

The Women's Local Government Society in Britain 1888-1914. 'To Serve and to Elect'

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Women's Local Government Society, Britain 1888-1918.

'To serve and to elect,[1]

Myriam Boussahba-Bravard

> The battle for London had been fought
>
> by the Women's Local Government Society.
>
> It is one of the least known, yet was one of the most effective
>
> women's organizations in the late nineteenth century (Hollis 1987, 317).

Thus, writes Patricia Hollis in her opening paragraph on the Women's Local Government Society (WLGS) in the now classic *Ladies Elect* (1987). In the field of local government, the WLGS was part of the complex debate about its organising principles, duties and elected representatives: who should be in charge of what? Who should be electors?

On 17 November 1888, this group defined its main objective as 'to promote the return, independently of party politics, of women as county councillors.' On 22 November 1888, on the suggestion of Eva McLaren, they adopted the 'Society to Promote the Return of Women as County Councillors' as a name (Minutes of the Executive Committee, [MEC], 1888, 17 November); in early 1893, the 'Women's Local Government Society' (WLGS) was durably adopted.[2] The object of the society became 'to secure that women shall be equally with men eligible to be elected and serve on local governing bodies.' Thus, they spelt out three claims

[1] This was the motto of the Women's Local Government Society.
[2] The acronym WLGS will be used for the whole period 1888-1918.

that the law did not then sanction: *equally* with men, *married* women and spinsters alike should have access to *all* types of local administration (see annex 1).

What looked like a short-term *ad hoc* London society, even for its founding members, was to structure into a principled, long-term national organisation. Faced immediately with legal opposition from unhappy Tory candidates (at the 1889 London Council election), the group decided on fighting legal suits. They realized that the law had to be changed if women were to play their (still restricted) role of elected representatives. To defend their two (elected) lady councillors[3] and support the one (co-opted) alderwoman on the London County *[page181]* Council, they established long-term cooperation with male legal professionals, an aspect which was to be one of the strongest points of the WLGS in the following decades. While the WLGS hardened into a service society for grass root activists offering up-to-date and free legal expertise, the Liberal profile of its Executive Committee remained quite stable. From the start their upper middle-class and Liberal lobbying networks proved extremely fruitful, which is why they stuck to this strategy until the 'civic and imperial' suffrage was granted to women — partially in 1918, on the same terms as men in 1928. The WLGS was not a suffrage society as it did not ask for women's parliamentary vote; they wanted to extend women's rights to local participation and administration through full local citizenship, equally with men.

Once established they slipped into easy cooperation with sister national organisations whose objectives were compatible when not identical**;** hence, the Society to Return Women as Poor Law Guardians (1881-1904), the National Union of Women Workers (NUWW) (1888-1917) or the British Women's Temperance Association (BWTA), set up in 1876, worked with the WLGS. They exchanged speakers and meeting halls and had many common members both at grass roots and executive levels.[4] Their common ground was that women played a front-line part in social action, which was axiomatically local, and, for the sake of efficiency, women should reach local decision-making levels. These umbrella organisations surfed on the demand for, and the granting of, increasing powers and duties attributed to local government; electing women on Poor Law and school boards and on town councils (in the future) was the objective of WLGS political literature.

From an Ad Hoc Local Committee to a National Lobby Group, 1888-1893

The founding meeting took place in November 1888, at Mrs Sheldon Amos's house 'for the purpose of ascertaining the most eligible and likely ladies who would consent to put in nomination for election as members of the new county councils' (MEC 1888, 9 November). The twelve persons present, nine women and three men, belonged to the educated upper-middle-class circles with an interest in 'civic and imperial' politics. Sarah Amos, sister of Percy Bunting,[5] was then a widow and sat 'on the Executive Committee of the Women's Liberal Federation, was active in music-hall reform, the National Union of Women Workers and the

[3] After the January 1889 London Council election of Margaret Sandhurst and Jane Cobden, unhappy Conservative candidates contested their elected mandates. Emma Cons was co-opted.

[4] The Society to Return Women as Poor Law Guardians (WGS) will be examined along with the WLGS. For the WGS, see Hollis 1987, 195-246. For the National Union of Women Workers, see Bush 2007, 105-131. For the British Women's Temperance Association, see Barrow 2000, 69-89.

[5] Percy Bunting was the Editor of the *Contemporary Review* from 1888 until his death in 1911.

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Salvation Army' (Levine 2005a). She supported suffrage. Her sister-in-law, Mrs Bunting, *née* Mary Lidgett, came from a Methodist family involved in reforming circles. She supported her husband Percy's involvements in social reform, *[page182]* political Liberalism and the welfare of modern Methodism. Her sister, Miss Elizabeth S. Lidgett (1843-1919) was a Poor Law guardian (she would remain so for 40 years in St Pancras ward) and a suffragist; she declined to stand for election to the London County Council in 1889 but remained a lifelong supporter of the WLGS (Martin 2005c; Montmorency 2005d; WLGS 1920, 29).

From its inception to its end, the key personality in the WLGS was Annie Leigh Browne (1851-1936) who started this society, used her contacts and money for policy developments as the Honorary Secretary of the WLGS (1888-1917).[6] She was born in Bristol in a philanthropic and social reformist family. Once in London, she became involved in girls' education and accommodation. At the same period, she became the Honorary Secretary of the Paddington Women's Liberal Association. After 1888 she devoted most of her time to the Society for Promoting the return of Women as County Councillors which became in 1893 the WLGS.

The WLGS played a prominent part in the feminist campaign against the education acts of 1902 and 1903, under which the directly elected school boards on which women had been elected members since 1870 were replaced by local education authorities, on which women were disqualified from serving. Although as a concession to the agitation, the new education committees included co-opted members who were chosen for their involvement in education they lacked the authority of public support of elected members. Hence Annie Leigh Browne continued to organize and fund the campaign to secure access to local politics, and in 1907 her persistence was rewarded with the qualification of Women (County and Borough councils) Act (Martin 2005b).

Both Annie Leigh Browne and her friend Mary Kilgour (1851-1955) were convinced suffragists and quite impatient with the inconsequence of the Liberal party on women's suffrage. Mary Kilgour, a university graduate, supported herself through her maths teaching in advanced institutions for girls. She was part of the Executive Committee of the WLGS from December 1888 until 1918 and wrote much of its political literature in the 1890s. Many WGLS founding members sat on the National Executive of the Women's Liberal Federation (WLF) set up in 1886: Louisa Mallet and Emma Cons, Countess Aberdeen as President and Eva McLaren as Honorary Treasurer of both societies.[7] Louisa Mallet and Emma Maitland, Liberals, were Progressive party candidates for the 1891 London school board election. Both Emma Cons and Eva McLaren had worked with Octavia Hill and were prominent in the temperance movement just like Louisa Twining, a famous reformer of the workhouse system (Banks 1985, 216-217). *[page183]*

The two candidates who accepted to stand in the 1889 London election had to be unmarried;[8] Lady Sandhurst (a widow, founded the Marylebone Women's Liberal Association in 1887) stood successfully in Brixton. Miss Jane Cobden (then a spinster, and a promoter of

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[6] 'Miss Browne guaranteed £200 in the event of insufficient subscriptions not coming into the defence case', (MEC 1890, 13 March). The defence case referred to is *De Souza* v. *Cobden*. See below note 9.

[7] Honorary Treasurers of the WLGS: Eva McLaren 1888-1892; Mary Kilgour 1892-1900; Lady Lockyer (sister of Browne) 1900-1918. Presidents of the WLGS: Countess of Aberdeen 1888-1902; Louisa Twining 1903-1904; Lady Strachey: 1905-1918.

[8] See annex 1 for a chronology of women and local governing bodies.

women's suffrage within the Women's Liberal Federation) was also elected in the Bow and Bromley ward. Both had strong Liberal connections and were duly supported by the London Liberal and Radical clubs. Among the potential women candidates short-listed by the WLGS but who declined to stand, some were avowedly Conservative. Octavia Hill declined because she remained opposed to the enlarged duties of local government; she also opposed parliamentary women's suffrage as did Lady Jessel (Conservative) and Lady Jersey, Countess of Jersey, Chairman of the anti-suffrage league (MEC 1888, 22 November). They thought it obvious that women's local participation would lead to a national one. However, some anti-suffragists such as Mary Ward welcomed women's local participation while opposing their parliamentary enfranchisement.

The three men present at the first meeting were barristers-at-law or elected to the London County Council (LCC) or both. Was this a sign that legal advice would be immediately needed?[9] Walter McLaren, a Liberal MP and dedicated suffragist, joined the Executive Committee on 17 December 1888 and on 20 December wrote to them urging the appointment of a solicitor. This combination of male legal professionals and local or parliamentary representatives was to be characteristic of the WLGS for years to come. Most were Liberals or 'Progressives' such as the Fabian solicitor Costelloe. However some Conservatives did work for the cause of women as county councillors. Lord Meath, a Conservative peer and philanthropist, an alderman on the London County Council (1889-92; 1898-1901), was still a Vice-president of the WLGS in 1912. In the Lords, he introduced a private bill on women's qualification for local representation in May 1889 while Mr Channing did the same in the Commons. The Minutes of the corresponding 1889 Executive Committee of the WLGS detailed the preparation and strategic lobbying thus:

> The date for the second hearing being fixed for July 20th the question of the best means of obtaining support was considered. It was thought that information should be supplied to Lord Meath and the advice to friendly peers might be obtained from the Earl of Aberdeen. It was resolved that the secretaries be requested to see Lord and Lady Aberdeen and Lord Meath. […] It was decided not to petition in favour of the bill but to get up memorials to individual members in both houses and to obtain an influentially signed memorial to Lord Salisbury, of which copies might be circulated to MPs. (MEC 1889, 1 May). *[page184]*

In 1889 the WLGS gave priority to influence and personal lobbying, perhaps because their small membership made it impossible to adopt another strategy. Although WLGS women were mostly Liberals, they met Conservatives sympathetic to their objective in their social circles. Conservatives could collaborate and even supported the WLGS. Lady Strachey, a Conservative suffragist, joined the Executive Committee in 1900 and became its third president in 1905.

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[9] 'In 1889 [Margaret Sandhurst] was a member of the council of the Women's Franchise League and […] in January was elected to the London County Council, returned by Brixton. Her election was in March declared void because she was a woman, on the petition of Beresford Hope the Conservative losing candidate' (Crawford 2001, 617). 'Jane Cobden [later Mrs Unwin] held on her seat because her defeated opponent declined to take legal action against her. […] However, once she began actively to participate in committee work, a writ was filed and in 1891 *De Souza* v. *Cobden* was heard in the Court of Appeal. Her membership of the council was held valid but her participation invalid' (Crawford 2001, 695). This paradox comes from the fact that legislation was passed ignoring women and the legal restrictions they suffered from.

The same cannot be said about the Primrose League which had banned any involvement of its members in the Parliamentary suffrage campaign and debarred its branches from affiliating to other organisations. They were not likely either to support a lady candidate if she was not a Conservative as their remit was exclusively to support the Conservative party (Vervaecke 2007, 180-202). In practice, this meant that the WLGS could expect no formal participation from Primrose League women, which singularly weakened their non-party stance (MEC 1888, 13 December).

The WLGS consisted of reformist women (with a few men) who may have had front-line experience but also possessed several qualities essential to national propaganda: they had money; ladies of their class did not have jobs; they knew publishers, could write about their individual experience and beliefs and were read by their peers. By birth and education, they were involved in existing networks and practices, which eased their access to each other's address books. The WLGS was from the start overwhelmingly Liberal, first through the individual affiliation of its members and their family circles. Besides, their method — lobbying influential males in power, in a discreet way — was another illustration of the Liberal tradition applied by and to women. Its non-party stance was in keeping with the wish of well-meaning individuals, males and females, for public service and general good within a prescriptive dynamic of structural change: this was more akin to the Liberal idea of 'progress' than to the Conservative vision of society, even when the latter was reformist.

The Development of an Umbrella Organisation: The Field Work of Sister Groups Fed WLGS Propaganda.

The Society for Promoting the Return of Women as Poor Law Guardians (also Women Guardians' Society, WGS) was founded in 1881 by Miss Ward Andrews (later Mrs Heberden), Caroline Ashurst Biggs, Laura Ormiston Chant and Eva Muller (later Mrs Eva McLaren), all of them suffragists and Liberals. Chant and Muller were also temperance activists. The remit of the WGS was 'to promote the election or appointment of properly qualified and suitable women as Guardians of the Poor' (Crawford 2001, 105, 397-399, 642; WGS 1890, 2) This society was undoubtedly a forerunner to the WGLS which promoted women's participation *[page185]* first to county councils and after 1893 to all local governing bodies, making the Women Guardians' Society (WGS) somewhat redundant. Besides, Annie Leigh Browne had previously set up a Local Electors' Association (1886-1888) with Eva Muller (Mrs McLaren) and Caroline Biggs (d. 1889): connections between these groups were obvious. After 1893, the WLGS provided the Women Guardians' Society with literature and speakers, shared its premises, sold its literature and after the national WGS disbanded in 1904 sent the requested information, usually of a legal nature, to isolated Poor Law guardians or local groups. The WLGS even organised a nationwide inquiry on women Poor Law guardians and published a 34-page pamphlet entitled the *List of Women Poor Law Guardians and Rural District Councillors in England and Wales 1904*. As usual with these political women,[10] this publication had a double objective: to show the high number of women involved and at the same time the

[10] These activists may have objected to such an adjective, but involved in women's political emancipation as they were, they were undoubtedly 'political' women.

low ratio of female to male representatives. The second aim was to protest against the abolition of school boards (1902; 1904 in London) and the consequent disqualification of women (see annex 1).

Lists of members of both societies clearly show how valuably connected the two societies were from the early beginnings of the WLGS in 1888. Comparing the directing committees and membership of the 1889 WGS and the 1903 Women's Local Government Society highlights how closely the two groups were related. Their structure and membership were also remarkably stable through time. Many of the 1889 WGS members belonged to the 1903 WGLS (WGS 1890, 2-3; WLGS 1904a, 2-3, 27-38).

1889 Women Guardians' Society	1903 Women's Local Government Society
President (Lord Meath)	One (out of 4) Vice-President (Lord Meath)
10 Vice-Presidents	—
20 Council Members	9 (out of 20) belonged to the WLGS of whom 3 sat on the Executive Com. (out of WGLS 25) 6 were ordinary members
9 on the Executive Council	2 (out of 9) were ordinary members
60 Lady Guardians ex officio members of the Executive Council	17 (out of 60) belonged to the WLGS of whom 2 sat on the Executive Com. (out of 25)

[page186] This did not prevent the subscription of ordinary WGS members to the WLGS, nor did it deter the increasing number of individuals convinced of the need for female representation locally and nationally. WGS branches were clearly asked to affiliate to the WGLS and it was more likely than not that locally they would share premises, local information and speakers as well as members. Obviously, the Poor Law guardians naturally had their place in the WGLS, even more so after the Women Guardians' Society folded in 1904 (Hollis 1987, 205-235). Would the increasing number of ladies Poor Law guardians subscribe to the official successor of the WGS?

The 1894 Local Government Act introduced a residence qualification instead of a property one. This allowed for the massive arrival of working-class candidates, including women, and the nomination and election of women, including married women. 'One hundred and fifty-nine women were guardians in 1893, eight hundred and seventy-five in 1895' (five and half times more). 'But by 1897 its [WGS] Annual Report sadly noted that only a hundred of the country's nine hundred women guardians were members of the society. It lacked the money to contact the hundreds of newly elected women in the provinces.' By 1897 only 11% of the women guardians subscribed to the WGS; these subscribers may have been the same or the predecessors of those who transferred to women's umbrella organizations such as the WLGS after 1904.

This snowball effect (or the critical mass effect) discredited the traditional 'reflex hostility of many guardians and Poor Law officials to women joining their boards' (Hollis 1987, 208-209, 236). Party politics which were proudly rebuked by many lady guardians in the past came back to the fore as the legitimate way to select a candidate. If female empowerment had been of use for a transitional period before the 1894 Act, the 1894 parish legislation made the WGS less significant: its sponsoring became less valuable because less effective than party sponsoring. Besides backing women candidates as 'women' at election times, there was now the WLGS.

The first annual report of the Women's Local Government Society (1893) indicated 96 individual subscribers and donors; this figure increased steadily each year to 176 in 1897 (+ 83% since 1893), 253 in 1900 (+44% since 1897) and 483 in 1904 (+90% since 1900). Until 1907,[11] the society remained small in terms of numbers despite its growth. Interestingly, bigger numbers meant more influential subscribers all over the country. And yet the increased budget of the early 1900s did not match the increase in numbers. This could mean that the new subscribers' wealth did not match the original ones' (budget increases: 1893-1897: + 150%; 1897-1900: +99%; 1900-1904: +17%). The affiliated groups numbered 21 in 1894, and 26 in 1904; nearly all of them (respectively 90% and 92%) were Women's Liberal Associations. After 1907 the demand and conditions of affiliations varied so much (see annex 1) that the WLGS set up a subcommittee to deal with them. Suffrage activity was then intense in the country and women's local franchise had been achieved. *[page187]* In 1908-1909, the minutes of their executive Committee mentioned the following applications:

GROUP	affiliation	MEC
The York branch of the NUWW	Agreed	13 Nov.1907
Registration of Nurses Committee (because "Out of scope")	Rejected	11 Dec. 1907
Birkenhead WLGS (only if it became a WLG Association)	Agreed	8 Jan. 1908
Oxford WLGA (only once financial agreement reached)	Agreed	8 Jan. 1908
The Herbert Road branch of the Woolwich Women's Cooperative Guild	Agreed	12 Feb. 1908
Bath Association for the Return of the Women Guardians ("The Committee expressed the hope that the Association would extend their scope of work, so as to include the return of women to all local government bodies.")	Agreed	13 May 1908
Chelsea WLG A	Agreed	22 July 1908
The local government Sectional Committee of the (new) Bromley branch of the NUWW	Agreed	7 Oct. 1908
Anerley Women's Meeting (as it was not a structured group, it could only be affiliated under the name of their secretary)	Agreed	9 Dec. 1909
Synemouth Women's Local Government Association	Agreed	15 Jan. 1909
St Marylebone WLGA	Agreed	10 Mar. 1909
The local government Sectional Committee of the Brighton branch of the NUWW		

Interestingly, in their first years most of their work was in and about Parliament. What mattered was lobbying: going to Parliament and meeting MPs and Lords, sending deputations to members of the Government. Writing letters, networking and taking well-informed advice did not need high numbers to be effective either. This must be the reason why little literature can be traced from the earlier period: lobbying was more important than propaganda. With their first success in 1894 and their setbacks in 1899 and 1902,[12] the WLGS realized that they should be working on both fronts. The problem in 1894 had been to find women *[page188]* willing to go through the electoral process of nomination, campaigning and election. The small numbers of nominees and eventually elected women could be used by anti-suffragists to prove their point, that women wanted neither the vote nor the job. Although this was an argument used

[11] The Qualification of Women (County and Borough Councils) Act was passed in 1907.

[12] When London vestries became boroughs (1899), women lost their electoral qualification (see WLGS 1899). In 1902 school boards were abolished; town councils directly managed education authorities instead, thus disqualifying women who had sat on school boards since 1870 (see WGLS 1901; WGLS 1902b).

against female parliamentary suffrage, it was raised for local elections too. The second argument used by the Antis (or the indifferent) was that election was not the best way to get the best suited women into local government: co-option was seen by many as the way to ensure women's service without any recognition of their potential political weight. With the 1899 and 1902 changes (see annex 1) the same problem arose; if co-option was a way to obtain women's participation in local duties, why bother about reforming the law (WLGS 1902a)? As the WLGS was well aware, apathy was the next danger after stark opposition. Hence informative propaganda from the WLGS outwards to wider and wider circles became a necessity not only because of their success in recruiting members and affiliating groups but also as one weighty component of successful parliamentary lobbying.

Pamphlets directly published by the WLGS, sold to branches or sister organisations, project the image of a society whose tone had to be self-controlled and whose contents aimed at exhaustive information. The pamphlets were densely informative, sold by the hundred or the dozen from the WLGS office. Although the WLGS usually called them 'leaflets,' the standard pamphlet numbered four pages. No pamphlet prior to 1894 could be traced either because they did not publish any[13] or because they used available literature from the Women Guardians' Society.[14] The 1894 success vindicated the WLGS; it produced and distributed 37 different items over the period 1894-1918. In the post 1907 Qualification of Women Act period, publication was scarcer and consisted of long annual meeting speeches. By contrast, hard facts dominated the pamphlets issued between 1894 and 1907. The peak years' new production corresponds to four items per year in 1894, 1902, 1904 and five in 1907, all of them answering major changes in the law (see annex 1). Besides reprints, WGLS members could use the platform of other organisations. In 1903, Mrs Bamford Slack (WGLS and Liberal member) wrote a suffragist pamphlet *A Menace to Liberty* published by the Women's Liberal Federation, in which she based her suffragist arguments on women's contribution to local government and their disqualification from town and borough councils.

The Local Government Act of 1894 was good news 'for on the new local governing Bodies it is expressly provided that women may serve, *[page189]* and in the electorate married women have their rightful place' (WLGS 1894c, 1-2). This pamphlet entitled *Women's Work in England and Wales (not including London) under the Government Act, 1894, popularly known as the Parish and District Councils Act* was first published that same year and dealt with changes:

> But although it is the duty of women to see that the men elected are fit and proper persons, their duty does not end there. Not only must women offer themselves as Guardians as heretofore, but for the Council in every parish and in every District (other than borough) one or more suitable women should be induced to let themselves be nominated as candidates, — women of some firmness of character, determined to learn the new work patiently, to co-operate with their colleagues with good will and tact, and capable when principle is involved of making a stand even if unsupported by others (WLGS 1894c, 1-2).

[13] The hypothesis that there was none seems acceptable if one remembers that the first annual report is for the year 1893. Pamphlets that have been traced are in the pamphlet collection of the London School of Economics.

[14] The Society for Promoting the Return of Women as Poor Law Guardians published in 1887 *Some Notes upon the Election of the Guardians of the Poor* by Caroline Ashurst Biggs, a 14-page reprint from the *Englishwoman's Review*, 15 March 1887. The nine first pages deal with election law and processes and the importance of women's participation in local government. The final pages turned into Biggs's vision of good management of Poor Law and her analysis of pauperism. The *Englishwoman's Review* backed the WGS (Hollis 1987, 234).

This pamphlet belonged to the (likely) first series published by the WLGS. Women were informed of their new rights which typically implied new duties. Contemporary women could not misunderstand the modal phrases: they had to take part through their vote, candidacy and election. The language of duty and moral qualities drew the ideal picture of a paragon woman (a language targeting a female audience) which may have been deterring to some would-be female candidates. On the other hand, the contemporary tone and writing style — systematic then in women's political literature — stemmed from moral common place convention and softened such righteous overtones. Once women were ready for the contest, they were told what work was about in each administrative unit (parish councils, rural district councils now including Poor Law, urban district councils which were not boroughs). 'But as the Act does not deal with the constitution of town councils, women remain ineligible for these councils owing to the disability imposed on them by the Municipal Corporations Act.' There they could only stand for the separate Poor Law board election and serve as guardians. The short conclusion hoped women would

> (1) poll in large numbers for the best candidates;
> (2) offer themselves for election. For the former active work in registering qualified women is a necessary preliminary; and, as preparation for the latter careful study of the needs of localities is strongly recommended (WLGS 1894c, 4).

Duties were clear and methods too. Women's group work was emphasised. Neither should women believe that local politics was open to them by right: they would have to fight for their election, a step which in the past had debarred many qualified women from standing, especially on the much sought after school board — hence the former 'genteel' tactics of standing where none was willing to stand or negotiating to be the only candidate (Hollis 1987, 221-227). Obviously, this was foregone history already in 1894 when women and working-class citizens could and did stand thanks to the new residence qualification. This widening democratic basis is indicated by the numbers who stood as well as the choice of candidates, usually endorsed by a political party or one or several support groups, sometimes both (Hollis 1987, 224-246). *[page190]*

The second 1894 pamphlet, *Women's Work in London* adopted the same format. Changes were stated and the duties of London local bodies were listed:

> Their constitution is changed in the following way**:** — 'The Ballot Act and the Corrupt Practices Act are applied for the first time; the property qualification is abolished; and the principle of one person, one vote is established.' Further it is now made clear by the Act that women can serve on the London vestries and the Woolwich Board of health, and that married women ratepayers can be parochial electors.

The change is soberly acknowledged as 'making democratic the constitution of the Vestries and Board of Guardians.' More unusual in a pamphlet is the paragraph devoted to the vital role of the overseers described in this way:

> […] the most important vestry officials, the Overseers, whose chief duty it is to make and levy the poor rate, and also to make out the lists of parliamentary and local electors. The Overseers must be householders, and are usually nominated by the vestry. It is amusing to read: 'Even a woman may be appointed though men of discretion and substance are usually preferred!' (*Instructions and Explanations for the assistance of Overseers*,

> published by Shaw & Sons, Fetter Lane) …Meanwhile it is likely that women occupiers would have fewer complaints to make of being omitted from the register if one of the overseers were a woman. The accounts of the Vestries are audited by elected Auditors. Women can be elected (WLGS 1894b, 1-2).

The amusement mentioned is a small revenge compared to the permanent problems that women had with overseers. Even if the law was far from being clear, overseers usually took no risk and/or thought they were doing public good by systematically excluding women from the register. Of course, in practice the overseer could not be a woman as no vestry would appoint a woman in such a vital office. The above quotation illustrates the common stereotype about women being without 'discretion' or 'substance.' How contemporaries reconciled this shallow superficial vision with the one of the (too) stern (too) dutiful (remarkably) effective lady guardian probably lies in the inconsistencies of the human mind backed by contemporaries' ideological perception of women.[15] The final page of the pamphlet lists local authorities in London 'with names of clerks and addresses of offices' and suggests women should read their local 'annual reports, which contain important information.' Ladies dutifully poring over reports and checking that reality matched the book were not uncommon as the numerous testimonies accounted (Hollis 1987, 303-354).

The pamphlet entitled *The Position of Women under the Local Government Act, 1894,* issued in 1894 explained the rights of women which were 'large, but not equal to those secured to men': *[page191]*

> [Marriage no longer disqualified a woman] for voting in elections under this Act, provided that husband and wife not be qualified in respect of the same property. …The inequality between the electoral rights of men and women under the Act is introduced by the inclusion of the Parliamentary register. This inclusion newly confers full parochial rights on three classes of men, without conferring them on the same classes of women: the three classes referred to are male owners, male lodgers, and men enjoying the service franchise. *In respect to elections of poor law guardians, women owners are actually deprived of the right to vote which they have hitherto had.*

All parochial electors or alternatively all the residents for at least 12 months could be candidates. This WGLS pamphlet went on:

> It is easier for a man to qualify as a parochial elector than for a woman, but the residential qualification is equal between men and women, married and single, and will be invaluable as enabling many married women to give their services as Guardians, as District and Parish Councillors and as members of London vestries (WLGS 1894a, 1-4).

Making the local franchise dependent on the parliamentary one could simplify male registration; on the other hand, it increased electoral discrimination facing women at the local level as no woman could be on the 'parliamentary register.' However, the WGLS could be satisfied that residence instead of rate-paying and matrimonial status placed women on the local register, even if unmarried women became disqualified as 'householders' and qualified as residents like married women.

Service and Citizenship

[15] The ideological vision of women was that they were light and inconsistent, that is 'feminine'. If they were of the serious type, for instance lady guardians, they became 'unfeminine'; in both cases they were objects of ridicule in their contemporaries' eyes.

To serve was indeed easier than to elect. By 1894 the ideal of public work and public good in which women *gave* service to the community was hardly ever questioned. Their granted participation was objectified into another avatar of the feminine domestic role where sacrifice and one-way service were the rules. Women's groups (including the WLGS) would use these arguments to safeguard female involvement at local levels. They may have genuinely believed it; but they also understood that once their mandates and work was acknowledged, once their cautious speeches were common place, once their self-restraint was properly understood as determination, they could demand more. The gradual transfer from philanthropic to civic work, from service to citizenship, echoes the debate on pauperism versus poverty in the sense that contemporary thinking gradually took in the status of the individual not as an aggregate of the many making up the community but as a person endowed with rights, whether the individual was working-class, a pauper or a woman. Thus 'the class of women' does make sense as a group reaching for political emancipation; the more emancipated *[page192]* the less relevant the grouping.[16] The implicit contention women had to face (and perhaps fight) was their equivalence to 'family,' denying them their individuality.

Jane Lewis's *Women and Social Action in Victorian and Edwardian England* (1991) addresses 'social action' through the writings and campaigns of five well-known females, Octavia Hill, Beatrice Webb, Helen Bosanquet, Mary Ward and Violet Markham to conclude on 'the possibilities and limitations of women's social action' (Hollis 1987, 247-302; Lewis 1991, 302). These women activists grounded their action in 'charity' which, towards the end of the century, gradually melted into the scope and duties of local government. These first-rank women objectified 'local involvement' as a stepping stone to national debates. They drew their national roles from their first-hand experiences in social action which led them to campaign for social reform principally concerned with 'family' management, a concept however which dissolved women as individuals. In her article on 'Gender, the Family and Women's Agency in the Building of the "Welfare State:" the British Case,' Jane Lewis (1994) shows how

> Family and gender were neglected, notwithstanding the fact that the rules concerning eligibility and entitlements have always been saturated with gendered assumptions about family relationships. …The classic texts ignore gender, the family and indeed the voluntary sector. Most texts have considered welfare only in terms of state welfare (Lewis 1994, 37 footnote 1).

Still today, the relative neglect of local and women's issues — not to say local women's issues — seems to be the corollary of highlighting state and family, easier-to-deal-with units than 'women' even though they may be wives and mothers. Lewis states that 'family' is both a consumer and a provider of welfare and stands as a convenient euphemism for caring unpaid roles assumed by female members of the family. She also remarks that 'the study of women and poverty, for example, has remained largely separate, notwithstanding the concern about lone mother families' (Lewis 1994, 38 footnote 4).

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[16] Here is a description of Women guardians before 1894: 'In so far as [women guardians] continued to read pauperism as moral degeneracy rather than as economic or social dislocation (which under COS [Charity Organisation Society] influence they largely did), then they [were] among the most conservative members of their boards, the most judgemental, and the most unpopular' (Hollis 1987, 238). The post 1894 increasing participation in local government of females from various class and political backgrounds made it impossible to see any longer women guardians as such a homogeneous group.

In the period when the WLGS was active, women involved in local social action were already seen as demonstrating their traditional and respected abilities as 'carers,' an activity which they could not be blamed for. Local care was traditionally organised at two levels; philanthropic ladies organised charity for poorer women. Whether actors or recipients of help, these women partook of their 'caring role.' That is why the WGLS deliberately excluded anything which was not 'local' and which was not about 'local governing bodies.' Such a strategy breathed caution to better maintain consensus about the caring role of women in their families, the natural extension to the children in need and *[page193]* — euphemistically again — the 'children-like' destitute and paupers. By arguing that women had to be on local governing bodies because of their expertise in 'female' fields, that they had to elect and to serve because they did better jobs, the WLGS integrated the contemporary discourse on women's nature. In turn this served two objects: it did not battle in a frontal attack with the more conservative views on women and women's roles. For instance, some anti-suffragists (and suffragists too) supported the local female franchise through arguments based on female essence. Secondly it tried to set men and women not in stark rivalry but in two complementary fields, politics and care. However, such a low argumentative profile (about why women should have the local vote) could not cast a shadow over the WGLS target of the *technical* enfranchising of women.

Besides women's political presence still had to be neutralised even though, by the end of the nineteenth century, local government politics was a *passage obligé* for women as recipients of local welfare, as social activists or political 'community' contestants. What was at stake, in fact, in the late decade of the nineteenth century was the normalisation of single women in local politics and the arrival of married women on the same stage. Playing low key allowed the WLGS to have 'family women' enfranchised, even if officially it was for the sake of the same 'family' these wives had to be extracted from to give them political existence (Boussahba 2003, 42-53). However, it would be hasty to conclude that the WGLS women members were 'maternalists' or exclusively devoted to the welfare of mothers and children, especially as their remit, 'women to elect and to serve on all governing bodies' was geared towards all women becoming electors and getting elected, including working-class activists. After 1894 the WLGS and the WGS organised talks to increase the number of married working-class women candidates and backed them. Indeed, the latter vindicated the WLGS years of lobbying for women as a group, whatever their class and party affiliation. The WGLS agenda was to end sex discrimination in local politics, and it never abandoned its non-party stand. The fact that the WLGS was non-party — despite its members being Liberal and middle-class — was also soothing for many of these newcomers who took their first steps in politics and supported labour groups.

The WLGS was truly involved in political work, even if it was officially to help women reach decision levels for the sake of social policies. Their remit was about empowerment of women beyond class; their means was electioneering and there was no stigma of social origins if women were 'suitable'; as long as women were elected it became a victory because gender superseded class. Their approach was based on the idea that all types of women were capable of service; their (mainly) Liberal individual affiliations made them believe in improvement through time of systems and individuals with potential. Their main concern was having women candidates standing at local elections. The WGLS moralistic tone illustrated the widespread

idea that, by essence, women were morally superior to men, which meant that they should be rewarded with the vote. The lower-key phrase ‘equally with men’ suggested that, by right, women too should be part of the electoral process.

With such a vision of the role women had to play in local government, a vision which included women in and worked for the democratisation *[page194]* of local politics, it became difficult to obliterate the role women could play in national politics. If, according to the WLGS, they were capable of so much locally, they could not but be expected to be capable nationally. The WLGS as a group never varied from its non-party non-suffragist position, but individual members were overwhelmingly — and logically — suffragists. *[page195]*

Annex 1: a chronology of women in local government

Poor Law Boards remained independent from Local Government structure up to 1914; this guaranteed that women (first unmarried female householders then all female residents) retained the vote and eligibility as guardians from 1875. From 1894 residents made up parochial electors instead of ratepayers and owners (WLGS 1894abc; Graham and Brodhurst 1894, ix-x).

In the Edwardian period, female householders, single or widowed women and owners or tenants of property, may have represented 16% of the municipal electorate; determining their class remains difficult (Tanner 1990, 124-127). From 1894, outside municipal elections, married women could qualify as residents or as owners (if it was not for the same property as their husbands).

1835 local representation	Municipal Reform Act. Town councillors elected for two and a half years by ratepayers, males over 21 owners or tenants of property. Wards for voting in towns over 6,000.

1844 social reform	Poor Law Amendment Act. Owners and ratepayers were allowed to vote for the election of guardians.
1867 Representation of the people Act	Borough franchise extended to all *male* ratepayers and lodgers paying rental of £10, and one-year residence qualification
1870 education reform	School boards set up. *All women could be candidates. All ratepayers including women could vote.*
1870 status of women	Married Women's Property Act allows women to retain £200 of their own earnings
1875 status of women	*Women householders eligible for election to local Boards of Guardians.*
1882 status of women	Married women's Property Acts allows women to own and administer their property.
1884 Representation of the People Act	Uniform male parliamentary franchise in boroughs and counties on the basis of the 1867 act.
1884 status of women	Married women's property Act makes a woman no longer a "chattel" but an independent and separate person.
1888 Local Government Act	County councils set up, elected by ratepayers *including (unmarried) women householders*.
1889 Local Government, London	Establishment of London County Council. *Unmarried women householders could vote but could not sit on councils.*[17]
1894 Local Government Act	All parliamentary electors given the vote in local elections, *means no females*. Rural and urban district councils set up. Vestries abolished and new parish councils set up. Poor Law boards remained independent bodies. *All women ratepayers, including married women, eligible to vote for and sit on parish and district councils, London vestries as well as sit on Poor Law and school boards*. *Still debarred from sitting on county and borough councils.*

[17](Parker 1888, 11, 25). See note 9.

1899 Local Government Act, London	London vestries converted into borough councils. *All Women lost the parochial franchise based on residence*. *Only unmarried women householders could vote.*
1902 education reform	School boards abolished and replaced by new local education authorities; county and borough councils in charge of them. *All Women lost their standing qualifications, could only be co-opted*. *Unmarried women householders could vote.*
1904 London	London school boards abolished. *Women could only be co-opted.*
1907 status of women	Qualification of women (County and Borough Councils) Act. *All Women allowed to vote and become town councillors.*
1918 Representation of the People Act	Common franchise for county councils, boroughs, rural and urban districts on the basis of the parliamentary register (*women allowed to become MPs)*: *universal male (over 21) qualification; female (over 30) property-based qualification.*
1925 Status of women	Married Women's Property Act requires husband and wife to be treated as separate individuals in any property transaction.
1928 Representation of the People Act	*Women and men on the same terms on Parliamentary and local registers: universal suffrage for men and women over 21*.
1929 Local Government Act	Boards of Guardians abolished and their functions transferred to county councils and county boroughs

Sources: Parker 1892; Parker 1894; WLGS 1894a; WLGS 1894b; WLGS 1894c; WLGS 1899; WLGS 1901; WLGS 1902a; WLGS 1902b; Lauder 1907; R. S. Wright and H. Hobhouse, 1914; Cook and Stevenson 1983; Graham and Brodhurst 1894; Hollis 1987. *[page197]*

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