

# The role played by women in the independent labour party

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



'The feminine qualities in man have been suppressed, and never allowed free outlet. His affections, his sympathies, all the finer feelings within himself have been by himself forcibly separated from his public life - the result being he has made a hell on earth, where was meant to be a kingdom of heaven' - Lilly Bell 1894 Under the leadership of Kier Hardie (1856-1915) the Independent Labour Party was formed in 1893.

The main, political objective of the ILP was to secure the collective ownership of the means of productions, distribution and exchange. (Hannan, June 1999) It was an uncompromisingly socialist party whose advocates attacked capitalism at every opportunity. However the ILP prided itself on being the most sympathetic of all political groups, at the time, to the women question; the party, at times, even went so far as to be sympathetic to the aspirations of feminists.

Ours is the one political party wherein women stand on terms of perfect equality with men" (Hardie, Kier 1899) Nevertheless although the ILP may have been keen to recruit women, those who did manage to join really had to assert themselves if they wanted to do more than make the tea and run fund-raising bazaars as their mothers had done in earlier organisations. The propaganda produced by the ILP and various other socialist periodicals such as the 'The Clarion' and 'Justice' gave somewhat mixed views in regards the women's emancipation and the suffrage movement.

In some cases ILP, socialist propaganda portrayed women as conservative and uninterested in politics because they were bound up in details of family life, at other times literature urged women to take part in the struggle for

socialism in order to bring improvement to the domestic sphere. (Hannan, June 1999) It could be argued, therefore that there was a deep seeded contention within the ranks ILP in regards to the women question. The vast majority of male members viewed women and women's emancipation in terms of pre-disposed Victorian ideals such as the idea of separate spheres, ideas that were reinforced by Marx and Engel's.

However there was a minority of members in the ILP, including Kier Hardie himself who were extremely apathetic to women's social and political needs and suggested that the ILP was a party that should represent all its members on equal terms. There is evidence to suggest in 'Life as we have know it', 'Maternity' and 'Round about a pound a week' that feelings of frustration, anger, desperation and resentment of their inferior status were more common among Victorian women than has often been recognised. Purvis, June and Holton, S. S. 1998) In spite of this the sexual division in Victorian society was so strong that many women and most men regarded it as natural and eternal, so to challenge it was to strike at the certainties of the age.

The Victorian ideal of womanhood cantered on marriage and the home, women's mission in life was to be the guardian of moral, spiritual and domestic values. Female inferiority and the Victorian stereotypes of the womanly women were reinforced by biological, anthropological and medical theories. Purvis, June and Holton, S. S. 1998) " Men have started out with the theory of the natural inferiority of women, they have assumed - like Rousseau, because it suited them to do so - that her 'true' sphere was the

home and her 'true' function maternity, and then persuaded themselves that they had biological reasons for keeping her out of the universities and for denying her the vote". - Ernest Newman, 1895

The nucleus of women's involvement in the ILP centered on the Pankhurst's (working class sisters who would later set up the 'Women's Social and Political Union) and was very closely associated with the suffrage movement. They concentrated initially upon work with women in the North of England. By 1897 what was later to be called the 'constitutional women's suffrage organisation' found support in both 'Justice' and the 'Labour Leader' and thus the ILP added a specific reference to the enfranchisement of women to its political programme in 1895.

During this decade 'Labour Leader' produced more articles relating to the women question than either 'Justice' or 'The Clarion'. (Abrams, Fran 2003) However the 'Labour Leader' generally portrayed women as insubstantially youthful, lethargic, inferior, apathetic, full of pretence and hopelessly dominated by men and suggested that any attempt to focus on women's common oppression would undermine labour and divert attention from class exploitations. Barrow and Bullock 2001) The 'Clarion' seemed to suggest that women's suffrage agitation was not as important as social and moral emancipation and although it initially supported women's suffrage it never came round to the adult suffrage position. By the beginning of the 20th century various attempts had been made by female members of the ILP and certain middle-class female intellectuals to explain the value of socialism in

reference to universal suffrage in areas of the country that other socialist propaganda could not reach.

This including the 'Clarion Van', the 'Women's Co-operative Guild' and the 'Women's Trade Union League' that were tremendously important in providing a strong local base from which a strong suffrage campaigns could be mounted, and although the principle idea behind the 'Clarion Van' was to bring socialism to the country districts, the van incidentally provided a valuable training ground for women interested in politics.

It also provided essential experience in public speaking for women. In 1884 alone Enid Stacey (1868-1903 'Clarion' columnist and author of 'A Century of Women's Rights') addressed 122 meetings in 33 townships in Lancashire, Cheshire and Cumberland on subjects, which ranged from 'Causes of Poverty' and 'What Socialism Is to 'Women's Franchise'. In 1895 at an annual conference, the ILP was voted the largest party in every proposal for extending electoral rights to both men and women. Hannan, June 1999)

Although Kier Hardie still remained the only male advocate of women's suffrage at a national level in the ILP until Isabella Ford (1855-1924 'Labour Leader' columnist and author of 'Women and Socialism') was elected to the executive in 1901. Ford joined the ILP because it was the only party that stood for equality and opportunity for the whole race. She understood that women had never had such equality before.

She addressed local meetings on a broad range of issues, including women's suffrage, protective legislation and women's trade union organisations " I am

right, I think in saying that the ILP was the first political party to promote the candidature of women for election on public bodies. It has the distinction also of being the first political body to elect women on its national executive" (Hannan, June 1999)

The suffrage movement within the ILP was in its earlier stages both middle class and individualistic, its chief strength lying in the claim of the individual women who had the right to fight for her way of life and support herself by her own extremities. It was often suggested to women that socialism could improve family life by improving child health, education and living standards and thus appeal to women confined to the domestic sphere.

Ryan, J and Ugolini, L, 2000) Lilly Bell (1844-1894 possibly an alias of Kier Hardie and columnist for the 'Labour Leader') suggested that attitudes towards, and behaviour within marriage was a crucial test of a man's commitment to a socialist future and that conventional religious and social thought that had conditioned women to be submissive could be challenged. (Hannan, June 1999) Kier Hardie put it in 1904, that the ultimate aim of the ILP was still the immediate equalisation of sexes, enfranchisement on the same basis as men symbolised by women's claim to social equality.

However one could dispute that if the energetic women promoting the franchise question had their way, the issue would dominate the ILP, which would be turned from other pressing questions towards realising the vote for women. " If the ILP is determined to concentrate its efforts upon a legislative attempt to extend the franchise, it must make up its mind what it wants. It

cannot be promoting an adult suffrage bill and a women's representation bill at the same time".

Thus some Socialist argued that campaigns around issues relating to sex oppression merely deviated from the more important struggle between classes. Even Fredrick Engel's (1820-1895) believed that from a materialist perspective, women's economic dependence was derived from men's control of private property, which made women the proletariat of the domestic sphere. (Purvis, June and Holton, S. S. 1998) Furthermore it has also been suggested that the ILP was so sympathetic towards women's issues that there was no need for a separate organisation.

Certain advocates believed that there was never a strong enough momentum to have women's associations at a national level. Nonetheless the ILP did aim to welcome women members and there were no formal barriers to women participating at all levels of the organisation. However little was done in any positive sense to attract women into socialist politics. Some branches of the ILP set up separate women's groups to provide a non-threatening context in which women could discuss their political views.

This is possibly why women found a warmer welcome for their ideas within the ILP than in any other socialist organisations. This can also help us to explain why there was a very widespread belief among scholars, both men and women, that the ILP was committed to sex equality. (Cowman, Krista 2002) Ultimately the Independent Labour Party was dominated by one key

political objective, the socialisation of the nation and the collective, public ownership of the means of production.

From its inception in 1893 until Isabelle Ford's promotion to the executive in 1901 women in the ILP truly had to assert themselves if they wanted to be recognised. The reason for this is because the majority of members in the ILP still believed in medically and anthropologically pre-disposed Victorian ideals such as that of the 'spheres of influence'. Almost all socialist periodicals did, at times discuss the 'women question' but they all generally tended to agree that such arguments deviated from other more pressing socialist questions such as class struggle.

However due to the support from Kier Hardie and some middle-class female intellectuals like Lilly Bell, women, for the first time in British history were given the opportunity to discuss and sometimes voice their political opinions. Although this was by in large confined to local level meetings. Consequently one could definitely argue that the ILP did attempt to give women their own forums in which to discuss their own political ideas.

Whether this was in order to prevent the 'women question' being discussed at a national level or whether it was a genuine attempt to include women into labour politics is another question. " Let us hear no more of 'Women do not want the vote'. Working women want to make themselves felt in public life for definite purposes - to improve the social laws and administration, and particularly to watch over the lives of women and children. To eject from the



electorate, public-spirited workers like these is a folly which nothing but voluntary ignorance can account for"