

## **To 'blaise the trail for women to follow along': sex, gender and the politics of education on the London School Board, 1870-1904.**

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### **Introduction**

In October 1876, Florence Fenwick Miller (1854-1935) received a letter from the Reverend Stewart Headlam on behalf of the Bethnal Green Commonwealth Club, inviting her to become a candidate for the Hackney division of the London School Board. Educated, socially aware and a member of the first women's movement in Britain, Florence accepted the offer because she was interested in the education of the working classes and wished to speak on behalf of elementary school girls and women teachers. She was also motivated by what she described as the 'scandalous shortage' of women with the drive and ambition to pursue interesting careers in the public arena. Florence had strong connections with pioneer doctors Elizabeth Garrett Anderson and Sophia Jex-Blake, was well known to the leaders of the major suffrage societies and had reached the point of enjoying an established reputation among the intellectual elite of the London Dialectical Society. At 22 years she became the youngest woman ever elected to the largest and most powerful organ of local government then in existence.

Opportunities for women in local government increased greatly in the last third of the nineteenth century. Although civic policies and administration were complicated by a tangle of authorities and agencies, the Municipal Franchise Act of 1869 was the first of a number of measures that were to effect

women's democratic participation. This piece of legislation restored the local vote to women ratepayers (a right they had lost under the 1835 Municipal Corporations Act). The following year the passing of the Elementary Education Act made women eligible for nomination and election to the thousands of locally elected school boards set up in and after 1870. The extension of Victorian state activity engendered new forms of public service and women were active in their localities as elected and appointed officials responsible for the administration of most education and welfare services. Thane has noted the unique quality of the British situation by highlighting the fact that no other major state in Europe or America offered women 'a comparable institutional role at such an early date'(1993, p. 351). Nonetheless, female involvement in the development of the state system of elementary education has been neglected in the traditional historiography of mass schooling. Besides debates about female invisibility, this is because the activities of the central state apparatus have been accentuated and 'these histories have been written from the records of the official central state run by male bureaucrats and politicians'(Koven, 1993, pp 94-5). As a consequence, there has been little work on the often lengthy public careers of local activists. However recent work by Hollis (1989), Hughes (1992), Martin (1991, 1995, 1999) and Turnbull (1983) aims to understand and rediscover the position of women in the process of local educational policy-making. So, women's participation in the politics of schooling is beginning to be released from historical obscurity.

This article considers the issue of female involvement by focusing on the work of the 29 women elected to serve on the London School Board.[1] It is based largely on a quite new source of manuscript material (the unpublished autobiographical fragment written by Florence Fenwick Miller) among the Contemporary Medical Archives Centre at the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine.[2] The object is to place Florence as a central character in the analysis. The availability of her memoir has thrown up issues pertinent to current debates about the history of English feminism and produced new interpretations of the friendship networks that made up the metropolitan women's movement. However there is no attempt to categorise these women as feminists. As elected women they all publicised the work of women in local government but this did not mean they were all motivated by interest in sex equality issues. The term 'feminism' was not widely used until the First World War (Caine, 1997, p.8) and it will become clear that sexual politics needs to be considered alongside party politics. Different class interests were also important and this article seeks to emphasise the diversities amongst activist women considered in relation to thought and actions. These themes will be located within a discussion of the role of women as educational policy-makers.

The paper is divided into three parts. The first part looks at the issue of women's representation. In so doing it will focus on the selection process; as well as the background and the political beginnings of these female politicians. The main focus is the recollections of Florence Fenwick Miller and a biographical method is used to make visible the links between private life

and public practice. Part two considers the political culture of the institution itself. The London School Board was the world's largest educational authority and the presence of women immediately complicated and partly contradicted the general connection of authority with masculinity. Hence the third part uses a historical methodology to explore women's careers as educational policy-makers. Overall, the article throws up a series of questions. Did the involvement of women change the political culture? What impact did they have on the education policy agenda?

### **Political Candidature**

Up to a point the school boards were democratic institutions. They were the first elected bodies to admit women on the same terms as men; but most people lacked the necessary resources and motivation to contest the elections. However political conviction combined with the tradition of female philanthropy and, specially in the towns, school board politics provided an important field of endeavour for the women's movement (Hollis, 1989; Martin, 1993, 1998; Turnbull, 1983). This was because the new franchise allowed women with the necessary property qualifications to vote; while multiple voting and the possibility of giving all your votes to one candidate favoured the representation of electoral minorities. Created under the terms of the 1870 Education Act, factors of size and formation placed the London School Board in a unique position. Whereas other school boards were restricted to between 5 and 13 members, the first London Board had 49 members, rising to 55 by the mid-1880s. In addition, the metropolis was divided into 10 vast wards (except the inner square mile of the City itself), which each returned a

number of candidates. As might be expected, the School Board for London was a flagship institution and played a vital role in setting the educational standards for other school boards to follow. London was the centre and symbol of imperial and national power and the letters MSBL (member of the School Board for London), served to convey a certain sense of prestige and social status among ones' peers.

The conditions for public life will be investigated in terms of political background, socio-economic status, education, marital status and family commitments. Florence Fenwick Miller has supplied a vivid record which, while it may not be wholly representative, is illuminating. Florence was the eldest child of John Miller, a captain in the British merchant marine and Eleanor Fenwick, the daughter of a civil engineer. She grew up in London in the 1850s and 1860s, in comfortable middle class surroundings (the family had an income of between £600 and £700 per annum). First educated at a dame school, her mother then gave her lessons at home before she entered a Young Ladies' Seminary at the age of six; a year later she was sent away to complete her education at boarding school. In her late teens Florence was attracted to medical training and it is noteworthy that her father supported her decision, whereas her more socially conservative mother was left feeling 'she had three sons and no daughter'(Fenwick Miller, Chapter 4, unpaginated). One of the first seven women students at Edinburgh University in 1871, she enrolled at the Ladies' Medical College, London, finished with Honours and gained a portion of clinical instruction at the British Lying-In Hospital. In the 1870s she ran a practice for women and children from her parents home in

Victoria Park. In 1879 she married Frederick Ford (honorary secretary of the London Dialectical Society); he was not very successful in business and Florence had to rely on daily or weekly journalism to support herself economically. By the 1880s she was writing steadily for a variety of publications including the *Modern Review*, *Lady's Pictorial*, *Fraser's* and *The Governess*; as well as being the author of several teaching texts. Marriage was quickly followed by motherhood (the couple had two daughters, Irene born 15 April 1880, and Helen born 1 July 1881); yet Fenwick Miller managed also to occupy significant public positions. Possibly her ego helped. We learn that her 'success as a public speaker was from the first quite exceptional' and that despite maternal opposition she found the electoral contest 'most exhilarating'(Fenwick Miller, GC/228/15; GC/228/27). She also gained advantage from her participation in the suffrage campaigns and membership of a social-cum-intellectual circle who carried on public debate from a position of centrality in the capital city. Was this kind of experience a familiar pattern for women's public activity in the past?

For the most part the 29 women considered here were well connected and better educated than others of their sex and class. A certain sort of familial background was an advantage when embarking on a public career and they formed part of a social and intellectual stratum of London society whose families were largely drawn from the traditional genteel professions, as well as wealthy businessmen (Martin, 1993). The one exception was the service of Mary Bridges Adams (nee Daltry), the daughter of an engine fitter, who represented Greenwich from 1897 to 1904. The pupil-teacher system enabled

Mary to establish herself as an independent person and in the 1870s she held posts as a teacher and head teacher in Newcastle and Birmingham. The first women members, Emily Davies and Elizabeth Garrett, were associated with the first women's network in Britain established in the late 1850s and named the Langham Place group after its cultural centre in London. This forum served as a conduit for political patronage and in the division of Marylebone, Elizabeth was succeeded by her younger sister, Alice Cowell; who served alongside the educationalist Jane Chessar. All but written out of history, Jane Chessar had close connections with the Langham Place social network but was forced to retire from public life on the grounds of ill-health. Alice Westlake was selected in her place. She also belonged to the Langham Place group, canvassed for Elizabeth Garrett in 1870 and went on to hold elected office until 1888 when her place was filled by Emma Maitland. Emma was unsuccessful at the polls in 1891 and this marked the end of Marylebone's record of continuous female representation. However the biggest breakthrough in terms of female representation came in 1879 when nine of the fifty successful candidates were female.[3] It is instructive to look more closely at the selection process in 1879, which suggests that there were clear divisions among activists over the question of tactics.

Florence Fenwick Miller left a detailed account of a campaign meeting attended by herself, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, Elizabeth Surr, Helen Taylor and Alice Westlake (among others). What is especially interesting is that Florence describes a clash over tactics and among personalities, a story that runs counter to earlier representations of past and present women members

acting as support networks (Hollis, 1993; Martin, 1993; Turnbull 1983). In any event, Alice Westlake and Elizabeth Garrett Anderson both counselled against women standing, explaining how difficult and costly an election was. It is possible that they acted out of concern at the more strident political behaviour of the other elected women and certainly there were manoeuvrings over the selection of a female candidate for Hackney, where Florence was the serving woman member. In an attempt to split her vote, Sir Charles Reed (Board chair and divisional colleague) proposed that the local Liberal party adopt Jane Chessar as their official candidate and when nothing came of it, Alice Westlake asked the middle-aged and highly conventional Rosamond Davenport Hill if she would contest Hackney. A clear example of recruitment by patronage, the criteria of political recruitment were hardly auspicious for anyone who did not play by the rules. As Norris and Lovenduski (1995) make clear, in political recruitment the key question 'is whether the applicant is "one of us": party loyalty and personal character are seen as more important than policy expertise or formal qualifications' (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995, p.238).

In addition to the women's network, party organisations steadily increased their grip on school board elections. In London they were contested by two loosely organised groupings of individuals running as the Progressive and Moderate parties. The Progressives included all shades of Liberal opinion, later fortified by the Socialist groups. The Moderates were allied with the Anglican clergy and the Conservative party. Only four Moderate women served on the London School Board - Eugenie Dibdin, Frances Hastings, Susan Lawrence and Mrs Wright. The rest were Progressives. Then, as now,

it seems likely that the political bias reflected powerful social conventions. For instance, evidence drawn from the British Candidate Study in the 1992 election established that few Tory women came forward as applicants for political recruitment, despite the predominance of older women as party activists (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995, p.248). The women who served in the 1880s and 1890s had strong party political connections. This pattern clearly fits in with the recruitment of Mary Bridges Adams who was first selected as a candidate in 1894. In demand locally as a public speaker, she was sponsored by the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society (RACS), 60 trade organisations and the London Nonconformist Council; three years later she was returned as member for Greenwich by a Progressive Election Committee that included the RACS, the Woolwich Trades Council and the local Radical Clubs (*School Board Chronicle*, 17 November 1894; 29 November 1897). Her election was a triumph for the organised labour movement and an extraordinary woman. But what about the specific organisational setting to which she had gained access? The next section looks at the institutional practices and cultures of the London School Board in order to consider the gendered division of labour and the efficacy of female interventions.

### **The Political Culture of the London School Board**

Feminist critics of contemporary British politics argue that the distribution of political power reflects a certain bias in the way society is organised that makes it easier for some individuals and groups to see their objectives come to fruition than others (Lovenduski and Norris, 1996). In this context it is useful to draw on the concept of gender balance that is being developed by

Lovenduski, Margetts and Dunleavy (1996). To simplify, this typology draws out the sex and/or gender biases of contemporary politics by distinguishing between positional, policy and organisational balances. Firstly, positional balance 'refers to the numbers of men and women in organisations as a whole and, within those organisations, to their presence in decision-making positions' (Lovenduski, 1996, p.5). Secondly, policy gender balance points up the extent to which public policies impact on women and men in somewhat different ways, as well as the question of who plays the majority role in the policy-making process. Finally, organisational bias alerts us to the biases integral to the rules, values, norms, structures and policies of a specific organisation.

Taking each in turn, male bias was clearly evident in quantitative terms. This is so even though the lowest level of female representation, just over 4 per cent in 1870 and 1873, contrasts favourably with the absence at that time of women from the House of Commons. Nonetheless, women were contained at the lowest levels of power and responsibility. The three most powerful posts were chair and vice chair of the Board and chair of the School Management Committee; they were always held by men and Helen Taylor was the only woman to become chair of a permanent standing committee. Elected for the first time in 1876, she created a stir by adopting a more open and generalised popular appeal to the working class electorate that centred on questions of active participation and control. Opinions towards her were mixed. Emily Davies found her tactless and overbearing. Male opponents nicknamed her the acid maiden. Yet in June 1883 members set a precedent by promoting

Helen to a position of authority as chair of the Educational Endowments Committee - even though recruitment by patronage is based on criteria of acceptability and she did not play by the male rules. It may be that the great majority of the men were afraid of the rivalry of women and this was a way of containing her within a context they could deal with. Helen resented a rigid allegiance to party and for six years was part of a women's caucus consisting of herself, Florence Fenwick Miller and Elizabeth Surr. Eager to promote a non-Party approach, Florence thought the relationship between the Board chair

and the Chairmen of Committees in some sort resembled the Premier and his Cabinet, and looked to Members who wished to be 'in the swim' to vote very much to order as is done in the House of Commons.

('An Uncommon Girlhood', GC/228/28).

On the 1876 board these three women politicians sought to challenge institutional norms and certainly behaved differently to Alice Westlake *and* their male counterparts. But was gender the major fault line in school board politics? To examine gender differences in political behaviour the 27 women who served for one full term or more are considered in terms of their attitude to party.

<Table 1 here>.

I would argue that 12 women members attempted to adopt an independent approach to politics; albeit with different goals. Thus Jane Chessar, Alice Cowell, Emily Davies and Elizabeth Garrett are labelled Independent as the party machines were not in control on the 1870 and 1873 boards. By the late

1870s, Henrietta Muller and Augusta Webster stood on Independent platforms; while Florence Fenwick Miller, Elizabeth Surr and Helen Taylor did not want to play by the rules:

Anything was justifiable, so long as it was safe, that would tend to the success of a man's Party [...] We three women Members, Elizabeth Surr, Helen Taylor and myself were a thorn in the side of the Party management of affairs. We were genuinely independent on which ground we had all been elected. We would deliberate and consider every question on its merits [...] and if we saw anything that ought to be blamed [...] exposed it regardless of the question of personality and Party ties ('An Uncommon Girlhood', GC/228/34).

Mary Bridges Adams and Honnor Morten were elected for their radical views that set them apart from the Progressives and Frances Hastings did not always adhere to the Moderate party line. By contrast, the four longest serving female representatives, Rosamond Davenport Hill (eighteen years), Margaret Eve (thirteen years), Ruth Homan (thirteen years) and Alice Westlake (twelve years) were Progressive party loyalists. These successful women gave high priority to their role as party representatives and won promotion to middle ranking appointments. At 50, Ruth Homan became vice chair of the industrial schools committee and Margaret Eve was appointed vice chair of the Evening Continuation Schools Committee in 1900 (*School Board Chronicle*, 22 October 1900; 16 February 1901). In terms of the gender balance, there was a distinct male positional bias on the London School Board. This certainly had an impact on the political culture of the institution and it is this aspect that will be considered next because policy gender

balance is examined in the section exploring women's careers as educational policy-makers.

From the start, three parties were involved in the management of London's board schools - the Board itself (working through a School Management Committee), individual members and local school managers. The board held open meetings every Wednesday, beginning at 3pm and usually continuing until 6:30pm, although it was often much later. Their main purpose was to hear the recommendations set out in reports from the various committees that conducted the work of the Board; these were accepted, amended or referred back. Members had a right to propose alternate motions of policy, and debate them, before an open vote was taken with each individual answering 'yes' or 'no' at the division. Overall, new members found an elaborately ritualised and formalised politics that followed 'the precedent of the customs of the House of Commons'(Florence Fenwick Miller, 'An Uncommon Girlhood', GC/228/28). The accent on parliamentary tradition meant the male organisational bias was very apparent, and female members undoubtedly felt uncomfortable and out of place at times. For instance, Florence Fenwick Miller testified to a rather bizarre difficulty she encountered on her second attendance at the Board. She recalled that the Board room porter approached her and said: 'The lady members' of the Board always wear bonnets, Ma'am'(ibid). Florence disliked wearing a hat and had left her bonnet in the ladies dressing room:

He said no more; but when I came to reflect, I felt certain he would not have spoken on his own initiative; Sir Charles Reed must have ordered him to say what he did. This droll insistence on women's heads being

covered no doubt owes its origin to St Paul's observation on the point. As that Eastern person had made a woman's wearing a covering on her head a symbol of her inferiority to her brother man ('An Uncommon Girlhood', GC/228/28).

At other times, a culture of male fraternity was reinforced by the exclusion of women members from the annual Lord Mayor's Banquet. Previously Jane Chessar, Alice Cowell, Emily Davies, Elizabeth Garrett and Alice Westlake had acquiesced with male wishes by declining their invitation to attend what they were told would be an exclusively male event. On this occasion Florence Fenwick Miller, Elizabeth Surr and Helen Taylor accepted. According to Florence:

It was then represented to us that our demand for equal rights could be met by our being invited on the distinct understanding that we would all three have a previous engagement that we regretted would prevent us from having the pleasure of accepting. But still we were stubborn and attended ('An Uncommon Girlhood', GC/228/34).

Although the presence of woman members immediately complicated struggles over power and advantage in public life, male and female territories and responsibilities reflected traditional notions of the sexual division of labour. Women dominated the membership of the Cookery, Laundry and Needlework Sub-Committee and this was the only Sub-Committee never to have a male chair. By contrast, female members rarely served on the Finance Committee or the Works Committee responsible for the purchase of school sites and school furniture, the erection and enlargement of school buildings and the general care of board properties. Emma Maitland asserted

that she wanted to bring a female perspective to all areas of the board's work, but the great majority were more likely to subscribe to conventional ideas about women's skills and interests. Once again, the service of Mary Bridges Adams is a notable exception. In 1897 she joined the traditional male territory of the Works Committee. Three years later she brought her professional expertise to the service of the Teaching Staff Sub-Committee.

Irrespective of the social and political pressures on women members, they also had to adapt to the demands of public office. Many members regarded the School Board as the main business of their lives and an indication of the workload can be gauged by reference to the weekly timetables of Florence Fenwick Miller in the 1870s and Emma Maitland in the 1890s. Thus Florence spent two or three days a week at the Board offices on the Embankment; while Emma found that Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays were taken up with central board work, as were alternate Wednesdays. Financial worries pressed hard on Florence. She frequently went without food on Board days and thought it a 'wild extravagance' to lunch out, on top of the 2s spent on fares and 9d on a cup of tea at the Board's tea-room. She spent hours on committee work, especially the powerful School Management Committee:

I remember once a long discussion over the request of a headmistress to be allowed a larger quantity of soap, because her school was in such a poor neighbourhood and the children came so dirty. At last I exclaimed: "It would pay me better to supply this soap myself for the winter than to spend any more time over it", to which the Chairman

answered wearily: “But we all feel like that, you know!”(‘An Uncommon Girlhood’, GC/228/34).

Both women devoted the rest of the week to constituency work - including the supervision of local schools, to which they nominated teachers, ancillary staff and resources. As Emma explained to Frederick Dolman during an interview for the *Young Woman* in 1896, she also played a part in developing schools for children with disabilities; taking advantage of a Continental visit to investigate German and Austrian methods for teaching deaf and dumb children.

The next section explores the implications of the female presence. Of course, it was clearly an advance for women to be elected to positions of this kind of political responsibility but did they bring important perspectives and priorities to educational policy-making? The focus here concerns the impact of women’s contribution to the politics of education. In particular, what were their policy priorities and what did they set out to achieve?

### **Women’s Careers as Educational Policy-Makers**

The evidence presented here shows a male gender bias along the different dimensions of positional balance and organisational balance. But does this mean women had little impact on the policy-making process? This article considers what Hunt (1991, p.11) defines as ‘middle level of decision making which intervenes between government policy and actual school practice’; taking the chance to focus upon the way female representatives sought to influence the decision making process. Women’s claims to political power

were based on the distinctive character of the female contribution. In particular, they were contingent upon a gendered and classed construction of 'special needs'. Girls were regarded as having different requirements to boys (either physical, emotional, or intellectual) and women candidates found it advantageous to campaign as ready to champion the interests of girls and women teachers. Moreover just as researchers today are finding evidence of a 'widespread popular conception that women politicians are more compassionate' than men, this was true in the period between 1870 to 1904 (Norris, 1996, p.93). Then and now these assumptions were based on deep rooted social stereotypes but gender was not the only factor shaping political attitudes and it has been found that 12 of the 27 women who served for a minimum of one term were loyal to parties dominated by men. Here the varied influence and policy priorities of women members will be considered in relation to some of the 'women's questions' mentioned earlier. The question of the elementary schoolgirls' curriculum and the interests of women teachers make it possible to assess whether they made a distinctive stand over the interests of girls and women. The final example of school attendance will be used to assess the policy gender bias in the politics of schooling.

### **The Schoolgirls' Curriculum**

Ostensibly co-educational, in London the new board schools frequently had different entrances for the sexes, as well as separate playgrounds and separate departments for older children (Turnbull, 1987). Concern about value for money led central government to impose payment by results in 1862 and although each pupil earned the same amount for successful examination

performance (Weiner, 1994, p.35); failing to teach girls needlework became one of the few offences for which an elementary school could lose its government grant (Davin, 1996). In 1878, theoretical domestic economy was made a compulsory specific (optional) subject for girls; four years later the government gave grants for the teaching of cookery. By the 1890s, this sex-differentiated curriculum had expanded to include laundry work and housewifery. Despite the addition of manual teaching, Turnbull (1987, p.86) concludes that working class boys 'did not receive practical instruction equivalent to the girls' needlework, cookery, laundry work and so on.' Thus it has been argued that the purpose of mass schooling was to impose an ideal family form of a male breadwinner and an economically dependent, full-time wife and mother

This was an ideal that came broadly to be shared by the bourgeoisie and men and women of the working classes alike, each for their own particular economic, political, cultural and social reasons. That it was unattainable for most outside the ranks of skilled and unionised labour was seen as unproblematic; it integrated the goals of the powerful men of the working classes with those of the dominant social and economic groups and served as an aspirational ideal to the unskilled, unorganised work-force (Gomersall, 1994, p.238).

So, the intentions in educating boys and girls were different. Excluded from national politics on the grounds of their sex, it is important to explicate women's involvement in school gender training.

Female reformers served as elected members of school boards and as co-opted members of the Technical Instruction Committees set up following the Technical Instruction Act of 1889 and some tried to win friends and influential allies under the auspices of the domestic subjects' movement (see Bird, 1998; Turnbull, 1994). Women spoke with different voices and the question of school gender training clearly exposes the tensions in the period 1870-1904 (see Bird 1991; Dyhouse, 1981; Hollis, 1987; Martin, 1995). A minority wanted girls and women to have access to the same educational provision as boys and men but the female curriculum was generally discussed as if biology was destiny. Yet any discussion of the purpose of education was complicated by enduring social and educational distinctions. Thus Clara Collet, Labour Correspondent to the Board of Trade, submitted a memorandum to the Bryce commission, investigating secondary education in the 1890s, that endorsed the principle of class-based educational provision. She argued strongly in favour of divided aims and touched on the theme of education versus instruction. This meant an emphasis on the cultivation of mental culture for middle class girls; whereas 'any system of education for working girls should have as its object their training for the responsibilities of married life' (*British Parliamentary Papers*, Secondary Education, 1895 session, p.380). To what extent her attitude was representative of women on the London School Board remains to be seen.

An analysis of the voting record of women Board members in the 1870s and early 1880s shows that Rosamond Davenport Hill and Alice Westlake were ready to concede the place of domestic economy in the curriculum. By

contrast, Jane Chessar, Alice Cowell, Emily Davies, Elizabeth Garrett, Frances Hastings, Florence Fenwick Miller, Henrietta Muller, Elizabeth Surr and Helen Taylor all tried to limit this kind of training. After 1882, changes in government policy and the influence of Social Darwinistic thinking put female opponents on the defensive and they had difficulty in making their presence felt. However the 1879 Board provides an interesting example of an oppositional alliance that crossed class and gender groupings. It included the two working men elected in the 1870s, the ex-Chartist and cabinet-maker Benjamin Lucraft and the trade unionist George Potter; as well as Florence Fenwick Miller, Henrietta Muller, Elizabeth Surr and Helen Taylor. These six stand out as the most persistent opponents of single sex classes in cookery arguing that the teaching was inappropriate to the realities of working class life since the cooking was done on gas cookers that were quite beyond the reach of working class housewives. George observed 'the girls must be intended for service. Such knowledge would not be of much use to them in an artisan's home' (*School Board Chronicle*, 30 March 1878).

Cookery was a grant-aided subject when the Moderate Frances Hastings was first elected in 1882, three years later she seconded Helen's unsuccessful motion to reduce the number of cookery classes (*School Board Chronicle*, 12 March 1885). She also attacked the time girls' spent sewing. In her contribution to the debate on needlework, for instance, Frances argued that much of the practical instruction was unnecessary. She wanted the girls to receive 'a foundation of general knowledge' instead (*The Governess*, 17

November 1883, p.138). Writing to Helen Taylor in March 1886, Elizabeth Surr expressed regret over her defeat at the polls:

I am sorry Miss Hastings is off, and that she was not re-elected; but although she is upright and well-meaning she was decidedly harsh in her dealings with the poor so that they would not care to vote for her; and she is too honest to be supported by any of the parties (E. Surr to H. Taylor, March 1886).

In terms of their impact on policy-making, the Independent women were always struggling against the odds but managed to score some victories. Thus, for example, Henrietta Muller 'sought and obtained a reduction in the number of stitches to the inch required in the schools' (*The Times*, 17 January 1906). Neither she nor Florence could see the necessity of this fine needlework and the teachers' reported it was damaging the girls' eyesight. By contrast, the more socially conservative Party women supported and influenced these developments. In the late 1870s, Alice Westlake told female head teachers to reduce their workload by substituting cookery for classes in 'drawing and grammar' (*School Board Chronicle*, 3 March 1877). Her colleague Rosamond Davenport Hill also wanted to consolidate the teaching of practical subjects related directly to domestic work. By the early 1880s, Rosamond was promoted to the position of chair of the Cookery Sub-Committee and subsequently gave evidence to the Cross commission investigating the effects and working of the Elementary Education Act (1870). When questioned as to whether any of the girls become cooks or domestic servants she replied

We hope they do. I heard a little time ago that a girl had taken a place, and that her employer was quite delighted with her because she could cook the dinner while the family attended chapel on a Sunday morning (*Royal Commission on Elementary Education (Cross) 1887*, evidence of Miss R. Davenport Hill, p.712).

At the turn of the century, Ruth Homan used her position on the School Management Committee to debate the question of whether cookery should be taught to boys. Assisted by Emma Maitland she mobilised support for a pilot scheme at the Bow Creek School in Poplar where she was manager. For a year the boys attended the cookery centre attached to the school and a copy of the Cookery Superintendent's report was sent to the Education Department; ironically referred to as the Board's 'upper house' by Florence Fenwick Miller. Significantly, the report notes the vocational aspects of the teaching, with its emphasis on naval fare and promises of employment at the seamen's home and Ruth achieved a pyrric victory when the 1902 Elementary Education Code allowed for the instruction of boys in 'seaport towns' (*School Board Chronicle*, 3 March 1900; Bird, 1998, p.127).

### **Women Teachers**

This discussion will focus on three issues that were crucial to the career development of London's women teachers: pay, promotion and opposition to married women's employment. Once again, it was the Independent women who pursued a distinct policy agenda; the rest supported the Party line. Florence Fenwick Miller has left a narrative account of the decision-making

process, showing a trend toward policy formation by the school management committee. This was true of promotions to headships

The Scheme was to appoint the headmaster of a boys school Head Teacher also of the girls in the same block of buildings. It was necessary by the laws of the Board that every Head Teachers name should be submitted, on his or her appointment, to the full Board for confirmation but in the case of the appointment of the men over the girls' schools I found that it was being made a practice to simply pass the Master's appointment through the School Management Committee and not to send it up to the full Board for confirmation at all. ('An Uncommon Girlhood', GC/228/34).

Florence saw this as discriminatory. It certainly confirms Copelman's (1996, p.50) suspicion that those in positions of power and authority were more concerned to establish a career ladder for men than for women. In 1876 the average salary of the head master of a boys' school was £305 while the average salary of an assistant was only £104. Florence argued that if this situation was allowed to continue the practice would effectively deny women teachers opportunities for advancement beyond the post of assistant. So, she successfully moved that: 'No male teacher should in future be appointed to be the Head Master of a girls' school, without the special sanction of the Board being previously obtained' ('An Uncommon Girlhood, GC/228/34).

In February 1878 there was an attempt to ban the work of married women elementary school teachers with 'rapidly increasing families'. This time Elizabeth Surr led the successful opposition, saying she 'feared this

suggestion emanated from gentlemen who wished to introduce the thin end of the wedge for the ultimate exclusion of all female teachers from Board schools' (*School Board Chronicle*, 9 February 1878). The following year, she and Florence were frustrated in their attempt to overturn a proposal that the Board receive three months notice of maternity leave from married women teachers. Elizabeth thought it 'indelicate', the vice chair retorted she could have 'opposed the proposal in committee instead of doing so openly and publicly before the Board and the press' (*School Board Chronicle*, 15 November 1879). Gradually the regulations defining the position of married women teachers grew more stringent. By the 1880s, for example, those who took confinement leave had to arrange for their own replacement and pay them out of their own salary. Florence Fenwick Miller, Henrietta Muller, Elizabeth Surr and Helen Taylor opposed the changes; Rosamond Davenport Hill, Mary Richardson and Alice Westlake did not. Far from it. Alice Westlake led the attack on the employment of married women teachers when working in the School Management Committee and speaking in debate. In the winter of 1881, for instance, she seconded a committee resolution to bar married women teachers with children under two (*School Board Chronicle*, 26 November 1881; *The Governess*, June 1882, p. 122). The *School Board Chronicle* offered a blow-by-blow account of debate within the school board. Press reports show the adversarial nature of School Board politics, as well as the concentration on aspects of women's personal lives. In one debate, Florence launched a personal attack on the character of her childless colleague Alice Westlake

she had been waiting in expectation that the lady who was largely responsible for this resolution would justify it. The resolution had been brought forward three times at the instance of that lady. She (Mrs Miller) was thankful that this Board was not composed entirely of married ladies without children. [...] The true womanly instinct and feeling and sympathy for children did not arise in a woman until she had had children of her own in her arms. [...] it was not for the Board to say that every teacher who married should become a household drudge instead of continuing to engage in intellectual work (*School Board Chronicle*, 26 November 1881).

The personal animosity is evident and exceptional because Florence was one of only two women Board members who married whilst serving (the other was Elizabeth Garrett); and the only woman who gave birth during her period in office. There were nine women on the 1879 Board and they each articulate different dimensions of women's experience. Unlike Florence, Rosamond Davenport Hill, Frances Hastings, Henrietta Muller, Mary Richardson, Edith Simcox and Helen Taylor were single; Alice Westlake was married but childless; whilst Elizabeth Surr was married with two grown-up daughters and two small sons. Evidently there was no correlation between personal biography and attitude to the employment of married woman. Attitude to party was a far more reliable guide. Even though they won the battle, Independents did not think they had won the war. Concern was expressed that the authority might yet attempt to dismiss married women and Florence and Helen helped launch the Metropolitan Board Mistresses' Association to support and protect women teachers (*The Governess*, June 1882, p.122).

## **School Attendance**

The final example is used to show the extent to which specific policies impact on girls and boys in somewhat different ways, as well as the question of who plays the majority role in the policy-making process. The significance of the women's role has been analysed in earlier work (Martin, 1991; 1999), here new source material is used to highlight the issue of legislative styles.

Local authorities prioritised the issue because the size of government grants, and until 1883, teachers' salaries depended directly on average attendance levels. However many of the urban poor saw mass schooling as an intrusion into family life that reduced the household's earning capacity and imposed an extra burden in the shape of school fees. Then, as now, pupil absenteeism was a persistent problem. It also had a gender dimension. Girls' average attendance was consistently lower than the boys'; it was also more irregular because they often had to care for younger siblings. However, there was a tendency for girl absentees to be treated sympathetically, whereas boys were more likely to be defined as truants and dealt with severely. The ultimate sanction was committal to one of two types of corrective institutions. The first was a single sex residential truant or industrial school. The second was a co-educational day industrial school provided for under the 1876 Education Act. Although the London School Board did not establish a day industrial school until 1895, it founded three residential schools in the 1870s, two more in the 1890s and a sixth in 1903. Five out of the six were for boys.

Further analysis shows that many women members prioritised this area of the Board's work. For example, on the 1876 Board Helen Taylor promoted the establishment of babies' rooms as a way of encouraging the attendance of girls who were frequently kept home to 'mind baby'; in 1881 she and Elizabeth Surr persuaded the board to press for government legislation to provide for the establishment of nursery schools and were part of a deputation to the Education Department on the subject (*School Board Chronicle*, 14 April 1877; 24 February 1881). Henrietta Muller shared their anxiety over female attendance and in August 1881 she unsuccessfully sought to encourage the girls by enabling them to qualify for a book prize on the strength of one, as opposed to two, complete attendance cards (*School Board Chronicle*, 4 August 1881). Social and cultural values were reflected in a tendency for the punitive aspects of Board policy to impact more heavily on boys. Thus Home Office regulations refused to allow corporal punishment to be inflicted on industrial schoolgirls and Ruth Homan led the opposition to Athelstan Riley's campaign to change the rules in the mid 1890s. First elected in the Moderate election victory of 1891, he ardently supported the attempt to make religious instruction more denominational and Ruth presumed the 'Rileyite floggers' wanted to 'thrash theology' into the girls. In a letter to the press she concluded 'We know what the natural impulse of every manly, chivalrous Britain would be - and that is to birch the floggers' (Fawcett Library newscuttings, 'School Boards', London 1896-7). Ruth also fought moves to re-instate the ritual of flogging boys as a punishment for being sent back to industrial school and in 1898 she joined forces with Honnor Morten in an attempt to ban the use of corporal punishment in the Board's reformatory

institutions. There were eight women members of the 1897 Board and aside from Emma Maitland, there was general agreement with Ruth that the punishments were too harsh. However, her proposal was successfully watered down by two male Progressives who thought the powers were necessary but recommended that the practice be carried out in private. Although Ruth did not accomplish her objective she did achieve recognition in the shape of promotion to vice-chair of the Industrial Schools Committee.

Twenty years earlier Elizabeth Surr gained a high public profile through her membership of the School Board's Special Committee on Incurable Truants, which later became the Industrial Schools Committee. With the support of Florence Fenwick Miller and Helen Taylor she was largely responsible for drawing public attention to over-expenditure on the *Shaftesbury* training ship; as well as exposing the cruelties practised by the superintendents of the Board's first truant school and a voluntary industrial school for boys owned by the chair of the industrial schools committee, Thomas Scrutton. The debate over the *Shaftesbury* provides the clearest expression of gender issues because it sought to breach the male bastion of finance and public exposure (Dyhouse, 1987).

In 1878 the Board decided to refit a vessel for use as an industrial training ship with the aim of encouraging boys to develop a taste for life on the ocean wave with lessons in seamanship and extra-curricular activities like gun, rifle and cutlass drill (*LCC Report with regard to Industrial Schools, 1870-1904*, p.53). However, the cost of the refit soon exceeded the original estimate and

there were mutterings of discontent from the women's caucus on the 1876 Board, supported by Benjamin Lucraft. In October 1878 members authorised the expenditure of a further £6000, the Industrial Schools Committee having exhausted the £28,000 already voted. Three months later they voted a further £2000, despite the note of caution sounded by Elizabeth Surr and Helen Taylor. Not unreasonably the two women recommended that they wait to see the findings of a Special Committee appointed to inquire into levels of expenditure on the *Shaftesbury*. In the face of growing public concern, Alice Westlake gave high priority to sustaining the committee chair and defending party policy. An example of her role as a party loyalist is to be found in her behaviour as a standard bearer of the party line at the next election. In a letter to the editor of *The Times*, Alice cast doubt on the veracity of Elizabeth Surr's information about Thomas Scrutton's expenditure on the refit. These two were the only female members of the Industrial Schools Committee and the day after Elizabeth protested her colleagues intrusion into a difference between herself and the chair:

I regret it lest the public might imagine that women on the School Board cannot work harmoniously together; therefore I deem it worth stating that nothing has disturbed the harmony with which two of my colleagues and myself have laboured, and that my behaviour to Mrs Westlake has always been courteous (*The Times*, 26 November 1879).

Alice Westlake was a more conventional activist in the public sphere than either Elizabeth, Florence or Helen. The more radical women were prepared to challenge institutional procedures in defence of a principle they believed in and it was Florence Fenwick Miller who moved a vote of censure:

It was not by my own design or desire that I took the leading place in this public duty. One of our Members, Mr Lovell, said to Mrs Surr that the women Members ought not to have taken the lead in censuring the Industrial Schools Committee on which she immediately compared him to Abimelech in the Bible. But she and I had to lead, simply because the men would not undertake the task of censure which appeared to us necessary ('An Uncommon Girlhood', GC/228/34).

Ultimately the strength of party discipline kept other members under control and the guilty parties clung on to their positions of authority on the Committee and the Board (*School Board Chronicle*, 22 March 1879). Significantly, Florence recalled that several who voted against her motion to dissolve the committee only did so because Mr Scrutton was a prominent Liberal. Writing in the *Women's Penny Paper* a decade later, Henrietta Muller recalled Florence's power as a speaker in debate 'I have seen men grow visibly pale, as she dissected - or rather vivisected - their halting arguments with her pitiless logic, leaving nothing but shreds behind' (*Women's Penny Paper*, 23 February 1889).

## **Conclusion**

For a thirty four year period women members of the London School Board drew upon and developed the ideology of domesticity to create empowering public identities. It has been argued (Yeo, 1998, p.12) that British women 'stretched various family roles precisely to ratify their public activism.' Thus Mary Bridges Adams mobilised her identity as a mother in electoral addresses, while Helen Taylor told the Metropolitan Board Mistresses'

Association that she cared for the children 'from the point of view of a maiden aunt' (*The Governess*, June 1882, p.122). On the same occasion Florence Fenwick Miller subverted the dominant ideas about femininity as domestic married motherhood to promote the work of married women teachers:

I believed that mothers would be very likely to be the most efficient teachers, partly because the sympathy of young women is often dormant until they have children of their own, when they understand and sympathise better with the all the little ones; and partly I urged, because the woman who is married and has made up her mind to continue her work is more settled in it, and less distracted by her personal emotions, than one who is still single. ('An Uncommon Girlhood, GC/228/34).

This episode shows how elected women used the rhetoric of familial femininity to justify their political actions and to set forth an ideal for imitation in public life. They must have felt satisfaction at feeling a sense of power but the evidence suggests there were tensions between those who gave high priority to their role as party representatives and those who challenged the direction of the policy agenda. Certainly some female politicians preferred the quieter work in private committees while others liked speaking in debate and some gave greater priority to constituency matters. For instance, Eugenie Dibdin kept a low profile in School Board politics but Hugh Philpott (1904, p.24), a contemporary chronicler of London education, was fulsome in his praise of her role as chair of the managers of the Drury Lane industrial school. Her daughter taught the girls to swim and she proved 'a most devoted and sympathetic friend, who knows every one' of the children 'by name and

takes quite a motherly interest in them all.' But whatever activities they perceived as appropriate and whatever their political behaviour, the presence of women in local educational policy-making contested the idea that a woman's place is in the home and the case studies suggest they secured a number of significant policy decisions.

Overall, school board politics provided some middle class females with a position of authority and a position of fulfilment. These women were a powerful force in their local communities and the preceding discussion highlights a distinct and vocal minority who acted in a less institutionalised way. More competitive than the average woman, the youthful Florence Fenwick Miller found the environment of power scintillating. Her objective was 'to blaise the trail for women to follow along' and like the other women policy-makers, her presence made more than just a symbolic difference to the politics of education.

## NOTES

[1] The 29 women were Annie Besant, Mary Bridges Adams, Jane Chessar, Alice Cowell, Rosamond Davenport-Hill, Emily Davies, Eugenie Dibdin, Margaret Dilke, Constance Elder, Margaret Eve, Elizabeth Garrett, Edith Glover, Frances Hastings, Ruth Homan, Susan Lawrence, Maude Lawrence, Emma Maitland, Ellen McKee, Hilda Miall-Smith, Florence Fenwick Miller, Honnor Morten, Edith Simcox, Elizabeth Surr, Helen Taylor, Julia Augusta Webster, Alice Westlake, FL. Wright.

[2] With grateful acknowledgements to Carol Dyhouse for this reference. Archival references have been used as the pagination of the original manuscript is inconsistent.

[3] The nine women were Rosamond Davenport-Hill, Florence Fenwick Miller, Henrietta Muller, Mary Richardson, Edith Simcox, Elizabeth Surr, Helen Taylor, Augusta Webster and Alice Westlake.

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