

WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS AND EDUCATIONAL ISSUES, 1900-1930

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Dans cet article l'auteure porte un regard sur le rôle éducatif de certaines organisations nationales de femmes – la Women's Christian Temperance Union le Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire, les Instituts des femmes, et le Conseil national des femmes du Canada. En examinant la relation entre les branches nationales et locales de ces organisations, en établissant comment les objectifs éducatifs de ces groupes furent disseminés, et en étudiant les pratiques de sélection curriculaire des départements d'éducation à travers le pays, Nancy Sheehan établit un lien entre les organisations nationales de femmes et les réformes en matière d'éducation. Elle conclut qu'un des résultats du travail éducatif effectué par ces organisations a été de créer un certain degré d'uniformité dans le curriculum des écoles publiques au Canada.

The period after the turn of the century was a time of great change in Canadian society caused by rapid immigration, industrialization and urbanization. Organizations and individuals became caught up in the need to reform society. A variety of reform movements, such as social gospel, progressive and new education, attest to this wide-spread interest. One such movement which found support for its causes from other reformers, and that engaged the interests of a number of organizations, in total or in part, was the women's movement. Because of the interrelationship among reform movements and the overlapping of causes and goals among organizations and groups, it is difficult to define the limits of the women's movement. Certainly extending the suffrage was one goal, as was the broadening of women's influence beyond the home – at least to those areas which could be viewed as maternally related. Access to higher education, better divorce laws, and mothers' allowances were included. Promotion of legislation that would prohibit alcoholic beverages, that would improve the health of children and adults

and that would benefit the poor and unfortunate were concerns of women and their organizations, although certainly not exclusively.¹ This article examines the educational role of several voluntary national women's organizations to ascertain their goals, strategies, successes and failures in affecting curricular policy and its implementation in public schools across the country.

Women's groups, clubs and societies have long been a part of the Canadian scene and experienced a growth in numbers, kinds and importance between 1890 and 1930. The majority of these, outside of church and missionary groups, were locally organized, often single purpose clubs, and for the most part existed for the benefit of the women themselves. Floral and garden clubs, literary and press societies, artistic and theatrical organizations enhanced the education and leisure of their members. University alumni and women teachers' groups gave women a collective voice and strength in their fight for equal pay and access to professional schools. Political equality leagues, national and provincial political organizations and business and professional clubs for women were generally supportive of the political and business enterprise. There were numerous charitable organizations – not the least of which were the many church groups whose members spent time fund-raising through bazaars, teas and sales, collecting items of clothing and household goods to be shipped to the needy, and carrying out the wishes of the ministers and elders of the church.

Women's reform organizations, first organized in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, were a departure from the personal, charitable and local orientation of most female societies. As a group they had a number of characteristics. First, their prime mandate was to reform society via legislative change. Second, each organization had a special thrust or orientation by which reform would be achieved. Third,

these were national organizations with local, municipal and/or provincial affiliates. Fourth, the work of each society was handled at the national and local level by specific committees, departments of work or councils. Fifth, the members, for the most part, were women of Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, middle-class background. Sixth, the leadership and/or membership of these groups tended to overlap, with women often belonging to more than one organization. And seventh, each one claimed to be an educational organization with committees or departments devoted to educational themes.²

The educational thrusts of these reform organizations had many facets. Not only were the groups interested in the enhancement of their own members and other adults, but they all considered the child to be very important. Since the one agency that had contact with most children was the public school, the particular message of each society somehow needed to become a part of the school's curriculum. Although the organizations were country-wide and policy was established at the national level, the school systems in the country had no such national face. It was incumbent upon the provincial and local units of the societies to lobby departments of education, school boards and individual teachers. Each of these reform organizations handled this differently.

MODERATION IS DANGEROUS DOCTRINE

SINCE alcohol is a narcotic drug, physiologically habit-forming and resulting in addiction in at least ten per cent of moderate drinkers, it is incumbent on the public schools to teach abstinence rather than moderation. When dealing with narcotics, moderation is dangerous doctrine.

John L. C. Goffin, M. D.
Los Angeles Board of Education

Credit: Glenbow Archives, Calgary

Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU)

The department within the WCTU³ that handled the public school lobby was known as Scientific Temperance Instruction (STI). A national STI coordinated the activities of local departments. The main goal of STI was to have a compulsory course in temperance (read *prohibition*) in every classroom, a WCTU-approved textbook and a provincial examination. To accomplish this, petitions were sent to provincial governments; personal interviews with Premiers and Ministers of Education were arranged; copies of approved textbooks and courses of study were sent to education officials; and members spoke at teachers' association conventions and appeared before curriculum review committees. They also enlisted other groups and individuals to help in their campaign.

The STI Department also ran essay contests, approached teachers and school boards at the local level, distributed STI literature and donated books to local school libraries on the subjects of alcohol and tobacco. Although the result of WCTU involvement in the curriculum of the school is hard to measure, there is no doubt that all provincial departments of education in English Canada did institute a compulsory temperance course with textbooks and questions on provincial examinations.⁴

Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire (IODE)

Like the WCTU, the IODE had a centralized administration with overall power in the hands of the national executive and the annual meeting; below this level, there were provincial organizations, then municipal and primary (local) orders. This meant that a hierarchical administration evolved, with the national body able to veto plans and activities devised at the local level. In 1904 the national executive formed an educational committee to advise and act on educational subjects in Canada. A representative group of educators agreed to serve. These activities had one goal – the inculcation in the youngsters of patriotism, which to the IODE meant imperialism.

The years prior to WWI were ones in which the IODE quietly pursued its objectives using school children, education officials and the curriculum to further its imperial goals. By supporting a school linking scheme and a correspondence plan, the IODE tried to put children and adolescents from around the Empire into contact with one another. By proposing programs for Empire Day and for the last Friday of each month, by donating libraries to schools and by holding essay contests, the women hoped to increase the children's knowledge and patriotic understanding of the Empire. By appealing for regular use of the anthem, by giving Union Jacks and pictures of royalty to schools, the members believed they would keep the imperial presence in front of the children. And by supporting the school cadet movement the Order was helping prepare the youth of the country to come to Britain's aid when necessary. IODE Empire Day programs were sanctioned by Ontario's minister of education; essay contests were integrated into the curriculum; inspectors provided lists of schools needing libraries; and school cadet corps sought the help of the IODE.

Although this interest in Britain continued, post WWI found the IODE beginning to take an interest in and promote a knowledge of Canada. It claimed to be a successful educational organization. However, not all the above activities were treated with the same kind of enthusiasm and interest; not all the chapters engaged in much educational work; and not all the schools or departments of education responded with the same degree of commitment to the cause.⁵

Women's Institutes (WI)

Women's Institutes differed from other groups in two important ways. Begun in 1899 in Ontario they spread across the country rather rapidly, but only in 1919 was the Federation of Women's Institutes of Canada formed with Emily Murphy as president. By that time the pattern of activity for individual institutes was established and the Federation became a mechanism for communication across the country rather than a policy-making body. Another unique aspect of Women's Institutes was their incorporation under

provincial departments of agriculture which offered financial and political support. The first Institute was the brainchild of Mrs. Adelaide Hoodless, who undertook a campaign to educate wives and mothers in nutrition and good housekeeping. To her goes credit for the push for domestic science education in schools and teachers' colleges.

The Women's Institute was begun as an adult education organization on the premise that, if you educate a women, you educate a family and sometimes whole communities. The women were particularly concerned about the rural school and many local institutes made improvements in it their main line of work. Cooking and sewing classes, the hot school lunch, medical inspection by qualified personnel, playground equipment and the promotion of good health generally were areas needing attention. These were particularly difficult in rural schools, which were one room buildings without extra space, running water or electricity. The schools were isolated from one another, independent, and one teacher was expected to handle everything. The Institute women operated at two levels. They passed and sent on to the government numerous resolutions asking for rural school improvements. And individual institutes made arrangements to support their local schools. Some started a hot lunch program, even if it was just to supply hot cocoa. Others arranged to have one or two of their members offer sewing and cooking lessons for the girls. A few raised the funds necessary to provide playground equipment. Institutes cooperated with rural public health nurses and the Junior Red Cross; members spoke at teachers' conventions and institutes; they made donations to school libraries and encouraged women to serve as school trustees.

Although the activities across the country varied, the Institutes established a reputation among rural women everywhere as social and educational centres.⁶

National Council of Women of Canada (NCWC)

The National Council of Women of Canada was the umbrella organization which coordinated the activities of the many associations which made up its

membership. It struggled to adjust to the changing role of its member organizations and to reconcile conflicting interests. Local Councils of Women coordinated the work of the local/municipal branches of affiliated members. In this way both local and national concerns of individual federations found their way into the debates of the National Council. Given the educational interests of many of the associations, it is not surprising to find that this activity had a high priority.

The Women's Platform in 1917 had a number of resolutions relating to education. The NCWC called for education to include music, art, physical education and technical training; to provide medical inspection in schools and an improved health curriculum; to include supervised playgrounds complete with play and sports equipment; and to produce good citizens of the Dominion and the Empire.

The umbrella nature of the NCWC resulted in resolutions that were com-

prises by one or more member associations whose thrust might be different on any one issue. In some ways this may have weakened the impact of the Council. However it also meant that some associations who had not heretofore been aware of, or interested in, particular topics became advocates. In this way the specific interests of one organization were supported by other associations. The message to government, institutions and the public would appear then to have widespread support.⁷

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Each of the associations under review had a national office with a constitution, annual meetings, a national executive and a committee structure. At the local level the national organizational structure was duplicated. Each of the groups also had a national magazine or newsletter which helped locals keep up with directions, ideas and actions that were going on elsewhere. The fact that these organizations had a framework and a communications device that linked local and provincial units to the national coordinating body meant that the lobby to each provincial department of education would carry the same message. Added to this was the role of the National Council in supporting the activities of its member associations; thus the lobby became a widespread one, not just that of a single organization. Not only was this identical message being carried to provincial departments of education, premiers and MLA's, but it was also reaching some individual schools, teachers, principals and trustees through the organizations' local affiliates. In effect, the women's organizations, through their educational mandate, had the effect that a national system of education might have had – the formulation of educational policy that varied little from coast to coast.

The fact that all of these groups had an interest in education and that most of them had educational committees or departments of work underlines the close association of women with the home and children. It was a natural extension of their work with their own children to go beyond the home to the care, support and education of all children. If women had social responsibilities, surely children were appropriate beneficiaries. What better way to improve society than through the training and educating of the

young? And what better way to extend their influence beyond the home and into the outside world without raising questions about spheres of influence? In 1897 Edith Archibald of the Halifax WCTU suggested that since "women's rights" had been so criticized, women should talk more of the "rights of children."⁸ This, I expect, is a clear example of the process of accommodation and resistance. The women bowed to the accepted view that their world was the world of the home and family and children. At the same time they resisted this confinement by interpreting this to mean "all homes and all children," in effect broadening their activities well beyond what society considered appropriate female behaviour.⁹

A further point concerns women's experience as teachers and the effect this had on their educational work in voluntary associations. Did the fact that many organizational women had experience as schoolteachers affect the educational success of their associations? Although the literature generally suggests that educational hierarchies tended to reinforce gender stereotypes with the women at the bottom of the hierarchy,¹⁰ there is some evidence to argue that one-room schoolteaching was at times productive of self-confidence, even rebellion.¹¹ This may account for the difference between the educational theory propounded by the leadership, both provincial and national, of these organizations and the little or complete lack of educational activity carried out by most members at the local level.

Another aspect of the educational role of women's organizations that may relate to women's experience as teachers is the kind of tactics used by these groups. What is striking is the similarity across all the associations. Essay and poster contests

with prizes and public recognition at an awards ceremony or in the societal newsletter or magazine were popular methods. The donation of books to school libraries on subjects such as temperance, health, the Empire, nutrition and Canadian topics occurred across the country. Appeals for support from other organizations, from churches, politicians and the public generally took place. The women wrote to and set up appointments with Ministers of Education and other department of education officials. They appeared before curriculum committees, spoke at teachers' conventions and addressed students in Normal Schools. In the arena of actual curriculum materials the women's groups endorsed particular textbooks, suggested curriculum guidelines and proposed implementation strategies. They produced literature to back up their contention that these new programs were not only necessary but also could be implemented.

Last, but certainly not least, the religious, ethnic and social class background of the women must be considered. The Anglo-Saxon, middle class, Protestant nature of the members of these organizations meant that the educational change advocated was that defined by one part of the society. The reactions of "other" women – immigrants, working class women, Catholics or Jews – to domestic science, school gardens, "hot" lunches, temperance programs or saluting the flag were not asked for or received. The less-than-hoped-for success of some of these changes, such as the school gardens, temperance instruction, and the hot school lunch, may have had something to do with this one-sided input into school reform.

In essence, then, the role of women's organizations in the educational arena



Dr. George M. Dawson Chapter of IODE, Dawson, Y.T. (8 July 1913)

Credit: Public Archives Canada

was one of facilitating the process whereby national issues became curriculum issues. This process was enhanced because the leadership of these groups overlapped one another, support for each others' causes was asked and given, and the National Council acted as a coordinating body. The Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, middle-class background of the women matched that of governing and educational officials and ensured better understanding of their goals. The close association of women and children, and the fact that many women had experience as schoolteachers, added to the dynamics of the educational activity of the women's organizations.

¹See Linda Kealey (ed.), *A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada 1880s-1920s* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1979); Carol Lee Bacchi, *Liberation Deferred? The Ideas of the English-Canadian Suffragists, 1877-1918* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983); Beth Light and Joy

Parr, *Canadian Women on the Move 1867-1920* (Toronto: OISE, 1983); and Ramsay Cook and Wendy Mitchinson (eds.), *The Proper Sphere: Women's Place in Canadian Society* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1976).

²These seven characteristics apply generally to the women's groups under discussion, but not all seven apply in every case: the IODE, for example, did not advocate legislative change; the Women's Institutes were slow to federate nationally, and the National Council of Women did not have a specific reform thrust.

³For information on the WCTU generally, see Wendy Mitchinson, "Aspects of Reform: Four Women's Organizations in 19th Century Canada," (PhD thesis, York University, 1977); "The WCTU: 'For God, Home and Native Land': A Study in Nineteenth Century Feminism," in Kealey, *A Not Unreasonable Claim*, pp. 151-168; and "The Woman's Christian Temperance Union: A Study in Organi-

zation," in *International Journal of Women's Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1981) 143-156; and Marcia McGovern, "The Woman's Christian Temperance Union Movement in Saskatchewan, 1886-1930: A Regional Perspective of the International White Ribbon Movement," (MA thesis, University of Regina, 1977).

⁴For information on the educational role of the WCTU see Nancy M. Sheehan, "Temperance, the WCTU and Education in Alberta, 1905-1930," (PhD thesis, University of Alberta, 1980); "National Pressure Groups and Provincial Curriculum Policy: Temperance in Nova Scotia Schools, 1880-1930," *Canadian Journal of Education*, Vol. 9 No. 1 (1984): 73-88; "The WCTU and Educational Strategies on the Canadian Prairie, 1886-1930," *History of Education Quarterly*, 24:1, (Spring, 1984) 101-119; and "Temperance, Education and the WCTU in Alberta, 1905-1930," *Journal of Educational Thought*, Vol. 14, No. 2, (Aug. 1980), 108-124.

⁵For information on the IODE see Nancy M. Sheehan, "The IODE, the Schools and World War I," *History of Education Review*, Vol. 13, No. 1, (1984) 29-44 and "'Tea-Sippers or Crusaders?' The IODE as a Women's Organization, 1900-1925," read at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, May, 1984.

⁶For information on Women's Institutes see Annie Walker, *Fifty Years of Achievement . . . the Women's Institute of Ontario* (Toronto: FWIO, 1948); British Columbia Women's Institute, *Modern Pioneers 1907-1959* (Evergreen Press, n.d.); *A Story of the Women's Institutes of Manitoba 1910-1934*, MG10 C8 Manitoba Women's Institute, File MW 1 Misc. Hist. Info., Provincial Archives of Manitoba; Alexandra Zacharias, "British Columbia Women's Institutes in the Early Years: Time to Remember," in Barbara Latham and Cathy Kiss, (eds.) *In Her Own Right: Selected Essays on Women's History in BC* (Victoria: Camosun College, 1980), pp. 55-78; and Carol J. Dennison, "They Also Served: The British Columbia Women's Institutes in Two World Wars,"

in Barbara Latham and Roberta J. Pazdro (eds.) *Not Just Pin Money: Selected Essays on the History of Women's Work in British Columbia* (Victoria: Camosun College, 1984), pp. 211-220.

⁷For information on the National Council of Women see Veronica Strong-Boag, "The Parliament of Canada: the National Council of Women of Canada, 1893-1929," (PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1975). See also Rosa L. Shaw, *Proud Heritage: A History of the National Council of Women of Canada* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1957).

⁸Ernest Forbes, "The Ideas of Carol Bacchi and The Suffragists of Halifax: A Review Essay on Liberation Deferred? The Ideas of the English-Canadian Suffragists, 1900-1925," *Atlantis*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 119-126.

⁹See for example, Jean Anyon, "Intersections of Gender and Class: Accommodation and Resistance by Working-Class and Affluent Females to Contradictory Sex-Role Ideologies" in Stephen Walker and Len Barton (eds.), *Gender, Class and Education* (Sussex: The Falmer Press, 1983), pp. 19-37.

¹⁰Alison Prentice, "The Feminization of Teaching," in Susan Mann Trofimenkoff and Alison Prentice, (eds.) *The Neglected Majority: Essays in Canadian Women's History* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979), pp. 49-65.

¹¹Geraldine Joncich Clifford, "'Daughters into Teachers': Educational and Demographic Influences on the Transformation of Teaching into 'Women's Work' in America," *History of Education Review*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (1983), 15-28.

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