

Working for Jewish Girls: Lily Montagu, Girls' Clubs and Industrial Reform 1890-1914

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Durham University: September 2002

Abstract

Lily Montagu was involved in social work and religious ministry with the London Jewish community for over sixty years. This article considers the significance of her involvement in the girls' club movement and her efforts towards workplace reform. It argues that the specific circumstances of the working class Jewish girls in the early twentieth century enabled her to develop a comprehensive view of both industrial organisation and social work. Her approach was submerged as social work and trade unionism diverged along fault lines of gender, but continues to raise issues of relevance today.

Introduction

Opening emergency workshops

On August 18th 1914, one week after the declaration of war between Britain and Germany, the National Organisation of Girls Clubs (NOGC) opened its rooms in Great Titchmarsh Street, London as a relief workroom for girls. It did so in response to a crisis in the clothing trade as wealthy patrons, panicking at the prospect of war, suddenly withdrew their orders. Initially, the workrooms were intended to help tide over a few affiliated club members in distress. However, so great was the demand for work, that two weeks after opening, the enterprise moved to the West Central Jewish Girls' Club, run by Lily Montagu in Dean Street, Soho. By the middle of September they had moved yet again to the Whitfield Tabernacle, where six hundred young women a day were employed.

During that first month of war, Lily Montagu, who chaired the NOGC, became a member of the Central Committee on Women's Employment, and through it secured a Government grant of £500 in order that the renamed "experimental" workrooms might take any unemployed girl, regardless of club

membership. By mid October, statutory workrooms were in place and the NOGC scaled down its operation. By January 1915, the employment crisis had passed, new openings were emerging for female labour and the NOGC workshops closed altogether with a pledge to seek work for the 20 girls remaining.

[1]

The National Organisation of Girls Clubs

That the NOGC could respond so rapidly and effectively to a temporary but very real need amongst clothing workers in London in 1914, was a consequence of its interests and its history. As its name suggests, its purpose was the national co-ordination of Girls' Clubs. It also provided activities and lectures, campaigned around the interests of young female workers and offered a support service for those who wished to complain about infringements of the Factory Acts. Many of the women involved in the work of the NOGC were, like Montagu, running girls' clubs. They were in regular contact with their members and the effects of the war on the girls would have been immediately obvious to them.

The organisation could trace its antecedents to the industrial unrest in London in the 1880s. It had emerged from the Women's Industrial Council (WIC), itself a development from the Women's Trade Union Association which had been created after the 1889 Dock Strike in order to organise female workers. As a member of the WIC, Montagu had been the Honorary Secretary of the Clubs Industrial Association (CIA), an associated group whose primary aim had been to educate young female workers about the Factory Acts, and to use girls' clubs as a basis for industrial organisation. In 1911, after disputes over policy regarding the demand for a minimum wage [2], the CIA became fully independent and joined with elements of the National Union of Women Workers to create the National Organisation of Girls Clubs.

The main interest of the NOGC was the welfare of young women at work and its uniqueness lay in its stated objective, to develop "social and industrial work under one head" for this group of workers. The recreational and educational activities which were the hallmark of affiliated clubs were devised in relation to the working life of members and in response to the effects which work had upon them. Where waged work impacted negatively upon moral, physical and intellectual development, the NOGC accepted

Montagu's argument that club leaders had a responsibility to "interfere in the industrial life of their girls".[3] Thus in 1914, the NOGC was in touch with young women as workers in a way which could be matched by no other organisation.

Because many of the women who were involved were "ladies of influence"[4], belonging to well-connected families, they could affect political decision-making, have their research findings and arguments taken seriously and thus inform government policy. Indeed, whilst the workrooms were being organised in October 1914, the Intelligence Department of the Local Government Board was also requesting the help of the NOGC in collecting statistics regarding the extent of unemployment.[5] It is no accident that their Chairwoman was seconded to the Central Committee on Women's Employment, and that the workroom facility they opened was endorsed by the State. Lily Montagu was self-consciously determined to use her class privileges to improve the lives of working class young women and her commitment to the NOGC reflected this determination. She was powerful within the organisation and the direction of its work in its early years, is marked by her priorities. These were general in their application but arose from the particular circumstances of her personal life.

Lily Montagu

Lily Montagu's main concern was the girls of London's Jewish community, many of whom were daughters of immigrant families. Young female workers, toiling in sweatshops, factories and at home were not in the ordinary course of events reached by the trade union movement. However, many were connected with girls' clubs. These clubs, provided by middle class voluntary social workers, sometimes as an aspect of a Christian "mission", offered opportunities for recreation and informal education.[6] Montagu was enthusiastic about their potential, and keen to make provision specifically for Jewish girls. She believed that clubs could help to heal class conflict and division if the middle class leaders were prepared to meet the working class members in a spirit of friendship. For her, to know a club member as a friend was to know about her life and circumstances and to work for her benefit. Taking this view, Montagu learned directly from the members of her club how low wages, overwork and insanitary conditions were implicated in the material, cultural and spiritual poverty which blighted their young lives. She thus became concerned with

the question of industrial reform and she worked tirelessly, both as a girls' club leader in day to day association with members and at an organisational level with other industrial reformers, to improve female working conditions. Yet she is a largely forgotten figure both in the general history of club work with young people and that of industrial reform.

As the moving force behind the creation of the NOGC, Montagu founded a major national voluntary youth organisation which continues its work today as 'UK Youth'. However, her name hardly appears in the general historical accounts of youth work, many of which are concerned primarily with club work with boys and young men or with particular movements such as the Scouts. Even in its own "Short History" [7], UK Youth does not mention Montagu. It is only within feminist and Jewish youth work that she is present.[8] Yet she was one of the few early youth workers to write about club work. The loss of her memory relates partly to her identification with the interests of the Jewish community and faith which situated her as a 'specialist' worker, despite her declared ecumenicism. However it is also due to her determination to place young women at the centre of her thinking and action. For as the twentieth century progressed, work with 'youth' became increasingly masculine.[9] The dominant practice came to concentrate almost entirely upon the social education and recreational needs of boys. Meanwhile as trade unions took care of boys' industrial conditions, any pretensions towards industrial reform were abandoned in mainstream youth work.

The growth of trade unionism as the major movement towards workers' rights and industrial reform has meant that complementary organisations working towards similar ends but without allegiance to party politics have not been given a great deal of attention by labour historians. Therefore, not only has Montagu been marginalised in the history of youth work, but she has also been virtually ignored in the accounts of twentieth century social and industrial reform. Only with Mappen's 1985 study of the Women's Industrial Council [10], does she begin to emerge into the frame. Yet she was associated with some of the best known female activists of the Edwardian period. For example, Beatrice Webb, Emmeline Pethick Lawrence, Clementina Black and Margaret Bondfield were all colleagues and Margaret Macdonald, who created the Women's Labour League, was a great friend. With Emmeline Pethick and Mary Neal of the

Esperance Girls' Club, Lily Montagu and her sister Marian purchased the Green Lady Hostel in Littlehampton as a holiday home for Girls' Club members which became a significant asset in the work of London Girls' Clubs.[11] Meanwhile, as the Chair of the Labour Law Association, Montagu worked alongside its President, Beatrice Webb.[12] Yet references to her in the accounts of these eminent women are sparse.

It is certainly the case that Lily Montagu does not fit easily into the stereotyped images of female labour reformers. She was not a waged worker and did not ally herself with any one trade union, and she seems to have retained her Liberal allegiances despite her friendship with Margaret and Ramsay Macdonald. Her story does not fit easily into the narratives of socialist activism and there is a marked absence of ideology in her own writings which are very simple and direct. In situating her reforming activism within clubs rather than trades unions, she was signifying her understanding of the manner in which young women could be reached. However, this ran counter to the principles of labour organisation emerging at that time. Emmeline Pethick Lawrence recalled in relation to her own work with the Esperance Girls Club:

There were people of some importance in the socialist movement who used to call on us in order to point out that what we were doing was quite worthless, since we were only extending to a handful of people some of the benefits that the capitalist regime had bestowed upon us, instead of throwing all our energy into an attempt to change the economic system.[13]

Montagu did not think in revolutionary terms. She considered it her duty to extend to as many people as she could “the benefits that the capitalist regime had bestowed” upon her, and she was convinced that this was work which could improve lives. At the same time, she believed that trade unionism could be a force for industrial progress, smoothing industrial relations, improving conditions for workers, and benefiting all in the process. She therefore hoped that her work would lead to trade union organisation amongst Jewish young women:

I must admit to my deep regret that with a few exceptions our girls have not identified themselves closely with trade organisations....

Perhaps because of persecution, most of our parents are individualistic. They have had to fight for their place in the world of industry; they have had to win for themselves the right to work for their living; so their strength has spent itself, and they have been inclined to teach their children to get on with their work, mind their own business and let other people get on with theirs, saying “What's it to do with you?” Again and again, we have tried to inculcate a wider point of view, and to explain the advantages of belonging to unions. The results have been rather sporadic and not very successful.[14]

Amongst people who had fled pogroms and for whom anti-Semitism was an ever-present reality, to be able to earn a living without harassment was the most pressing ambition. Montagu was alert to the conditions under which such sentiments had emerged and her realism led her to investigate other means by which she could affect conditions of labour. It was in this context that the work of the Women's Industrial Council was appealing. Here was an organisation comprising mainly middle class women like her, which carried some weight with the establishment, but without party political allegiance. However, because she chose to use it as a basis for extending her club work, rather than as an adjunct to political activism she only appears on the margins of the political story.

Nevertheless, Lily Montagu is not totally forgotten. She is remembered for her contribution to Jewish welfare and religion. Those who knew her recall with respect and affection her club and settlement work and her continuing involvement in youth work until her death in 1963.[15] Her status in this context has an extra dimension because of her contribution towards the establishment of Liberal Judaism.[16] She undertook a long and painful spiritual journey away from the Orthodoxy of her family which eventually resulted in strained relations with her beloved father. She confided her troubles in Margaret Macdonald, who compared the situation with the family opposition she encountered when she moved to the left in

politics; but Margaret thought Lily's religious struggles "specially difficult".[17] Ultimately, although Montagu's family was important to her, her faith took precedence. All other activities flowed from her desire to create a "Living Judaism".[18] In 1915 she had the honour of being the first woman to preach in a British Synagogue [19] and she became Britain's first Jewish woman Minister. Prior to this she had often officiated at the services of the West Central Section of the Liberal Jewish Synagogue whose congregation was at the outset primarily female.

Lily Montagu never courted fame. However, the fact that she occupied roles which granted her organisational power and authority and the amount of work which she embraced, suggests that her invisibility in the record of socialist and social welfare movements is structural as well as personal. Not only did her concern with working class Jewish girls situate her outside the main concerns of trade union organisation, but her particular emphasis upon the importance of combining industrial, social and personal matters meant that her interests were out of temper with the tendency of the times to resolve social questions and issues into grand narratives and mass movements. Suffrage and social justice she supported, but suffragism and socialism never claimed her allegiance. Similarly, in her religious life, her tendency was towards interpretation. She sought harmony between individual feelings, emotions and beliefs and the textual, ceremonial and organisational imperatives of formal religion.

In pursuit of a balance between faith (spiritual and personal life), friendship (community life), and understanding (intellectual and cultural life), Montagu gave her time and energy across three major fronts - Jewish religious reform, girls' clubs and industrial reform. That she should have attempted to combine these three elements reflects to a large extent not only her own personality, but also the particular time, place and social space into which she was born.

Identity and Identification

Montagu was very much a child of her time, maturing in a period when young women of her class were attempting to carve out a space for themselves in the public world. She recognised this herself:

It was the time of great changes in the lives of girls in the so-called leisured homes. Their education was too good to allow of them being any longer content with the small home duties which in another generation satisfied unmarried girls. They felt the need to justify their existence by some form of useful effort.[20]

Many of these young women justified their existence through voluntary social, welfare and missionary work. Visiting the poor in their homes, developing clubs, teaching in Sunday Schools and organising groups to campaign against destructive habits such as drinking, gambling and prostitution, was quite the fashionable thing to do. Such work - undertaken in moderation - was considered suitable for young women because it could be easily conceived within the traditional terms of domesticity and femininity.[21]

In addition to this general atmosphere affecting young ladies, there were particular factors affecting Lily Montagu: the example and influence of her parents; her awareness of the conditions of the East End of London; and her Jewish identity in a period of Jewish immigration.

Parents

Ellen (nee Cohen) and Samuel Montagu were members of the Anglo-Jewish establishment. Her mother's power was expressed as a woman "in the background" [22] exerting a strong family influence. Ellen Montagu gave continuous practical and moral support to Lily, the sixth of her ten children, even when religious differences caused a family rift. Lily Montagu took her mother as a role model for her approach to club work, endeavouring to learn about each of the members individually, to guide them and teach them with tolerance and understanding, maintaining her authority by offering an example of exemplary behaviour in her own life. Later, she was to refer to herself as the "Club Mother" and to acknowledge the significance of the

loving understanding of my mother...because during forty years of my life I have been called "mother" by a vast number of girls and women. I feel I owe much of my power to win the confidence of "my children" from having as my model the mother

who throughout her life had no greater pleasure than that of sharing her children's interests, and whose faith in God was expressed in every detail of her life.[23]

Her father was a self-made, millionaire banker. He was an influential figure within the Anglo-Jewish community, involved in religious, philanthropic and political organisations. As a Gladstonian Liberal he became MP for Whitechapel in 1885. Samuel Montagu was a powerful figure in his daughter's life and it was to her father that she looked for her inspiration to act upon and change social and industrial conditions. Until 1911, when she broke with Orthodox Judaism, she had her father's unequivocal support. For instance, along with Fred Lawrence, Samuel Montagu donated £1000 towards paying off the mortgage and extending the premises of the Green Lady Hostel.[24]

Although there were some limitations upon her freedom, such as the necessity of being accompanied by a chaperone when she first began to visit poor homes, Lily Montagu benefited greatly from having been brought up in a large, liberal and politically active household:

My parents led strong, purposeful lives, and were not opposed to our having interests outside the home. They applauded our desire to assist others less fortunately placed than ourselves, and, through their close concern with the East End of London, I was constantly visiting there.[25]

Visiting the East End included attendance at some of her father's political meetings where she was able to observe the audience from the platform. She recalled that it was here that she learned to understand that recreation in community was important, that association gave people pleasure and that laughter could cement relationships. Most of all, she learned that people could be won over if they were heard and taken seriously.[26] These lessons were applied directly in both her club work and in organising around industrial issues.

The East End

While her father was MP for Whitechapel, the East End of London, suffering gravely from economic volatility, was alive with political activity and industrial unrest. In 1886-7 there were demonstrations and occasional rioting amongst unemployed workers which spilled over into the smart areas of the West End, threatening the wealthy inhabitants with fears of revolution.[27] In 1888, the Match Girls' strike brought to the forefront of public attention the conditions under which these women laboured and the consequences for their health and well being. Annie Besant, who led their strike, powerfully connected their conditions with the lack of female political power.[28] The following year, the Great Dock Strike gave the lie to the widely held view that unskilled casual labourers could not be organised. From this was born the 'New Unionism', which gave great impetus to socialist organising.

At the same time as these events dominated the political stage, Montagu's constituency became notorious through the 1888 Whitechapel murders. The fact that the victims were prostitutes inhabiting some of the poorest areas, spoke to the deepest fears of the Victorian establishment regarding the sexual dangers of the city. Narratives of sexual degradation and corruption had already established the city streets as a place of danger for girls and women [29] and many respectable people were involved in activities to promote sexual purity, or to 'save' the fallen. Within philanthropic work with women, this theme was ever-present. It did not take a great deal of imagination to link prostitution with poor wages and the absence of wholesome leisure activity for young women.

A politically involved household like the Montagu's could not have failed to have opinions on these matters. Samuel Montagu, offered a reward of £100 for information leading to the arrest of the Whitechapel murderer.[30] Meanwhile, the MP attempted to demonstrate sympathy with the dockers, arguing that they should at least be provided with shelters as they waited for work. The events of those years must have had a strong effect upon the consciousness of Lily Montagu. In 1888, aged fifteen, she had just left school, and was struggling to continue her education at home. Certainly social and religious issues were significant in the growing political awareness of Margaret Gladstone (Macdonald) with whom Lily was in constant communication and it appears that the two young women significantly informed each

other's views.[31] Moreover, for Lily the question of the East End was even more acute because of the tensions created in response to the growing numbers of immigrant Jews settling there.

Jewish Immigration

The involvement of the Montagu family in Whitechapel reflected the significance of the Jewish community in that area. In 1886 in particular, Jewish people displaced by persecution in Russia made their way to the East End of London where, it has been suggested, their presence “disturbed the precarious relations in East London Trades” and made more “visible” the “conditions of work in the sweated trades”.[32] Jewish charities which had traditionally cared for the Jewish poor were inadequate to the task of providing comprehensively for the new settlers and there was much discussion about the practical consequences of the migration. Nathan Adler, Chief Rabbi for 35 years until 1880, wrote of the refugees:

Many of them are lost without livelihoods...it is difficult for them to support themselves and their households, and at times they contravene the will of their Maker on account of poverty and overwork, and violate the Sabbath and Festivals. Some have been ensnared in the net of the missionaries and renounced their religion, may the Merciful save. Woe to the eyes which see and to the ears which hear such things.[33]

Moreover, the new Jewish settlers were different. They had different languages, dress and social and religious habits. They were obvious on English streets. For the settled Jewish community, only recently enfranchised in 1858, such visibility was destabilising. It stirred up anti-semitism.[34] The challenge was therefore to help the immigrants to assimilate to English ways as quickly as possible whilst at the same time enabling them to retain their Jewish identity and faith.[35] Samuel Montagu was a driving force in attempting to meet this challenge.

In her memoir of her father written in 1913, two years after his death, Lily Montagu mentions his education in the Mechanics Institute in Liverpool where he had to “fight many battles in order to exhort respect for the Community which he represented, and to which he was from his earliest days passionately

loyal”.[36] The words she used to describe him, could easily have been said of herself: “As a worker among Jews, he had always one supreme object in view; he wished to free the least happy of his co-religionists from oppression, whether political, industrial, social or religious”.[37] It was within this context that Lily Montagu began to take an active part in social and religious work. However, she was concerned primarily with the female experience. For her, the question of poverty was compounded by the sexual vulnerability of women. Women who could not earn a decent wage, could become easy prey to predatory rich young men or be ensnared by prostitution. Intolerable working conditions made young women vulnerable to hasty and unsatisfactory marriages. Meanwhile, Saturday work denied them the opportunity for Sabbath observance and they could thereby be easily lost to an inflexible Judaism, either through conversion to Christianity or through marriage to a Christian. Montagu explored these themes primarily in her fictional and semi-fictional writing [39].

A Vision

According to Nellie Levy an early member of the West Central Club, later its leader and who in 1914 was employed by the NOGC, Lily Montagu was motivated by a vision experienced in 1892:

A young girl dreamed and behold a vision appeared and she saw her sisters, and they lacked much that had been bestowed on her, some needed guidance and friendship, some to be lifted out of squalor and shown the light; some seemed mere children forced to become breadwinners; some ran to and fro to snatch at pleasures that were transitory and left bitterness and disillusionment; some cried “Give us opportunities denied us, we too need light, space, knowledge”; others sat and waited to enter the world of literature and art, and again, others feared to tread, for the path seemed strewn with giants, who could be overcome only by strength which they lacked, and still others groped towards those frailer than themselves and longed to hold out a helping hand but knew not how.

...and she cried:

“To this vision I consecrate myself, and for its fruition I will labour unceasingly. I will break down barriers, establish friendships and give opportunities. I will share, bind up

those who are broken, and I will set before them light and good through a Faith in Judaism, so that they have strength wherewith to live”.

And God blessed her and she awoke.[39]

This was undoubtedly the story which Montagu used to explain her motivations for founding the West Central Jewish Girls Club. However, her interventions began before 1892. In 1890, with her sister Marian, she offered lessons in History and Literature to girls forced to leave school in order to work. Meanwhile, she was helping to run “happy evenings” for children at the Jewish Free School. She enjoyed these evenings but doubted their value, claiming that they lacked structure and purpose.[40] During this period she was introduced to club work by Margaret Gladstone who ran a Sunday School class and Church boys’ club between 1889 and 1893. Through Margaret she realised the importance of developing friendships with the children.[41] The idea of cross-class friendship was at the heart of the separation of social work from that socialism which was motivated by ideas about class conflict and Montagu’s commitment to the principle of friendship undoubtedly restrained her relationship with the Labour Movement. While Margaret moved from social welfare to political activity and thence to socialism, Lily remained a social welfare worker throughout her life.

It was probably Margaret’s Gladstone’s Sunday School which encouraged Lily to start her Sabbath services for Jewish children. At these informal services, she found that not only the children, but also their mothers attended in preference to the Synagogue. It was clear to the ever-observant young woman that the formalism of the Synagogue and routine observation of ritual, did not speak to the real lives of these women and children, and here began her quest for a reformed and responsive Judaism.

However, in 1893, when the West Central Club was founded, her Orthodox credentials were beyond reproach and when the devout Emily Harris started a Bible class in Bloomsbury, she invited Lily Montagu to give Shakespeare readings to the girls as a treat for coming to the class. When these girls suggested that there were numerous Jewish girls involved in the Soho clothing trade who would welcome a club if the young lady would like to start one, the young lady took the hint. Thus Lily Montagu began to

provide social and educational work in Frith Street for the Jewish girls who worked in the sweatshops of the area. Nellie Levy continues the story:

When the numbers had reached 17 and had outgrown the accommodation, two rooms in Dean Street were rented. Marian, her sister, immediately joined her in this work, became immersed in it and remained a co-worker, a loving, loyal and self-effacing helper to Miss Lily throughout her life. Immediately, classes were formed, the three ladies feeling that the girls having left school at a very early age had been deprived of knowledge which would have made their lives richer and fuller. Most of the girls and their parents had come from Russia and Poland, having escaped from persecution, and Miss Lily wanted to integrate them into the English way of life, so English classes for foreigners (as they were then called) were started.

In a short time, the membership roll reached 70 and the West Central Jewish Club for Working Girls sprang into being: the objects stated were “to bring brightness and refinement into the lives of Jewish working girls”.^[42]

Industrial Interests

Whilst most middle class women who became engaged in club work with girls would have claimed that their work was designed to educate and improve the condition of working class girls, Montagu believed that few club leaders understood the level of commitment required to achieve their goals:

Like other philanthropists, club workers are too easily satisfied with fringing the problems with which they should grapple. They peep down the abyss in which the underfed, the ill-housed, and badly clothed work out their life's drama, and they turn their energies to surface polishing. They try to make their girls conduct themselves well in the clubs, and interest them and amuse them as best they can during their evening's leisure. But they are inclined to ignore the industrial life; they like to forget the grim truth that if girls work for less than a living wage, in a vitiated atmosphere, they are not likely to become the strong, self-controlled women whom we desire the clubs to train.^[43]

For someone who desired to assist working class Jewish young women to achieve the highest ideals of Jewish womanhood, it would have been impossible to ignore the circumstances of work. Everything about the daily life in the factories, sweatshops and home based industries of the London economy in which young working class women of whatever faith spent their days, militated against these ideals. Montagu worried about the effects of labour upon young women at a number of levels.

Firstly she was concerned about the age at which they started work. This disrupted their education and prevented them growing to their full potential, a loss which she herself had experienced. Earning a wage also meant that to a large extent they became independent of home control. This was dangerous to their safety and sexual morality particularly when the drudgery of working life created a craving for excitement. Jewish girls were predominantly engaged in the seasonal trades. Here the situation was exacerbated in the slack periods when with nothing to occupy their time, the girls simply hung around “loafing”. Thus she advocated the raising of the school-leaving age and, alongside recreational activities, developed in her club a curriculum of both formal and informal educational work.

Secondly, she believed that low wages, unequal to those of boys, caused girls to think of themselves as cheap. Low wages, and a lack of training, were related to the belief that waged work for girls was only a temporary interlude before marriage. Industrial organisation amongst girls was consequently considered irrelevant. This undermined any sense of responsibility or pride which might be developed in girls with regard to their work. When work lacked skill it was mere drudgery and it was hardly surprising therefore that many longed for marriage as an escape from such labour. Thus the educational work of Montagu’s club was designed to increase skill and encourage aspiration amongst her members. In reality, many girls and women were the main breadwinners of their families. Particularly within religious Jewish families where male education was considered to be of more significance than female, the women were often the main earners. The self-worth of such young women could be heightened by improved wages and training. These gains Montagu believed could only be won through self-directed industrial organisation, but skills learned in the club might help.

Thirdly, industrial success was won as a consequence of individual ambition and competition, where self was central. The culture of competition sat in direct opposition to Montagu's belief in the importance of the shared and common life, wherein association and equality between individuals encouraged care and concern for each other. Against such competitive attitudes she advocated co-operation and organisation in both social and working life.

General conditions of work for young women were often exaggerated in their consequences for young Jewish women toiling in local sweatshops. Remembering the conditions which were common at the end of the nineteenth century, she later wrote:

The wages of women and girls were so low that it is not surprising that they regarded their working life as a temporary evil rather than as a career in which it was desirable to be as efficient as possible. Girls, or at any rate, Jewish girls, were expected to marry, and they often married for the sake of deliverance from the crushing circumstances of their lives. Most of my girls in the early years of the Club were tailoresses in domestic workshops. The employers had to carry on their work near the big, fashionable West End retail shops. Rents were inordinately high, and it was necessary to live near the "shop", so that rooms had to be used for living and working purposes. The average working hours were 8.00 am to 8 pm with an hour for dinner and half an hour for tea. In hot weather the men often worked stripped to the waist, and the atmosphere created by overheated bodies was anything but pleasant....

Many of our girls worked for very long hours as dressmakers and milliners. It seemed remarkable that children could survive the strain of such protracted sedentary occupation.[44]

In encountering the conditions of work of the members of the West Central Club it became apparent to Montagu that industrial reform included policing existing legal standards effectively. There could be an important role for the middle class leaders in helping to enforce and improve industrial law.

Her conviction in this matter was expressed through her membership of the Women's Industrial Council (WIC) to which she was introduced by Margaret Gladstone in 1896.

The Women's Industrial Council

The WIC was founded in 1894 by a number of middle class women who, in the wake of the strikes of the 1880s had attempted to unionise women workers in the East End of London through the Women's Trade Union Association. They had very little success and eventually they turned their energies to the wider aim of improving the industrial conditions for women. The WIC was designed to play to the class strengths of the women involved. Its intentions were explained in the first issue of its quarterly magazine, the Women's Industrial News (WIN):

The Women's Industrial Council was established by a little group of people, who after several years' endeavour to organise working women, had become convinced,

First: that there was a great need for the careful and systematic collection and publication of facts about the conditions of female work and

Second: that the position of working women might be ameliorated in various ways by the organising of recreative clubs, by the training and developing of greater skill in certain occupations, and in some instances by alterations of the law.[45]

The organisation offered a congenial environment for Montagu to pursue her aspirations. From the start she prioritised the concerns of young women. In 1897, the WIN reprinted a conference paper that she had delivered in which she argued that, it was the "imperative duty" of club leaders to "interest themselves in the industrial lives of their members":

I have heard leaders say that it is outside their club work to interfere in the industrial lives of their girls. I ask them whether they can honestly profess friendship with their girls if they refrain from making use of the knowledge which might render their young lives far more tolerable? Again, can a club leader maintain that her girls derive full benefit from the classes and amusements which she provides for them, while they spend their days under insanitary conditions, and constantly work beyond the legal

number of hours?....We can only promote the usefulness of our clubs by trying to improve the conditions of the members' industrial lives.[46]

Particularly after 1899 when she became Secretary of the Clubs Industrial Association, and as Chair of the Industrial Law Association, she concentrated her efforts upon educating girls about their rights at work, emphasising the importance of the Factory Acts, encouraging club members to provide information about employers who flouted the rules and linking them with the services of a voluntary lawyer should they need help. At the same time, she argued vigorously for an increase in the numbers of female factory inspectors. These themes were to remain at the forefront of her activity as the Club's Industrial Association transformed itself in 1911 into the National Organisation of Girls Clubs. Looking back in 1943 she explained her priorities:

Quite early in our Club history, we realised the importance of securing for our girls at least the minimum legal standard of working conditions. We knew that bad employers, by evasion of the law, could get an unfair advantage over those who benefited their employees by keeping the law. The first necessity for us leaders was to know the law, and we had the assistance on our council of Clementina Black. At one time she made a skilful rhyme of the Factory Act....

In order to obtain the confidence of workers and convince them that it was their responsibility to report evasions of the Factory Act we founded the Clubs Industrial Association....We had lectures from factory inspectors, especially the senior Inspector, Miss Anderson (afterwards Dame) and Mrs. S. Webb, and since we had the girls' confidence we could easily discover illegal overtime, and other evasions of the Factory Acts....

Under the presidency of Mrs Sidney Webb, we formed the Industrial Law Association, in connection with the Women's Industrial Council, and lectures were organised for club leaders, who would take counsel together on general industrial conditions, and they in turn would instruct their girls. Among other distinguished colleagues, were Miss Margaret Bondfield and Miss M. Symonds.[47]

From a personal concern with the well-being of girls, to an understanding of the necessity of improving female working conditions, Lily Montagu moved inexorably towards the question of educational provision. Firstly, it was crucial that Club Leaders should “know the law”. Secondly, it was the responsibility of those leaders to inform their members about the law and thirdly it was important that club leaders share their knowledge in order to better “instruct their girls”. Eventually the desire to provide the best possible service in club work directed her attention towards the necessity of training workers. She herself regretted the fact that she had received no formal training. Her work had begun in a period when class and status were all that was required to intervene in the lives of others less fortunate but in a consideration of the industrial training needs of working class girls she came to understand only too clearly its relevance for her own profession.

Conclusion

Lily Montagu’s life work had at its heart her Jewish faith and identity as well as an abiding belief in the potential of femininity as a power for good. This cut across class differences and encouraged in her a sympathy for Jewish girls whose circumstances were not as fortunate as her own. In many ways, her early interventions into working class life were typical of those of any young middle class English woman of her age seeking useful employment beyond the limits of domesticity. Montagu’s initial efforts to increase opportunities for religious understanding and observance amongst Jewish women and children were broadly educational and very similar to the faith inspired activities of middle class Christian women venturing into voluntary social work.

However, the particular situation of young Jewish women workers made her keenly aware of the impact of waged labour upon their lives. This not only restricted their potential to realise themselves in the ideals of Jewish womanhood, but also narrowed their intellectual and social horizons. It was this realisation which, in the context of the liberal humanism of Montagu’s own education and social network, encouraged her to become active in the women’s movement for industrial reform. She was unusual in not translating this concern into party political activism or feminist activism. Although she favoured trade union

organisation, her awareness of the precariousness of life for many immigrant Jewish families, of the particular circumstances of the trades in which Jewish workers were engaged and of the place of women within this caused her to maintain her commitment to the possibilities of the club movement as a means of industrial organisation and education for young women.

Within the club movement she was also unusual in situating industrial reform at the heart of the work. Whilst most girls' club workers were inspired by an evangelical desire to "improve" their members through general education, training and recreational activity, few were inclined to use their clubs as a vehicle for rights-based education, for campaigning, and for legal interventions into industrial matters. Montagu understood that to know the conditions under which her club members laboured, was to understand the girls themselves. Such knowledge provoked a moral obligation to not only seek to improve girls' characters, but also to improve the circumstances in which such characters were formed. This in turn brought with it a desire that the girls might be educated to organise themselves, to be active rather than passive participants in their own world.

Lily Montagu's work offers an example of a sustained effort to organise and educate women around their working conditions in a manner which centred the reality of women's lives. The masculinity of the trade union movement and the therapeutic, family-centred approach which was to characterise the historical development of social work place her outside the mainstream of both movements. However, many of the issues which were of concern to her remain pertinent today for those who work in the fields of trade union organisation, education and social welfare and who have a particular concern for young women. The emphases are of course different, and work and education have changed significantly for the majority. Nevertheless, for young women who belong to poor working class families, for the daughters of minority communities and asylum seekers, there is much which is all too familiar, particularly in relation to conditions of work, low wages and an absence of recreational and informal educational opportunities. For those who might wish to intervene in the lives of such young women, an appreciation of Lily Montagu's work has much to offer.

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