advances. In fact, the 1890s, long considered by scholars to be a period of stagnation for the women’s suffrage movement, was actually a turning point in which parliamentary support began to increase based on the recognition that the suffragists presented a more logical argument than the anti-suffragists did.

A “revisionist analysis,” as he terms it, Pugh’s influential work challenges numerous assumptions and long-held beliefs about the campaign for women’s suffrage. Besides the novel contention that the last decade of the nineteenth century aided the cause, Pugh lessens the Pankhursts’ importance in the movement, stressing the importance of non-militant suffragists throughout. He also demonstrates that the importance of the Conservative Party and conservative suffragists has been underestimated. Traditionally, historians have emphasized the role the Liberal Party and devoted Liberal suffragists played in the women’s suffrage movement. However, more recent authors, including Pugh, discuss the Liberals’ failure to commit to a platform endorsing women’s suffrage and bring attention to the support Conservatives or radicals

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29 Pugh, The March of the Women. For more information on the women’s suffrage movement in the 1890s, see David Rubenstein, Before the Suffragettes: Women’s Emancipation in the 1890s (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986).
30 Pugh, The March of the Women, 3.
provided.\textsuperscript{31} In fact, the failure of either major party to formally endorse suffrage was both a cause and an effect of the women’s suffrage movement’s failure to align itself with one party. As a result, the movement consisted of supporters across the political spectrum from conservatives to radicals who agreed on little else besides the desire for women’s suffrage in some form, with conservatives tending to support limited women’s suffrage and radicals calling for universal adult suffrage.

Historians’ contemporary contexts also influenced which particular aspect of the women’s suffrage movement they chose to emphasize. In the aftermath of the women’s movement of the 1970s, for example, many historians sought to highlight early feminist aspects of the struggle for suffrage. The problem with this approach, however, was its tendency to attribute feminist beliefs to women who not only did not yet possess this term, but whose ideas differed greatly from modern proponents of feminism. One modern definition of feminism refers to a belief in the equality of the sexes. In \textit{Victorian Feminisms}, Barbara Caine contends that the study of Victorian feminists has led to the modification of this definition. Instead of claiming that the British women’s movement in the latter part of the nineteenth century was exclusively concerned with increasing women’s involvement in the public sphere in equal capacity with men, Caine argues that Victorian feminists recognized the differences in the genders and primarily sought to ease women’s subjugation to men in the private sphere.\textsuperscript{32} Importantly, this interpretation of feminism allows for the inclusion of anti-suffragists, like Violet Markham and Mrs. Humphry Ward who opposed women’s entrance into the public sphere of national politics,

\textsuperscript{31} For a general discussion of the women’s suffrage movement and the political parties, see Rover, \textit{Women’s Suffrage and Party Politics}. For further consideration of the Liberal Party’s relationship with the women’s suffrage movement, see David Morgan, \textit{Suffragists and Liberals} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975). For more information on the labor movement’s relationship with women’s suffrage, see Lucy Middleton, Ed., \textit{Women in the Labour Movement} (Croom Helm, 1977).

\textsuperscript{32} Caine, \textit{Victorian Feminists}, 2.
into the feminist movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Caine also argues that Victorian feminists across the spectrum incorporated the doctrine of separate spheres into their ideas on feminism. Consequently, even among the most progressive women’s rights advocates, the doctrine of separate spheres remained influential.

Emphasizing the idea of feminist undercurrents in the women’s suffrage movement, Susan Kent in *Sex and Suffrage in Britain* argues that the women’s suffrage movement was part of an outcry against male domination and part of a larger struggle for women’s rights. Kent explains that many of the prominent women involved in the women’s suffrage movement were also involved in other causes for advancing women’s position in society. Josephine Butler led the campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Act and Emily Davies sought to expand women’s higher education. Lydia Becker, the first president of the National Union of Women Suffrage Societies, worked with Butler for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts and served as treasurer of the Married Women’s Property Committee. This supports Kent’s claim that suffragists desired more than the expansion of political rights. Kent further contends that the suffragists attacked the prevailing attitude that demeaned and objectified women as “The Sex” and sought to reform the sexual double standard of morality. Though she acknowledges the importance of working-class suffragists and the movement’s followers, Kent focuses her argument on the movement’s prominent middle-class leaders. Working-class women and many middle-class followers, however, sought different goals from the suffrage. Finally, Kent argues against the prominent belief among historians of the movement that women’s suffrage was an

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33 Ibid, 16-7.
34 Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain*, 3.
essentially conservative movement. Rather, she believes that the call for women’s suffrage was a direct attack by early feminists on the center of male patriarchy – the Parliamentary vote.  

Research on the struggle for suffrage has also focused little attention on the opposition to women’s suffrage. Most authors have regarded the anti-suffragists as misogynists who employed irrational arguments in opposition. Admittedly, much anti-suffrage rhetoric portrayed women as intellectually inferior, incapable of voting, or otherwise implied that nature had never intended for women to vote. Other anti-suffragists, however, employed more sophisticated arguments for their opposition. Brian Harrison in *Separate Spheres: The Opposition to Women’s Suffrage in Britain* conducted the first extensive study of the anti-suffrage movement. First, he analyzed four major themes or categories of reasons for opposing women’s suffrage.  

Then, Harrison offered a chronology of organized anti-suffragism, one which particularly emphasized the impact anti-suffragism had on public opinion. In addition, Pugh’s chapter on anti-suffragism in *The March of the Women* provides valuable insights into the movement, including an argument that anti-suffragism suffered as a movement due to divisions between male and female anti-suffragists. Biographies of prominent anti-suffragists, including John Sutherland’s *Mrs. Humphrey Ward*, added significantly to the understanding of the reasons for opposition to suffrage. Especially among female anti-suffragists, the desire to prevent women’s suffrage rested on the belief that the lack of suffrage was ultimately better for women.  

Though many of the leaders of the women’s suffrage movement supported or were prominent in other women’s causes, they nevertheless maintained a deliberate separation among the varying causes. For example, though many suffragists supported the repeal of the Contagious
Diseases Acts, Lydia Becker and Millicent Fawcett did not want to promote an association between the two campaigns because of fears that the morality of suffrage might be questioned.\textsuperscript{39} In part, separation between the various causes reflected a tactical ploy on the part of leaders of individual movements to draw the greatest number of supporters, without eliminating some because of an association with another cause. However, this separation also reflected the reality that not all supporters of women’s suffrage supported all other causes purporting to improve the condition of women. Some women who sought to advance women’s rights in other ways did not support women’s suffrage. Beatrice Webb, who sought to improve the condition of working-class women, did not initially favor women’s suffrage. Violet Markham and Mrs. Humphrey Ward both supported causes to expand women’s rights and both worked vehemently in opposition to women’s suffrage. During World War I, Markham revised her opinion on the merits of women’s suffrage, but Mrs. Ward never did. Failure to support women’s suffrage was not an automatic indication of lack of support for other causes advancing women’s rights; similarly, support for women’s suffrage did not indicate a desire to challenge the doctrine of separate spheres in other areas.

Many female supporters would not have participated in the movement if they believed that its leaders sought a complete alteration of gender roles or a complete repudiation of the separate spheres ideology. Francis Power Cobbe, for example, did not approve of the “New Woman’s” disregard for Victorian moral norms. As the WSPU became increasingly militant and its leaders became engaged in very “unfeminine” actions its support dwindled among the public and those who supported women’s suffrage. Furthermore, it was not merely intolerant of men who feared the emancipation of women or unfeminine actions; most women did not desire the vote either. Though there were numerous reasons for this, the widespread acceptance of the

\textsuperscript{39} Pugh, \textit{The March of the Women}, 9.
ideology of separate spheres was the most fundamental. Most women and even most suffragists did not advocate full gender equality or women’s access to all aspects of the public sphere. If they were to be convinced of the necessity and desirability of receiving the vote, the suffragists would have to ensure that the franchise would not significantly challenge conventional ideas of femininity.

Certainly, many of the prominent suffragists saw the cause as a means to reform society’s conception of gender and to further expand women’s rights and roles in society. But even if they believed otherwise, suffragists relied on the language of separate spheres to convey the argument for women’s suffrage. In part this resulted from necessity. Anti-suffragists frequently accused suffragists of trying to “unsex” women. As a result, suffrage propaganda showed women performing traditionally feminine roles or claimed that suffrage would better enable women to perform their domestic duties. Anti-suffrage propaganda claimed that giving women the right to vote would interfere with their more important duties as wives and mothers. Suffragists responded that women’s suffrage would enhance the importance of the family in political life. To those anti-suffragists who claimed that women’s superior moral virtues would be sullied by their participation in politics, suffragists replied that women’s superior virtues would elevate the level of politics.

VI. The Influence of Separate Spheres

The women’s suffrage leaders, members of Parliament, and the general public all showed great concern over which category of women should achieve the franchise. One MP in discussing a woman’s suffrage bill that would have only granted the right to vote to single women stated, “Under this Bill, elderly virgins, widows…kept women….would be admitted to the franchise, while the married women of England – mothers who formed the mainstay of the
nation – were rigidly excluded.”

Who was more deserving of the Parliamentary franchise, single or widowed women who had no male to virtually represent them, or married women who dutifully tended to their families as women ought? The answer to this question relates to the continued importance of separate spheres. Both anti-suffragists and suffragists’ writings and speeches sought to invoke separate spheres and women’s roles as wives and mothers in support of their argument. Why was the presence of similar themes in female anti-suffrage and pro-suffrage works important? By discussing the emphasis both suffragists and anti-suffragists placed on women’s traditional societal roles of wife and mother in arguing for or against suffrage, this thesis aims to analyze how female leaders of both sides regarded the goals of the movement, women’s place in society, and thereby provide an explanation for why the right to vote did not result in significant changes in women’s societal role.

Besides the common discourse of separate spheres, a comparison of the writings and speeches of prominent suffragists and anti-suffragists reveals similar themes. This is especially true of a comparison between female anti-suffragists, who tended to be less extreme than their male counterparts, and female suffragists. Chapter Two of this work analyzes Millicent Fawcett’s beliefs about the role of women in society and what she believed suffrage would accomplish. Chapter Three looks for similar themes in the writings of Mrs. Humphry Ward, the leader of the anti-suffragists. By examining the works of both Frances Power Cobbe, a conservative suffragist and Violet Markham, a prominent anti-suffragist, Chapter Four makes a direct comparison of the themes of two opponents. Together, these chapters will demonstrate not only that female anti-suffragists and suffragists shared many similar ideas about the roles women at the outset of the twentieth century should serve in society, but also that these women largely operated within the context of separate spheres’ ideology.

40 Ibid, 25.
During the early part of the twentieth century, as well as in our own time, the most
dramatic and best-known incidents of the British women’s suffrage movement consist of women
behaving in a distinctly unfeminine manner. The Women’s Social and Political Union under the
leadership of Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughter Christabel advocated militant methods to
achieve the suffrage, including fire bombing mailboxes and smashing store windows. They
encouraged women to get arrested and then attract even more attention by going on hunger
strikes in prison. In 1913, one woman even martyred herself for the cause by throwing herself
under the king’s horse on Derby day. Though these methods certainly attracted more attention
from the press than the behavior of nonmilitant suffragists led by Millicent Garrett Fawcett and
the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies, the criminal behavior of the suffragettes
shocked most of Britain and possibly harmed the cause, rather than helped it. In addition to
repugnance at violence in general, British men and women were very uncomfortable with these
women who broke so dramatically from the image of the ideal women of the time. If suffrage
was going to turn women into violent, out-spoken, and utterly unfeminine women who despised
their “natural” duties towards their homes and children, most men and women did not desire it.
Although the actions of the WSPU were responsible for validating this fear, in reality, people
had feared that suffrage would make women more masculine and threaten gender relations from
the moment John Stuart Mill had raised attention to the issue in 1866.

Most suffragists, even and especially after the antics of the WSPU, considered it their
duty to reassure the British public that women’s suffrage would not unleash revolutionary
changes in gender relations in the home, or women’s role in society. At the turn of the twentieth
century, the idea of gender equality was considered radical and most suffragists shied away from publicly advocating it. The extent to which suffragists personally desired gender equality, however, as well as what they meant by the term, varied by the individual. For this purpose, gender equality may be defined as equal social, political, and economic rights, which may be perceived as blurring differences between the genders. As a prominent and influential national leader in the women’s suffrage movement, Fawcett represented thousands of women who desired the vote. Therefore, her reasons for desiring suffrage and the results she foresaw arising from suffrage are indicative of what many other suffragists believed and what British society would tolerate. Fawcett wanted some women, those who desired it, to have greater access to higher education and the professions, but she expected that most women would consider domestic responsibilities as their primary duty. She wanted equal moral standards for men and women, accomplished by enforcing stricter standards for men, rather than more permissive standards for women. She wanted women to have a vote in Parliament in order to accomplish these goals. Unlike more radical suffragists, such as Christabel Pankhurst, Millicent Fawcett did not stress that men oppressed women, nor did she advocate a transformation of patriarchal society. As will be demonstrated throughout this chapter, she expressed her reasons for women’s suffrage in terms of the traditional separate spheres ideology that men and women are critically different, not in terms of gender equality.

Born in 1847, Millicent Garrett was the seventh of ten children born to Louise Dunnell and Newton Garrett. The family was financially comfortable, and they were able to send all but one of their daughters to a women’s boarding school in London. Here, the girls learned the elements of effective composition as well as proper ladylike behavior. Newton Garrett believed
in the importance of educating his daughters and allowing them to express their own ideas.\textsuperscript{41} Louise was a strict Evangelical and admirably managed ten children and a busy household.\textsuperscript{42} Though the Garretts did not raise their daughters in a manner extraordinarily different from other middle-class parents similarly situated, three of their daughters became prominent in women’s rights causes at the end of the nineteenth century. In large measure, Millicent and her older sister Agnes, who was one of the first interior designers and aided in opening the profession to women, became involved in advancing women’s societal roles because of the example set by their older sister Elizabeth Garrett Anderson. After a difficult struggle, Elizabeth became the first female doctor in Britain. Elizabeth helped to develop Millicent’s feminism and encouraged her to desire more from life than marriage. However, Millicent at the age of twenty wanted to and did marry Henry Fawcett, a member of Parliament who had previously courted Elizabeth. Because Henry was blind, Millicent spent much of her seventeen years of marriage to Henry helping him. Although Henry Fawcett was a staunch supporter of women’s suffrage and encouraged Millicent’s work with the cause, while her husband was alive Millicent was not very active in women’s campaigns. Largely conforming to the Victorian ideal of female domesticity, Millicent’s primary concerns were her husband, her daughter Phillippa, and the management of her household. But she always maintained close ties to women’s rights causes, their leaders, and her particular interest – women’s suffrage. After Henry Fawcett died in 1884, however, Millicent became more actively involved in several campaigns promoting women’s rights.

Fawcett asserts in her autobiography that she was born a suffragist. She certainly became devoted to the cause early in life. In 1867, at the age of twenty, she attended the House of

\textsuperscript{41} David Rubinstein, \textit{A Different World for Women: The Life of Millicent Garrett Fawcett} (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991), 7.
Commons debate, initiated in response to Mill’s proposal, on women’s suffrage. In the same year, she joined the executive committee of the National Society for Women’s Suffrage. Though Fawcett was an influential member of this organization and its successor, she did not begin extensively speaking on behalf of women’s suffrage until her husband died in 1886, at which point she was on the executive committee of the Central Committee for Women’s Suffrage. As continually occurred throughout the long period of the struggle for women’s suffrage, this organization split when a large portion of its members left to form a rival women’s suffrage organization. In 1896, she aided the unification of various suffrage societies into the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). At this point, she became honorary secretary of the Central and Eastern Society and was appointed to the NUWSS’s parliamentary committee. In 1907, after the NUWSS was reorganized, she became its president and remained so until 1919 when the NUWSS became the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship. She remained on the board of this organization and was one of the few women active in the mid-nineteenth century women’s movement alive to witness the achievement of full women’s suffrage in 1928. She died the following year.

Although Fawcett dedicated herself primarily to the campaign for women’s suffrage, especially after the formation of the NUWSS in 1896, she did take an interest in women’s rights causes other than suffrage. This suggests that she supported a more widespread effort to free women from the subjugation of men and, some may even claim, that she promoted greater gender equality. Fawcett, like many other suffragists and anti-suffragists, sought to increase women’s access to higher education and the professions. She also believed that women were equal with men, but necessarily different. In response to one critic, she wrote, “We recognize the difference between men and women, and maintain…that this difference is not one of inferiority
or superiority.”43 This statement, however, only indicates that Fawcett promoted the idea of equivalent worth between the genders, not gender equality as defined above. Moreover, as will be demonstrated in chapter 4, Fawcett’s statement above was very similar to one made by the anti-suffragist Violet Markham. In her autobiography, Fawcett described the campaign for suffrage as one aspect of a multifaceted movement, which included such goals as improving women’s access to education, employment rights, and instilling an “equal moral standard between men and women.” She believed that anybody who worked for one of these goals actually worked towards all of them.44 She believed, for example, that women’s suffrage would force members of Parliament to consider women’s opinions and force Parliament to remedy women’s legal disabilities. Unlike some other suffragists, Fawcett did not regard suffrage as an end, but as a means towards improving women’s condition in England. With the right to vote, women, she believed, would be able to more adequately address the glaring injustices of English law as it affected them.45 As Barbara Caine explains, part of Fawcett’s feminism consisted in her work to gain greater access for women in all aspect of the public sphere.46 Importantly, however, many female anti-suffragists also promoted greater opportunities for women in the public sphere, yet repudiated any claim that they were working towards gender equality.

In addition to her support for an expansion of women’s role in society, Fawcett’s involvement in campaigns to promote sexual purity also supports the claim that she sought to further gender equality. Though she refrained from taking a very active role in the campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts, Fawcett became vocal in the social purity movement, a campaign consisting mainly of middle-class women promoting male sexual restraint. She sought

44 Fawcett, What I Remember, 118.
45 Rubinstein, A Different World for Women, 141.
to increase attention to sexual abuses committed against women and young girls. For example, waging a campaign to prevent one man, who in having an affair with a young woman had ruined her reputation, from becoming a Member of Parliament. Susan Kent, author of *Sex and Suffrage*, claims that Fawcett believed that women’s suffrage would result in stiffer punishments for sexual crimes against women. In addition to seeking to modify English law, which dealt very leniently with sexual crimes against women, Fawcett also attacked the sexual double standard that allowed most men to go unpunished while the full force of moral condemnation fell on women. Yet, the promotion of sexual restraint for men and a reformation of the law as it related to sex crimes do not necessarily indicate support for gender equality.

In contrast to later feminists and those who believe that Fawcett repudiated separate spheres ideology, Fawcett did not disparage marriage or women’s domestic role. Owing to the greater number of women than men in Britain, however, she did not believe that the domestic sphere could not accommodate all women. As she wrote, “It is all very well to tell a woman that her sphere is to be a wife and a mother, when there must always be a large number of women unmarried, owning to the simple fact that there are more women in the world than men.” For those women who chose to marry, Fawcett advocated more equality between husband and wife, which she believed would ultimately promote more harmonious marriages. Some husbands and some opponents of women’s suffrage believed that women owed absolute deference to their husbands. Fawcett, however, claimed, “Unlimited monarchy has gone in the family, as surely as it has in the State: and as its disappearance has been marked in the State by the creation of a deeper sense of loyalty and patriotism, so I think its disappearance in the family has been and will be marked by a finer and stronger bond of mutual love and obligation between parents and

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children.” 49 Even Fawcett’s moral purity campaign, which rested on traditional views of the family, can be regarded as promoting marriage by advocating monogamous practices. She hardly claimed, as some more radical suffragists did, that marriage turned women into slaves and was, therefore, undesirable. In a response to a critic of women’s suffrage, Fawcett wrote, “There are people who are in rebellion against all order in society; who think marriages should be dissolvable at will; that parents ought to have no control over their children; that no harm would be done if women wore men’s clothes…they are not people who have anything to do whatever with the movement for the emancipation of women.” 50 Fawcett, like most suffragists, did not attack the institution of marriage or the appropriateness of women primarily remaining in the domestic sphere.

As leader of the largest women’s suffrage organization in Great Britain, Fawcett was a pragmatist who supported any party or member of Parliament who expressed a desire for women’s suffrage, and she supported any women’s suffrage bill proposed by Parliament, no matter how limited. At various times in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, she supported women’s suffrage measures that would only enfranchise single women and widows, or measures that would only enfranchise female ratepayers. She believed that women’s suffrage in any form could ultimately be used to expand the franchise to encompass more women. As a result, Fawcett’s writings and speeches on the topic reflect a fairly wide range of themes, depending upon the audience she was addressing and some of these may be said to conflict.

49 Fawcett, “Women’s Suffrage: a Speech Delivered to the Women’s Debating Society, the Owns College, Manchester, on he 13th of February, 1899,” (Manchester: North of England Society for Women’s Suffrage, 1899), 14.
50 Fawcett, “The Emancipation of Women,” 258.
Broadly, Fawcett’s biographer David Rubinstein defines her avowed reasons for advocating suffrage as conservative, feminist, and sociological. While Fawcett may have stressed different themes depending upon her audience, her personal reasons for supporting women’s suffrage probably encompassed all of the themes described above, rather than one particular motive. Fawcett believed that women’s suffrage would aid middle-class women’s educational and professional aspirations as well as help working-class women receive more equitable treatment from unions and employers. Yet, she also believed that these goals and suffrage itself would not threaten women’s responsibilities as mothers and wives, or their innate femininity. Though she regarded the domestic sphere as confining for women, as did some female anti-suffragists, she did not desire women to abandon it.

In spite of Millicent Fawcett’s commitment to a variety of causes seeking to advance women’s position in society and her involvement in the moral purity campaign, she did not promote gender equality. She believed that society ought to accord women as well as the domestic sphere more respect, and she sought to provide women with greater educational and professional options; but as will be demonstrated throughout this chapter, she did not repudiate separate spheres ideology, which is incompatible with gender equality. Ultimately, Fawcett supported an expansion of women’s sphere but within the language and context of the doctrine of separate spheres.

Operating in the language of separate spheres, Fawcett never deviated from the idea that women naturally belonged in the domestic sphere. She wrote:

To women as mothers, is given the charge of the home and the care of children. Women are, therefore, by nature as well as by occupation and training, more accustomed than men to concentrate their minds on the home and the domestic side of things. But this difference between men and women, instead of being a reason against their enfranchisement, seems to me the strongest possible reason in favour of it; we want the

51 Rubinstein, A Different World, 137.
home and the domestic side of things to count for more in politics…We want to know how various kinds of legislation enactments bear on the home and domestic life.\textsuperscript{52}

By first asserting that women properly possess dominion over the home and family and endorsing the central ideal of the separate spheres doctrine, Fawcett explained that this important part of life must be taken into greater account in political life. She claimed that the home was “the most important institution in the country.”\textsuperscript{53} Women, as proper inhabitants of the domestic sphere, should therefore have more of an influence on national politics so as to assess the effects of legislation on the home. In the same speech, she later explained her belief that “the home side and the political side of things have been kept too far apart, as if they had nothing to do with each other.”\textsuperscript{54} Because this statement advocated a closer relationship between the domestic sphere and the public sphere, which by the doctrine’s definition should remain separate, it does pose a challenge to separate spheres. Yet, Fawcett only advocated in this speech that the public sphere should take more account of the domestic sphere, not that the two spheres should completely merge. Fawcett does not claim, as later feminists would, that the idea of separate spheres inhabited by the different genders should have no bearing in the way that the men and women comport themselves. Though women were participating more in the public sphere, women would still regard the domestic sphere as their primary duty.

Simply stated, the doctrine of separate spheres explains that men and women are fundamentally and naturally different. Though Fawcett did desire an expansion of women’s role in society, she did not attempt to claim that men and women possess exactly the same qualities. In fact, as she stated, “we base our claim to representation to a large extent on them [the differences between men and women]. If men and women were exactly alike, the representation

\textsuperscript{52} Millicent Garrett Fawcett, “Home and Politics,” \textit{Before the Vote was Won: Arguments For and Against Women’s Suffrage}, Jane Lewis, ed.(New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 419.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid, 420.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
of men would represent us; but not being alike, that wherein we differ is unrepresented under the present system.”  

After the middle of the 1890s, the claim that women needed the vote because the genders were fundamentally different became one of Fawcett’s central themes. In an article in *The Englishwoman*, Fawcett expressed her disbelief that those anti-suffragists who contend that women’s duties lie in the “spheres of Home, Society, Education, and Philanthropy” would not desire women to possess a means to influence Parliamentary legislation on these same issues. Though some anti-suffragists claimed that the differences between men and women were not so extensive as to prevent men from adequately representing women’s interests, Fawcett believed that issues concerning women did not receive the proper attention from Parliament. She believed that women needed suffrage because “there is scarcely an instance in which the supposed interests of men and women come into conflict in which the state of the law is not flagrantly unjust to women.” Women needed the franchise because men and women were different, as the anti-suffragists claimed.

Fawcett’s emphasis on gender differences was perfectly in accordance with the doctrine of separate spheres. While seeking to expand women’s higher educational and professional opportunities, Fawcett did not claim that women were capable of performing every duty or career that men were. She also did not claim that suffrage would lead to gender equality. As she wrote, “we are not asking Parliament to give legislative expression to any theory or doctrine of equality between the sexes.” By asserting the claim to suffrage on the grounds of gender

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55 Ibid, 419.
56 Rubinstein, A Different World for Women, 139.
57 Millicent Garrett Fawcett, “Men are Men and Women are Women,” *The Englishwoman*, v. 1, no. 1, Feb. 1909; 17-31.
58 Millicent Garrett Fawcett, “A Reply to the Letter of Mr. Samuel Smith, MP 11 April 1892,” *Before the Vote was Won: Arguments For and Against Women’s Suffrage*, Jane Lewis, ed. (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 437.
59 Ibid, 436.
differences, rather than gender equality, Fawcett sought to reassure large segments of English society that suffragists “did not wish to turn society upside down or women into men.”

The harm female suffrage could wreak on women’s responsibilities as mothers was one of the anti-suffragists most frequent themes. One anti-suffrage poster, for example, depicted a screaming child with the caption, “Mummy’s a suffragette.” In order to convince the public of the desirability of women’s suffrage, the suffragists had to confront this argument. Fawcett, like those opposed to women’s suffrage, emphasized the fundamental importance of women’s role as mother. In one of her speeches, she stated, “The motherhood of women, either actual or potential, is one of those great facts of everyday life which we must never lose sight of.” As a suffragist, she never argued that women should abandon their natural duties in order to become more engaged in politics. In fact, Fawcett believed that the right to vote would enable women to become better mothers. In short, Fawcett believed there was a positive correlation between a nation’s “civilization” (with Great Britain regarded as the most civilized nation), the freedom accorded to women, and women’s aptitude for motherhood. She challenged opponents of women’s suffrage to compare the womanliness of English women, especially as regarded the care of children, with women in countries that greatly subjugated women. While traveling in Egypt, Fawcett claimed to have witnessed an Egyptian mother who “would allow her infant’s face and eyes to be covered with flies and never even raise her hand to brush them off.” Moreover, Fawcett, as well as other women’s rights advocates, claimed that improving the quality of women’s education and allowing them greater civic responsibility would better enable

60 Rubinstein, A Different World for Women, 141.
64 Fawcett, What I Remember, 125.
them to teach their children the qualities of responsible citizenship. As Fawcett wrote, “The fact that to the mother in nearly all classes is consigned the training of children in their most impressionable years, in itself is one of the strongest claims that has ever been put forward for raising the education and social status of women.” Nevertheless, many anti-suffragists claimed that the excitement of politics would somehow harm the health of unborn children and the future of the English race.

In order to promote women’s suffrage, Fawcett claimed that women’s special knowledge of children, which came from mothering, placed them in a unique position to comment on children’s needs. Because increasing amounts of Parliamentary legislation were dealing with the family and children, Fawcett claimed that it was in the best interest of the nation’s children to enfranchise mothers. (Some of the areas of national legislation dealing with children included employment of minors and education.) As she stated, “women have acquired through their domestic avocations a considerable degree of knowledge of children’s minds and needs, and it is, therefore, a national misfortune, when legislation bearing on these subjects is brought forward, that there is no adequate constitutional method in which the women’s influence can make itself felt.” Rather than abandoning their children if they received the right to vote, as the anti-suffragists claimed, suffrage would allow women to better ensure the safety and welfare of their own children and the children of England.

In addition to special knowledge of children, Fawcett further argued that women’s other domestic responsibilities had taught them valuable skills that would aid them in voting. From managing household finances, women had gained practical knowledge about economics and

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At the beginning of the twentieth century, as the national government became more involved in the fields of social welfare and reform, it also increasingly encroached on the domestic sphere. Hence, those who were most involved in the maintenance of the home should be able to contribute their unique knowledge. As can be illustrated by a poster entitled a “Suffragists Home” in which a suffragist has fallen asleep amidst a disorderly house, anti-suffragists claimed that suffrage would cause women to neglect their domestic duties. However, as Fawcett countered, “Those women who are not good for much domestically will most likely not be good for much politically….” In this way, Fawcett directly correlated skills women had gained from their domestic duties to those presumed to make an informed voter.

Furthermore, Fawcett reassured opponents of female suffrage that voting would not encourage women to abandon their domestic responsibilities, as those women who would be irresponsible in their homes would be the least motivated to vote.

By supporting women’s suffrage and even women’s participation in the professions, Fawcett did not want women to neglect their domestic duties or their families, nor did she diminish the importance of women’s domestic work, as later feminists would. In an 1891 article, Fawcett refuted the accusations leveled by anti-suffragists that women’s rights advocates depreciated women’s domestic duties and role as mother. As she pointed out, “From Mary Wollstonecraft…, the spokeswomen for women’s freedom have always held in the highest esteem the value and importance of women’s work in the home.” Furthermore, she urged women “to be on guard” lest participating in political life caused them to “recoil from the domestic repose of their homes, or feel they take no pleasure in the love of their children or

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69 Fawcett, “Home and Politics,” 421.
husbands,” and if they found this to be the case, she encouraged them to stop their political

Fawcett continued to explain that in her personal experience, participation in politics had not caused her to neglect her domestic duties, but actually to increase her appreciation of her home. In a different speech, she also cited the examples of other prominent well-educated women who participated in public life while maintaining an efficient household. To further her point, Fawcett estimated the very small amount of time that voting would cause women to be away from their homes, less than half-an hour a week. Based on this argument, Fawcett claimed, anti-suffragists might as well claim that women should not go for a walk or attend church, lest it would take them away from their domestic duties. Nevertheless, suffragists always emphasized that women would not be forced to vote; those who believed that voting would cause them to neglect their duties would not be encouraged by Fawcett to vote.

Opponents of women’s suffrage sought to convince the public that women’s suffrage would pose a severe threat to domestic tranquility by causing husbands and wives to fight over politics. In order to preserve domestic harmony, so the argument proceeded, women must not be able to hold political views opposed to their husbands’. Fawcett believed, however, that “if they [wives] had votes there would be more domestic harmony on political subjects than there now is; for then marriages would not so frequently take place between those who hold diametrically opposite political views.” Fawcett contended that women could, even without the suffrage, hold political opinions different from their husbands, which according to the anti-suffragist argument, would lead to domestic strife. It was unrealistic to expect that husbands did not discuss politics with their wives.

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73 Ibid.
74 Ibid, 104.
In desiring greater educational and professional avenues for women, as well as the vote, Fawcett did not desire to “unsex” women, as opponents of increasing women’s rights claimed. Opponents of women’s suffrage feared that voting would inevitably sully women’s femininity. Anti-suffragists frequently depicted women who desired the franchise as shrieking, hysterical, spinsters, or hags. Fawcett, however, did not believe that enfranchisement would make women become less nurturing, gentle, sentimental, or less feminine in any way. She relied on the experience of women in higher education to assuage fears of the dangers women’s expanded roles posed to femininity. She even argued that women’s feminine qualities enabled them to perform certain aspects of their professions with more compassion and gentleness than men. For example, she claimed, “It is not too much to say that a woman can never hope to be a good doctor unless she is truly and really a womanly woman. And much the same thing may be said with regards to fields of activity not yet open to women,” including political activity. As Fawcett pointed out, many people once feared that involving women in the political process as canvassers would cause them to behave and dress in a more masculine manner. However, she explained that the political process had not thus far attracted masculine women. Rather, election agents, “prefer the distinctly womanly woman; in looks, dress, and manners she must be a woman to her finger-tips.” Most suffragists made sure to dress in a feminine manner to counter claims of masculinity by anti-suffragists. Fawcett also utilized the example of Queen Victoria, who actually opposed women’s suffrage, as a woman engaged in political affairs who remained extremely feminine and faithful to her domestic duties. In spite of spending her entire life

involved with politics, “no woman, as wife, mother, or friend, has ever shown herself more
entirely womanly in her sympathy, faithfulness, and tenderness.”

Opponents of women’s suffrage asserted that women’s natural destiny consisted only of
functioning as wives and mothers. Fawcett did not agree with this extremely limited view of
women’s social function and in a letter to the editor of the *Times*, she responded to a lecture on
“Women’s True Function” with the argument that women would pursue activities best suited to
their natural gifts. Thus, if anti-suffragists were correct, the vast majority of women would
naturally continue as good wives and mothers, whether they were enfranchised or not. Fawcett
explained that if nature had invested women with certain qualities, “All the Acts of Parliament
that ever have been passed or even can be passed cannot shake the rock upon which the
institutions of Nature are founded.” Moreover, Fawcett actually encouraged women to behave
in a traditionally feminine manner. In the 1890s, she called upon future enfranchised women not
to, “give up one jot or title of your womanliness, your love for children, your care for the sick,
your gentleness, your self-control, your obedience to conscience and duty, for all these things are
terribly wanting in politics.” In this manner, Fawcett, as will be further demonstrated below,
sought to utilize traditionally feminine qualities as reasons for granting women’s suffrage.

Fawcett was highly critical of those who claimed that women’s qualities made them
incapable of voting. Critics often pointed out that certain women, whom they claimed
represented the majority, were emotionally unfit to exercise the franchise. Men supposedly
possessed common sense and reasoned judgment, while women were too excitable and unstable
to exercise the franchise. In response to this argument, Fawcett explained that this distinction did

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78 Fawcett, “Home and Politics,” 422.
80 Fawcett, “Home and Politics,” 422.
81 Ibid, 419.
not apply to all men and women and that there were plenty of women who possessed the
capacity for rational decision-making.\textsuperscript{82} Nevertheless, in a speech she made at a women’s
college, Fawcett agreed with some anti-suffragists that women could be more trivial-minded and
pettier than their male counterparts; however, she blamed this on the few outlets allowed for their
intelligence in contemporary society and hoped that “national responsibility” would ennoble
them.\textsuperscript{83} She further made a distinction between truly feminine qualities and the false ones, which
were unnaturally cultivated and responsible for the frivolous nature of some women’s minds. “Is
there anything truly feminine in fainting fits,” she asks, “or in screaming at a mouse or at a black
beetle?”\textsuperscript{84} Fawcett explained that men in order for them to prove their superiority encouraged
such traits in women. She hoped that suffrage would in fact eliminate remaining vestiges of
artificial weakness that women practice under the misguided notion that it constituted feminine
behavior. As she stated, “The world would wag on if this kind of womanliness disappeared
altogether; what we cannot afford to lose is the true womanliness, mercy, pity, peace, purity, and
love…,” and she believed that women’s suffrage would strengthen this kind of true
womanliness.

In accordance with separate spheres ideology, Fawcett also agreed with opponents of
women’s suffrage that women naturally possessed greater moral purity. Unlike the opponents,
however, she did not believe that contact with the political life of the nation would degrade
women’s morality. On the contrary, Fawcett argued that women’s increased participation in
politics would raise the level of morality in politics.\textsuperscript{85} Fawcett, like most of the suffragists,
believed that voting would help to ensure that issues that were of interest to women would be

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{82} Fawcett, “The Poet-Laureate on Woman Suffrage,” \textit{Times} (London), 8 Jan. 1909, 8.
\item \textsuperscript{83} Fawcett, “Women’s Suffrage,” 5.
\item \textsuperscript{84} Fawcett, “Home and Politics,” 423.
\item \textsuperscript{85} Ibid, 422.
\end{itemize}
addressed by Parliament. In particular, Fawcett believed that Parliament would not adequately address issues of the white slave trade, the prostitution of minors, or sexual abuse of women until women were allowed to vote. As with other “true womanly” characteristics, Fawcett believed that women’s suffrage would strengthen women’s innate moral qualities and allow her to better use them to the benefit of the nation.

During the late 1890s when there was a Conservative government, Fawcett sought to secure its help for a women’s suffrage bill by framing the women’s suffrage question in a manner that would appeal to Conservatives. As a result, she claimed that women’s suffrage would help to preserve the traditional social order, rather than challenge it. In one speech, she stated, “What new forces were they [the Conservatives] prepared to bring against the anarchy, socialism, and revolution which were arrayed against them? The granting of women’s suffrage would be against the disintegrating power of the other side, as women were everywhere anti-revolutionary forces.” Rather than pushing a radical agenda to challenge the gender status quo, Fawcett claimed that women would seek to preserve traditional order. Elsewhere, Fawcett wrote that many people, “recognizing women’s intrinsic leanings towards morality and order, look upon their more active participation in public affairs, and especially their admission to the Parliamentary suffrage, as a valuable reinforcement of the party of order against the attacks of the anarchists.” Though the Conservatives’ failure to strongly promote women’s suffrage, combined with her political pragmatism, prevented her from forging a strong alliance with the Conservative party, her assertions that women’s suffrage would serve as a bulwark in support of traditional moral and family values remained a prominent theme.

86 Ibid, 139.
87 Fawcett, “Emancipation of Women,” 258.
While Fawcett may have believed that once a limited number of women (only single women and widows, for example) achieved the franchise they would provide a wedge for more women to achieve the franchise, she consistently advocated for the extension of suffrage to women on the same terms as men, that is as property owners. In several speeches, she forthrightly denied her desire for universal suffrage.\(^88\) In claiming that women ratepayers ought to be enfranchised, she relied on a traditionally Conservative argument for household suffrage. Household suffrage, voting restricted by property qualifications, would be strengthened by the inclusion of female householders.\(^89\) This would serve to counter the effects of the extension of the franchise in 1867 and 1884 to include many working-class voters (approximately two-thirds of all men possessed the franchise after 1884). Fawcett hoped to appeal to conservative sentiment by arguing that working-class men, who were largely ignorant and uneducated before they received the franchise, could vote, but even the most educated and qualified women could not. As Fawcett plaintively wrote, “when it comes to electing a member of Parliament for the place where she [an esteemed well-educated woman] lives, she is in a lower political position than any drunken, illiterate ne’er do well man who is not fit to black her boots.”\(^90\)

In response to anti-suffragist attacks, Fawcett emphasized that women’s suffrage would not be a threat to women’s traditional societal roles. As a pragmatic leader of a large national organization, Fawcett, according to some scholars, attempted to appeal to the broadest range of opinion and so her speeches and writings may be more conservative than her actual beliefs. Barbara Caine claims much of Fawcett’s emphasis on womanliness and sexual difference

\(^88\) Millicent Garrett Fawcett, “Extracts from Various Articles and Speeches on Women’s Suffrage” (London: National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies, 1909), 6.
\(^89\) Fawcett, “A Reply,” 437.
\(^90\) Fawcett, “Extracts,” 5.
occurred in the 1890s after opposition to women’s suffrage became more organized. But this too, provides a useful insight into the attitude of the British public towards women’s suffrage in the early-twentieth century. Fawcett had to reassure the British public that women’s suffrage would not threaten women’s motherhood, domestic responsibilities, femininity, or turn women into men, because very few women, much less men, would support suffrage if they believed that it would eliminate the idea of separate spheres. Even if Fawcett did modify her rhetoric, she fundamentally believed in and promoted separate spheres ideology. She believed that women’s role as mothers, and associated characteristics of nurturing and compassion, were important and beneficial for society, and also necessitated largely different societal roles for the genders. Fawcett nevertheless believed that women needed suffrage so that Parliament could address issues of importance to women; accepting the emphasis on gender difference, male voters could not adequately address women’s concerns. In this manner, she believed that separate spheres ideology could be modified so as to accommodate the idea of women’s suffrage. As will be demonstrated in the next chapter, however, the idea that separate spheres ideology and women’s suffrage could coexist was the main difference between suffragists and anti-suffragists; both groups failed to support the idea of gender equality.

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91 Caine, *Victorian Feminism*, 222.
Chapter 3
Mrs. Humphry Ward: Rights not Votes

When our victory for Women’s Suffrage was celebrated in 1918, I had been in the collar as a speaker on its behalf for fifty years, and I own that one of my first thoughts was, ‘Then I shall never have to make another Suffrage speech!’ I could not have kept it up as long as I did if it had not been for the constant fuel my flames received from the Anti-Suffragists, and especially from the quite priceless Anti-Suffrage Review.92

– Millicent Garrett Fawcett

As this quote by Millicent Garrett Fawcett illustrates, suffragists and anti-suffragists had a symbiotic relationship. Anti-suffrage arguments and taunts motivated suffragists to promote their cause with greater zeal and thus ensured more publicity for the issue of women’s right to vote. Although organized anti-suffragism only began in 1908 with the formation of the National League Opposed to Women’s Suffrage, led by Mrs. Humphry Ward, and its newspaper the Anti-Suffrage Review, there had been vocal opponents of women’s suffrage from the first debate in the House of Commons in 1867, when J.S. Mill attempted to include women in the bill to expand the suffrage. Outcries against women’s suffrage tended to be highly correlated with suffrage publicity. When suffragists received more publicity than usual, anti-suffragists wrote more articles and gave more speeches. By 1900, suffragists’ arguments largely seemed more coherent, rational, better reasoned, and composed than anti-suffrage arguments because anti-suffragists had always relied on emotional appeals – the belief that there was just something wrong with women voting - to convey their points.

Although both male and female anti-suffragists relied heavily on emotional appeals to the public about women’s inherent unfitness for the franchise, male anti-suffragists tended to be more misogynistic than female anti-suffragists. For example, male anti-suffragists were more

likely than female anti-suffragists to claim that women were too stupid or incompetent to vote, emphasizing female inferiority. Male anti-suffragists frequently sought to scare the general public about the establishment of “petticoat government” and the possibility that women’s suffrage would lead to women’s domination of men. For example, one leaflet distributed by the Anti-Suffrage Campaign warned that it was neither just nor egalitarian for women to vote. “It is the subjugation of men to women, turning the order of nature upside down. It is contrary to commonsense, to experience, and to history.”\(^{93}\) According to male anti-suffragists, the “natural order” prescribed that men govern women. In English politics, this supposedly necessitated that only men vote. However, were women to possess the franchise, female voters would outnumber male voters, which would supposedly mean that women would govern men.

Female anti-suffragists, like male anti-suffragists, emphasized that a national women’s franchise would violate or undermine prescribed gender roles. Relying heavily on separate spheres ideology, they tended to stress the importance of women’s domestic roles and feminine qualities; they claimed that if women were to become involved in the turmoil of national politics, they would do a great disservice to themselves and the nation by endangering their femininity. Though all female anti-suffragists relied consciously or unconsciously on separate spheres ideology, they differed in the degree to which they believed women should remain in the home. Some female anti-suffragists held very narrow beliefs on women’s role in society. Many female anti-suffragists, however, especially after 1900, claimed to support women’s involvement in philanthropic organizations and even the local government franchise; they regarded these activities as extensions of women’s domestic roles and therefore in harmony with women’s “natural” qualities of nurturing and caring for children and the sick. In fact, many female anti-

suffragists believed in some of the same women’s causes as Millicent Fawcett did, such as the expansion of higher education for women. But, whereas Fawcett envisioned women’s suffrage as an acceptable expansion of women’s role in society, female anti-suffragists believed that women’s suffrage was a direct challenge to the idea of separate spheres. In their view, men and women were different, so giving women the vote would either turn women into men or produce a highly ignorant electorate.

Like many of the suffragists, Mrs. Humphry Ward had a successful career, worked as a political campaigner, wanted women to engage in philanthropic activity and vote in local government elections. But, she did not want women to possess the national franchise. In this way, Ward perfectly embodied the contradictions of the anti-suffrage movement and the opinions of much of British society. By examining Ward’s reasons for opposing suffrage, this chapter will demonstrate the similar themes and importance of separate spheres ideology in Ward’s and Fawcett’s arguments and conclude that the two opponents shared a similar view of women’s societal role.

Mrs. Humphry Ward was born Mary Augusta Arnold in 1851, the first child of Julia and Thomas Arnold, who was the eldest son of the famous headmaster of Rugby, Thomas Arnold, and the brother of Matthew Arnold, Professor of Poetry at Oxford and well-known Victorian man of letters. Mary’s family was highly patriarchal, with the males in her family attempting to live up to the example of her grandfather Thomas.94 When Mary was only four years old, her father, much to the distress of her mother, converted to Catholicism. Thomas and Julia originally decided that Thomas would raise the male Arnold children Catholic and Julia would raise Mary (and any later female children) Anglican. However, in 1856, Julia Arnold, along with Mary’s

three brothers, left to join her husband and his extended family in Ireland and left Mary, who at this point was the couple’s only daughter, with an aunt and grandmother; Mary was effectively orphaned for the next ten years. Rarely visited or in communication with her parents or siblings, Mary attended boarding schools, stayed in various relatives’ houses during vacations, and had a lonely childhood. While her younger brother William, the family favorite, attended a prominent prep school, Mary was sent to a boarding school on reduced fees where she felt humiliated because of her lack of money. In a family where Mary’s existence was barely acknowledged, her brothers were pampered simply because they were boys. Though her younger sisters were allowed to remain at home with the family, Mary did not reside with her parents until her father returned to Protestantism and Oxford in 1866.

While at boarding school, Mary developed her literary interests and began composing stories at the age of thirteen. Between 1867 and 1871 while living in Oxford, Mary composed novels and attempted, with little success, to have them published in magazines. But, by 1869, Mary’s parents had resolved that she should marry. They worried that Mary lacked “natural” womanly instincts and domestic skills; Sutherland asserts in his biography of Ward that she never possessed the typical Victorian reverence for home or regarded herself as a domestic angel. Consequently, the Arnolds bought her new clothes and sent her to parties, which increasingly came to occupy all of her time. In 1872, their efforts culminated in Mary’s marriage to Thomas Humphry Ward, a fellow at an Oxford College. Humphry, as he was usually called, actually helped to develop his wife’s intellect and proved supportive of her literary endeavors. As Sutherland explains, for the rest of Mary’s life she would be known publicly as Mrs. Humphry Ward. Though even in her own time, this earned her mockery, it expressed her intense

95 Ibid, 12.
96 Ibid, 40.
loyalty to her husband and she “proclaimed herself utterly and voluntarily her husband’s property.” In the 1870s, Ward had three children - Dorothy, a future anti-suffragist, Arnold, a future MP, and Janet. In 1881, the Wards moved to London and Mary’s first book, *Millie and Olly*, was published. However, it was her second book, *Robert Elsmere* (1888), that launched Ward’s career. Subsequent works, such as *The History of David Grieve* (1892), *Marcella* (1894), *Sir George Tressaday* (1896), *Helbeck of Bannisdale* (1898), *Eleanor* (1900) and *Lady Rose’s Daughter* (1903), made Ward one of the most popular British novelists of her time, both in England and America. She also wrote two anti-suffrage novels, *Delia Blanchflower* and *The Testing of Diana Mallory*.

As already implied, Mary Arnold received a rather inadequate education at her boarding schools. Like many young girls at this time, Mary’s education consisted primarily in preparing her for marriage. Later in her life, Mary bitterly reflected on the poor quality of education she received stating, “As far as intellectual training was concerned, my nine years from seven to seventeen were practically wasted. I learned nothing thoroughly or accurately,” As a result, Mary Arnold became committed to improving the education of girls. She advocated better intellectual training for women in boarding schools as well as increasing their access to higher education. In fact, until her campaign against women’s suffrage somewhat tarnished her reputation, young educated women greatly admired Ward. Ward also devoted much of her time to philanthropic work among the poor. She believed in the importance of physical activity for girls, as well as boys. At the time, physical activity for girls was considered a novel idea. One of the causes she devoted much of her time to was advocating the construction of play centers and parks for children in working-class neighborhoods. In one of her articles she laid out her beliefs

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97 Ibid, 59.
on the proper roles for women in society: “Let us insist on our will and right to educate children, to have a say in reforming the dwellings of the poor, in the moral and physical purification of our towns, in the brightening of our country life, in the national care of the sick and insane, and upon equal opportunities with men in the realms of science and art.” In advocating these options for women, Ward adopted a position that was nearly identical to that of many suffragists.

Given Ward’s own experience, her commitment to higher education for women, and belief in the importance of female philanthropic work, it seems perplexing to turn now towards her career as an anti-suffragist. How could a woman who supported advancing women’s position to such an extent oppose women’s suffrage? Mrs. Humphry Ward had always been a committed anti-suffragist. As early as 1889, Mrs. Humphry Ward’s name appears, along with those of many other well-known women, in An Appeal Against Female Suffrage. But, by 1908 when Ward took to speaking on behalf of and helping to organize the Women’s Anti-Suffrage League, her views on suffrage were an oddity among prominent educated women. Ward introduced the Women’s Anti-Suffrage League’s manifesto at the league’s first meeting, and she was mostly responsible for organizing the league, though Lady Jersey was elected its president. Though the anti-suffragists had remained unorganized for forty years, the large numbers of MPs supporting women’s suffrage in 1908, as well as the attention the suffragettes were receiving, seemed to necessitate more organized and prominent anti-suffrage activity. Ward edited and contributed articles to the Anti-Suffrage Review and could also be relied on to submit propaganda to other outlets. In 1909, Ward agreed to a debate with Fawcett over the merits of women’s suffrage, an action which she subsequently regretted due to the enthusiasm demonstrated for Fawcett’s cause, rather than her own. In March of that same year, Ward organized an Anti-

100 Sutherland, Mrs. Humphry Ward, 299.
Suffrage Rally at Queen’s Hall and collected 250,000 signatures for her cause. Because of low membership, the Women’s National Anti-Suffrage League joined with the Men’s League for Opposing Women’s Suffrage in 1910; thereafter, the League came increasingly to be dominated by men.\textsuperscript{101} The outbreak of World War I and the truce over women’s suffrage provided Ward with some rest. However, she continued to respond to the increasing suffragist agitation and made a last effort to rally the forces of anti-Suffrage in public opinion and the House of Lords in 1918. But, support for women’s suffrage was too great in the House of Commons and she was forced to accept defeat in 1918. She died in 1920.\textsuperscript{102}

As already mentioned, though the anti-suffragists may have been lacking in rational reasons for opposing women’s suffrage, they possessed a highly emotive case, and Mrs. Ward both believed in these reasons for opposing women’s suffrage and expressed them skillfully. Moreover, the violence and antics of the WSPU and the Pankhursts did much to drive support over to the anti-suffragists. What the British public, female anti-suffragists, and Mrs. Ward feared most about suffrage was the threat, irrational yet emotive, that suffrage would make women less feminine. Once granted suffrage, women would neglect their homes, their children, their husbands. Mrs. Ward, and all the many people who agreed with her, believed that the suffrage cause was already making women neglect their duties and behave too aggressively. In contrast, they thought philanthropic work, advanced education, and the municipal franchise, all of which Ward supported, did not threaten women’s feminine qualities and could be seen as an expansion of the domestic sphere. In supporting these causes, Ward’s vision of proper womanhood and women’s role in society did not differ substantially from many suffragists’

\textsuperscript{101} For more information on the two anti-suffrage organizations, please see Brian Harrison, \textit{Separate Spheres: The Opposition to Women’s Suffrage in Britain} (London: Croom Helm, 1978), 111-143. For further information on Mrs. Ward’s anti-suffrage activities, see Sutherland, \textit{Mrs. Humphry Ward}, 301-9.
\textsuperscript{102} For further information on the end of Ward’s life, see Sutherland, \textit{Mrs. Humphry Ward}, 350-77.
views, including those of Fawcett. Ward, unlike Fawcett, however, believed that women’s suffrage would fundamentally alter gender roles, which she believed to be complementary, and threaten the tranquility of the family and women’s very femininity. Accepting separate spheres ideology, Ward believed that men and women were inherently different and that these differences were responsible for the different social roles, which even if modified by access to higher education and some professions, men and women must perform.

In 1910, Octavia Hill, another prominent female philanthropist opposed to women’s suffrage, wrote to the Editor of the *Times* (London), “I believe that men and women help one another because they are different, have different gifts and different spheres – one is the complement of the other.”103 Two years earlier, Mrs. Humphry Ward stated the same argument more succinctly; “There is, and always will be, a natural division between the spheres of men and women.”104 Such anti-suffragists as Hill and Ward would not claim that men’s exclusive right to the national franchise rested on their superiority. Rather, they believed that men and women performed different, though equally important, functions in society. This belief was stated in the Anti-Suffrage League’s Manifesto: “Because the spheres of men and women, owing to natural causes, are essentially different, and therefore their share in the management of the state should be different.”105 Ward directly confronted the suffragist argument that women should possess the franchise precisely because men and women are different. She claimed that the fallacy in this logic was that votes were not “necessary to the interests of women;” women’s civic responsibilities did not require them to have the national franchise.106 Though women had

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a civic duty to care for the sick, the elderly, and children in charitable organizations, this was only an extension of their primary sphere - the home. Men and women necessarily did not have equal rights, though they possessed equal worth. While the danger Ward believed women’s suffrage posed for males’ rights will be discussed later, she also believed that women’s suffrage would harm women. In a defense of the anti-suffragist position in the *Educational Review*, Ward wrote, “In following the suffragists,” women “are endangering their true power and their true sphere.”107 Women did not belong in national politics; it was not their sphere. Ward believed that “difference not inferiority” accounted for why women ought not to possess the national franchise.108 According to Ward, the welfare of the nation, as well as of humanity, depended “not on men and women doing precisely the same things, but on the full development of the functions of each.”109

One of the most effective arguments Ward derived from separate spheres ideology was the physical force argument. Biological differences, especially women’s (on average) inferior physical strength to men, were the most fundamental differences between the genders and the most irrefutable. In England and America at this time, there was considerable support, including among feminists, for limiting the number of hours and conditions under which women could labor due to their weaker physical frames and role as the bearers of the nations’ future generations. Nobody would have considered the absurd notion that women could serve in the military. As an article in the *Times* (London) announcing the formation of the Women’s Anti-Suffrage League declared, “women might be partners in law-making, but could not be partners in

any law-enforcing.” In spite of England’s civilized state and the lack of violence in the voting process, Ward maintained that the modern political state nevertheless was based on physical force. Anti-suffragists stressed that the enforcement of laws ultimately rested on the threat of physical force, used by the police or military for example. Men had created England’s political system and men therefore the exclusive right to maintain it. Ward made much of the argument that with women’s suffrage women could vote for war yet never face the danger of fighting in one. As she explained, “women have no right to claim full political power in a state where they can never themselves take the full responsibility of their actions, because they can never be called upon finally to enforce them.” Though suffragists asserted that those who voted for war frequently, because of age or class, did not actually have to fight the wars, Ward emphasized the fundamental difference of gender. She, along with most people, considered gender differences as producing greater discrepancies in thought than class differences. Hence, Parliamentarians, pressured by their desire for re-election in districts where there would be more female than male voters--women outnumbered men in the population--would vote for war to please their female constituents. She worried that women voters would launch the nation into wars, which women would never have to fight in. Why women exclusively would ever desire to send their husbands, sons, and brothers to war was besides Ward’s point. For her, the theoretical idea that women could vote for war when they did not bear the direct physical burden of fighting was enough to justify excluding them from the franchise. As she concluded in one of her articles, “the balance of political power is on the same side as the balance of physical force.”

112 Ibid.
113 Ward, “Mr. Asquith’s Rebel Angels;” 8.
Anti-suffragists also contended that much of national politics consisted of such issues as the economy and the Empire, which women did not know anything about. Even Millicent Fawcett agreed that women as a whole were ignorant of national political affairs. However, whereas Fawcett saw the franchise as elevating women’s intellect and believed that a combination of improved education and the actual practice of voting would enable women to become more knowledgeable, Ward and the anti-suffragists believed that such a state of affairs would be neither possible nor desirable. In the case of diplomacy, for example, Ward stated, “this skill depends upon a trained knowledge of the world and its affairs, which only men can get. It is their natural business to get it.”\(^{114}\) While some women might be highly intelligent and knowledgeable of national affairs, the vast majority of women were not and could never become so. As an article in the *Times* (London) reporting on the opinions of those who formed the Women’s Anti-Suffrage League stated, “The association will represent those who believe that, though Mrs. Fawcett is personally well-fitted to have a vote, or many votes, that is a poor reason for admitting into the franchise two or three millions of women who know nothing whatever of politics, or parties, or the nation, or the Empire.”\(^{115}\) Moreover, as a result of the prevailing notion of the complementary spheres of men and women discussed earlier, Ward and the anti-suffragists did not believe it was desirable for women to learn about such men’s business as finance and Empire. She believed it would be harmful to the economic and general health of the nation to bring “in the votes and the political influence of those who have never had any guiding or responsible share in commerce and finance.”\(^{116}\) Following the logic of separate spheres ideology, Ward believed that certain knowledge, essentially those that were the concern of national government, naturally belonged to men because of their gender. Ward implored her

\(^{115}\) “Woman and Suffrage,” 3.  
fellow women, “in the name of common sense, leave to men the franchise which determines war and peace, diplomacy and finance, and those vast industrial affairs which are exclusively masculine.”117 Women should have no concern with national political issues.

Like Millicent Fawcett, Mary Ward believed that motherhood was one of women’s most important functions, both personally fulfilling and a patriotic service to maintain the British race. Both suffragists and anti-suffragists alike manipulated the late-nineteenth century glorification of motherhood to support their arguments. Unlike Fawcett and the suffragists, however, Ward believed that women’s suffrage would damage, rather than aid, women’s role as mother. A reporter for the Times (London), writing on a speech Ward gave, asserted that Ward “thought it true to say that the opposition to woman suffrage turned upon the fundamental fact of maternity.”118 In addition to believing that women’s activity in politics would render them less nurturing and less feminine, an issue which will be discussed later, Ward believed that involvement in politics would be excessively time consuming. Either women’s domestic duties or political involvement would necessarily suffer. Giving women the benefit of assuming that they would not neglect their children, Ward claimed, “the home, if properly attended to, will damage the vote.”119 Constrained by their domestic duties, women would not possess sufficient time to become politically educated and the electorate would become more ignorant as a result. Men, by contrast, were not prevented from acquiring political knowledge “by the cares of the home and family.”120 Ward explained that this was especially true of the working-class woman. “The wife of the working-man has the sole care of the children and the home, and, in the majority of cases, is overburdened by it: her thoughts do not travel beyond the home circle...she

117 Ibid, 256.
has, indeed, neither interest nor time for even rudimentary politics." 121 In an article in the Times (London), Ward elaborated on this theme. She asked if suffragists really proposed to add to the responsibilities of working-class women, already overburdened with domestic and work duties. She asked the suffragists, “Are you going to propose that some of them [working mothers’ few hours at home] should be spent in reading newspapers and going to meetings?” 122 However, as Ward and the anti-suffragists emphasized, the fact that women’s maternal duties rendered it undesirable for them to participate in national political activity did not make women inferior human beings or even inferior political citizens as compared to men. “Women on whom the child-bearing and child-rearing of the world rest” contributed their civic duty by raising future generations. 123 Neither suffragists bent on expanding women’s role in society, nor male anti-suffragists desiring to prove women’s manifest inferiority to exercise the franchise, ought to disregard women’s important role as mother.

In addition to warning women and the British public that women’s suffrage might cause women to neglect their motherly duties, Ward argued that the danger caused by ignorant women voting on issues of national security would place the nation’s children in danger. In this manner, she attempted to counter the suffragist claim that women’s suffrage, by giving the vote to those most knowledgeable about children’s issues, would benefit children. As in the case of motherhood, both suffragists and anti-suffragists sought to appropriate the value separate spheres ideology placed on women’s traditional roles for their own cause. In one article Ward appealed directly to mothers, asking them if they “wish to embarrass the diplomacy which protects them and their children by adding to the ignorance-vote.” 124 Furthermore, Ward argued that

121 Ibid.
122 Ward, “Mr. Asquith’s Rebel Angels,” 8.
Parliament already paid sufficient deference to women’s opinions on matters concerning children. As she wrote, “Not a single bill is now passed bearing on the special interest of women and children, but women are anxiously consulted.”¹²⁵ She claimed that women were instrumental in framing the Midwives Act, the Children’s bill, as well as other important legislation and that women could serve on royal commissions. To further counter suffrage claims about the alleged benefit women’s suffrage would provide for children, Ward also claimed that women under the current political system had outlets, appropriate to their societal role, for improving children’s conditions which they were not utilizing to fullest potential.

As will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, Ward argued that much reform legislation dealing with children was a concern of local government, for which women had the franchise but failed to exercise it in large numbers. Moreover, Ward expressed outrage that intelligent women were wasting their time and skills on women’s suffrage and “this barren agitation for equal rights with men” while “we cannot get women enough to do the work which urgently wants doing” for children’s charities.¹²⁶ In her anti-suffrage novel Delia Blanchflower, Ward contrasted the male protagonist’s similar problem of finding qualified women to help with a school for crippled children with two women’s obsession with suffrage.¹²⁷ In this manner, Ward suggested that if suffragists truly wanted to express their womanly concern for the care of the nation’s children, they ought to become involved in philanthropic work, or even encourage other women to exercise their local government franchise, rather than focusing all of their energy on the national suffrage.

In Delia Blanchflower, Ward described the suffragists as “rebelling against motherhood, and life-long marriage; clamouring for easy divorce, and denouncing their own fathers, brothers,

¹²⁵ Ward, ‘Women’s Anti-Suffrage Movement,” 260.
¹²⁶ Ibid, 261.
and husbands, as either tyrants or fools."\(^{128}\) In fact Delia, a young woman becoming increasingly obsessed with militant suffragism is wild, unruly, and even her own father cannot control her. (The last name Blanchflower, conveying the idea of female modesty, is ironic). Her obsession with suffrage interferes with her relationship with her father, causing him great pain at the end of his life, and hampers her fulfillment of her domestic responsibilities. Ward did not envision that once these obsessive suffragists, such as the followers of the Pankhursts, or even those who inclined towards the moderate Fawcett, achieved the franchise they would return to responsibly carrying out their domestic duties and seek harmony in their domestic relationships. On the contrary, Ward feared that women’s suffrage would cause irreversible rifts in family relationships between men and women. As Ward explained, “giving the vote to wives of voters tends to the introduction of political differences into domestic life.”\(^{129}\) Either wives would vote exactly as their husbands directed them to, thereby providing these men with a double vote, or they would vote differently from their husbands and introduce domestic strife. Ward believed that women, out of loyalty to their husbands, owed them deference, including in their opinions. A bad wife would disregard her husband’s opinion and vote as she pleased; this would lead to arguments and disrupt the tranquility of the home. As Ward contended, “We are mothers, wives, and sisters of men, and we know that our interests are bound up with the best interests of men,” who could be trusted to valiantly represent the interests of women.\(^{130}\) The path favored by the suffragists, by contrast, would only lead to sex warfare; the anti-suffragists would preserve the interdependency of the sexes.

Unlike many male anti-suffragists, especially those writing prior to 1900, Ward did not attempt to claim that women’s domain consisted exclusively of the home. In this regard, her

\(^{128}\) Ibid, 4.
\(^{129}\) Ward, “Women’s Anti-Suffrage Movement,” 258.
\(^{130}\) Ibid, 259.
opinions were much closer to those of the suffragists. Ward’s own life experiences as a successful novelist and political campaigner (against women’s suffrage) demonstrates that she believed that women had a function in public life. As Ward conceded, “The time has gone by, if it ever existed, when a woman can be said to have no interest beyond her home. On the contrary, the public life of the modern state cannot do without women.” What then of separate spheres? As already mentioned, women’s philanthropic work drew on their supposedly natural feminine qualities, such as nurturing, and thus did not harm the basic idea of separate spheres. A woman’s sphere could be extended beyond her immediate home so long as her involvement in the public sphere did not threaten her femininity or that which made her different from men. It was not the mere fact of leaving the house that Ward believed would “unsex” women; it was the political activity, something she believed to be inherently masculine, that would threaten women’s femininity.

One leaflet distributed by the Women’s Anti-Suffrage League quoted Queen Victoria as saying, “God created men and women different – then let them remain each in their own position…Women would become the most hateful, heartless, and disgusting of human beings were she allowed to unsex herself.” Queen Victoria, male and female anti-suffragists, and Mary Ward all believed that women’s suffrage by its very nature would “unsex” women, making them more masculine. Though little actual violence accompanied the voting process by the end of the nineteenth century, Ward nevertheless maintained that the “rough training of the public-house and its talk, of the village caucus and convention” provided men with the political schooling, which women did not have access to, necessary for voting. Should women engage

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in this masculine activity or the masculine political process in general, they would become more aggressive and wholly unattractive creatures.

Most people at this time believed that there were inherent emotional differences, based on biological differences, between the sexes as well. Even if these perceived differences could have been shown to be the result of the social constructions of gender norms, most people at this time would nevertheless maintain the desirability of women behaving in a traditional feminine manner. Hence, women were supposed to be submissive, frail, delicate, and agreeable. Women were also believed to be more emotional than men, more susceptible to influence, and less capable of rational thought. The threat to the political process posed by women voting was thus clear. As expressed in the Appeal Against Female Suffrage that Ward signed in 1889, if women’s “quickness of feeling could be immediately and directly translated into public action, in matters of vast and complicated political import, the risks of politics would be enormously increased.”

Ward and the anti-suffragists believed that women’s suffrage would either threaten the integrity of the political process, or the political process would blunt women’s femininity. As one of the characters in Ward’s Delia Blanchflower states, “None of the womanly women want it [suffrage].” As this quotation indicates many anti-suffragists, including Ward, viewed the suffragists as screeching banshees who had already eliminated their feminine qualities by becoming unnaturally involved in the political process; this phenomenon, they assumed, would only become more widespread if all women were to become involved in the political process by voting. The “Appeal Against Female Suffrage” explained that women naturally possessed such qualities as sympathy and disinterestedness and these qualities “might be seriously impaired by

135 Ward, Delia Blanchflower, 49.
their admission to the turmoil of active political life.” Anti-suffragists stressed that women naturally possessed more compassion, empathy, nurturing, and passion, than men. In their own sphere, such traits made them more capable than men. For example, feminine characteristics like nurturing were especially useful for raising children. In conducting charitable work, such traits as empathy and compassion ensured that women were much better-suited to the work than men. Outside of their sphere, however, these feminine traits were ill-suited to the caprices and turmoil of politics. Upon entering politics, women must either lose these feminine qualities, which would be tragic for domestic life and charitable organizations, or harm the political process with their feminine traits.

Like the suffragists, Ward and other anti-suffragists claimed that women possessed superior moral virtues than men. Ward, however, warned that the admission of women into the franchise would diminish women’s natural virtue, rather than raise the general moral standards of politics. Politics, inherently masculine and derived ultimately from physical force, would contaminate women and blunt their innocence. Women’s superior morality, after all, was derived from those essentially feminine traits--compassion, nurturing, empathy, which involvement in politics would sully. The “Appeal Against Female Suffrage” stated the anti-suffragist contention that the current political system, in which women influenced the opinions of their male relations, already increased the morality of politics. In addition, Ward, along with most other anti-suffragists feared that women’s suffrage would tend towards gender equality, which they interpreted as turning women into men. They assumed that if women were given equal political rights with men, women would soon attain the same moral (that is, immoral) standards as men.

137 Ibid.
The constitution of the Women’s National Anti-Suffrage League stated as one of its purposes, “To maintain the principle of the representation of women on Municipal and other bodies concerned with the domestic and social affairs of the community.” Whatever the same anti-suffragists might have argued prior to women receiving the local government franchise, by 1908 and the formation of the National Anti-Suffrage League, most anti-suffragist accepted it. In order to support women’s right to vote locally but not support the national franchise, Ward and other anti-suffragists had to point out the differences between the two franchises and rely on their rhetorical ability to convince the public of this dubious distinction. In much of her writing, Ward was careful to refer to the national franchise as the “Imperial Franchise,” thus, connecting the national franchise with the masculine idea of Empire and the physical force argument discussed previously. Ward and the anti-suffragists were also quick to point out that though women possessed the municipal franchise, they did not exercise this right in large numbers. However, as she asserted, it was the local government that primarily dealt with such “women’s issues” as related to the care of children and the sick. With this argument, she attacked suffragists who claimed that they desired the franchise to improve the condition of the nation’s children. Ward countered “a hundred things could have been done for children, if [female] voters [in local government] and organizers had so willed it.” In addition to using such data to bolster their claims that most women did not truly desire the franchise, Ward and other anti-suffragists also blamed the national suffrage movement and the obsession it inspired in its followers for poor local election turn out by women. Rather than devoting their time, energy, and skills, to this useless cause, as Ward claimed, suffragists ought to devote their talents to educating other

140 “Woman Suffrage,” 10.
women about the importance of the local government franchise. Whatever Ward and the other anti-suffragists tried to claim, the local government franchise was one of their biggest obstacles. Suffragists could point to women voting and assert that the process had not “unsexed” them, interfered with their domestic or motherly duties, or substantially altered gender roles.

There is some irony that a quotation from the leader of the suffrage movement, Millicent Fawcett best summarizes Mrs. Humphry Ward’s life. Fawcett stated in her autobiography,

There was no real sincerity, no conviction, in the stuff they talked on what they erroneously conceived to be the winning side. I make an exception of Mrs. Humphry Ward, for she was so constituted as to be able to believe at one and the same time that women were fundamentally incapable of taking a useful part in politics, but that she herself was an exception to the rule, for she took a deep interest in the whole political life of her country as it developed before her, and sought, both by speech and by writing, often with considerable effect, to influence its direction.  

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As Fawcett suggested, many female anti-suffragists opposed women’s suffrage because they simply believed it would never happen. In 1909 when Ward helped to form the Women’s Anti-Suffrage League, it still seemed possible that the anti-suffragists might win, at least in the foreseeable future.  

142 Of the anti-suffragists, Mary Ward possessed the rare combination of sincerely believing in her position and desiring to improve the condition of women in other facets of life. Drawing from the discourse of separate spheres ideology, Ward agreed with the suffragists that the well-being of the nation depended upon women’s role as mothers and that in many ways, women’s societal roles and feminine characteristics made her the equal of men. But where moderate suffragists, such as Fawcett, claimed that women’s differences from men, those special feminine qualities that tended to the nation’s children and tended towards the improvement of morality, were reasons for desiring women’s suffrage, Ward could not agree.

141 Fawcett, What I Remember, 123.
142 Sutherland, Mrs. Humphry Ward, 301.
Though moderate suffragists like Fawcett could appropriate separate spheres arguments as reasons to grant women’s suffrage, Ward argued that the essence of the ideology—women occupy the domestic sphere, men the public sphere—necessarily meant that women had no place in the public sphere of the national franchise. Ward believed that women’s suffrage would significantly alter gender roles. Because of the larger population of women than men, there were potentially more female voters than male in Great Britain. As a result, Ward and other anti-suffragists argued that women’s suffrage would make women as a class more powerful in government. Moreover, Mary Ward, a female anti-suffragist who in many ways sought to advance women’s condition, nevertheless believed that suffragists sought to overturn the natural order in which men ruled over women. Indeed, Ward did believe that in the home, as well as in the government of the nation, women owed deference to men. In this way, she did differ from those moderate suffragists like Millicent Fawcett, who sought to equalize gender relations in private and public, without diminishing the importance of marriage, the family, or national political institutions. Both Fawcett and Ward agreed that men and women were different and primarily operated in different spheres, but Fawcett had enough faith in both genders to believe that women could express different political opinions from their fathers and husbands without destroying these relationships or the interdependency of the genders. Unfortunately, much of British society shared Ward’s fear that once women achieved equal political rights with men, gender roles would necessarily change.
Chapter 4
Frances Power Cobbe and Violet Markham: On Women’s Duties, Women’s Citizenship, and Gender Differences

As discussed in Chapter 1, there are inherent problems with claiming that the suffragists advocated gender equality. Most accepted that gender differences ensured that men and women would perform largely different functions in society. Suffragists, however, tended to stress that women’s differences did not render them inferior to men. Many female anti-suffragists as well were loath to claim that women’s differences made them wholly inferior to men, other than in the realm of national politics. Rather than being anti-woman, such anti-suffragists claimed to be the true heirs of the “feminism” advocated by Mary Wollstonecraft. Based on her belief in a rational God, Wollstonecraft had claimed intellectual and spiritual equality for women, while nevertheless expecting women’s primary duties to be in the domestic sphere. Anti-suffragists, like many suffragists, accepted this argument. In the tradition of Wollstonecraft, anti-suffragists and suffragists sought to elevate women’s position in society by arguing that women needed better educations, or more legal rights, in order to become better mothers. Both suffragists and female anti-suffragists emphasized women’s feminine virtues as mothers and “angels in the home.” In the views of many suffragists and female anti-suffragists, women were the social equals of men in the domestic sphere. Yet, no anti-suffragist and few suffragists promoted gender equality, an idea that minimized the effects of biological differences and advocated similar societal roles for men and women. The anti-suffragists were hardly “anti-women;” instead, they sought to elevate the traditional image of women. Women might possess different duties in society, but these were not necessarily inferior to men’s.

As we have seen in Chapters 2 and 3, the language suffragists and anti-suffragists employed to promote their cause contained many similarities. Comparing Millicent Fawcett and Mrs. Humphrey Ward, the two leaders of the suffrage and the anti-suffrage movements, also reveals, with some important differences, their similar beliefs about the role of women in society. Mrs. Fawcett did not advocate any more than Mrs. Ward did that the majority of women ought to abandon their “natural” duties as wives and mothers. Both accepted that men and women are fundamentally different and have largely different societal roles to fulfill, as separate spheres ideology postulated. The two women differed, however, over whether the doctrine of separate societal roles could be expanded to include women’s right to vote in Parliamentary elections.

Millicent Fawcett and Mary Ward also shared a background in social reform movements, working towards improving women’s lives in a variety of ways. Both women, for example, emphasized the importance of increasing women’s access to higher education. As already discussed, favoring increased legal or social rights for women did not necessarily indicate a repudiation of separate spheres or women’s traditional roles. Before Fawcett began to devote all of her energies to the suffrage cause in the 1890s, she, like many other Victorian suffragists had been involved in other women-centered campaigns. Among her fellow women’s rights advocates was Frances Power Cobbe. As will be described in further detail below, Cobbe was highly religious and advocated protecting women from physically abusive relationships. In fact, Cobbe devoted more of her time to this cause, and from the 1880s until her death, to campaigns aimed at ending cruelty to animals, so that she is generally not regarded as a leader in the Victorian women’s movement. Yet, she did write and speak extensively for women’s suffrage and her reasons for advocating it may be regarded as indicative of other female Victorian reformers who advocated suffrage but did not devote themselves exclusively to the campaign.
Likewise, Violet Markham, a prominent anti-suffragist speaker between 1906 and 1912, did not devote all of her attention to the anti-suffrage campaign. As will be discussed later, she was an avid traveler as well as a philanthropist.

Because of Markham’s anti-suffrage stance, few scholars have regarded her as a feminist or claimed that she advocated gender equality. In contrast, Cobbe’s support for suffrage, as well as her efforts to reduce marital violence, have allowed some scholars to consider her a feminist. Yet, as will be demonstrated in this chapter, Cobbe and Markham shared many opinions regarding innate gender differences and women’s societal role. Even in differing over the question of women’s suffrage, both Cobbe and Markham used separate spheres ideology to support their positions, and neither supported gender equality.

I. Frances Power Cobbe’s Life

Frances Power Cobbe was born in 1822 in Dublin to Frances and Charles Cobbe, an Anglo-Irish landowner. Except for one year at a boarding school in Brighton, until the age of thirty-six Cobbe lived a secluded life on the family estate. Throughout her childhood, Frances’s parents provided her with a classical, as well as a religious education. While a teenager, Cobbe expressed religious doubt; however, the works of Thomas Parker profoundly influenced her and she soon became very religious. In 1855, Cobbe wrote her first book, *Essay on Intuitive Morals,* and she later became a popular professional journalist. In the early 1860s, Cobbe primarily focused her talents on the debate over celibacy versus marriage; she vigorously denounced critics who claimed that single women possessed a duty to marry. She favored women remaining single and engaging in valuable philanthropic work. Cobbe herself never married, preferring female companionship. Like many other middle and upper-class women of the later part of the nineteenth century, Cobbe became involved in charitable organizations. She volunteered with

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145 Caine, *Victorian Feminism,* 114.
the Workhouse Visiting Society and the Society for Friendless Girls and she also became very active in the anti-vivisection campaign. Cobbe saw a close connection between the plight of helpless animals, exploited by all-powerful men, and women, who were also subject to exploitation by men. 146 Likewise, the women’s suffrage movement at this time under the direction of Lydia Becker sought to connect its efforts to improve the condition of women with other philanthropic missions aimed at the helpless and needy. In her autobiography, Cobbe said she became involved in the women’s suffrage movement from “reflection on the sufferings and wrongs borne by women…our less fortunate sisters, the robbed and trampled wives, the mothers whose children were torn from them…”. 147

As Barbara Caine emphasizes in Victorian Feminists, Cobbe was involved in nearly all contemporary debates on women’s issues, from marital violence to the advantages of celibacy to the problems of women’s legal, social, political, and economic inequality. Unlike later feminists, however, Cobbe emphasized the importance of biological differences and believed that these resulted in substantial gender differences and different societal roles. 148 Moreover, though Cobbe was involved in many women’s rights causes, including the campaigns for reforming the married women’s property laws and the divorce laws, she did not lead any of them. Of the numerous campaigns she supported, she was particularly involved in efforts to denounce male violence in marriages. Though Cobbe briefly served on the Executive Committee of the London National Society for Women’s Suffrage, she remained active in the campaign by speaking and writing to support the cause. She was, however, always skeptical of the women’s suffrage movement’s inclusion of everyone from radicals to Conservatives; she also expressed unease about associating with some people in the women’s suffrage movement whom she considered

146 Ibid., 106.
147 Frances Cobbe, Life of Frances Power Cobbe (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1895), 526.
148 Caine., Victorian Feminists, 104.
lacking in “good taste.” 149 By the 1890s, Cobbe was no longer active in any aspect of the women’s movement. She died in 1904.

II. Violet Markham’s Life

A year after Cobbe died, relative newcomers to the struggle for women’s suffrage set the campaign on a course Cobbe would have hesitated to approve. Cobbe probably would have condemned the WSPU’s actions from the very first moment Christabel Pankhurst disrupted a Liberal Party meeting and was arrested. In 1884, Frances Power Cobbe wrote to an American suffragist newspaper, “we [English suffragists] shall carry on all our agitation ….firmly and bravely, and also calmly and with generous good temper.” 150 The Pankhursts’ tactics hardly qualified under this definition. By 1908, suffragette violence had generated sufficient sensationalism to bring the issue of women’s suffrage to the forefront of public debate, but it had also alienated many men and women from the suffrage movement. One such woman was Violet Markham. Frequently, however, distaste for the suffragettes provided a convenient excuse for those who opposed women’s suffrage for other reasons. Markham did not claim that suffragist violence was her only reason for joining with Mary Ward in forming the Women’s National Anti-Suffrage League. On the contrary, in her autobiography, she cited numerous reasons for her opposition to suffrage in the beginning of the 1900s and in doing so explained why other intelligent, even unconventional women who favored women’s rights in other forms, might not favor the Parliamentary franchise.

Of the four women this work discusses, Violet Markham was the youngest, born in 1872, when suffragists such as Frances Cobbe were already prominent. Violet was the youngest, an

149 Ibid., 113.
150 Frances Cobbe, “Of the Many Interesting Letters Received by the National Convention at Washington…,” The Woman’s Tribute (Portland, Or). 1 May 1884, 1.
“unwanted afterthought,” of the five children born to Rosa and Charles Markham. According to Violet’s autobiography as well as other writing, her parents’ marriage was evidently not happy, a situation which, in addition to an older sister’s unhappy marriage, probably contributed to her initial aversion to marriage. She was already 43 when she married James Carruthers, a regular army officer in South Africa, in 1915. In direct contrast to Mary Ward, Markham continued to use her maiden name in her public activities. The attitudes of her parents contributed to Markham’s development in other ways as well. Both of her parents were ardent Liberals and Markham’s mother was skeptical of woman’s suffrage. Though education for middle-class girls was common by the 1880s, Markham was primarily educated at home, except for a period of eighteen months at the age of seventeen when she was educated at a girl’s school. Because she possessed little formal education, Markham had fewer options than most middle-class women at this time to work in the public sphere. Like other intelligent middle-class women of the period, Markham was frustrated by her lack of viable options and turned to philanthropic enterprises to provide a purpose in her life. She began visiting workhouses and in 1897 she began to work for the school board in Chesterfield. Markham also discovered an outlet for her energies in traveling throughout the British Empire, which fueled her interest in Imperial affairs. In 1895 at the age of 23, Markham visited Egypt for the first time, and in 1899 she made her first trip to South Africa; she would later write several books on South Africa. In the 1950s, Markham emphasized the importance of education for the native African population of South

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Africa and claimed that the level of education or “civilization” ought to be the proper standard for citizenship in that nation, rather than race. 153

Throughout the 1890s, Markham’s personal correspondence reveals that she held strong anti-suffrage views. However, she did not begin to campaign actively against women’s suffrage until the Women’s National Anti-Suffrage League was formed in 1908. Thereafter she became one of the Anti-Suffrage League’s most talented speakers. Like Mary Ward, Markham believed that the anti-suffrage campaign should not consist exclusively of a negative position. She wanted the National League to promote women’s political involvement through means other than the Parliamentary franchise. Markham encouraged the male leaders of the National League to promote the idea of a separate women’s council with an advisory function as an alternative to suffrage. Her work for the anti-suffrage campaign culminated in a speech at Albert Hall in 1912, in which she set out her vision of men and women’s separate citizenships. As will be discussed in more detail later, during the First World War, Markham changed her opinion on women’s suffrage and later in life she expressed regret for her earlier opposition. 154 During the war, Markham began working for the government in the National Relief Fund, which provided aid to families and dependents of servicemen. In 1918, Markham campaigned unsuccessfully as a Liberal for Parliament after her brother, who had been running for the seat, died. However, she was elected to the Chesterfield town council in 1924 and became the Chesterfield mayor in 1927. During the Depression, she worked for the Unemployment Assistance Board and the Central Committee on Women’s Employment. In this position, she became very involved in the plight of working-class women, though she largely believed that these women should work in domestic service. She remained committed to Liberal women’s causes throughout her life. Yet,

154 Markham, Return Passage, 95.
Markham’s opinions on women and women’s place in society failed to conform either to the traditional feminist or new feminist positions, which will be discussed in the conclusion. In spite of the reforms she advocated to increase women’s access to the public sphere, she still stressed the biological differences between the genders and believed that these differences necessitated separate societal roles. Helen Jones, editor of *Duty and Citizenship: the Correspondence and Political Papers of Violet Markham*, emphasizes that Markham promoted her own interests throughout her life and not necessarily the interests of women in general. As a result, Jones shies away from referring to her as a feminist (in either the modern definition or Markham’s contemporary meaning).  

Markham died in 1959.

Given her travels, and her political leanings, Markham does not appear to be a likely opponent of women’s suffrage. In addition, Markham’s age (she became active in anti-suffrage work while in her thirties) as compared to other anti-suffragists, makes her anti-suffrage stance more remarkable. The older female anti-suffragists would have presumably been influenced by more traditional views of women’s role in society. A young middle-class woman in the latter part of the nineteenth century, Markham benefited from changes in women’s legal position and status, greater access to higher education, and increased opportunities for women (though these changes did not significantly reduce the lack of opportunities and frustrations Markham personally encountered). What was it about the issue of Parliamentary suffrage that encouraged Markham not only to support the opposite cause, but also to lend her considerable speaking talents to it as well? In her autobiography, Markham attributes part of her motivation for supporting the anti-suffrage cause as personal. Her mother had been deeply opposed to women’s suffrage. Additionally, Markham was a friend of Mary Ward and Gertrude Bell, both of whom

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were prominent anti-suffragists. But Markham’s speeches and writings, as well as her later recollections in her autobiography, indicate a deeper ideological commitment to the anti-suffrage cause. Among these reasons, was a belief that suffragists attributed too much importance to achieving the Parliamentary franchise.

Frances Power Cobbe did not agree with the accusation that suffragists placed undue emphasis on the importance of achieving the Parliamentary franchise. Yet, she did not devote all of her energies to achieving the franchise and neither did most other women in the Victorian women’s movement. They, like Millicent Fawcett and other constitutionalists after 1900, recognized the importance of advancing women’s rights in other areas, including higher education and local government; these were both causes that Violet Markham supported. Like Millicent Fawcett and Mary Ward, Frances Cobbe and Violet Markham expressed their opinions on women’s suffrage largely within the confines of separate spheres ideology and their discourses contain similar ideas, but utilized to opposing ends. However, the disparity in age between the two women and the different stages of the suffrage campaign in which the two women were active would seem to weigh against a close comparison between Cobbe’s and Markham’s arguments. Though Markham did not support women’s suffrage, she was influenced by the work of Cobbe and other Victorian feminists. Moreover, the existence of similarities in their arguments helps to underscore the pervasiveness of separate spheres ideology. When women’s rights advocates, such as Cobbe, continued to rely on traditional gender constructions to argue for suffrage, it was easy for anti-suffragists, such as Markham, to utilize separate spheres ideology, without appearing overly anti-woman or old-fashioned. Ultimately, the similar uses of separate spheres ideology in Cobbe’s and Markham’s writings indicates the perseverance of traditional beliefs on women’s societal role through the achievement of suffrage in 1918.

156 Markham, *Return Passage*, 96.
III. Men and Women are Different

In *Feminism and Democracy*, Sandra Holton explains that Frances Cobbe and Millicent Fawcett shared an ideology that emphasized men and women’s different societal roles, rather than an ideology based on gender equality.\(^{157}\) Chapter 2 has already demonstrated the extent to which Fawcett utilized gender differences as a reason for granting suffrage. Cobbe likewise used the argument that men and women are different in support of suffrage. Even more so than Fawcett, Cobbe conceded that innate biological differences were responsible for women’s intellectual and physical inferiority. As Cobbe wrote in her 1894 autobiography, “My own opinion is, that women en masse are by no means the intellectual equals of men en masse; and whether this inequality arises from irremediable causes or from alterable circumstances of education and heredity is not worth debating.”\(^{158}\) However, she maintained that women were inherently more moral, religious, and affectionate. Moreover, Cobbe claimed, “we [women] are less often criminals than are men; perhaps we are a little less selfish and certainly more conscientious than ordinary men.”\(^{159}\) This led Cobbe to conclude: “in the lump, women are better than men, though not so strong and not so clever!”\(^{160}\) Cobbe believed that level of morality was a more significant indicator of human worth, as well as citizenship, than intellectual or physical superiority. In the nineteenth century, it was well-established doctrine that women were morally superior to men, but few men would accept that women’s moral superiority compensated for women’s lack of physical strength and alleged inferior intellect. Because Cobbe accepted that women’s intellect and physical strength were inferior to men’s, she could not claim that men and


\(^{158}\) Cobbe, *Life*, 526.

\(^{159}\) Frances Cobbe, “Expediency of Woman Suffrage,” *The Woman’s Tribute* (Portland, Or), 25 July 1903, 1.

\(^{160}\) Ibid.
women are equal, but as she wrote, “we [women] are not their [men’s] equals but their equivalents.” ¹⁶¹ This was, in short, the argument of most suffragists and anti-suffragists alike. Men and women had different talents and abilities that are of equal worth.

Suffragists believed that men and women’s different capacities necessitated that they perform different tasks in society, a view that was also consistent with separate spheres ideology. As discussed in chapter 2, Fawcett accepted that women’s primary sphere of activity would remain the domestic one. She, however, did accept that the doctrine of separate spheres could be sufficiently expanded to allow women to vote in Parliamentary elections. As Fawcett and other suffragists recognized, the national government was increasingly dealing with issues relating to both genders. Cobbe explained in 1874, “we desire the franchise for women, because while believing that men and women have different work to do in life, we still hold that in the choice of political representatives, they have the same task to accomplish; namely the Joint election of a Senate which shall guard with equal care the rights of both sexes.” ¹⁶² Voting in Parliamentary elections should not be considered as exclusively concerning the public sphere of men. Suffragists, such as Fawcett and Cobbe, explained that male voters could not adequately represent women’s interests precisely because men and women were so different. No man could understand the problems and sorrows of women. ¹⁶³ Moreover, especially when Cobbe was writing, Parliament was only very slowly addressing women’s inequalities in property and child custody. Cobbe explained, “the gravest interests of women are continually postponed by Parliament to the considerations of trifling questions concerning male electors.” ¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ Ibid.
¹⁶² Frances Cobbe, “Why Women Desire the Franchise,” Before the Vote was Won: Arguments For and Against Women’s Suffrage, Jane Lewis, ed.(New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul),183.
¹⁶³ Frances Cobbe, The Duties of Women: a course of lectures given in 1881 (London: S. Sconnenschein, 1905), 185.
¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 182.
believed that gender differences translated into different societal roles; however, she did not accept the prevailing notion that the Parliamentary vote was in the exclusive sphere of men.

Chapter 3 of this work detailing Mary Ward’s anti-suffrage arguments has explained that anti-suffragists relied heavily on the idea that men’s and women’s differences necessitated different roles in the state. Violet Markham argued in 1912 that men and women are “marked by…profound and unalterable differences of natural structure,” which result in different talents and abilities. Like Cobbe and Ward, Markham accepted the belief that women were intellectually and physically inferior to men. Unlike Cobbe, Markham did not attempt to claim that women’s moral superiority in some way advanced women’s general superiority. She was also wary of advocating any form of gender equality. Nevertheless, she did promote a view of equal worth between the genders similar to that espoused by Cobbe and Fawcett. In private correspondence, Markham wrote, “to me the assertion of equality between men & women is not what I want, equality if you will but equality in diversity.”¹⁶⁵ Hence, Markham did not see the value in promoting the belief that the genders were equal, but she accepted that their differences were equivalent. By 1908 when Markham became active in the anti-suffrage campaign, anti-suffragists were well acquainted with the argument advanced by conservative suffragists that separate spheres could be sufficiently expanded to accommodate women’s participation in national politics. But as Markham stated at an anti-suffrage rally in Albert Hall in 1912, “We believe that men and women are different-not similar-beings, with talents that are complimentary, not identical, and that they therefore ought to have different shares in the management of the state.”¹⁶⁶ Thus, both Cobbe and Markham believed that biological differences

¹⁶⁵ Violet Markham to Elizabeth Haldane, 6 March 1912, Jones, *Duty and Citizenship*, 52.
between the sexes resulted in different innate abilities and necessitated different functions in the state, but they differed over whether the franchise was exclusively male.

IV. The Physical Force Argument

One of the earliest, as well as one of the most persistent, arguments promoted by those opposed to women’s suffrage derived from the idea that the state ultimately rested on physical force. Violet Markham, like Mary Ward, made a distinction between the local government franchise and the national franchise. Though local government increasingly addressed issues that concerned women and women could participate in it, Markham maintained that Parliament primarily dealt with such issues as defense, finance, and Empire, which women were ignorant about.¹⁶⁷ Markham also frequently referred to the national franchise as the Imperial franchise and stressed the dangers to the Empire of adding a large group of ignorant voters to the electorate. In one letter to the *Times*, Markham wrote, “few women have any practical knowledge or experience” in the “concerns of the Imperial Parliament.”¹⁶⁸ Moreover, after 1900, anti-suffragists could increasingly point to the threat of likely foreign war as a reason against enfranchising women. From the beginning of the suffrage movement, suffragists had been addressing the physical force argument hurled at them by opponents, yet as late as 1912, Markham’s comments demonstrate that even younger women who believed in promoting women’s causes, including even the local government franchise, might use the idea of women’s inferior strength as a compelling reason against the franchise.

Of the Victorian suffragists, Frances Cobbe in particular had espoused some innovative arguments to combat the assumption that women could never fight in defense of their country. As a basis, Cobbe reiterated the standard suffragist defense that not all men who fight vote and

¹⁶⁸ Violet Markham, “Sir Almroth Wright’s Letter: Miss Violet Markham’s Protest,” *Times* (London), 8 April 1912, Letters to the Editor, 8.
not all men who vote fight. Following the anti-suffragist argument to its logical conclusion, if women may not vote because they do not defend the state, Cobbe wrote, “all the men too weak, too short, or too old for the military standard likewise [must be] disenfranchised, and ...the actual soldiers of our army [must be] accorded the suffrage.”\footnote{Frances Cobbe, “Our Policy: an address to women concerning the suffrage,” \textit{Before the Vote was Won: Arguments For and Against Women’s Suffrage}, Jane Lewis, ed. (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul), 93.} Nonetheless, suffragists still suffered from the rejoinder that men as a class could fight, whereas women as a class could not. More importantly, Cobbe used the separate spheres ideology that women possessed inferior physical force as a reason for granting the suffrage. Though suffragists conceded that only men might defend the nation, they denied that politics in civilized nations any longer relied on physical strength. Moreover, as women indeed did possess inferior strength, they ought to have the protection accorded from the franchise. Cobbe claimed, “I advocate Women’s Suffrage as the natural and needful constitutional means of protection for the rights of the weaker half of the nation.”\footnote{Frances Cobbe, “Speech at the women’s suffrage meeting, St. George’s Hall,” \textit{Before the Vote was Won: Arguments For and Against Women’s Suffrage}, Jane Lewis, ed. (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul), 268.} This was no claim of gender equality based on the idea that with comparable physical exertion from childhood, many women are capable of reaching the same physical levels as many men. Instead, Cobbe relied on the traditional ideal of chivalry. She told men that they ought to protect the weaker sex by allowing her to assert through Parliamentary elections what she cannot through force.

V. Motherhood

Women’s ability to have children and the destiny of most women to become mothers was the most obvious difference between men and women. Suffragists and anti-suffragists alike stressed the importance of women’s role as mother, both to her children and to society as a whole. Moreover, both groups increasingly based claims to women’s citizenship on women’s
role as mothers of the Imperial race. Anti-suffragists believed that women’s suffrage would be detrimental to women’s maternal duties. Combining several different arguments, anti-suffragists claimed that women’s suffrage would make women less feminine and thereby less maternal, or the additional time women voters would devote to gaining political education would take away from the time devoted to their children. More importantly, anti-suffragists emphasized women’s role as mothers in order to place their argument firmly in the context of separate spheres ideology. Men were to serve the nation by voting and becoming involved in politics and women were to serve the nation by bearing and raising the next generation. In 1912, Markham still emphasized the importance of women’s role as mother. She claimed, “Woman is in a very special sense the guardian of life—spiritual as well as physical; she is essentially the maker and the keeper of the home…she is always the ‘mothering thing,’ and married or unmarried, has the mothering work of the world to do.” Thus, women’s highest societal function was to be a mother, whether to her own children or as a surrogate mother to the nation’s needy. Most suffragists accepted the importance of motherhood in individual women’s lives and advocated for society to accord women more respect because of their roles as mothers. But suffragists adopted the motherhood argument as their own, arguing that women as mothers served such an important and sacred role that they ought to have the vote. In one speech, Frances Cobbe acknowledged, “There is one interest in a woman’s life…supreme and above all others - the love of her Mother when she is a child and the love of her Child when she is a mother.” As Cobbe said, no one, including no suffragist, would dream of questioning the importance of women’s maternal role.

172 Markham, “Sir Almroth Wright’s Letter,” 8.
174 Ibid.
In arguing that women should have the vote, Frances Cobbe stressed women’s duty as mothers and accepted separate spheres ideology, which regarded women’s maternal duties as the compliment of men’s public duties to society. But Cobbe believed that the duty to society women performed as mothers equally entitled them to the vote men supposedly earned by their ability to fight for the nation. As Cobbe explained, a mother “serves the community in the very best and highest way it is possible to do, by giving birth to healthy children.”\(^{175}\) In addition, Cobbe claimed that there was no higher function than motherhood and stressed the “holiness” of women’s maternal role. In a speech given at St. George’s hall in 1876, Cobbe explained, “I need not dilate on the dearness and holiness of this tie [motherhood], the image here upon earth of God’s own love.”\(^{176}\) In this manner, Cobbe continued the Wollstonecraft feminist tradition that emphasized the importance of motherhood as a reason for granting women greater educational and political rights. Like Wollstonecraft and both many female anti-suffragists, and suffragists, Cobbe sought to elevate the public estimation of motherhood and place it at least on par with men’s professions. Cobbe wrote that motherhood, caring and nurturing children is a woman’s “function, public and private at once, - the profession which she has adopted.”\(^{177}\) Cobbe and many other advocates of women’s causes at the time recognized that male society claimed that motherhood was women’s main societal function, necessary for producing healthy future generations, but most men belittled this feminine role. Cobbe believed that granting women’s suffrage would encourage men to regard women’s role as mothers with more respect. She stated that women’s suffrage “would begin a worthier estimate and a deeper reverence for motherhood

\(^{175}\) Cobbe, *The Duties of Women*, 190.
\(^{177}\) Cobbe, *The Duties of Women*, 190.
and womanhood together.” As the anti-suffragists had predicted, however, women’s suffrage did not confer all the benefits that suffragists had hoped it would.

While most suffragists believed that the franchise would not diminish women’s capacity as mothers, anti-suffragists believed that women could not function as capable voters and mothers. As Violet Markham stated, “the cardinal facts of marriage and motherhood hamper the economic and political activities of women in a manner that has no parallel in the case of men.” Unlike most other suffragists, Cobbe agreed that the responsibilities of motherhood prevented mothers from doing much else. Anticipating the arguments that would be adopted by female anti-suffragists, Cobbe explained, “So immense are the claims on a mother, physical claims on her bodily and brain vigor, and moral claims on her heart and thoughts, that she cannot, I believe, meet them all, and find any large margin beyond for other cares and work.” She further added that she believed it to be “a misfortune for all concerned when a woman [mother]…..is either driven by poverty or lured by generous ambition to add to that great ‘Profession of a Matron’ any other systematic work, either as bread-winner to the family or as a philanthropist or politician.” Cobbe was not a modern feminist who claimed that women were capable of possessing a career and adequately performing their duties as mothers. The women’s suffrage bills in the 1870s and 1880s, which Cobbe promoted, dealt only with the inclusion of single women and widows in the franchise; these measures would not have affected most of Britain’s mothers. But, for those mothers who might have gained the vote, Cobbe would have urged them to be cautious in utilizing the vote. Where voting and motherhood conflicted, Cobbe believed voting should give way.

179 Markham, “Sir Almroth Wright’s Letter,” 8.
180 Cobbe, The Duties of Women, 190.
181 Ibid.
In claiming that motherhood imposed such an important responsibility as to preclude voting, Cobbe made an important distinction between mothers and single woman and widows. Anti-suffragists relied on other arguments, such as the physical force argument or a threat to feminine qualities, to claim that even these women ought not to vote. Cobbe, on the other hand, believed that there was nothing to prevent single women, widows, and even women who had finished raising their children from voting. She wrote, “Of course, all this [reasons for opposing women’s work outside the home] ceases when a woman’s family is complete, and her children are grown up and no longer need her devotion. She may then enter, or return, to public life with the immeasurable gain of a rich experience of a mother’s heart.” 182 With this statement as well, Cobbe relied upon a gender difference--motherhood is unique to women--as a reason for granting the suffrage. Cobbe even stressed that single women and widows had a duty to married women to ensure that the interests of mothers and women in general received proper attention from Parliament. Cobbe, like other suffragists, believed that Parliament had for centuries failed to provide adequately for women’s interests. Under English law, Cobbe wrote, “They tell each English mother…that her child is not hers, but her husband’s; that he may take it from her arms while he lives….” 183 Though she conceded that recent reforms had provided mothers with more rights to their children, she maintained that the fundamental principle of the laws remained; until 1918, suffragists claimed, with some justification, that English law, in spite of reforms, treated mothers unfairly as regards to child custody after divorce. Parliament, Cobbe believed, could not be expected to accord mothers the respect before the law they deserved until at least some women could vote.

182 Ibid., 191.
As will be discussed later, Cobbe accepted the idea that the experience of voting would improve women’s minds. Like other women’s rights activists of her time, she also believed that women ought to receive better educations so that they would be better able to educate their children. But she did not adopt the argument used by many other suffragists that mothers ought to receive the vote so as to better educate their children in citizenship; as demonstrated above, she did not believe that mothers should endanger their sacred duty by voting. Anti-suffragists like Violet Markham completely agreed with this argument. Moreover, like Cobbe, Markham believed that women should receive a quality education so, among other reasons, they could better educate their children. As can be clearly demonstrated from her reply to Sir Almroth Wright, an anti-suffragist who depicted the ideal woman as meek and mindless, Markham did not subscribe to a view of motherhood or femininity that portrayed women as ignorant or incapable. Markham wrote, “The woman he [Wright] sets before us would be incapable of throwing light on the most muddled mothers’ meeting…let alone engage in public duties of a serious character. Unhappy would be the household ruled by such a woman and the children brought up under her care.”184 Like the suffragists, Markham promoted the idea that ignorant, frivolous women made worse mothers than those women who possessed a quality education or engaged in public service duties. In fact, unlike the suffragist Cobbe, Markham believed that mothers could engage in limited philanthropic functions. The belief that women should not receive the Parliamentary vote did not necessarily indicate a desire to confine women exclusively to the home.

VI. Domestic Tranquility

As already mentioned, anti-suffragists claimed that women’s suffrage would cause women to completely abandon their domestic duties, or at least decrease the quality of their

184 Markham, “Sir Almroth Wright’s Letter,” 8.
work. Frances Cobbe, like Millicent Fawcett, did not demean the work women performed in the home, or encourage women to neglect their domestic duties in order to vote. Accepting this part of separate spheres ideology, Cobbe assumed that domestic tasks were women’s proper responsibility. Cobbe explained, “we ought to perform our present share in the world’s work—the housekeeping, the house-adorning, the child-educating—so as to prove that, before we go a step further, we can and will at least do this.”\(^{185}\) In addition, Cobbe was also a pragmatist and she recognized that women’s suffrage would receive little support if people believed that women who desired the vote neglected their homes. As she shrewdly observed, “I do not say that the wife, daughter, and sister who manages a house in perfect order and frugality, to the comfort of all the in-dwellers, will thereby convince them of her right to the Suffrage; but I am quite sure, that if she neglect so to manage the house…she will very completely prove her unfitness for any higher functions.”\(^{186}\) Moreover, to quell anti-suffragist fears, Cobbe proclaimed, “I have failed yet to find in the experience of real life, a single case in which a woman who exercised public spirit, even to the extent of self-devotion, was not also an admirable and conscientious daughter, wife, mother, or mistress of a household.”\(^{187}\) Unlike the feminists of the 1970s, Cobbe and most suffragists did not contradict the belief that a woman’s primary responsibility was the home; whatever duties women performed outside the home, whether philanthropy or voting, she must first ensure the proper functioning of her home. As Violet Markham observed in 1912, for the vast majority of women, their primary responsibilities will be domestic, not political.\(^{188}\)

As already mentioned in chapter 2, suffragists believed that women’s suffrage would improve the quality of domestic relationships by elevating a woman’s mind and allowing her the

\(^{185}\) Cobbe, “Our Policy,” 95.
\(^{186}\) Cobbe, “Our Policy,” 95.
\(^{188}\) Markham, “Sir Almroth Wright’s Letter,” 1.
capacity to carry on informed conversations with the men in her life. As Cobbe emphasized in her writings on marriage, “True and noble conjugal love knows nothing of such humiliation,” in which one partner is deliberately kept ignorant and subjugated to the other.\textsuperscript{189} She believed that women’s suffrage would encourage men to regard their wives with greater respect. Noting the abuse in many marriages, however, Cobbe did advocate less stringent divorce laws for women. Anti-suffragists, particularly, Mary Ward, regarded such views as a promotion of immoral behavior and an attack on marriage and believed that women’s suffrage would only lead to the evil of reformed divorce laws. In contrast, rather than encouraging antagonisms between married couples, as anti-suffragists had consistently accused them of doing, Cobbe believed in the importance of mutual respect. In one article advocating women’s suffrage, Cobbe related, “I even took on myself once to tell the lady principal of our new college for women at Oxford, that I thought she ought to be a married woman with a husband who would sit at the head of the dinner table every day and lead the conversation! I believe it would be an excellent arrangement; better for students than many a course of Lectures.”\textsuperscript{190} Such a statement reveals that Cobbe possessed great regard for real marriages, those that consisted of mutual respect, and she did not advocate the destruction of marriage, as some anti-suffragists accused.

Those opposed to women’s suffrage, as well as those opposed to virtually any other measure that could be conceived as advancing women’s rights, claimed that promoting women’s equality would lead to warfare between the genders. Utilizing separate spheres ideology, opponents of women’s suffrage claimed that for women to desire the same rights as men in any realm would lead men to regard women as their competitors, which would prove ruinous for domestic relationships. Frances Cobbe, however, claimed “there is no justice in describing their

\textsuperscript{189} Frances Cobbe, “Mat-women,” \textit{The Woman’s Journal} (Boston), 22 Oct. 1887, 1.
\textsuperscript{190} Cobbe, “Expediency,” 21.
demand for a share in the constitution of their country in the odious light of an hostility between
the sexes, or of pitting women against their fathers, brothers, and husbands.” 191 Accepting the
ideology of separate spheres, Cobbe agreed with anti-suffragists that the genders had
complimentary, rather than antagonistic, roles to fulfill in society. She stated, “With all my soul,
I believe that the interests of women are really the interests of men; that…the ‘Woman’s cause is
Man’s.’”192 Hence, by desiring women’s suffrage, women were not promoting their interests
against the interests of men but the interests of both genders. As she claimed, “it is no more in
the interest of men that women should be wronged, than it is for the good of my right hand that
my left should be maimed.”193 Anti-suffragists like Violet Markham, however, did not accept
such an argument. She and many others opposed to women’s suffrage believed that the militant
suffragettes certainly were promoting a sex war by attacking men and insisting that they were
repressing women.

According to the anti-suffragists, to believe that men repressed women by not allowing
them to vote necessitated the belief that men’s and women’s goals were antagonistic to each
other. Markham claimed that “The power to register a vote may be dearly bought if men in the
future are to look on women, not as comrades, but as noisy competitors with interests
antagonistic to their own.”194 Domestic tranquility would obviously be endangered if men and
women’s interests were to be regarded as competing. Moreover, Markham believed that
claiming equality with men and competing with them would not best serve women’s interests.
As she wrote, “when men and women compete for the great prize of life on a fair field without
favour the result will not be satisfactory in the long run for the combatants possessing smaller

192 Ibid., 265.
193 Ibid.
194 Violet Markham, Times (London), 31 Oct. 1906, Letter to the editor, 8.
skulls and weaker muscles.”195 Markham, like other anti-suffragists, believed that women’s suffrage would undermine chivalry and force women possessing no natural advantages to compete with men. Thus, a sex war would not only destroy domestic tranquility, but women would almost certainly lose.

VII. Femininity

If separate spheres ideology held that voting belonged to the masculine public sphere, then the experience of women voting possessed the risk of causing women to become more masculine. As demonstrated in previous chapters, suffragists and anti-suffragists agreed on the desirability of maintaining most traditionally feminine qualities; however, they disagreed over whether the suffrage would destroy these feminine characteristics. Anti-suffragists also claimed that some of women’s “natural” qualities, such as her heightened emotions, would prove disastrous for the nation. As late as 1912 Violet Markham wrote, “women in the mass are more emotional; more prone to be swept by impulse and feeling than men.”196 This idea persisted even among women who advocated some measure of women’s rights and long after both extensions of the Parliamentary franchise to women. To counter such claims, suffragists such as Frances Cobbe differentiated between “truly” feminine qualities and those that resulted from affectation and centuries of lack of mental stimulation. Accepting stereotypes of the time and echoing anti-suffrage belief, she wrote, “We may pity a woman who cannot stop herself from shrieking if a horse runs away, or a boat tosses on the waves; but assuredly we do not feel she is a person to be trusted with an important charge.”197 Many female anti-suffragists accepted the distinction between female frivolity and the truly feminine qualities that were more desirable. But they believed that women’s suffrage would cause women to lose those qualities, such as nurturing and

195 Ibid.
196 Markham, “Sir Almroth Wright’s Letter,” 1.
compassion, while maintaining their frivolity. However, Cobbe believed that the experience of voting would cause women to become less frivolous. As she claimed, “We do not believe that one particle of womanly gentleness and dignity, nay, not even the finest flavour of high-bred grace, will be lost when women are permitted to record their votes for representatives in Parliament…What will be lost, we are persuaded, will be a little of frivolity….” Cobbe blamed frivolous women, those concerned primarily with their appearances and pleasing men, for the predominate belief that women did not want the franchise. These women may not have desired suffrage, either from ignorance or from a desire to tell the men in their lives what they wished to hear, but women possessing the true feminine qualities of virtue, compassion, and nurturing did desire the franchise.

Accepting the ideology of separate spheres, many suffragists and anti-suffragists believed that women were inherently more moral than men. Both groups feared any action they believed would lead to women’s moral degeneration. Frances Cobbe proclaimed, “I would rather that women should remain without political rights to the end of time than that they should lose those qualities which we comprise in the word “womanliness.” For anti-suffragists, women’s initiation into the national political process would necessarily lead to an erosion of their feminine qualities, including their superior morality. By contrast, suffragists like Cobbe believed that women’s participation in politics would raise the level of morality in politics. Cobbe even believed that women had a duty to engage in politics so as to increase its morality. As she wrote, “We are bound to do all we can to promote the virtue and happiness of our fellow men and women, and therefore we must accept and seize every instrument of power, every vote, every

influence which we can obtain, to enable us to promote virtue and happiness.” Anti-suffragists, like Violet Markham, would have agreed with Cobbe’s statement; however, Markham believed that women’s duty to promote the virtue of the nation only extended within their own sphere. The local government franchise, where issues concerning children, the poor, sick, and elderly were primarily decided, could properly be considered part of women’s sphere. The national franchise, according to Markham, was primarily concerned with such issues as national commerce and the governance of Empire and women’s ignorance on these topics would lead them to corrupt the level of politics, rather than increase its morality.

In another argument derived from women’s superior morality, Cobbe emphasized the absurdity of excluding the more moral, law-abiding half of the population from the political affairs of the nation. As she claimed, “To refuse a share in the law-making of a nation to the most law-abiding half of it, to exclude the votes of the most conscientious, temperate, religious and most merciful and tender-hearted moiety is a mistake which has not failed to entail great evils and loss.” Though Markham accepted that women’s morality was superior to men’s she was also a realist; she believed that the suffragists placed too much faith in what women could accomplish through the franchise. As she later recollected in her autobiography, “I felt certain that no golden age was to be had on such easy terms nor that women by their advent as parliamentary voters would be in a position to reform the world. In this view I was not mistaken.”

Those opposed to women’s suffrage had always taunted the suffragists that “real” women, meaning those women who exhibited traditional feminine qualities pleasing to men, did not desire the franchise; they did not want to become engaged in the uncouth political process.

203 Markham, *Return Passage*, 95.
Though conceding that the majority of professional women might want the franchise, Violet Markham maintained that the vast majority of women, who were primarily engaged in the activities of the home, did not want to be enfranchised.\textsuperscript{204} For anti-suffragists after 1904, the activities of the militant suffragettes seemed to validate their fears that women’s suffrage, or even the campaign for women’s suffrage, corrupted women’s femininity. In the 1870s, Frances Cobbe had warned her fellow suffragists that, “the more women shriek for the franchise, or for anything else, the less men will be disposed to open their ears to that extremely unpleasant sound.”\textsuperscript{205} She was aware of the tendency of the opposition to portray those women who desired the franchise as shrieking or hysterical. The suffragettes’ militant actions did not invent this negative stereotype; however, their actions did seem to conform to it. As Violet Markham wrote when she later reflected on her anti-suffrage activities, “the violence of the suffragettes made opposition easy.”\textsuperscript{206} Markham greatly disapproved of the militants’ actions, but she also worried about the effect their actions were having on the general opinion of women and women’s aptitude for other forms of public service. In her response to Sir Almroth Wright’s letter condemning the militant suffragists, Markham explained, “It is necessary to protest against any theory which generalizes about women from the fanaticism and violence of the militant suffragist.”\textsuperscript{207}

In spite of the above statement, Markham did believe that the suffragettes’ obsession with the franchise eroded their femininity and women’s suffrage threatened to do the same to other women as well. In a letter to the editor of the \textit{Times}, Markham acknowledged, “It is often said of women that neither logic nor humour counts among their strongest points. The recent behaviour

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\textsuperscript{204} Markham, \textit{Times} (London), 31 Oct. 1906, 1.
\textsuperscript{206} Markham, \textit{Return Passage}, 97.
\textsuperscript{207} Markham, “Sir Almroth Wright’s Letter,” 8.
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of the suffragettes would appear to support this contention.” \(^{208}\) Rather than exhibiting the “Sobriety, self-restraint, self-control, the subordination of personal desires to the wider interest of the whole,” characteristics that have typically been attributed to women, Markham accused the suffragettes of pursuing “their own personal ends, to the shame and humiliation of all other members of their sex.” \(^{209}\) Such activities as smashing windows, destroying property, heckling policemen, and resisting arrest jarred the traditional image of women in the home. Yet, Markham accused the militants of invoking the privileges of femininity and chivalry when arrested for their violence. She claimed that suffragettes possessed the “unreasonable but most feminine desire…both to eat and keep their political and domestic cake.” \(^{210}\) Markham characterized the militants as demanding very publicly their equality with men, but once they faced the consequences of their actions, they claimed female privilege. Markham believed that “women who brawl at public meeting and are removed screeching from the House of Commons must not subsequently make hysterical appeals to be relieved from the disagreeable consequences of their behaviour on the ground of youth, beauty, refinement, and sex. This is an appeal to feminine privilege of the rankest character.” \(^{211}\) When it would prove beneficial to them or their cause, Markham accused the suffragettes of adopting traditional feminine traits. As she wrote, “They smash windows, but…they wish to ‘do it beautifully,’ and fortify themselves with a high moral atmosphere.” \(^{212}\) Markham correctly identified that the suffragettes wished to appropriate women’s claim to superior morality in their violent actions; they claimed that their actions served a higher moral cause. Markham also realized that the suffragettes, consisting


\(^{211}\) Ibid.

\(^{212}\) Markham, “Militant Suffragists,” 1.
mainly of younger middle-class women, were always careful to dress nicely, emphasizing their femininity through their appearance. For Markham and many others, the militant suffragettes’ actions confirmed their fears of what would occur if women received the franchise. As Markham sarcastically commented, “It opens up an attractive vista of the public results we might expect to follow from the establishment of feminine rule marked by such a judicious and temperate spirit, say, at the Board of Trade or India Office.”

VIII. Desire to Preserve the Traditional Social Order

Both Liberal and Conservatives feared women’s suffrage because they believed that women as a class were ignorant and would likely vote for the other party. Though many suffragists were affiliated with the Liberal Party, some suffragists, including Frances Cobbe, courted the support of Conservative Members of Parliament. In 1884, Cobbe and other suffragists signed their names to a circular to Conservative Associations. The authors of the circular stressed that the women householders already possessed the qualifications, except for belonging to the male gender, to vote under the existing law. Hence, the suffragists stressed that to enfranchise women householders would strengthen the status quo. In an effort to appeal to Conservatives in the 1880s and 1890s, some suffragists also stressed that the propertied women that would be enfranchised would serve to strengthen the existing social order against the challenge of newly enfranchised working-class men. Suffragists frequently appealed to class prejudice in hopes of gaining Conservative support. In the circular, for example, the authors emphasized “the great injustice that would be done to women who were heads of households or farmers, if they were to be denied the vote which was to be given to their servants and

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labourers.” Ignorant, lower-class men could vote, but educated middle and upper-class women could not. In 1874, Cobbe supported a women’s suffrage bill that would have only enfranchised female heads of households. She explained that the bill was “needed to restore the just balance in favour of an educated constituency against the weight of the illiterate male voters now entrusted with the suffrage.”

In articulating her reasons for promoting women’s suffrage, Cobbe likewise relied on the Conservative idea of the franchise, which based the right to vote on property or tax qualifications. She stated, “To those who hold that Property is the thing intended to be represented by the Constitution of England, we have shown that we possess such property. To those who say that Tax-paying and Representation should go together, we have pointed to the tax-gathers’ papers…” In this manner, Cobbe and other suffragists who appealed to Conservative ideas, emphasized that enfranchised women would serve as a force against societal change, not produce a profound alteration in gender roles.

Some anti-suffragists like Violet Markham feared that women’s suffrage, a measure they regarded as inherently radical, would result in severe changes in the social order. Markham recollected in her autobiography, “Personally, I always suspected that votes for women implied adult suffrage and for adult suffrage I did not think the country was ready.” Believing that the vast majority of women were uneducated and ignorant of political affairs, Markham did not wish to add more uninformed voters to the electorate. Moreover, Markham and other anti-suffragists correctly realized that granting even limited women’s suffrage would necessarily result in granting suffrage to all adult men; no man would tolerate the lack of a vote when even some women possessed the privilege. Articulating a conservative idea against the expansion of the

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215 Ibid., 276.
218 Markham, Return Passage, 95.
electorate, Markham stated, “I have never felt there is any virtue in collective ignorance or in
counting heads without regard to their contents.” Anti-suffragists additionally feared adult
suffrage because there would be more eligible female voters than male. Based on separate
spheres ideology previously discussed, Markham and others believed that women were incapable
of receiving the necessary political education, which men could garner by virtue of their gender.
Hence under women’s suffrage and adult suffrage, the majority of the electorate would be
politically ignorant. Like Cobbe, Markham appealed to the Conservative fear of an ignorant
electorate. But where Cobbe had stressed the education of a few, Markham had emphasized the
ignorance of the majority.

IX. Women in Local Government, Politics, and Citizenship

In spite of their adherence to separate spheres ideology, both Frances Cobbe and Violet
Markham supported an expansion of the doctrine to allow women to function outside of the
home. Importantly, in promoting women’s use of the municipal franchise and philanthropic
activities, both women emphasized the link between these activities and women’s traditional
domestic role. Since the 1860s, women had been able to vote in local government elections. For
suffragists like Cobbe, this was strong evidence for the national suffrage position. For Markham,
however, women’s possession of the municipal franchise was a strong reason for not granting the
Parliamentary franchise. As previously mentioned, Markham, like Mary Ward, believed that
local government, not Parliament, decided those issues of most concern to women. Moreover,
Markham consistently emphasized in her anti-suffrage propaganda that women did not utilize
their municipal franchise. In a letter to the Women’s Local Government Society in the aftermath
of her 1912 speech, Markham challenged the society as to what women as ratepayers (she makes
a distinction between women in their voting capacity and in their volunteer endeavors) had done

219 Ibid., 100.
to eliminate such conditions as slums, or provide assistance for the ill, elderly, or indigent. If women truly wanted the Parliamentary franchise in order to improve the country, as many suffragists claimed, then why had the majority of women thus far failed to utilize a tool already at their disposal? Markham concluded that women either did not want to vote, or were ignorant that they possessed the local government franchise. Markham used the experience of women voting in local government elections as an indication that women’s suffrage would not result in the improvement of the level of morality in politics or the positive social reforms that suffragists promised. However, because Markham believed that the local government franchise properly belonged in women’s sphere, she believed in the importance of encouraging women to utilize it.

In contrast to the opinions of most male anti-suffragists, Violet Markham and Mary Ward did not desire to promote the anti-suffrage cause simply by stressing women’s inferiority to men. Markham in particular emphasized that she was not “anti-woman.” In a letter to Lord Cromer, a leader in the National League Opposed to Women’s Suffrage, Markham stated, “I have always as you know held the view that our League should have a positive as well as negative policy, but it should not confine its work merely to opposing the Parliamentary franchise for women. It should also point out the directions in which women’s work and energies could most profitably be used.” This followed from Markham’s commitment to encouraging women to utilize the municipal franchise and her encouragement of their philanthropic activities. Markham and other female anti-suffragists also debated the merits of creating an elective or non-elective women’s

220 Violet Markham to Women’s Local Government Society, 1912, in Jones, Duty and Citizenship, 48.
221 For more information on women and local government, see Patricia Hollis, Ladies Elect: Women in English Local Government, 1865-1914 (New York: Clarendon Press, 1987).
222 Violet Markham to Lord Comer, 10 Feb. 1912, in Jones, Duty and Citizenship, 46.
council, possessing influence over the male Parliament. Markham certainly believed that women were citizens of the nation and their opinions should be given some regard, even in national politics. But as she believed women’s citizenship to be different from men’s (men’s citizenship derived from their ability to defend the nation; women’s from their role as mothers), the manifestation of women’s citizenship must likewise be different.

In many respects, it is the differences between Frances Cobbe and Violet Markham that makes their similarities the more striking. Cobbe was fifty years older than Markham, yet Markham was the anti-suffragist campaigner. Likewise, Cobbe, a Conservative, supported women’s suffrage, whereas Markham, a Liberal, did not. Yet, Cobbe and Markham shared many similar views. Both believed that men, in general, were intellectually superior to women, in general. From her desire to prevent a further increase of the ignorance in the electorate, an idea that is essentially Conservative, Markham originally could not support women’s suffrage. When Cobbe advocated suffrage for women householders, she claimed that the inclusion of such middle and upper-class women would increase the education and intellect of the electorate and serve to mitigate the effects of the recent extension of the franchise to lower-class men. Both women believed that biological differences between the sexes resulted in innate gender differences and largely different societal roles for men and women. Markham followed the conclusion of this argument to indicate that men and women must possess different kinds of citizenship. Both women believed that women’s citizenship and their most important societal function was to become mothers. To varying degrees, both women also feared the negative effects suffrage might have on mothers. Likewise, both women emphasized the value of women’s “feminine” qualities of compassion, nurturing, and morality. Neither Cobbe nor Markham desired women to become more like men; neither advocated gender equality. Both

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women recognized the importance of gender difference in producing complimentary societal roles. Finally, both women possessed a strong commitment to the idea of duty and women’s duty to society. For Cobbe, women possessed a duty to demand the suffrage so that women, with their superior morality, might improve politics and the nation. For Markham before the First World War, women possessed a duty not to vote so as not to further contaminate the electorate with ignorant voters. According to both Cobbe and Markham, women’s greatest civic duty consisted in their domesticity and role as mothers.
Conclusion
The Persistence of Separate Spheres

Throughout this work, I have demonstrated that much of the campaign for women’s suffrage derived from separate spheres ideology and an affirmation of traditional gender roles. For this reason, suffragist and anti-suffragist rhetoric possessed numerous similarities and many suffragists and anti-suffragists possessed similar opinions on women’s innate characteristics and duties in the private and public spheres. Of the four women this work has examined, all supported some measures, including access to higher education and promotion of philanthropic work, to advance women’s condition in Britain. Yet, Millicent Fawcett, Mary Ward, Frances Cobbe, and Violent Markham, also believed that men and women were fundamentally different and must possess different duties in society that reflected these different characteristics. All four of these women emphasized that motherhood constituted women’s most fundamental difference from men and her greatest societal duty. Anti-suffragists like Ward and Markham believed that women’s suffrage would hamper women’s maternal duties and claimed this as a primary reason for their opposition. Suffragists like Fawcett and Cobbe had to quell public fears that suffrage would pose a danger to women’s motherly role. Cobbe, an older more conservative suffragists, did not promote suffrage for mothers with young children. Fawcett, representing more common suffragists’ arguments, claimed that women’s suffrage would require mothers to sacrifice little time from their duties and would actually enhance their maternal role by forcing issues affecting children to receive more attention in Parliament. As demonstrated in chapters 2 and 4, neither suffragists claimed that motherhood, or the associated characteristics of nurturing and compassion, were less than natural in women, as later feminists would.

Throughout this work, I have stressed the problems of referring to the suffragists (or the anti-suffragists) as feminists. The descriptor was not used until the 1920s, did not acquire its
modern usage until later, and even now, is subject to debate as to its applicability. Fawcett, Cobbe, Ward, and Markham were not feminists; none of the women advocated gender equality—full social, economic, and political rights with men and deemphasizing biological differences between the genders. On the contrary, all of the women based their arguments on differences between the genders. These women, did however, promote causes designed to further women’s position in society and some changes in the law to increase women’s rights. As such, modern feminists can correctly claim Fawcett and Cobbe, as well as Ward and Markham, as their ideological predecessors. As will be discussed below, the debate between suffragists like Fawcett and Cobbe and anti-suffragists like Ward and Markham raised issues that modern feminists continue to debate.224

During World War I, Violet Markham, like much of British society, changed her mind on women’s suffrage. The reasons she provides in her autobiography were strikingly similar to those attributed to the British public in general. She explained her conversion as arising, “partly because I gained a great deal more experience of women’s work and of the disabilities under which women often labour….I did not think that women were going to regenerate the world, far from it; nor that the glowing promises of the suffragists would be fulfilled. But without this reform, social and political life would rest on a basis chronically lopsided and unfairly weighted against one sex.”225 In World War I, large numbers of women contributed to the war effort by taking over the jobs vacated by men who became soldiers. Although most of these women had been employed in different sectors of the economy before the war, during the war, newspapers emphasized women’s patriotism and the novelty of women’s employment. Public conception of

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224 For a discussion of changing ideas about citizenship, see Nicoletta Gullace, *The blood of our sons: men, women, and the renegotiation of British citizenship during the Great War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillon, 2002).
women increasingly accepted that women were capable, not only of working in jobs traditionally assumed to be inherently masculine, but of voting as well. During the war, even the anti-suffragist *Times* began to advocate women’s suffrage. The media portrayed the achievement of women’s suffrage in 1918 as a reward for women’s war work; however, in reality, this was not the case. In reality, the 1918 Representation of the People Act only enfranchised women over thirty, not the younger women who had worked during the war. British society perceived these older women, who were more likely to be wives and mothers, as less of a threat to the existing social order and traditional gender roles. This measure also insured that women would not outnumber men in the electorate. Like Violet Markham, the British public had come to accept limited women’s suffrage, but not any fundamental changes in gender roles.

As the anti-suffragists greatly feared, limited women’s suffrage did lead to much more “radical” measures. In 1928, with little opposition, women were finally granted suffrage on the same terms as men. All women and men over the age of twenty-one could vote; Britain now had universal adult suffrage. Also as anti-suffragists predicted, women’s suffrage did lead to female members of Parliament, although very slowly. In 1918, soon after the bill granting women’s suffrage was passed, Parliament passed a law allowing women to serve as members of Parliament. In 1919, Lady Astor became the first women to serve in the House of Commons, after her husband who had previously held the seat moved to the House of Lords. In 1929, Margaret Bondfield became the first female Cabinet member when she became Minister of Labour. The ultimate anti-suffrage fear was realized in 1979 when Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister. However, for numerous reasons, Thatcher’s tenure as prime minister did not fulfill either anti-suffragist or suffragist predictions about a female prime minister.
In fewer than seventy-five years since suffragists and anti-suffragists argued over whether gender difference was a sufficient reason to merit women’s suffrage, a female prime minister demonstrated that gender difference is not necessarily the most effective indicator of political opinion. As leader of the Conservative party, Thatcher possessed a reverence for the traditional social order that would have baffled anti-suffragists. She sought to undo much of the Labour reforms since the Second World War and sought to scale back the extent of British socialism. Contrary to what suffragists might have expected, she did not provide a great deal of support to women’s issues. In fact, she stressed the importance of the family and warned against its erosion. As will be discussed below, by the 1970s, emphasis on the family frequently coincided with condemning women for working and leaving the care of their children to others. Likewise unanticipated by suffragists, Thatcher’s governments did not receive exceptional support from female voters. In fact, during her tenure as prime minister, the Conservative Party lost support among women; for the past sixty years, the Conservative Party had possessed an advantage among women voters. At the beginning of the twentieth century, few anti-suffragists or suffragists would have believed that a female prime minister would not significantly promote women’s causes.

If anti-suffragist predictions about the dire catastrophes that would befall British government with the advent of women’s suffrage were wrong, in many ways suffragists were equally incorrect in their predictions of the benefits women’s suffrage would cause in politics, society, and women’s lives. Women’s suffrage did not dramatically improve the condition of women. In fact, widespread agitation for advancing women’s rights or changing women’s roles in society did not emerge again until the late 1960s. After World War I, the women praised for their patriotism were thanked for their service to the nation by governmental and public pressure

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to vacate their jobs so that the soldiers returning from war could have employment. Women workers who failed to do this were subject to much ridicule. Traditional beliefs about gender roles underlay this call to reward soldiers with employment. While women may have performed a great service to the nation by performing necessary work during the war, their employment was still to be considered temporary, a supplement to men’s labor. Throughout much of the rest of the century, British government and society continued to act in ways that supported this belief.

In spite of the debt the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 1970s owed to the struggle for suffrage, the leaders of the new women’s movement were vastly different from the suffragists. The Women’s Liberation Movement advocated gender equality and stressed that men and women possessed similar abilities. For the modern feminists, women are similar to, equal to, and deserve the same rights as men. Most importantly, unlike the suffragists, the feminists of the 1960s demanded a change in traditional gender roles for women. They no longer considered motherhood to constitute women’s highest personal and societal duty. Women needed intellectual, professional, and personal fulfillment in a similar manner as men did. By the 1970s, in large measure due to economic necessity, many more women had begun working outside of the home. This fact, combined with a “permissive movement” in the 1960s, fueled a necessity for women to possess greater control over their reproductive processes. Oral contraceptives enabled women to prevent unwanted pregnancies, as did increased access to abortion since 1967. While sexual mores in Britain have relaxed and women do not suffer the same degree of societal stigma from engaging in premarital sex or having illegitimate children, the double standard nevertheless persists with promiscuous women more likely to be condemned than promiscuous men. Finally, class differences affect the degree choices and liberation British women experience. As with the suffrage movement, the Women’s Liberation Movement was a
middle-class movement, with middle-class leaders addressing middle-class women’s concerns. As a result, middle-class and professional women have benefited more from the feminist movement than working-class women.\textsuperscript{227}

Given the large presence of women in the workforce and the ideas of the women’s liberation movement, it is nevertheless relevant to ask the degree to which traditional gender roles and the ideology of separate spheres persists in contemporary British society. Though many married women possess employment outside of the home, the burden of domestic tasks and childcare fall overwhelmingly upon women, even in households where both spouses work.\textsuperscript{228} Housework has been gendered as female and married men do not perform as many domestic chores as their spouses. Ideas about traditional gender roles persist even within women’s employment. Jane Lewis contends that working-class women are probably employed more from necessity than the desire to achieve personal fulfillment.\textsuperscript{229} Most employed women still work in employment traditionally regarded as feminine, nursing, teaching, or secretarial, for example, and believed to require “feminine” qualities, such as nurturing, empathy, and attention to detail. These professions still do not receive the same respect or the same level of payment as traditionally masculine employment. Though discrimination solely on the basis of gender is illegal under the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975, women face difficulties with receiving promotions because many employers still value the work of women less than men. The presumption that the male is the family breadwinner and women’s income is temporary and supplemental also remains.\textsuperscript{230} In addition, employers fear that women are more likely to quit

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{228} Ibid., 3.
\bibitem{229} Ibid.
\bibitem{230} Ibid., 8.
\end{thebibliography}
their jobs due to family constraints. Hence, gender differences within employment and within domestic tasks still persist.

Though British society has largely accepted the idea of women’s employment, women’s maternal and familiar duties are still emphasized. After World War II, the term “working mother,” emerged and many people worried, as Cobbe, Ward, and Markham had, that women’s employment would endanger their roles as mothers. The media and politicians warned that divorce and unmarried motherhood would cause the “breakdown in the family.” As Jane Lewis explains, rhetoric about concern for the “family,” frequently masks attacks on working mothers.231 In the 1950s, social scientists warned of the dangers to children posed by working mothers and urged women to become full time housewives. Similar themes were espoused in the 1980s, though with more reluctance since a majority of mothers worked.232 Unlike the suffragists, some feminists in the 1970s attacked women’s duties in the family, arguing that the family was largely responsible for women’s oppression. However, especially in the 1980s, women who choose to become full-time housewives and pursue traditional gender roles, regard the feminist movement with hostility.233 Like the anti-suffragists, some contemporary women attack the feminists for demeaning the family and women’s “natural” role as mother. Feminists, like the suffragists, have to defend themselves from such accusations because motherhood remains an important aspect of life for most women. Many middle-class professional women do not want to choose between possessing a career and having a family. This has resulted in an increase in women’s responsibilities; before and after work, middle-class women must perform most of the domestic tasks and childcare expected of housewives. The traditional construction of gender placing primary care of children on women persists.

231 Ibid.
232 Ibid., 31.
233 Ibid., 35.
As demonstrated throughout this work, suffragists and anti-suffragists largely shared an ideology about women’s characteristics, as well as roles and duties in British society. Rather than seeking, as feminists of the 1970s would, to base their claims to women’s rights on an idea that men and women are similar and ought to possess similar opportunities in society, suffragists, like anti-suffragists, believed in the desirability of maintaining gender differences and separate spheres. Unlike feminists of the 1970s, suffragists and anti-suffragists sought to increase the respect women earned for their domestic work and maternal duties, as well as promote their virtues of greater morality, compassion, and nurture. Both accepted that women should enter the public sphere and could greatly benefit society by doing so, but did not want women to become as involved in the public sphere as men were. They believed that women’s talents made them superior to men in the domestic sphere and that this provided women with equivalent worth within society. By contrast, some feminists since the 1970s and much popular opinion, have tended to belittle women’s work in the domestic sphere; British society has never placed as much worth on the unpaid work performed primarily in the home as it has on the paid labor performed by men outside the home. To be considered equal to men, many believe that women must behave more like men and pursue employment in the public sphere in a similar manner as men do. Psychologists and sociologists stress that most differences between men and women can be attributed to socialization, rather than innate biological differences. To a large extent, women’s rights advocates since the suffragists, have emphasized gender similarities, rather than differences. But, as suffragists and anti-suffragists realized, though not to the same degree as they believed, men and women are different. Does claiming that men and women are equal, can do the same things, have the same abilities, disparage what is innately feminine? Millicent Fawcett, Frances Cobbe, and many other suffragists certainly did not believe that women had to
behave more like men in order to possess equal political rights. The beliefs of female anti-suffragists, like Mary Ward and Violet Markham, likewise demonstrate that women who agreed upon the broad goal of promoting women’s interests did not necessarily agree upon the best means of accomplishing it; similarly, many contemporary anti-feminists claim to be advancing respect for women by promoting women’s role as mothers and domestic work against the threats, respectively, of abortion and employment outside the home. Like separate spheres ideology, the debate upon women’s role in British society, the best means of promoting women’s interests, as well as what constitutes those interests, has persisted from the suffrage struggle to contemporary Britain.
Illustrations

I. “Mummy’s a Suffragette”: commercial anti-suffrage postcard, in Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women*, 219, fig.112.


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