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DEPARTMENT  
OF ECONOMICS

# Working Paper Series

1994

**BEATRICE WEBB AS FEMINIST**

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ISSN 1321-9774

**WP 94-3**

ISBN 0 86418 319 4

# **BEATRICE WEBB AS FEMINIST**

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**Department of Economics  
University of Wollongong  
Working Paper Series WP 94-3**

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## ABSTRACT

A number of analysts have argued that Beatrice Webb was neither a feminist nor played any significant part in the women's movement. This claim has been challenged by other observers who have argued that Webb was very much a feminist, albeit a socialist rather than a liberal feminist. This article seeks to advance the debate regarding Webb's feminism by examining several papers she wrote and/or edited for the *New Statesman* in the period 1913–1919. These papers constitute but a portion of her written contribution to the struggle for women's rights. Their separate and detailed examination is justified, however, as they have thus far played virtually no part in the debate. This omission needs to be remedied, for the documents constitute substantial evidence that Webb actively campaigned against the injustices women suffered as workers, citizens, mothers and human beings.

Within the historical literature Beatrice Webb is seldom accorded a place amongst those individuals recognised as having made a significant contribution to the emancipation of women. Commonly, this lack of recognition is based on the mistaken belief that Webb had little sympathy for feminism and/or failed to play a part in the women's movement. Pujol, for example, asserts that Webb lacked an analysis of the patriarchal forces at work within the capitalist economy, accorded women's needs little significance and relied on the benevolence of men and male-controlled institutions for the implementation of her reform proposals.

The ultimate message she gives to her readers is that women's equality and their access to economic independence can be sacrificed to other (presumably superior) needs: those of men, those of the state, or those of the national economy (Pujol, 1992: 9192).

Going further, Seymour-Jones (1992: 206) claims that Webb embraced Spencer's belief that women were at a lower level on the evolutionary scale and that their mental development was inferior to that of men because their energies were channelled into their reproductive systems. As for the issue of Webb's supposed lack of involvement in the struggles of women, Pujol (1992: 84) asserts that while Webb was certainly interested in such issues as equal pay, she came to the question 'from outside the ranks (and the leadership) of the women's movement'. This depiction of Webb as an outsider has also been advanced by Caine (1982), who claims that Webb never saw the relevance of feminism either to her own personal problems or to the wider social questions with which she was concerned. As a result, it is asserted, she rarely commented on the women's movement, never generalised from her personal experience to the situation of women as a whole, and failed to take an active part in the struggle for sex

equality:

Most historians of the late nineteenth-early twentieth century women's movement have concentrated on the campaigns which were waged specifically to improve the situation of women – and she was not particularly active in such struggles. Indeed for a number of years she was widely known as an opponent of women's suffrage; and even when she changed her mind on this issue, she did not throw her full weight behind 'the cause' (Caine, 1982: 23).

This perception of Webb as an individual little concerned with or involved in the struggle for the rights of women has not been embraced by all scholars. The socialist, Mary Agnes Hamilton, for example, argued in 1932 that while it may be true that Webb was opposed to female enfranchisement when she was young, she in time came to be 'a more thorough-going equalitarian than most of the Feminists of her day or ours.' (Hamilton, 1932: 231). More recently, Nolan (1988) has argued that Webb was very much a feminist, albeit a socialist rather than a liberal feminist. Nolan argues that Webb was highly sensitive to the inequities suffered by women and was very much aware of the need for organised action to right their wrongs:

Like her predecessor, J.S. Mill, who stood in the forefront of those attempting to secure equal rights for women of nineteenth-century England, Webb's efforts in behalf of her sex took the form, not only of debate, but also of action. During a heated discussion on women with the wife of Samuel Barnett .... Webb told her 'that the only way in which we can convince the world of our power is to show it.' And she did just that, spending the next several decades of her life engaged in works designed to up-grade the status of women in England (Nolan, 1988: 212–214).

The objective of this article is to advance the debate regarding Webb's feminism by examining several papers she wrote and/or

edited for the *New Statesman*. Webb published these papers in the period 1913–1919. They constitute but a portion of her written contribution to the struggle for women’s rights. I have undertaken elsewhere an extended review of Beatrice and Sidney Webb’s contribution to the economic analysis of the status of women (Nyland and Ramia, 1994). A separate, detailed examination of the *New Statesman* papers is justified, however, as these writings have thus far played virtually no part in the debate. This omission needs to be remedied, for the documents provide substantial new evidence that Webb was concerned with the economic and social injustices that women suffered as workers, citizens, mothers and human beings. Moreover, they show that she struggled to remedy these wrongs and was very much part of the women’s movement.

## THE AWAKENING OF WOMEN

The first papers to be examined were edited by Webb and published as a supplement to the *New Statesman* in 1913. Titled ‘The Awakening of Women’, the supplement included articles by several leading feminists of the period. Among the contributors were Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Christabel Pankhurst, Betty Balfour, B.L. Hutchins, Adelaide Anderson, Maude Pember Reeves and Millicent Fawcett. The supplement also contained a ‘Select Bibliography of Feminism’ which focused on the condition of women and female suffrage.

In her introduction, Webb argued that it was impossible to understand the significance of women’s awakening unless one realised this stirring was not merely a women’s issue (Webb, 1913: iii). Her observation was not meant to belittle the women’s movement. Rather, it was designed to make the point that women’s natural allies were not the powerful within society but rather the oppressed. Webb believed women’s demand for

equality was 'one of three simultaneous world-movements towards a more equal partnership among human beings in human affairs' (Webb, 1913: iii). Women's struggle was paralleled on the one side by the struggle of the labour movement and on the other by the resistance of those subject-races who were the victims of imperialism. Webb insisted these three movements for equality were moving in the same direction. However, she recognised that they did not always advance in harmony. Indeed, within all three currents there were 'reactionaries' who believed the inequality against which the other groups struggled was natural and inevitable. There were feminists, for example, who thought it just to exclude the manual working class and other races from participation in the good things of life. Similarly, there were individuals in both latter groups who insisted that male domination of women was a kindness.

Webb's emphasis on the commonality of the struggles of the oppressed was a primary feature of her writings on women. This was a characteristic often resented by those feminists who wished merely to emphasise sisterhood and play down differences based on class or race. To convince women they shared a common interest with workers and subject races, Webb quoted from an anti-suffrage pamphlet written by Sir Almroth Wright. When doing so she inserted 'only the words necessary to show how easy it is to use all the arguments in favour of the dominance of the male sex as reasons for a similar dominance of a class of property owners or a white race' (Webb, 1913: iii).

The failure to recognise that man [the capitalist, the white man] is the master and why he is the master lies at the root of the suffrage [labour, nationalist] movement. By disregarding man's [the capitalist's, the white man's] superior physical force, the power of compulsion upon which all government is based is disregarded. By leaving out of account those powers of the mind in which man [the capitalist, the white man] is the superior, woman

[the labourer, the coloured man] falls into the error of thinking that she [he] can really compete with him [them] and that she [he] belongs to the self-same intellectual caste. Finally, by putting out of sight man's [the capitalist's, the white man's] superior money-earning capacity the power of the purse is ignored (Wright, cited by Webb, 1913: iii. Webb's insertions in square brackets).

Webb observed that reactionaries such as Wright, who argued that the consequences of women's subjugation proved the need for this subjugation, inadvertently advanced the case for feminism. The obvious circularity of his argument, she believed, highlighted the truth contained in Gilman's (1913) contribution to the supplement. The latter argued that the fact that women commonly failed to match men's achievements was not a consequence of innate inferiority; rather, it was a product of an artificially arrested development imposed upon women by men.

Supporting evidence for Gilman's hypothesis, Webb observed, was only too evident and this not least as regards women's achievements in the industrial and professional fields. She was pleased to note, however, that this situation was being remedied by the desire of the capitalist class to exploit women's labour directly. She observed that the papers by Hutchins (1913) and Courtney (1913) highlighted the extent to which capitalism was forcing millions of women to become independent wage earners. By so doing, it was compelling these women to undertake many tasks claimed to be beyond their natural capacities — a challenge being taken up with an increasing degree of success.

While rejoicing that women were gaining an unprecedented degree of economic independence, Webb observed that this process was tragic in many ways. The tragedy lay in the fact that while women were being forced to walk along the wage-earning road, 'we have not unbound their feet'. Indeed, she observed, this was a tragedy not only for women but also for wage-earning men,

for it led many women to become blacklegs, that is, workers who accepted wage rates lower than was the norm within a trade:

By continuing to brand the woman as the social inferior of the man, unworthy of any share in the direction of the country, upon the economic development of which we have made her directly dependent; by providing for her much less technical training and higher education than for the boy; by telling her that she has slighter faculties and smaller needs, and that nothing but toil of routine character is expected from her; by barring her out, as Mrs. W.P. Reeves points out, from the more remunerative occupations .... man has made woman not merely into a wage earner, but, taken as a whole, in the world of labour, unfortunately, also a 'blackleg,' insidiously undermining the wages of man himself (Webb, 1913: iv).

Believing that capitalism was bound to continue drawing women into industry, Webb argued that it was in the interests of male wage-earners to accept women as comrades and ensure they were provided with the resources they needed to compete on equal terms. She insisted that where women had acquired these resources they had shown they could match men in the most difficult of tasks and therefore had no need to blackleg in order to obtain employment. Further, they had shown a willingness to stand in unity with their fellow workers that equalled, if not excelled, that of men.

If women were to attain the work skills they needed, however, Webb believed they must have a minimal level of freedom from the excessive demands of their employers. Only if they had this liberty, would they have the time and energy required to attain the education and training needed to match men's accomplishments in industry. Accordingly, Webb supported the unionisation of women workers and legal limitations on what their employers could demand from them. Her advocacy of the



latter proposition led her to engage in a prolonged debate with those market liberals who insisted governments must always adopt gender neutral labour market policies (Nyland and Kelly, 1992). One leading liberal with whom Webb disputed over many years was Millicent Fawcett. Caine (1992: 245) has argued that Fawcett's 'hostility both to protective legislation and to the role of trade unions in regard to women's work remained implacable'. However, Fawcett's paper in the 'The Awakening of Women' contradicts Caine's claims. The article makes it clear that Fawcett moderated her positions on both unions and protective labour legislation and forged a rapprochement with Webb. In her paper, Fawcett endorsed Webb's claim that the women's movement was but a part of a greater crusade for human equality. In a reversal of her earlier commitment to the market rights of the individual, she also denied capitalists the right to employ women for lower wages than men. Further, she observed that, in industry, the cause of women was being advanced by the rise of trade unionism and by the work of the factory inspectors (Fawcett, 1913: viii–ix).

## VOTELESS WOMEN AND SOCIAL REVOLUTION

The second *New Statesman* publication that Webb contributed to the campaign to improve women's status appeared in February 1914. This paper, titled 'Voteless Women and Social Revolution', examined the implications of the fact that even some right-wing feminists such as Fawcett had come to embrace the labour movement (Webb, 1914a). The notion of 'right-wing' or 'Individualist' feminism is seldom used in modern literature. In the early years of the twentieth century, however, it was common terminology Hutchins, for example, described the liberal feminists as the 'Right wing of the Women's Movement' (Hutchins, 1915: 121). The right-wing feminists were characterised by a tendency to place their primary emphasis on the need for women to attain



the vote, by a hostility to men, and a commitment to classical liberal economics and ideology. Their involvement in the struggle for the rights of women was primarily an outcome of the discrimination experienced by women of the middle class. The beliefs of these individuals reflected their class origins in that they tended to emphasise liberal freedoms such as the right of the individual to an equal chance of competing in the labour market. They were aware that the most enthusiastic supporters of the Factory Acts were the female factory workers. Nevertheless, they urged individualism and freedom of contract on their working class sisters and opposed bitterly the imposition of legal restrictions on the capitalists' use of female labour.

In contrast, the labour feminists drew their support primarily from the working class and from those middle-class activists who found it impossible to ignore working women's support of the Factory Acts. As with their right-wing counterparts, the labour feminists opposed male domination and patriarchal social relations. However, they differed from the liberals in that they emphasised the need to give priority to improving the well-being of those women in greatest material need, urged solidarity between the sexes and tended towards a socialist or collectivist solution to women's oppression. Moreover, they believed that the free market policies which the right-wing feminists were urging upon the women of the working class were largely designed to serve the interests of middle and upper class women. The Individualists claimed to be fighting for the rights of all women, just as bourgeois men had claimed to fight for all adult males when they campaigned for the 'rights of man'. As far as the labour feminists were concerned, however, the rightists' claims were as fraudulent as had been the claims of the men of the bourgeoisie. The difference between the two groups, and the fact that the labour feminists believed their interests to be not merely divergent from, but often diametrically opposed to, those of their

right-wing counterparts, has been well captured by Hutchins:

The middle-class woman's agitation was inevitably influenced by the ideals of her class, a class largely engaged in competitive business of one kind or another. Equality of opportunity, permission to compete with men and try their luck in open market, was what the women of this type demanded, with considerable justification, and with admirable courage. The working woman, on the other hand, the victim of that very unrestricted competition which her better off sister was demanding, before all things needed improved wages and conditions of work, for which State protection and combination with men were essential (Hutchins, 1915: 196; see also Klein, 1971: 15; and Feurer, 1988).

The right-wing feminists insisted that women should be as free as men to determine the conditions under which they sold their labour power and that this was a principle that applied equally to the women of all classes (Hutchins and Harrison, 1966: 173-199). In reply, though they preferred equal legal protection for both sexes, labour feminists argued that simply because male workers refused to accept state protection or could not convince the community that they should be protected was no reason for denying women protection from excessive demands on the part of their employers. Their perspective as regard the principle of sex equality versus the principle of legislative regulation was encapsulated in Webb's observation:

[T]here seem to be two principles which, for the last century, have competed for public approval. There is the principle of sex equality; a principle which is good in itself and results, under certain circumstances, in bettering the conditions of a woman's life. But there is another principle: the principle of legislative regulation. Under the capitalist system we now perceive that it is imperative to regulate competitive wage-earning, and that without this regulation the physical and moral state of the

workers suffers indefinite deterioration. Without this protection of the standard of life of the workers, no personal freedom or personal comfort is practicable. This principle of a legal minimum standard of life is of even greater value to women than (sic) it is to men because of their weaker bargaining power (Webb, 1978: 387).

As suggested above, in the paper 'Voteless Women and Social Revolution' Webb sought to examine the implications of the right-wing feminists' decision to embrace the labour movement in the immediate pre-war period. Her discussion of this development began by noting that the suffragettes were making little headway despite their intense agitation. Indeed, within parliament, the only major political party that gave substantial support to woman suffrage was the Labour Party. Webb lamented this lack of progress and observed that it was a key factor in explaining why even the extreme 'Right Wing' faction of the women's movement, that is, Fawcett's National Union of Women's Suffrage, had formed an official alliance with Labour. At the same time she observed that this lack of progress was a development that had 'some counterbalancing advantages'. The most notable advantage was the fact that the opposition to female suffrage was making right-wing feminists much more aware of the inegalitarian nature of their societies. This awareness was, in turn, leading these women to find common cause with others who suffered inequality. As a result of this new-found sensitivity, Webb observed, even those feminists who had traditionally opposed factory legislation, the 'tyranny of trade unions' or increased taxation of the rich were becoming truly radicalised.

Webb recognised that many of the liberal women who were fraternising with the cause of labour and the oppressed races would 'stampede' back to the ranks of the conservative parties which represented their class interests once women won the vote. However, she pointed out that the longer the conservatives excluded women from the electoral process, the greater would be

the cost they would have to pay. By advancing this observation, she sought to place pressure on the right-wing political parties to moderate their opposition to woman suffrage. It is probable that she also sought to bring to the Labour Party's attention the importance of continuing its support for women's right to vote.

[T]he longer women are excluded from citizenship the smaller will be the number of reversions to the creed of *laissez-faire* in social and economic questions, even among women of the upper and middle classes. But this is not all. Among the four millions of salaried and wage-earning women — the teachers, the clerks, the factory hands — the growing intensity of sex consciousness is being fused, by close comradeship with Socialists, into the 'class consciousness' of the proletariat eager not merely for political but for economic 'enfranchisement'. I wonder whether Liberal Ministers quite realise how the contemptuous refusal of the suffrage by a party that claims to be democratic strikes the average woman in Lancashire cotton mills or Leicester shoe-shops? The insincerities, prevarications and tyrannies of the male Cabinet Minister, the male judge and the male party journalist are becoming identified in the working woman's mind with a growing revolt against the low wages and the degrading conditions of employment which seem part and parcel of an essentially masculine capitalism. The votelessness of women (sic) is, at the present moment, tantamount to a rapidly spreading Socialism from one end of Great Britain to the other (Webb, 1914a: 586).

## WOMEN IN INDUSTRY

Webb's paper on the suffrage was followed a week later by a second *New Statesman* supplement on women, which she both edited and introduced. This collection dealt specifically with

women in industry and all contributors were members of the Fabian Women's Group. This organisation, of which Webb was a founding member, was a body which had as its purpose 'the complete political and economic emancipation of women'. There is some dispute as to the extent of her subsequent degree of active involvement in this body. However, what is clear is that she did work closely with the organisation at certain times and that the members of it helped Webb in her research (Seymour-Jones, 1992: 345).

The supplement was offered 'as a contribution towards the elucidation of the problems presented by the position of women in twentieth-century industry.' (Webb, 1914b: i) In her introduction, Webb began by continuing her discussion of the impact of capitalism on women's social position. She noted that the participation of women in the production of wealth is almost as universal and certainly as ancient as humanity. What was comparatively modern and confined to the capitalist nations was the existence of a female population which laboured separately from their families and received an independent wage. It was observed that in contemporary England, one-third of the females over 15 years of age earned their own livelihood independently of father and husband. Consequently, these women had an unprecedented degree of freedom and equality with men. Webb applauded this development but again lamented that the equality women had attained in industry was far from complete. Society continued to assume that women's needs were less than those of men and paid them accordingly. Women also undertook the work of the home even if they laboured in the public sphere, were taxed without representation, and were denied any direct involvement in the determination of the laws that regulated their lives (Webb, 1914b: i).

The contributors to the industry supplement each undertook to provide data that would detail the disadvantages suffered by

working women. Webb confined her introduction to 'a few words' on the 'features' of women's oppression which she had identified. She began by denouncing the claim that women's needs were less than those of men. It was acknowledged that they consumed less, but Webb insisted they did so primarily because of custom and the refusal of employers to pay women the wages they paid to men. Also denounced was the 'double service' of labour that women were compelled to endure while men 'roamed free' once their single shift was done.

Her main contribution, however, Webb reserved for the question of the working woman's right to vote. She noted that the suffrage debate commonly assumed that the woman of property was the most obvious victim of women's exclusion from the electoral process. While stating that she did not wish to belittle the political grievance of wealthy women, Webb insisted it was the working woman who in reality had the greater claim to the vote. The latter earned this priority because she was a direct contributor to the wealth of society, an attribute not shared by her propertied counterpart who was able to live a life of leisure. The priority of the working woman also stemmed from the fact that she tended to have greater personal experience of the results of government:

As an 'employed person' she finds the hours of her labour, the safety and sanitation of her workplace, and, in some cases, even the wages she receives, determined directly by the action of Parliament. As a 'poor person' she lives under special legal compulsion with regard to the education of her children, the sanitation of her home, and the provision for her sickness and invalidity. As a person who is always within sight of destitution she is perpetually confronted with the Poor Law (Webb, 1914b: ii).

In contrasting the claims of the working and propertied



woman Webb also noted that the worker generally had greater personal experience of both the realities underlying political controversies and of participation in democratic organisations. Her working life made her aware of the limits of legislation and thus of the need to stand in unity with her class. Likewise, her participation in her trade union and consumer cooperative gave her a degree of direct participation in the democratic process rare among women of wealth. As a consequence of this involvement, Webb concluded, working class women were evolving a great industrial democracy complementary 'to the political democracy established by the upper and middle class' (Webb, 1914b: ii). This great achievement, she insisted, proved the justice of the working woman's claim to a full share in the government of the country.

#### **PERSONAL RIGHTS, MOTHERHOOD AND CITIZENSHIP**

Webb's use of the *New Statesman* as a vehicle to further the campaign for the rights of women, and working women in particular, continued in a series of papers she published through May to August of 1914. In May she contributed a paper to a special supplement on 'Motherhood and the State' (Webb, 1914c). This collection criticised social Darwinism and highlighted women's need for adequate natal and aftercare services. Webb's contribution discussed the issue of 'Motherhood and Citizenship'. She noted that maternity and child care had become recognised as political issues of national significance. Given that women could not vote, the politicisation of maternity meant that it was men alone who decided the policies the state should adopt in relation to this most female activity. Webb considered this situation to be outrageous but did not believe it made a case for granting women the franchise. She insisted that women were more than reproducers of the race. They had

interests as wide as men. They should have the vote, but they should have it because they had a right to be involved in the determination of all social issues, not only those related to reproduction.

At the same time, Webb thought the politicisation of motherhood raised an important new issue for women as citizens. It placed an onus on women to 'exercise to the utmost their influence on Local Government' which was the state sphere then responsible for providing the needs of maternity. Webb insisted that women must organise within this sphere to ensure all women had adequate access to the resources they needed to give birth and raise healthy children. Moreover, she argued that women should demand these resources not as welfare handouts, but as a health provision that was their due as members of the human race.

Debate on the issue of maternity continued in the *New Statesman* through May and June of 1914 with the journal publishing three articles by an author who wrote under the pseudonym of 'Candida' (1914a,b,c). This author argued that women should have the right to refuse maternity. This meant they must be free of both legal and moral constraints on their ability to exercise birth control. She also argued that single women should be free to have children outside of marriage. Webb replied to Candida in a series of papers published through July and early August (Webb, 1914d). She began by observing that Candida seemed more concerned with the rights of the individual than with the rights of women. It was noted that she pleaded for the removal of public constraints on women's freedom almost solely on the grounds 'that each individual woman has a moral right to live her own life and develop her own faculties to the degree and in the direction that is agreeable or beneficial to her.' (Webb, 1914d: 396)

Webb sympathised with Candida's commitment to personal



rights but disagreed with the degree of emphasis she placed on the needs and desires of the individual. She observed that, as was common with right-wing feminists, Candida failed to give any consideration to the social effects of the rights she was demanding on behalf of the individual. Rather, it was simply assumed that 'the individual right coincides with the social interest'. This perspective presented a philosophic individualism carried beyond even that of Herbert Spencer. Webb noted that Spencer at least acknowledged that the rights of the individual had to be limited if they conflicted with the like claims of other individuals. Indeed, Spencer acknowledged that at times it was even necessary to restrain the rights of individuals if they endangered the social interest. The extent to which social rights needed to be recognised was of course the critical issue dividing Collectivist and Individualist. However, the differences between these two perspectives were a matter of degree rather than of absolutes. Candida's individualism, however, was extreme in offering no concessions to society and few to other individuals. Personal freedom was virtually absolute and the 'liberties of all' were simply ignored.

Webb further responded to Candida by electing to examine several 'personal rights' claimed by the women's movement. She chose to discuss these rights 'in the light of the three principles of personal freedom, mutual consideration, and reciprocal obligation between the individual and the social organisation.' (Webb, 1914d: 397). She began by discussing birth control and the single woman's desire to have a child. Acceptance of family planning had made great advances in Britain over the previous four decades. Indeed, acceptance of birth control had progressed to the stage where couples discussed openly whether they would have children, and if so, when and how many. This was a development of which Webb approved, insisting that in many ways it was a gain both to the individuals concerned and to

society.

Given that the demand for family planning had become socially accepted, however, Webb was puzzled as to why Candida felt it necessary to plead fervently for its public sanctioning. Webb's dilemma was accentuated by the fact that she believed there were major questions relating to birth control that remained to be settled. Not the least of these unresolved issues was the impact family planning was likely to have on the nation's birthrate and the quality of its children. Webb noted that in some nations population growth was approaching zero, a development that endangered the existence of whole peoples. The problems associated with this danger were compounded by the fact that birth control was more often practised by the upper and middle classes than by the poor. Webb perceived this latter situation to be a matter of concern. This was not for genetic reasons. Rather, it was because it meant an increasing proportion of the nation's children were being nurtured by families without adequate economic resources.

Webb considered Candida's failure to pay any attention to the social dimension of family planning to be unacceptable. Likewise, she was critical of the notion that the unmarried woman's desire for a child should be considered simply a question of personal rights. As with all other issues, she believed consideration must be taken not only of the individual's interest but also of society's needs and the 'like liberty of others'. For the child born out of wedlock, this meant consideration had to be accorded the child's right to a father. For society, it meant thought had to be given to the effect on the community of encouraging sexual licence. Webb's particular concern with the latter issue emanated from her belief that undermining the sexual norms that limited promiscuity would remove a bulwark that provided women with some respite from sexual harassment by men.

Webb's prescriptions for all the difficulties she identified

centred on the development of the 'reciprocal relation between the social organisation and the individual in respect to childbearing and child-raising.' (Webb, 1914d: 430) As regards family planning she noted that in contemporary Britain this relationship existed in an incomplete, distorted and obsolete form. Society encouraged women to have children and compelled parents to maintain their offspring. However, the community did little to ensure that individuals had the means to achieve this objective. The wage system ignored the number of children in a family, while the tax authorities actually penalised families with children. Consequently, it was common for a woman to elect not to have children because she could not afford their maintenance. Webb believed such a situation to be totally unacceptable. Women had a right to choose birth control but they should not be forced to this option by economic pressures. Society's need for healthy children, and the individual woman's right to choose whether she was to give birth, demanded that the nation accept that it had a duty to ensure women were provided with the resources they needed. This meant the provision of the means to prevent pregnancy, if this was desired, and the resources required to fulfil the role of mother if and when women chose to become pregnant. Only if they were guaranteed these resources would women truly enjoy the freedom Candida believed was a woman's right. To fail to consider these broader issues was to confine the right to family planning to the affluent woman. In short, to merely focus on the individual was to ignore both the collective needs of the nation and the individual needs of the women of the working class.

As regards a woman's right to have a child out of wedlock, Webb noted that this claim was advanced primarily by women of the upper classes who could not find a suitable mate and/or by those individuals who would not accept the indignities forced upon wives by the existing marriage laws. In reply, she noted that there was no shortage of men, but merely a shortage of men with

wealth. What needed reforming, therefore, was not society's notion of sexual morality but rather the conventions regarding property. Similarly, oppressive marriage laws demanded a response that centred not only on the rights of the individual but also on the reform of these oppressive laws.

Webb's concern at Candida's extreme individualism was further manifested in the third and fourth of her papers on personal rights. These publications dealt with women's place in the labour market. Candida had not discussed this issue but, as noted above, it was a topic that had long divided labour and right-wing feminists. Webb consequently seized the opportunity which Candida's stress on individualism had provided to discuss these issues. She began by examining the question of the 'right of the woman to free entry into all occupations'. It was noted that women had a minority of the jobs in the labour market and that they were concentrated in the low paid and low status sector of the market. For this problem, she noted, the individualist had an easy solution. This was to throw all occupations open to both sexes and to introduce equal pay for equal work. Webb had difficulty with this policy because she believed both the consumer and other workers had rights which, in certain circumstances, were undermined by this policy.

A factor she believed critical as regard other individuals was '... the question of the rate of remuneration and the conditions of employment, which women ought to claim or to accept' (Webb, 1914d: 494). On the question of pay, she noted, there was a paradox:

The Feminists who insist on the right of women workers to earnings equal to those of men find their strongest allies in the most antifeminist male organisations, whose leaders see in this 'principle of equality' the least invidious method of keeping women out of their particular occupations (Webb, 1914d: 525).

These reactionary males insisted on equal pay because they were aware that when employers were compelled to pay men and women the same wage rate they very often responded by refusing to hire women. It was this 'hard fact', Webb noted, that had led right-wing feminists in the late nineteenth century to oppose equal pay. The latter had insisted on the right of women to take work at 'any price and under any conditions acceptable to themselves, without considering the convenience or interests of men.' The fact that such an approach to wage bargaining was likely to drive the wages of both men and women below the subsistence level, the Individualists had tended to ignore. They had believed that what was important was that individual women be free to maximise their participation in the labour market. By 1914, the right-wing Individualists had abandoned their support for wage cutting and embraced the demand for equal pay. Their adoption of this policy, however, generally failed to consider its effect on the demand for female labour. It was advanced as an individual right that on principle had to be supported, irrespective of its consequences. Not surprisingly, this was a policy that was greeted with glee by those men who were determined to keep women out of industry.

Webb rejected the notion that a woman could justifiably undermine the standard rate in an occupation merely to advance her personal well-being. The downward pressure this form of individualism placed on wages she believed to be neither in the interests of women nor of society. At the same time she recognised why the more reactionary professional associations and unions joined with the right-wing feminists in promoting the demand for equal pay. Her prescription for this difficulty was to assert that, while the individual woman could not work below the standard rate, the women employed in an occupation could collectively choose to accept a rate lower than that paid to men. Webb was not happy with this solution. However, she saw it as a

necessary compromise between the need to preserve women's jobs and the need to halt a downward wage spiral. In short, the policy aimed to both contain market pressure on occupational rates and counter both those reactionary males and right-wing feminists who promoted policies not necessarily in the interests of women workers.

[I]f we are to escape tyranny — which may be the tyranny of one class of producers over another — each class must be left (subject always to the supreme requirement that it must not derogate from its own health and efficiency) to define for itself the particular conditions of employment which seem to its own members to promote their professional efficiency, self-development, and personal happiness. ... at any rate as regards the vast majority of the four million adult manual working women, we have to negative both the male Trade Unionist's claim to impose his own Standard Rate and his own working conditions on the women doing similar work, and the abstract doctrine of the modern middle-class feminist in favour of identity of working conditions and of 'equal remuneration for men and women' (Webb 1914d, 526).

## THE GREAT WAR

The fourth of the papers Webb wrote in reply to Candida appeared on 1 August 1914. Three days later Britain declared war on Germany. Webb was devastated by the outbreak of the conflict and her articles in the *New Statesman* ceased abruptly. It was not until September 1915 that she again appeared in the journal. In the intervening period, however, she appears to have been busy, for her September contribution was a major study of the teaching profession with special focus on the National Union of Teachers. The study was a wide-ranging examination of elementary and secondary schools, special subject teachers and



the Teachers' Registration Council. Women's role in the National Union of Teachers was a significant portion of the report, with Webb recognising that gender was a major cause of division among teachers. However, the study appears to have also made her very much aware that there existed a more substantial divide within the teaching profession. This was the cleavage between the qualified and the unqualified teacher. The membership of the National Union of Teachers consisted of 37,496 men and 53,911 women with membership rights being the same for both sexes. However, membership was restricted to certified teachers. This rule excluded the many thousands of elementary teachers from membership, including the 40,000 members of the National Union of Unqualified Teachers. Ninety per cent of the unqualified teachers were women. Nevertheless, the female membership of the National Union of Teachers was as enthusiastic as the men to keep out their unqualified sisters — a response that was deeply resented by the latter (Webb, 1915a).

Webb's new found sensitivity to the divisions induced by qualifications was to become manifest in the major report on the relative wages of men and women she produced after the war. In this latter study she was to argue that it was not sex but qualifications that was the major factor dividing workers and restricting women's labour market opportunities. While the war lasted, however, she was more concerned with ensuring that the financing of the conflict was not thrust solely on to the working class and in particular with protecting workers' wage standards.

The means by which Webb sought to contribute to the wages issue was explained in a plea for financial support that appeared in the *New Statesman* in October 1915 (Webb, 1915b). The plea was written by Barbara Drake for the Joint Committee of the Fabian Research Department and the Fabian Women's Group. It reported that trade unionists, representatives of the British Association and the Women's Industrial Council, and others, had

decided to undertake 'an enquiry into the new position of women in industry'. Of the 'others' listed as participating, the Webbs were placed first.

That there was an urgent need for a study of how the war was transforming the industrial status of women was stressed by Drake. She noted that history unfortunately showed that the entry of women into male dominated trades was often used by employers as an opportunity to cheapen the price and degrade the conditions of labour. That employers might use the great influx of women into the war industries for this purpose, she believed, was a danger that had to be recognised and countered if vast new areas of 'sweating' were not to be established.

The trade unions had agreed in March 1915 to withdraw or relax their rules and customs regarding female and unskilled labour for the duration of the war. In return, the government and the employers had given certain safeguards. The most notable of the latter promises was that women employed on munitions work would be paid at the same piece rates as the men. What was occurring, however, was that women were either being employed on time rates or their work was artificially redesigned in a manner which allowed employers to claim that because the work was so different, the old union rates were not relevant. Consequently, the prewar union wage standards were being 'thrown to the winds, while the women are employed at rates that threaten the whole position of Labour.' (Drake, 1915: 13)

Drake warned that unless this position was understood and confronted it was probable that both men and women workers would awaken after the war to find themselves powerless as never before. It was imperative, therefore, that a major study be undertaken immediately:

- (1) To enquire how far, and in what occupations and processes, female labour is being introduced for the first time; or is increasing; or is replacing male labour.



- (2) To find out at what rates and under what conditions women are now working, and what is the cause or explanation of or justification for any differentiation between grades or sexes.
- (3) To enquire how far the readjustment of processes now being made have rendered easier the introduction of female labour, and how far they are likely to secure its permanence after the war.
- (4) To enquire into the rules and customs which restrict the employment of men or of women, or influence the line of demarcation between their work, and to enquire in what way any alteration is likely to affect them (Drake, 1915: 13).

Over the next three years, several papers dealing with the position of women in the war industries appeared in the *New Statesman*. These articles were published anonymously so it is not possible to state to what extent they reflected Webb's views. Indeed, the next *New Statesman* paper that provides a definite insight into her ideas on gender relations did not appear until May 1919. This article, 'Women in Industry', was also anonymous. Nevertheless, it serves the purposes of this article. It does so because it reports accurately the minority report Webb submitted as a member of the War Cabinet Committee on Men and Women in Industry in 1919 (Anonymous, 1919).

The author of 'Women in Industry' noted that through the war period arbitrators continually had to resolve difficulties associated with the relative wages of men and women. Once the conflict approached a close, this issue was passed to a War Cabinet Committee by the government. The basic question the committee was asked to advise upon was whether men and women employees should be paid the same wage rate.

The committee had six members, five of whom were government officials and all of whom signed the majority report.

Webb was the only independent member and she chose to submit a minority report that differed markedly from those of her colleagues. It was observed by the *New Statesman* commentator that the critical factor distinguishing the majority and minority reports was their perception of the place of women in industry. Majority members saw women as 'creatures burdened by a peculiar sex disability' (Anonymous, 1919: 157). Webb, on the other hand, insisted that in 'industry women are just workers, and that the question of sex is, broadly speaking irrelevant' (Anonymous, 1919: 157). The reporter observed that Webb appeared to realise fully the implications of the issue of relative wages, whereas the majority of the committee only perceived them dimly.

The first was the principle of the market rate for labour — that is, the principle of having no principle at all and of leaving the relative wages of men and women to be determined at hazard by the varying circumstances and conditions of the labour-market in each particular trade. This the Majority and the Minority alike preferred to reject. The second was the principle of absolutely equal treatment, or better, of no discrimination between the sexes in respect of any method of wage-payment, whether for time spent, or by results. This was rejected by the Majority, and accepted by Mrs. Webb. The third was the principle of 'equal pay for equal work,' interpreted as meaning work equal in quantity and quality at equal expense to the employer. This was rejected by Mrs. Webb, but accepted by the Majority in name, though not by any means completely in actual fact (Anonymous, 1919: 157).

The distinction between the majority's policy of 'equal pay for equal work at equal cost to the employer' and Webb's preference for an 'equal occupational rate for the job' was not mere semantics. As the *New Statesman* reporter observed, the majority position ignored the many difficulties inherent in the notion of

equal pay for equal work at equal cost. It ignored, in particular, the difficulty of identifying whether the cost of the employee's output was the same for both sexes. This was a 'difficulty', the reporter observed, that was ready made for those employers who wished to substitute women for men so that a lower wage could be paid.

Even if the principle were accepted, it would be impossible in practice to ensure its application; for, when once the door is opened to inequality, it is inevitable that the customary factor of cheapness in women's labour should reassert itself, especially as women are still weakly organised and as some of the non-industrial women's societies seem more anxious to extend the area of women's employment at all costs than to protect the rates of those who are employed. War-time experience shows that, if once deductions for lower efficiency and increased cost to the employer are admitted, it is utterly impossible to maintain any real relation of equality (Anonymous, 1919: 158).

A fourth principle also influenced the debate, that of need. Many more men than women, it was put to the committee, had dependents and therefore needed a wage sufficient to provide for more than their own sustenance. The majority responded to this observation by setting a minimum wage for women that assumed no dependents with a higher minimum accorded to men. This policy provided yet a further opportunity for employers to use women's increased participation as a device to cut real wages across the board. Webb, on the other hand, argued for a minimum wage that was the same for both sexes. As far as she was concerned, the issue of dependents should not be resolved by the wage system. Rather, the differing needs of families should be taken care of by the state, which should pay wage supplements direct to those families with children.

Webb opposed the so-called equal pay option and a separate

minimum wage for men and women precisely because she recognised the great wage cutting opportunity it provided employers. While wishing to enhance the job opportunities of women, she maintained her belief that this must not be achieved by inducing a downward spiral in wage rates. Accordingly, she argued vehemently for equal occupational rates and no sex discrimination on entrance. She was aware that the adoption of her principle would limit the extension of the area of women's employment. As suggested above, it was because she wished to preserve women's jobs and extend the area of women's participation that she had earlier given support to a separate standard for men and women in certain occupations. Given that she now believed employers and the state to be intent on using the increased participation of women in industry as a device to cut wage rates across the board, she decided this option was no longer viable. Webb regretted that the payment of equal rates within all occupations was likely to widen the sexual demarcation of the trades. However, she was convinced this was a cost that had to be paid if the lives of the working class were not to be decimated by wage cutting.

The *New Statesman* writer concluded the 1919 article by predicting that the policy advocated by Webb would in the long term be accepted in British industry.

Her report will not be acted on to-day or to-morrow; but, when we have floundered a while longer in the sea of contradictions and absurdities in which any less ambitious scheme will fling us, we shall be driven to take the whole question in hand on the lines of her present proposals (Anonymous, 1919: 158).

This prediction has been validated by time and, sadly, so has Webb's belief that the policy she advocated in her minority report would cement the sexual division of labour.

## CONCLUSION: WEBB AS FEMINIST

The *New Statesman* papers constitute but a portion of Webb's contribution to the campaign waged in the early years of the twentieth century to advance the rights of women. The value of these papers, however, is that they provide a concise and detailed insight into her thought regarding gender relations. They are also important because they have never been subjected to critical analysis or played any part in the debate regarding Webb's feminism. Together, they add substantial support to the claim that she was concerned with the economic and social injustices suffered by women as a consequence of their sex and that she rejected explicitly the claim that women were the biological inferiors of men. Moreover, they show that she did not rely solely on male benevolence or on male dominated institutions to advance women's cause, as is claimed by Pujol (1992). Further, they reveal that she did develop an explicit analysis of the patriarchal forces at work within the capitalist economy and that her analysis was shared by many within the ranks of the women's movement. In short, the *New Statesman* papers show that Webb not only abandoned her early opposition to the women's movement and to female suffrage, she became an active campaigner who threw her full weight behind the cause. This was a shift made possible by her acceptance that she had been wrong to oppose female suffrage in the 1890s. It was also facilitated by the move to the left exhibited by many in the women's movement in the period after 1890 as they came to accept that the struggle for gender equality was part of a wider movement for greater equality in human affairs. Webb was a socialist rather than a liberal feminist but, by any acceptable definition of the term, a feminist she was. Indeed, to borrow Hamilton's observation, Webb was 'a more thorough-going equalitarian than most of the Feminists of her day or ours' (1932: 231).

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