I

'Their Proper Sphere at Home' 1874

BEFORE THE 1870s there is little evidence of any consistent organization of women workers except in the textile unions. However, the assumption that women outside the textile industry did not organize at all until the 1870s is false. There is considerable evidence that women did. It is important, therefore, to record the early stirrings of militancy amongst women, which one reporter saw as 'more menacing to established institutions than the education of the lower orders'.[1] It is equally important to look at the reasons why women did not organize consistently or were not organized or supported by men. Some of the reasons are the same for men and women and lie in the nature of early trade unionism. But many of the reasons relate specifically to women and concern the type of jobs they did and the wages they received, the attitudes of men to women, the economic relationship in particular industries and the status, role and position of women in the 19th century.

From the outset of the Industrial Revolution the one feature which was common to all women's work was low pay. Records show that before the Industrial Revolution women earned less as day labourers than men even for the same work. Where payment was partially in food, women, likewise, were paid with smaller food rations regardless of whether they were pregnant or nursing mothers. The one job done almost exclusively by women, spinning, was poorly paid and a 'spinster', even though she worked all her working hours, could barely earn a subsistence wage.[2] It was this tradition of unequal pay, low pay and low evaluation of 'women's' skills which formed the basis of the pay and status of women workers entering the textile industry in the early 19th century and other areas of industrial labour subsequently. It was, in fact, to form the basis of all employment of women in the 19th century.

The productive role which women had played as part of the

economic unit of a family was largely forgotten in the social and economic changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution. In wealthier families women were relegated to idleness and in poorer families they became low-paid wage labourers. Those women who worked in the home to 'service' their male breadwinners had their recognized role eroded in status to one which was seen as having no economically recognized productive importance. Alice Clark in her book *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* described this change and its implications for women.

> It has been suggested that the earlier English Commonwealth did actually embrace both men and women in its idea of the 'Whole', because it was composed of self-contained families consisting of men, women and children, all three of which are essential for the continuance of human society; but the mechanical State which replaced it, and whose development has accompanied the extension of Capitalism, has regarded the individual, not the family, as its unit, and in England this State began with the conception that it was concerned only with male individuals.[3]

For all the state's concern with 'male individuals', the Industrial Revolution was based on the labour of child and female 'individuals'. In 1838 only 23% of textile factory workers were adult men.[4] Since women earned on average half what men earned, it was not surprising that they were employed in such large numbers. The level of women's pay was uniform in all branches of textiles throughout the country; there was no such uniformity about the types of jobs that women did. The assumption that the sexual division of labour in industry and its consequent sexual pay structure were based on such things as men's physical strength and their allegedly superior skills is not borne out by evidence. In different branches or geographical areas of textiles women did different jobs. Men quickly gained a dominant position in the cotton industry by controlling the most skilled jobs, those of spinning and weaving, those jobs were almost entirely the province of women in the jute and flax industry in Dundee.[5] From the outset there was clearly little logic in what was regarded as a 'woman's job' or a 'man's job', but equally clearly sexual divisions in labour were quickly established. Once established these divisions became entrenched by a sexual pay structure

which paid women about half the male rate. Women working in exclusively 'female' work earned even lower rates. Other industries, which followed textiles in the process of mechanization, adopted a similar pattern of male and female divisions of labour and wage rates. It was against this picture of entrenched divisions between men and women workers, divisions which mirrored the social and legal status of women, that the early trade unions began to organize.

Trade unions in the 19th century developed in a piecemeal way, trying out and settling for a variety of structures, rules, policies and memberships. With the repeal of the Combination Acts in 1824 and the passing of Peel's Act the following year, which gave unions the right to collective bargaining, trade unions were able to widen their scope and recruitment from being merely Friendly Societies or illegal combinations. Despite this freedom trade union organization, for a variety of reasons, remained mainly restricted to skilled or craft workers. It was generally believed until the late 19th century that effective organization of and action by unskilled workers could not be successful. This attitude excluded many men workers and almost all women workers. Since women were excluded from apprenticeships, they were excluded from skilled jobs. The exception to this was the category of 'traditional' women's skilled jobs, such as millinery, mantua making and needlework. Although the craft unions dominated the first three-quarters of the 19th century, other unions with less restrictive membership policies did emerge and there were many more attempts at organization of a variety of semi-skilled workers. Frequently workers took action against intolerable conditions, usually wage cuts, but such spontaneous action by no means necessarily led to permanent organization. Given this piecemeal development of trade unions, it is not surprising that there was no prevailing attitude taken on the question of the organization of women workers. In fact from the beginnings of trade union organization a variety of attitudes emerged towards what was seen as 'the problem of female labour.'

The most advanced and exceptional attitude emerged in a few of the textile unions, who established the first mixed unions for men and women workers. Some men trade unionists, whilst

they were not prepared to open up their membership to women, did believe that women should be organized separately and on rare occasions offered support to that end. Not all women were entirely governed by the attitude of men and from the early 19th century some of them took independent militant action, tried to organize and sought support from men. All these attitudes, however, were an exception. The attitude which dominated the policies of the early trade union movement was that expressed by Henry Broadhurst to the TUC in 1875. He maintained that the main aim of a trade union with regard women was to

> bring about a condition . . . where their wives and daughters would be in their proper sphere at home, instead of being dragged into competition for livelihood against the great and strong men of the world.[6]

Since few trade unionists considered the question in terms of the 'rights of women', the attitudes which evolved in relation to the organization of women were adopted in response to women's economic position. The fact that women were paid about half the male rate for the job meant that they, as cheap labour, were seen by men as a potential, or actual, threat to men's jobs. But, with very few exceptions, men did not challenge the wage rate paid for the job; they challenged the women's right to the job. This attitude arose from the unquestioning acceptance by trade unionists of the dominant ideology of Victorian society which saw women as second-class citizens in every sense. However, by accepting the social and economic position of women, trade unionists created a trap for themselves, from which they were only to emerge when they could see women as workers and not as a separate group – women.

This 'trap' was most clearly evident in what seemed the insoluble problem which skilled unions faced, namely 'the problem of female labour'. The problem tended to appear either where mechanization was introduced, causing dilution of the skill and threatening the tight control skilled unions could exercise through apprenticeships, or where employers realized that the jobs, or part of the jobs, could be done by women. The following extract from the records of the Brush-

makers Union in 1829 sums up the situation many craft unions faced.

> Now there was another matter the Brushmakers had to put up with. Economic matter known as FEMALE LABOUR.
> This became serious in 1829. Many a man lost his job. The numbers ON THE BOOK were alarming.
> The movement initiated by a few employers was to cheapen labour. Whilst the Society paid £15 to Members willing to emigrate; and 10s a week out-of-work relief to SURPLUS men at home; and Tramping Money to numbers seeking work in all the various towns; certain masters employed women to do men's work at half price.
> So it came to pass that poor women became the enemy of poor men.[7]

The brushmakers recognized that the women were desperate for jobs 'because bread was wanted that day – that hour' and that it was not the women who should be blamed; 'the wickedness was in the hand that withheld the other half'. Again the brushmakers recognized the cause of the trouble, but they could see no solution to the problem other than going 'to reason with the Employers' who 'employed women to do men's work at half price'. Needless to say, they found that 'there is no task more difficult for working men than to go and reason with the employer of cheap labour'. The extracts on that subject ended with this resigned note.

> Be it said, the matter of women being given men's work at half-price was a stubborn fact that had come to stay.[8]

Nowhere did anyone suggest any way around the problem other than trying to control entry, reasoning with the employer and hoping that the practice would somehow go away. So women continued to take jobs at half pay because they needed bread 'that day – that hour' and 'poor women became the enemy of poor men'.

This state of enmity existed in many trades and most unions confronted with it found that they could not resolve it because of this acceptance of women's inequality. Some skilled unions managed to keep the problem under control by rigidly enforcing the exclusion of women, but few could make the policy hold against employers who were determined to employ labour at

half price. By not recognizing women, by excluding women from their organizations and by refusing to see women as workers which would have led to a demand for equal pay the craft unions fought a losing struggle. They could merely blindly dream of a day when 'their wives and daughters would be in their proper sphere at home'. This hope was echoed in a statement issued by the Central Committee of the Consolidated Union of Bookbinders, who had found that the employment of women and children on men's work had recently caused them

> a large amount of expenditure in Manchester, and has always been a source of annoyance and disquietude wherever it is allowed, and we trust our members will see their own interest in keeping it within reasonable limits until such time as we can see our way to do away with it altogether.[9]

Whilst unequal pay for the same work was the main cause of enmity between men and women workers, the objective conditions of some industries meant that employment was so structured that men and women workers could have little common interest. In industries like the potteries the skilled potters who were employed for an overall piece-rate, themselves employed women and children as their assistants. Such an employment structure meant that whilst the potters tried to organize in the mid-19th century to protect themselves against their own employers they neither extended union membership nor encouraged union organization of their own employees. This was to have disastrous effects for trade union organization;

> When, in later years, owing to improved methods of manufacture, women were able to compete with men for the same job, they came with a long tradition of low wages behind them and with no experience of union organisation. By their behaviour men had shown that they did not believe that the interests of all workers in the trade, men and women alike, were ultimately identical, and consequently it was not to be expected that women would believe in it either. By their selfish, short-sighted policy, men made of women much more serious and unscrupulous competitors than they otherwise would have been.[10]

For most craft unions a state of warfare between men and women workers seemed the inevitable future until some day when women could be eliminated from the workforce. How-

ever, a few proposed another solution – the separate organization of women. Normally this was seen as a way to raise women's wages so that they would present less of a threat to the men's rate, but the more concerned men were also outraged at the appalling exploitation of women workers. Separate action and organization was the obvious expression of a society which was based on evaluating the sexes separately. In the 1830s and 1840s there is considerable evidence of this policy being expressed, and in some instances pursued, either as a conscious policy or as a 'natural' expression of the divided work situation.

Like other craft unions the cotton unions in the early 19th century were concerned about the problems of female labour. Initially their union organization followed typical skilled craft unions in restricting membership and charging high dues and entry fees. However, their strength was constantly undermined, particularly in strikes, by the large numbers of unorganized, mainly women, workers in their industry. Being a little more realistic than most other trade unionists of the time, the cotton workers realized that women were not likely to disappear from their industry; so, in 1830, the Ramsay Congress of Spinners passed a resolution urging women to form their own organizations. During the 1830s and 1840s many women textile workers did take action and organize separately.

In 1833 in Scotland it was reported that 'the women powerloom weavers are driven to form a Union';[11] and in Glasgow that same year women and men spinners and powerloom weavers combined to raise money to fight for equal pay. Evidence to a select committee on manufacture recorded that a man had seen a letter signed by a woman calling upon one house to raise wages equal to the men's.[12] In Leeds 1,500 'Cord Setters in the neighbourhood of Scholes and Hightown, chiefly women, held a meeting . . . at which it was determined not to set any more cards at less than halfpenny a thousand'.[13] Meanwhile the Female Operatives of Todmorden combined to write a letter to the *Examiner* defending their right to work. Without any organizational base and without strike funds, women often needed great courage or desperation to take action. The following account of a strike by six girls in Dundee in 1846 gives a picture of the kind of treatment meted out to

those workers who challenged their employers. The six girls demanded an increase of a $\frac{1}{2}$d a day which was refused. The girls in their turn refused to return to work. On the following day the employer, Mr Baxter,

> instead of fining the girls, had them arrested and marched through the streets under police escort to a private office where was seated a magistrate, one of the Baxter family, and the overseer and the manager of the mill. The judicial Baxter there and then sentenced the girls to 10 days' hard labour.[14]

If women were not defeated by 'the law', their lack of strike funds meant that they were unlikely to be able to withstand a prolonged dispute. Being 'hungered back' to work after six weeks, as were women strikers in Glasgow in 1847, was a typical outcome of many disputes of the period.

Women textile workers were by no means the only women workers to take action or to organize separately. Nor were the textile unions the only ones to support a policy of separate organization of women. The Grand National Consolidated Trades Union of Great Britain made a specific point in its charter of laying down guidance for the separate organization of women. Point XX of the charter stated that 'Lodges of Industrious Females shall be instituted in every District where it may be practicable; such Lodges to be considered in every respect, as part of the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union'.[15] Even wives were provided for in the charter, since they could become members of Auxiliary Lodges and thus be included in the GNCTU. Some Lodges of women were formed as part of this grand plan, the most notorious being the Oldham Lodge of Ancient Virgins, who were particularly active in fighting for the ten-hour day. Women lace workers in Nottingham had also established a considerable level of organization in the 1830s. At a meeting held to protest against the transportation of the six Dorchester men (the Tolpuddle martyrs), women unionists turned up in a 'large body' to join the men

> and were greeted with three hearty cheers from their brethren in Union with whom they afterwards walked in procession to the market place where after singing a portion of a hymn the whole assemblage quietly dispersed.[16]

Ten years later, in the 1840s, there was still some organization of women, namely the Nottingham Lace Runners Association, which tried unsuccessfully to organize a 'turn out' of homeworkers.[17] However, there are no records of continuing organization of women lace workers. In the 1850s, when men lace workers began to organize themselves on the lines of the New Model Unions, with low subscriptions and an emphasis on mediation, not strike action, women were excluded from membership.

On rare occasions men not only advised a policy of separate organization, for women, but tried to help women to establish them. This kind of co-operation is hinted at in the records of such strikes as the Glasgow 'equal pay strike' of 1833. Such co-operation was even more evident in a series of disputes in the bookbinding trade in London in the 1830s and 1840s. In fact the journeymen bookbinders of London and Westminster in the 1830s decided to act on behalf of the women employed by the British Foreign Bible Society, when the society tried to reduce the wages of both men and women employees. The journeymen petitioned on behalf of about 200 women,

> the whole of whose wages have been reduced in consequence of the late alteration in the prices of these books. Their wages were before very low. Your memorialists respectfully submit that the making it more difficult, and in some cases impossible, for females to earn an honest subsistence, by their labour, is in the same proportion to give potency to the seducers of female virtues.[18]

Whether it was owing to their strength or the moral argument they used, the journeymen did achieve for the women better rates for a ten-hour day. Without organization of the women, rates and conditions worsened to a point at which in 1845 the journeymen decided to protest once again. They petitioned the employers on behalf of the women, claiming that women

> often have not the power to plead their own cause in such matters, and being helpless in many respects where their wages are concerned, they are trodden down until a state of things such as described in the 'Song of the Shirt' appals the mind with the enormity of their injuries, their suffering and their moral condition.[19]

This time, however, the employers did not concede to the journeymen's argument and dismissed a number of women who signed a statement agreeing with the journeymen's claims. The dismissed women were supported by a walkout of about 100 women. The journeymen not only helped the women to formulate a claim, but also contributed to a strike fund for them. Despite that help, the unity of the strikers slowly disintegrated as women either accepted work elsewhere or returned to work at the old terms.

Whilst the journeymen bookbinders of London and Westminster saw clearly the need to fight for improved wages for women as part of a way of protecting their own wage rates, there was no suggestion that they should offer membership to women in their association. In fact the only area in which the idea was considered and acted upon was in certain textile unions. The textile unions were, in the 19th century, the advanced vanguard of the organization of men and women workers.

Despite the hope expressed by the spinners unions that women would organize separately, such organization on any effective scale did not develop. The spinners gradually realized that the lack of organization of all the less-skilled ancillary workers in spinning was seriously hampering and undermining their own organization. The spinners unions, based on craft lines, restricted membership to male spinners who could afford the high entry fees and dues. With such high dues the unions could afford to pay strike pay to their members, but any strike of spinners immediately put out of work large numbers of unorganized workers who had no organization or strike fund. These unorganized workers, who were mainly women, formed a ready group of 'knobsticks', 'blacklegs' and strike breakers. They were often driven to desperate measures to avoid starvation. To try to stop their strikes being broken by other workers, the spinners unions finally accepted the separate organization of piecers and cardroom workers. At first they excluded women, but in 1837 the Bolton Association of Cotton Spinners admitted women to their piecers' section and other unions or sections of unions organizing piecers and cardroom operatives soon followed suit. In an industry in which women predominated, it was ludicrous

to form a union from which the majority of workers in that job were excluded. For some time the spinners' sections of unions continued to exclude women from membership, but slowly the rules were changed and women were admitted. The weaving unions followed the same pattern in the cotton industry.

The textile unions became the pioneers of mixed unions. Their pioneering spirit went even further. Not only did they accept men and women into membership, they negotiated rates based on 'the rate for the job' and not on a rate for 'the sex of the worker doing the job'. The fact that the unions organized so widely in the cotton industry enabled them to achieve through collective bargaining fixed wage rates – an achievement that was far in advance of other unions. In 1853 a group of employers conceded collective bargaining and agreed to a list of wage rates in spinning. This historic agreement was known as the 'Blackburn List'. Not only was it a list which fixed rates for each job, but the rates were fixed on the basis of the rate for the job. This precedent was followed by other textile unions, so that in effect, from the outset of collective bargaining and written agreements in the textile industry, there was equal pay. In fact few women earned as much money as men, since the majority of women worked in unskilled and semi-skilled jobs and the men tended to corner the best-paid skilled jobs. However, the policies of the textile unions of having a mixed membership and of negotiating a rate for the job were unique. They led a large and active female membership in the textile unions. No other unions of the period followed their example, but there is no doubt that if they had, the history of women workers in the trade union movement would have been very different.

Whilst women workers did protest, strike, demonstrate and organize, there is little evidence that their action had any real effect in terms of protecting or improving their wages, hours and conditions except in the textile industry. Even there collective bargaining only achieved fixed wage rates. In all industries women workers were appallingly exploited in the 19th century. Bad work conditions, excessively long hours and outrageously low wages were the norm. In addition, they suffered many indignities and humiliations at the hands of foremen and

employers. Their already sub-subsistence wages were eroded by excessive disciplinary fines and by deductions made for materials. Those women who were not ground down by years of working seventy-eight hours a week in bad conditions, on a poor diet, with child-bearing the only interruption, might well die from one or other industrial disease. The conditions of working women in the mines, the textile factories, the potteries and many other industries during the first part of the 19th century have been frequently quoted; the exploitation of women was second only to the exploitation of child labour. Outside the textile unions, male trade unionists almost entirely washed their hands of the plight of women workers. It was the government which became the main body concerned with their protection.

The Victorian parliamentarians, confronted with such reports as the Sadler Committee in 1833 on Child Labour, the annual reports of the factory inspectors from 1833 onwards and the many other government reports on individual industries found their consciences stirred. The report of the Children's Employment Commission on Mines and Collieries, with its description of child and female labour, moved parliament so greatly, even some members to tears, that the Mines Act of 1842, which barred women and children from working underground, was hastily passed. This act met with little hostility from the men workers, because in some pits they had tried, sometimes successfully, to ban women from work underground since women prevented 'lads and men from getting their proper wages'.[20] For the government, the passing of the Mines Act was, in the words of B. L. Hutchins and A. Harrison, 'perhaps, the most high-handed interference with industry enacted by the State in the nineteenth century, and it doubtless led the way to the inclusion of women in the much milder Factory Bill of 1844'.[21] Interference by the state with *laissez-faire* capitalism had begun in 1819 with the first legislation restricting the hours of child labour. As legislation increasingly restricted child labour through the 1820s and 1830s, women, the second source of cheap labour, were employed in increasing numbers to work for excessively long hours. Some employers employed married females, whom they found even more exploitable than single

women. Lord Ashley, in a speech on the Ten Hours Bill, quoted a letter in which the writer claimed that

> Mr E, a manufacturer informed me that he employs females exclusively at his power-looms; . . . gives a decided preference to married females, especially those who have families at home dependent on them for support; they are attentive, docile, more so than unmarried females, and are compelled to use their utmost exertions to procure the necessities of life.[22]

From the outrage caused by government reports, a movement began to press parliament to legislate for the restriction of hours that women should work in industry. The motives of the men trades unionists who supported the campaign were mixed. In part they hoped that they would gain from 'behind the women's petticoats' a restriction on their own hours. They also hoped for further restrictions on women; the Yorkshire Short Time Committee advocated a restriction on the hours women could work, but wished also to see a restriction on the proportion of women to men employed and a ban on married women working. Women were frightened that a restriction on the hours they could work would mean that they would lose their jobs fearing that the employers would prefer men who could work for any number of hours. The government was swayed, not by trades-union argument, but by a report which brought to light the terrible facts of the long hours, low wages and appalling conditions that were the lot of women textile workers. In 1844 an act was passed restricting the hours of women employed in textile factories to twelve hours a day. The employers quickly found a way of evading the act: they employed women on relay systems, making it virtually impossible for the inspectors to discover the hours actually worked. To try to stop such evasions the 1850 Factory Act was passed. It laid down that the ten-hour legal maximum working hours for women textile workers must be fixed between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. or 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. As such the Act of 1850

> was an important turning point in the history of English factory legislation, [since] by it a normal working day was for the first time expressly established, or, in other words, the legal working day was made to coincide with the legal period of employment, allowance being made for meal times.[23]

The mid-19th century saw a piecemeal, but ever-growing, body of factory legislation. The textile industry was chosen as the first industry in which the hours of women were restricted, not so much because its hours were longer or their conditions worse than in other industries, but because public attention had been focused on it. As public attention, through government reports was directed to other industries, legislation was passed controlling the hours women could work in a variety of factory-based industries. The potteries, the lace industry, printing, dyeing and bleach works were all included. Through their reports the factory inspectors spearheaded the campaign for the extension of legislation to cover all women factory workers. They even recommended the extension of the factory acts to include private houses and small domestic industries. As more evidence poured in of the pay and conditions of women workers, it was revealed

> that there was nothing special about excessive hours of work, insanitary conditions, overstrain and waste of life and power; that these were not peculiar to any one kind of work or any one form of industry but might be found wherever the workers were cheap and competition unregulated, existing perhaps in their acutest form in the 'cottage homes of England'.[24]

In the 1860s factory legislation was extended tentatively to include certain sanitary provisions as well as regulations about the fencing of machinery. The latter was opposed by the National Association of Factory Occupiers, the Association for the Mangling of Operatives as Dickens called it, an organization of employers whose aims were to oppose further extension of factory legislation.

The 1842 Mines Act and the Act of 1844 restricting the hours of women working in textile factories marked the beginning of the long history of legislation relating to women workers. This state interference into the affairs of employers, which was against the capitalist ethic of *laissez-faire*, was justified by its parliamentary supporters on the ground that women and children were weak, helpless creatures in need of protection. The male textile workers' reasons for supporting the restriction of hours on women were not merely in the interests of their womenfolk. They hoped to gain not only a reduction of their

own hours of work, but also a cut-back in the employment of women generally. Other unions would have welcomed the application of the Mines Act to their trades, since it would have solved the problem of women being employed for half pay.

These two acts were not only precedents in state interference with employers 'rights', they were also precedents in state interference with free collective bargaining. From these acts right through the extensions of the factory acts to the Trades Boards Acts (Wages Councils), the Equal Pay Act and the Sex Discrimination Act, the trades unions have accepted, in relation to women, statutory interference in the basic spheres of collective bargaining – hours and pay. From the outset of protective legislation the trade union movement has looked to parliament rather than organization to deal with some of the most critical problems relating to women workers. The history of women workers' struggle for better wages, hours, conditions and opportunities is closely linked with legislation.

Whilst the organization of women workers was, before the 1870s, mostly confined to the textile unions, the roots of that organization had been strongly laid. The roots, too, of divisions and attitudes which were to influence the varied developments of the organization of women workers had been firmly laid. Unequal pay and the acceptance of cheap female labour; the attitude that a woman's proper sphere was the home; the change to the individual male as the basic unit in the capitalist labour market and the attendant non-recognition of women's productive role as bearer of children and homekeeper: all these were entrenched in the early 19th century and gave rise to a heritage of tensions, misunderstanding and lack of clear socialist thinking which hindered the development of the trades union movement. The social and economic position which women were forced into by the Industrial Revolution created the conditions which made it difficult to organize women, even though the behaviour of the textile unions showed that it was by no means impossible.

Working-class women were not only economically oppressed. Their social and legal inferiority inhibited their self-assertion. The fact that Victorian middle-class men deified the mother and wife at home and denied middle-class women the right to

work or to study meant that, within the world of work, women had nothing to aspire to. They could merely aspire to marrying a man who would earn enough to support them. To become that very rare phenomenon, a forewoman in a factory, was perhaps the highest peak they could reach. A poor girl working in a milliner's shop might dream of becoming the proprietress, but she was much more likely to have to turn to prostitution in times of slack trade to keep herself alive. In the 1850s and 1860s a few middle-class women had begun to open up other horizons than the lonely, ill-paid job as governess. Miss Buss and Miss Beale pioneered serious education for girls and other women fought for the rights of women to enter the professions, particularly medicine.[25] But in Victorian society women, Queen Victoria apart, took no leadership roles. They looked to men for leadership.

In talking of the oppression of women in the 19th century women's role as child-bearers cannot be omitted, since much of the oppression of women by men was justified by reference to it. Child-bearing took a great toll on women's health and lives. In 1845 the average number of live births born to married women was 5.71. The numbers of miscarriages and still births are unrecorded. Poor diet, unsanitary housing conditions and poverty and ignorance led to appalling suffering and high death rates in women through pregnancy and childbirth. The infant mortality rate was high, but contrary to the popular belief of the time it was not higher among children of working women than among children of non-working women. The highest mortality rate was found in mining communities, where the women traditionally did not work. Poverty, ignorance and dirt were, and still are, the main causes of infant mortality, not the assumed neglect by working mothers of their children. The life of a woman worker in the 19th century was hard; economic necessity was the only reason why married working-class women worked. Teenage girls, if all their wages did not go to support their families, could enjoy a brief few years of independence, money to spend and a little free time. They had little to look forward to. They faced a future of relentless child-bearing and rearing, hard toil and a short life-expectancy, for only one third of the girls who reached the age of 15 could in 1845 expect to survive until the age of 65.

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22 Quoted in PINCHBECK op.cit. p.194
23 B. L. HUTCHINS & A. HARRISON op.cit. p.107
24 B. L. HUTCHINS & A. HARRISON op.cit. p.165
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