

WOMEN, WIVES AND MOTHERS

1866 – 1945

ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS OF HELPING CHILDREN

A journey of generosity and giving through the generations



In the early years of the Society women's status was very different to that of today. Until 1928 they did not have equal voting rights with men. Their education was limited and legal rights were dominated by men. For most women marriage was the only attractive prospect and legally in marriage they were largely subject to men. Working class women worked invariably in poorly paid jobs; some wives depended solely on their husband's wages. Within a year or so of marriage most women became mothers and for some childbearing dominated the majority of their lives. Miscarriage was common and larger families equally commonplace. Childbirth and its hazards foreshortened women's lives and women had to develop survival strategies to bring up children and this meant providing the means to do so.

It was not until the early twentieth century that things slowly began to improve, and only after the Second World War that women combined motherhood and work in a less dependent way. At any time widowhood, or other life event such as separation or divorce, could create vulnerability for women. In the early years of the Society this was especially true and remained the case for the majority of women to beyond the middle years of the twentieth century. It still leads to vulnerability for some women today.

“Mother is a Presbyterian and does not earn”.

Case studies from applications point repeatedly to the inability of the mother to earn or, if she did earn, earn very little. The inability of relatives to help is often noted. A mother's application in 1901 noted the loneliness of her situation. She was caring for six children and had no income. In another case in the same year both parents were dead and the grandmother earned “a shilling now and then working in the fields.” Her brother supported the family. In 1902 it was noted that a mother had nothing to fall back on “but a few shillings which she earns by outdoor labour and poultry rearing.” In 1905 a mother whose husband was admitted to the Belfast Asylum was earning some money by “selling some tools from time to time that belonged to her husband (so) she was able to get clothing for the children.” Of another mother of seven in 1905 it was said that without the Society's help “they would be in absolute starvation.” A mother in 1914 was said to be “depending on last pay received from her husband.” In 1915 an aunt cared for two children where the parents were dead. She had to leave her own employment to do so. In 1925 a mother who had taken time to care for her sick child lost her job and had only “a little work as a charwomen.” In the first half of the twentieth century there is increasing reference to “war pension” or “state pension” or “widows' pension.” In one case in 1916 it was noted that the widow received 18 shillings “and rent and food exhaust it more.” One mother in 1939 took in boarders to keep her home together. In 1944 “Mother is Presbyterian and does not earn” was still prominent in the narrative of applications.

Emigration and Remarriage

If women became economically vulnerable as widows and mothers, the loss of a husband could also prove detrimental to the status of these women in society. With employment prospects curtailed and status diminished, one route to the possibility of better prospects was emigration. One family in 1881 is recorded as having emigrated, in 1876 another had “gone to Scotland”. In 1866 another family had “gone to America”; in another case in 1914 the family is noted as having moved to Canada.

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Another route out of economic vulnerability and reduced status was re-marriage, and the Society's records show that there were 296 remarriages between 1883 and 1890. In some circumstances however, remarriage may have proved difficult. With children to support and likely in poor health due to childbearing, childrearing and work related debility, she may not have presented an attractive prospect to any possible suitor, especially in the wake of war or conflict where there was a higher ratio of females to males. Remarriage might prove difficult, but not impossible. In 1905 a family were supported when the father died. Four children aged 4, 3 and 1 were left, another child died aged 4 months. The mother was supported until 1908 when she remarried. In 1916 a mother was left bereaved when her husband was killed in action in the First World War. She had four children aged 11, 9, 7 and 2 years of age. She was supported by the Society until she remarried in 1920.

Paragons in Poor Health

As motherhood took on an increasing symbolic significance during the Victorian era middle-class mothers were viewed as paragons of virtue supporting both home and family. In applications, stress is obviously placed on qualities to be admired in a working-class mother. She is referred to as "very industrious", "a careful woman of good character and attentive to her children", "careful and thrifty", "a very quiet, decent young woman", "hardworking and sober", "a sober woman". Other applications contain remarks such as "a good mother, good housekeeper, honest, sober and truthful", "capable and reliable" and "mother – of excellent character, a most exemplary wife and mother". If these wives and mothers were exemplary they were also subject to debilitating illness. One application in 1901 notes the mother was "delicate", and another in 1905 notes the mother was "not physically strong". In 1934 a mother was described again as "delicate". In 1940 a mother "is unable to earn owing to heart troubles". Weakness due to repetitive childbearing, overwork and stress no doubt was the reality for many women whose applications were made to the Society.

Grants Withdrawn

The ideals associated with wives and motherhood were not attained by all, at least not all of the time. Various problems were encountered including elopement, drunkenness, adultery and keeping "an improper house". In one case the reason given for a family being struck off the roll was "immoral mother"; in another, a somewhat cryptic "mother unsatisfactory" which leaves what "unsatisfactory" might mean open to interpretation. Clearly in times of economic need, and given her vulnerable position, a mother with children to feed and clothe was open to the exploitation of men. In ordinary times she might manage with what little money or goods she could beg or borrow. In less ordinary times her existence would have been precarious. In such perilous circumstances, with resources all but exhausted, the temptation to seek solace with another, whose motivation in offering help may not have been altruistic, must have been strong. There were various circumstances in which grants were withdrawn or suspended for contravention of the Society's code of conduct which, however, was only implemented as a last resort, aware that the child was to be helped if at all possible.

Resilience, Ingenuity or Vulnerability

It is not an unreasonable expectation that the women, wives and mothers that grace the pages of the Society's records, should be seen as emerging like formidable and resilient figures struggling against adversity and developing survival strategies with ingenuity. It is not unreasonable, but it would be inaccurate. What emerges from the record is the overall vulnerability of these women, at risk of poverty and abuse and some, perhaps more, on the cusp of destitution. Women, wives and mothers were left inadvertently, or on purpose, by men to face a hostile environment with many having few resources at their disposal. For many the Society was a crucial source of help at a critical time, for some a lifeline preventing the fragmentation or destruction of their family, for all it was, in the period before the welfare state, the only safety net they had available.