

# The Politics of Food and Women's Neighborhood Activism in First World War Britain

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## *Abstract*

In 1917 and 1918 violent cost-of-living protests, largely peopled by poor urban housewives, erupted across the world. Although Britain did not experience such dramatic events, a women's politics of food can be found in local neighborhoods that touched the lives of unorganized housewives on the wartime home front. The new local committees created to defend consumer interests in the face of food shortages proved to be permeable to some women, particularly those who already had some experience with women's politics. However, limits were placed on this participation and on the self-organization of housewives by the ambiguous understanding of who constituted a consumer and thus who could speak for the ordinary housewife as she battled the food queues. By exploring the women's politics of food at a local level, it is argued that working-class women's participation in Food Vigilance Committees or in local boycotts may have had longer lasting effects in Britain than the more dramatic cost-of-living actions elsewhere.

In February 1917 working-class housewives overturned market carts in a Jewish neighborhood of New York and threatened to light the paraffin they had poured over the peddlers' vegetables.<sup>1</sup> In Vienna in March 1917, women denied potatoes at a nearby market hijacked a bread wagon, shouting, "We want bread! We are hungry! Our men are bleeding to death in the battlefields and we are starving!"<sup>2</sup> Famously, on International Women's Day in 1917 thousands of housewives and women workers enraged by the endless queues for bread poured into the streets of Petrograd, shouting, "Down with high prices" and "Down with hunger."<sup>3</sup> The Russian Revolution had begun. In August and September 1917, women led and dominated a series of violent street demonstrations in Melbourne, Australia, demanding immediate action on the rising cost of living.<sup>4</sup> These are all examples of a women's politics of food that emerged in leading cities of the world in 1917 and 1918. Their shared features include spontaneity, the use or threat of violence, and, most strikingly, the involvement of largely unorganized working-class housewives. Their direct action sprang from the experience of living in densely populated city neighborhoods and was usually sparked by localized examples of profiteering by traders dealing in the necessities of everyday life.

It is striking, therefore, that there were no comparable violent mass actions in wartime Britain. Yet there was a politics of food on the British home front. This article explores some of the reasons for its different character

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and women's engagement with it. The British politics of food offered women new formal and informal political spaces, created in response to the crisis of "total war." Often removed from government attention, women took action in neighborhoods to deal with rising prices and the scarcity of many foods. However, women's participation was limited by the ambiguous understanding of who constituted a "consumer" and thus who could speak for the "ordinary housewife."

There are several explanations for the lack of violence. First, unlike in Germany and Austria, British civilians did not suffer prolonged hunger during the war.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, John Burnett argues that despite the price of food more than doubling during the hostilities, Britain was fed much better than her enemies, and somewhat better than most neutrals. A second possible explanation is that nationally and locally the authorities managed the crisis better than in other countries by implementing, however belatedly, a system of rationing that, crucially, had popular support.<sup>6</sup> Third, Matthew Hilton and other historians argue that working-class resentment was contained nationally through the establishment in 1918 of the Ministry of Food's Consumers' Council.<sup>7</sup> The relationship organized labor had with government through the War Emergency: Workers' National Committee (WEWNC) might also have helped to manage discontent; the committee was not prepared to use hunger as a political weapon to disrupt the war effort.<sup>8</sup> More generally, the established labor movement controlled discontent by forming committees and organizing protests—the sources suggest the British preferred to write letters of complaint rather than riot.<sup>9</sup> Fourth, there were opportunities to let off steam at a local level, particularly through Food Vigilance Committees (FVCs). Individuals could make a practical difference, for example, by creating cost-price restaurants and municipal kitchens.

There is also a gender dimension, if not explanation, to the absence of violent protests. The British, particularly women, were widely held to be stoical. Agnes Husband (a prewar suffragist) observed at a food protest meeting that the "working woman was the most patient and long suffering woman in the nation."<sup>10</sup> British women were not, of course, inherently more passive than their sisters elsewhere, but the masculinist culture of the British working class and their organizations made a difference. In an earlier essay, I demonstrated not only that the war transformed consumption into an unequivocally political matter for the Left, but also that it was no longer seen as a domestic—and therefore a women's—issue.<sup>11</sup> As state action on the food supply became a demand of the male Left, men were encouraged to take action on behalf of their hungry wives and children. Women no longer had the space to be actors in their own right. Food had shifted, at least in the minds of socialists, from a gender issue to one of class, a lever in the class struggle. I suggest here that for the working class more generally, as food became politicized on the home front, so it quickly became seen as primarily a matter of class ("the workers' food") rather than gender. This was to be crucial for the possibilities of a women's politics of food in wartime Britain.

If the economic, social, and cultural conditions of wartime Britain meant that violent cost-of-living actions were largely avoided, what was the character of women's engagement with the politics of food? To answer this, the focus has to shift from the national to the local, particularly to the neighborhood, which goes against the grain of existing historiography that tends to examine food through the prism of government policy or through studies of national organizations, such as the WEWNC or the Consumers' Council.<sup>12</sup> This focus neglects how the politics of food played out at a local level, precisely where problems of supply were experienced, where discontent was expressed, and where solutions had to be found. It was also at the local level that women were coping with the daily effects of food shortages as they struggled with everyday shopping and to put meals on the table.

The neighborhood was thus key to the development of a women's politics of food. As well as the home, the neighborhood encompassed the streets, shops, and marketplaces where shared routines could bind women together in loose networks and facilitate collective action.<sup>13</sup> The neighborhood was therefore where the politicization of the food supply and shopping enabled organized women to reach out to housewives hitherto untouched by any kind of politics. Moreover, it provided the catalyst for such women to take action themselves. But historians have almost completely neglected this aspect of British women's daily experience of the home front, let alone the politics that arose from it.<sup>14</sup>

Shifting discussion of the wartime food crisis to the local level—particularly to a series of neglected consumer-orientated organizations and to the housewives who had to deal with the practical consequences of food shortage—fills a missing piece in the jigsaw of women's politics in the opening decades of the twentieth century. Before 1914, some socialist women attempted to build a politics of consumption as part of a gendered critique of socialism, while after 1918 some Labour women tried to create a neighborhood-based politics of the everyday as a means “to make a bridge between the women in the home and the public authority, and to interpret one to the other.”<sup>15</sup> Women's neighborhood activism on wartime food provides a link between these two kinds of women's politics, not only in terms of the individuals involved but also their challenges to the boundaries of what was understood as “political” and the spaces in which women might act. By understanding more about the extent and character of wartime activism, we learn more about women's politics.<sup>16</sup>

This article argues that there was a significant women's politics of food in Britain, despite the absence of dramatic large-scale demonstrations found elsewhere. Food riots were not the only way in which women participated in, or made their own, wartime politics of food. It is also not sufficient to take the contributions of the few professional Labour women who sat on national organizations like the Consumers' Council or the WEWNC as representing the interests and views of the ordinary woman consumer. Local sources challenge the assertions of some scholars that women's interests were “a central pillar”

of wartime consumer politics, or that “the needs of the housewife consumer were aired” through the local committees set up to deal with the food shortages.<sup>17</sup> I conclude here that we need a localized archaeology of women's politics in the neighborhoods where the food crisis was experienced and a politics of food enacted. This will contribute not only to a greater understanding of the national politics of food during the war but also allow us to recognize the war as a crucial moment in the shaping of women as political actors.

After a short survey of earlier scholarship on wartime food protests, this article turns to the growth of the various local mixed-sex committees in Britain that engaged with food shortages and considers the possibilities for women's participation in these committees. The purpose is to identify which of these mixed-sex spaces offered the greatest opportunity for women to shape the local politics of food. I also explore the degree to which women took part as “consumers” or “housewives.” However, mixed-sex organizations were not the only ones through which women took initiatives: Women also participated in more woman-centered localized actions over food. Identifying how these two sites of localized actions over food differed and why is central to my analysis, as is whether British women's politics shared any of the characteristics of women's protests found abroad. The essay concludes with a comparison of British women's neighborhood activism with the more dramatic cost-of-living demonstrations elsewhere.

### *Conceptualizing a Wartime Women's Politics of Food*

The tools for an analysis of women's relationship to the politics of food in wartime Britain lie in the work of earlier scholars who have analyzed global protests. The communal strikes (Temma Kaplan's term) and spontaneous cost-of-living demonstrations largely peopled by poor urban women suggest a particular form to women's politics of food in wartime. Kaplan has argued that these protests were “insurrections in which the women of a neighbourhood began by demanding food, fuel, or moderately priced housing until they succeeded in rousing massive support from the men of their class. Together they forced their governments to take action.” The women concerned had little prior political involvement and were motivated by what she terms “female consciousness.” “Having fulfilled their obligations as mothers, wives and family members, desperate women felt a sense of entitlement to demand the minimum subsistence necessary to continue to carry out their roles.”<sup>18</sup> Although such collective action to secure rights derived from the sexual division of labor might appear conservative or antifeminist, Kaplan argues that it can have revolutionary consequences insofar as it politicizes the networks of everyday life.<sup>19</sup>

Both Judith Smart and Dana Frank raise another significant issue in their analyses of the cost-of-living demonstrations in Melbourne and New York.<sup>20</sup> This is the relationship between already politicized women (usually socialist, labor, or anarchist) and the unorganized housewives who boycotted, protested,

and even rioted. In Melbourne the demonstrations were led by socialist women, while in New York women's spontaneous protests were quickly targeted by political activists seeking to provide leadership. Housewives still formed the crowd, but their voices become harder to discern as socialist women, and men, in particular, spoke for them and sought to divert the protests toward other issues, such as antiwar, suffrage, or wage struggles. For the socialists, the protests were a means to politicize and recruit unorganized women. For the housewives, the motive was rather different: an urgent need to confront the high cost of living. The interests of the two groups converged for a period, but in neither place did this lead to the formal politicization of many of the housewives.

Belinda Davis's study of Berlin and Maureen Healy's work on Vienna raise equally important questions about how food shortages might bring women into the public arena and acknowledge their political agency. Davis claims that it was the role of consumer that created opportunities for women "to act and interact in the public sphere: in the streets, before shops, and in market squares." It was, she says, "the combination of the feminized image of the consumer and the sheer physical presence of masses of women standing in lines for food . . . [that] effectively made 'women of little means' . . . leaders for consumer interests."<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Healy shows that "women and children strongly influenced public discourse in wartime Vienna and constituted its newest fiercest political actors."<sup>22</sup> Everyday consumption was a key arena for this action; the extreme conditions meant that everyday life shaped, and was shaped by, a politics that enabled these poor housewives to act as empowered consumers.

Is the British experience open to such readings, even though discontent over the rising cost of living and food shortages largely took nonviolent forms? Was the politics of food for women on the British home front an example of Kaplan's female consciousness? Was shopping for necessities an issue that connected organized women, particularly socialist and labor women, with the housewife in the food queue, as Frank suggests it did briefly in New York? Or is it more productive to compare the British experience with Davis's and Healy's explorations of women and everyday life on the home front, where ordinary women often successfully engaged with those in power without being formally political? These questions will inform what follows. However, it may be that British women's relationship to the local politics of food on the home front does not sit neatly within the existing historiography of wartime cost-of-living protests and indeed challenges what we have thus far understood as women's wartime politics of food.

### *Opportunities for Women's Participation in Local Mixed-Sex Committees*

Food, whether figured as "the cost of living" or "the food queue," was a local issue from 1914, not just a national question. Over the course of the war, women had a number of different opportunities to participate in local mixed-sex organizations set up to deal partly or exclusively with the food crisis. It was here that a localized politics of food unfolded and where women discovered which

spaces were most open to the experiences of ordinary housewives. But food was no longer understood as a domestic and thus a women's issue as it had been before the war. At most of the early community-based meetings that protested the war's effect on the cost of living, it was men's rather than housewives' voices that were heard.<sup>23</sup>

However, women were there in the crowd, just as they were to participate in other aspects of the wartime politics of food. Despite the fact that women were not yet recognized as citizens, new local organizations enabled them to influence the development of neighborhood practice on the food supply. Citizen Committees, convened by local authorities, had a wider brief than the various official and unofficial wartime relief committees, with their whiff of charity.<sup>24</sup> In the first months of the war the labor, socialist, and suffrage press was full of exhortations to organized workers and to women to seek nomination for all these committees. Socialist women urged the formation of "working women's councils in every district" as a bridge between the unorganized housewife and the Citizen Committees.<sup>25</sup> There were some successes, such as the three members of Tooting Socialist Women's Circle chosen for their Citizen Committee.<sup>26</sup> In many areas, however, getting women, particularly working-class women, selected was difficult, and this generated complaints from the labor movement.<sup>27</sup> In practice, women discovered that the Citizen Committees and the various relief committees were not particularly conducive to anything that might be termed a women's politics of food because of their disappointingly limited focus, as well as the isolation of those women who were selected.<sup>28</sup> The initial optimism that these committees would provide a useful space to create a local politics of food soon faded.

From the outset of hostilities there were widespread calls to nationalize the food supply. Yet for two years the government paid practically no attention, believing that the maintenance of a free market would meet the country's requirements. However, the situation kept deteriorating, and the woman shopper bore the brunt of this. By 1917, the Commissioners on Industrial Unrest were reporting that rising prices as well as faulty distribution were sources of dangerous discontent, and in the spring the House of Commons was informed that the country had only three or four weeks' supply of food in stock.<sup>29</sup> As a consequence, in the summer of 1917 a new initiative was taken at the local level to address the increasing tension. With it came a new possibility for articulating a woman-focused politics of food.

Each local authority had to set up a Food Control Committee (FCC) with a clear duty to safeguard the interests of consumers.<sup>30</sup> For the first time, an explicit call was made by the government's Food Controller for consumers to be represented. However, against government advice, many FCCs were dominated by retailers, farmers, and members of the food industry, although each committee had to have at least one representative of labor and one woman. Largely because of this statutory requirement, a number of women were included. But most of these women were already members of local elites and therefore did not represent the ordinary consumer. There were

exceptions: Nellie Cressall, a mother of six married to a paint-factory worker, was nominated to sit on Poplar FCC.<sup>31</sup>

The poor representation of working-class women was an issue. Neighborhood protests demanded that FCCs should be elected rather than selected in order to represent the ordinary people most affected by food shortages. For example, in Wakefield the local labor movement demanded that the FCC include at least one woman who “has a knowledge, from actual experience, of the conditions prevailing in a Yorkshire working class household.”<sup>32</sup> But how were such women to be found? Could any connection be made with the women who were now spending many, often fruitless hours queuing outside shops?

The signs were not propitious. As these queues emerged during the winter of 1917–1918, the government feared they would damage military morale as well as cause civil and industrial unrest.<sup>33</sup> The food queues consisted almost entirely of women and children, yet press reports and official discussions rarely stressed the gender of the participants.<sup>34</sup> The symbolic power that the food queue gave to women in the wartime politics of food elsewhere is not so apparent in Britain. Instead, people expressed their frustration and protested both in the traditional manner of local demonstrations and public meetings, but also by forming organizations to put pressure on local and national government to act. These were the Food Vigilance Committees (FVCs), often associated with Trades and Labour Councils, but including men and women from a wide range of political and nonpolitical community groups.

The FVCs presented a real opportunity for women to take part in community action. Unlike the Citizen Committees or the FCCs, these were ad hoc groups. The FVCs’ purpose was “to make the views of working class consumers more effectively heard.”<sup>35</sup> Given that rationing was now likely, the regional London FVC made clear why it was in the interests of ordinary consumers to get involved: “Who is to do the rationing?—people who do not understand the food requirements of the workers?—the speculators and the ‘philanthropic’ rich?—or shall we take a hand in the job ourselves?” They demanded popular control and that local authorities establish municipal kitchens, and advised, “Send deputations to your Council; such deputations should include a number of workmen’s wives. If your Council wants to sleep, wake it up.”<sup>36</sup>

The increasing food crisis seemed to demand action from those affected most directly by it. FVCs appeared all over the country, and many involved significant numbers of women, including some who served as officers and executive members. The surviving minutes of Willesden FVC show women driving the business of the committee forward: chairing meetings, offering resolutions, and representing the group at other meetings and reporting back.<sup>37</sup>

The FVCs acted as pressure groups, chivvying local FCCs to take more decisive action on behalf of consumers and galvanizing the discontented into making demands about the food supply of the local and national state. One method was the leafleting of women in neighborhood food queues.<sup>38</sup> It is here, in the FVCs, that one finally senses a recognition that most ordinary

consumers were women facing real battles to provide an adequate diet for their households. A flyer produced by Lewisham FVC in June 1917 provides an example of attempts to reach the unorganized woman shopper:

Are you satisfied with the present high price of food and the conditions of shopping? . . . Why should you stand in queues for your children? The Rich and Well-to-do do not do it! It is beneath their dignity! Should it not be beneath the dignity of the wives of the workers? . . . If you are tired of struggling for Food, sign this leaflet.<sup>39</sup>

In many ways the FVCs were the spaces in which women, particularly unorganized women, had the best prospect of translating broad concerns about their own and their family's well-being into a more self-consciously political demand. Women on FVCs took up issues that would have otherwise been overlooked, for example, demanding that shops be kept open to enable female munitions workers to buy food or pointing out where to site local municipal kitchens.<sup>40</sup> FVCs were an important space in which women could affect the politics of food, develop a women's politics around everyday consumption, and engage with the impact of the wartime economy on their neighborhood and daily life.

### *The Effect of the Turn to Direct Action on Women's Participation in the Politics of Food*

The wider politics of food reached a turning point in 1917, and this affected the character of women's participation as well as the spaces in which they took action. For a time, streets and marketplaces became at least as important as meeting rooms. By August 1917 the effect of high prices was apparent in London with crowds of women attending street-corner meetings.<sup>41</sup> Increasingly, voices in the press argued for new tactics, prompted by the so-called "evil of the queues."<sup>42</sup> The *Herald* argued for Labour women to move from talk to action, taking the issue of high prices into their own hands: "We hope that the Women's Labour League will not stop at resolutions but will organise the working-class women throughout the country to go into the market-places and themselves fix prices, as has already been done in some west coast towns."<sup>43</sup> Although calls for direct action predated the panic over food queues, most local demands for "drastic action" came in 1917 and 1918.<sup>44</sup> However, the new strategy did not involve consumer tactics, such as boycotts or petitions. Instead, the workers were to come to the aid of the consumers—thus underlining that they were distinct groups. With, it seems, their pragmatic support, women were becoming more marginal to the direct action. A resolution passed at a large meeting in Hull addressed by the socialist Julia Scurr threatened that if the government did not act to end the queues then a national strike should be called.<sup>45</sup>

By December 1917, workmen in Sheffield were threatening to take the place of women in queues, regardless of any loss of working hours, and early



in 1918 Hannah Mitchell encouraged Manchester Central Independent Labour Party (ILP) to discuss whether they should support a strike against the unequal distribution of food.<sup>46</sup>

The threat of industrial action by male workers, with their greater industrial muscle, was increasingly seen by both women and men as the only way to get the government to take decisive action. George Lansbury, editor of the *Herald*, made this clear: “Hungry people always fight. There has never been a revolution in the world that has not been brought about by hunger.”<sup>47</sup> This was, of course, what worried the government. They only had to look abroad to see the disruptive and even revolutionary effects of subsistence riots.

Rationing was finally introduced to deal with the food queue—the threat of real disturbances (civil and industrial) trumped all those resolutions, petitions, and essentially polite public meetings. Civilian rationing began on January 1, 1918, with sugar; and meat, margarine, and tea followed first for London and the Home Counties and by April elsewhere. By the summer of the final year of the war, government control applied to all important foodstuffs except bread, which was saved from rationing by the use of a subsidy and by lowering its quality in order to ensure continued availability.<sup>48</sup> The government believed that the implementation of what Sir William Beveridge called the “complete control over nearly everything eaten and drunk by 40,000,000 persons” eliminated the food queue and with it the real threat of street disturbances supported by industrial action.<sup>49</sup> However, queues did not disappear overnight: They could still be found in Manchester in April 1918.<sup>50</sup>

The wartime politics of food was not over, nor was women’s role within it. The implementation of food controls remained a challenge for the rest of the war. FCCs and FVCs, including their women members, continued to be central to the local politics of food. FVCs badgered the FCCs to make rationing work at the neighborhood level to make it as fair as possible, to ensure the prosecution of hoarders, and to develop community provisions such as National Kitchens and cost-price restaurants. To meet some of these concerns, the first local consumer councils were formed in 1918. Some were called together by FCCs to access the “consumer’s point of view” (Bolton and Manchester), while others were founded by the Left in criticism of their local FCC (Peterborough and Dundee).<sup>51</sup> Although a number of women’s organizations were represented on the Bolton council and a woman teacher was its secretary, there was no formal representation of the consumer as such.<sup>52</sup> Women were involved but as organized workers rather than as housewives.

This had been the story of women’s participation in all the new local organizations, set up by local authorities and communities that sought to tackle the increased cost of living and growing food shortages on the home front. Although some women managed to participate in one way or another in the various mixed-sex and often more formal political spaces, it was rarely explicitly as housewives. However, entangled with this thread in the wartime politics of food ran another that was much more determinedly woman-focused. Was it here that the housewife and the woman activist could meet?

*A Woman's Politics of Food*

In the mixed-sex organizations set up to deal with the local food crisis, working-class women's participation was often hampered by their class and always by their gender. Working-class representation was limited to begin with, and even when working-class women were present, their voices and concerns were not always heard. But since the first years of the war, some socialist women had presented an alternative vision. They looked beyond the committees to other ways of drawing working-class women into political action around the food supply. These socialist women argued that working-class women's involvement was not only necessary but should be a priority for the Left. They endeavored to develop a working-class politics that would galvanize those most affected by the crisis: working-class wives.

In the early years of the war, Margaretta Hicks and her National Women's Council (NWC), originally part of the British Socialist Party, applied tactics developed in prewar political work with women to the new conditions. These woman-focused activities took place in the working-class neighborhoods of London, where socialist women mobilized unorganized working-class housewives to make a domestic issue a political one.

The NWC organized street petitions, local meetings, and demonstrations; formed deputations; and collected food and fuel budgets of working women. It also encouraged the use of consumer boycotts: "It would be a brave shopkeeper who would dare to raise prices when all his customers were organized."<sup>53</sup> For a year after November 1914, the NWC joined with women from a range of women's and other organizations to form the Joint Food Supply Committee. Its subcommittees endeavored to make a practical politics of food by campaigning on issues such as milk depots, cost-price restaurants, meals for schoolchildren, prices, and food production. At the outbreak of war, Hicks reached out to housewives in their neighborhoods with a petition calling for action on food supplies.<sup>54</sup> It was supported by other socialist and labor organizations and twenty thousand signatures (mostly women's) were gathered across the country. Calling for "further organisation of women on these lines,"<sup>55</sup> by November Hicks was reporting that "Our recent cards on the food question have also brought in a great number of women who come tentatively."<sup>56</sup>

Week after week in the socialist newspaper *Justice*, Hicks reported how the politics of food was beginning to touch the experience of previously unorganized women, the key being that "Every woman can help in her own district."<sup>57</sup> Moreover, she recognized that "Women, as a rule, look at things in the concrete; they like to see actual things, and as long as we work in actualities we shall get the co-operation of other women."<sup>58</sup> Hicks also saw the need to give practical support to enable working-class women to participate, particularly those who had never before been part of an organization. She suggested, "when we have a woman who is capable of being elected on a public committee, let another member of the Women's Circle volunteer to do her washing and ironing, and, if necessary, let someone see to her children getting their teas on committee

days. . . . It is actually being done by one of our Circles. We are learning solidarity!"<sup>59</sup> By acknowledging in its political practice the reality of women's daily lives, Hicks and the NWC made a notable effort to reach the ordinary housewife and enable her to organize around the politics of food.

### *Local Protest and the Growth of Housewives' Activism*

Women's activism was also found in more informal spaces. This could involve those who were already engaged in party or women's politics, but it could also include the unorganized working-class housewife. From the outset of war, women took part in street protests about the rising cost of living. But only later were there instances of specifically women's direct action around issues of food. This may have been because women at the grassroots had grown in confidence, or that they had more to be angry about and had a clearer sense of how to deploy that anger from other successful campaigns, such as the Glasgow rent strikes of 1915. One commentator claimed that "Glasgow women are certainly roused as never before, and once they have tackled the 'rent robbers' they intend to deal with the food and fuel profiteers."<sup>60</sup>

Action could be sparked by specific shortages. A dearth of potatoes in March 1917 prompted two thousand women, led by socialists, to march to the Glasgow City Chambers to protest the alleged holding back of supplies. The crowd enthusiastically cheered references to peace and the Russian Revolution.<sup>61</sup> Housewives certainly constituted the crowd, but we can only hear their voices indirectly, in their participation and cheering. Hearing the voices of ordinary housewives is particularly difficult.

On the other hand, sometimes women's actions left a more visible trace than their words. For example, neighborhood consumer boycotts organized by housewives in marketplaces and in food queues seem to have occurred across the country but not in a systematic fashion. The actions of the Edmonton Housewives League in 1915 were probably only the tip of the iceberg. These housewives campaigned to get the local council to establish a municipal milk depot, calling on women to use the consumer boycott as a weapon.<sup>62</sup> Other housewives managed to reduce local prices for milk by successfully employing a "silent strike," boycotting fresh-milk retailers, while others held a "muddling strike," buying a lot of milk one day and nothing the next in order to confuse producers and traders.<sup>63</sup> Other examples of local direct action included women's food riots prompted by a huge increase in the price of potatoes that swept the small industrial towns of West Cumberland in early 1917, and a women's boycott prompted by high meat prices that ended in a riot in Spitalfields in the summer of 1917.<sup>64</sup>

### *The Effect of the Gender-Neutral "Consumer"*

Gender stands at the heart of any understanding of such local politics of food and the opportunities for women to engage with it or to create their own practice. The degree of gendering varied from place to place with much hanging on

how “the consumer” was defined. The English language creates problems of interpretation here. Explicitly gendered language was employed in other countries, figuring the protester as female. In Germany the key term “women of lesser means” was used interchangeably with “the consumers,”<sup>65</sup> while in Barcelona the women cost-of-living protesters used the word *vecindaria*, roughly translating as “female comrade” or “sister” and denoting membership of a tight community.<sup>66</sup> The English language is less helpful, since “consumer,” unlike “housewife,” is not explicitly gendered. Thus the fact that “consumer” was the dominant term used in the British wartime politics of food is significant. Sometimes the idea of the consumer included women but was not limited to them, as when the National Convention on the National Food Supply talked of “the mass of urban consumers, and especially . . . the women.”<sup>67</sup> Crucially, in all the debates about who should be included in the FCCs’ membership, there was never a clear definition of consumers or who could best represent their interests. Was being a woman—one category of membership—enough, or should another category, labor, represent the working-class housewife who was not also a paid worker? Many assumptions were made by all concerned, but there were few clarifications, and in this fog the ordinary working-class housewife disappeared. Indeed, when in 1918 the leading Labour woman Marion Phillips discussed her work on the national Consumers’ Council, she understood the consumer as male—“in order that *he* may obtain *his* supplies at the lowest possible prices” (my emphasis)—and never mentioned the so-called “unorganised consumer.”<sup>68</sup>

This last was a curious phrase used to justify the wider representation of consumers on the new Consumers’ Council. The term recognized that, unlike other interest groups, the ordinary consumer had no mechanism to organize representation. However, the Food Controller’s gesture to include “unorganised consumers” on the Council was undermined by his choice of elite individuals (Lord Rathcreedan, the Countess of Selbourne, and Sir William Ashley) whom the veteran socialist H. M. Hyndman, an active member of the Council, understandably described as “ludicrous” choices.<sup>69</sup> Nobody in authority seemed to know how, or perhaps even wished, to reach the voices of the ordinary, unorganized consumer. This was to have a profound effect on the possibilities for a women’s politics of food.

### *The Housewife and the Local Politics of Food*

What was the relationship between the ordinary housewife dealing with the food crisis in her daily life and the local politics of food? Were grassroots activists any more effective than government at identifying the unorganized consumer and establishing a meaningful dialogue or representing her interests?

The fact that there was no agreement in Britain that the consumer and the housewife were synonymous affected the degree to which women engaged with the politics of food and how they represented themselves. Perhaps surprisingly,

“housewife” was little used in the mainstream, socialist, labor, or women’s press or in local or national government publications. It was only much later, during and after the Second World War, that it became a rallying point for a certain sort of women’s politics—middle-class and often quite right-wing.<sup>70</sup> During the First World War, the NWC did not call itself a housewives’ organization even though its food campaign focused on the working-class housewife: “It is our duty as women, as housekeepers and ‘chancellors of the exchequer’ to get a thorough understanding and grip of this food problem. It is the proud work of Socialist women . . . to take the lead in this national work.”<sup>71</sup>

Housewives leagues seem to have been rare in Britain, unlike the contemporary Imperial Organisation of Austrian Housewives and the (American) Housewives League (both middle-class organizations) or Brooklyn’s Socialist Housewives League.<sup>72</sup> One British example, the Rugby Housewives Committee, sent representatives to the NWC-sponsored Joint Food Supply Committee and corresponded with the WEWNC. Although it was concerned with a range of wartime issues including food, very little is known about the membership or its overall aims.<sup>73</sup> More generally, there is little surviving evidence that women formally organized as housewives, even though they might instigate local boycotts of “profiteers.” Ambiguity in terminology and thus self-definition perhaps inhibited formal organization; it was less likely to be an issue in direct action sparked by specific issues.

The sole national organization that seems to have mobilized at least once to represent the housewife in relation to food was the short-lived Women’s Party. In December 1917 Flora Drummond led a deputation of housewives to interview Lord Rhondda, the Food Controller. They spoke from experience of the terrible effect of the queues. One said, “If the people are refused the food, and know it is there, they will get it. There will be another revolution, and it will not take long.” Rhondda reiterated, “I am on the side of the consumer, and especially the poorer consumer.”<sup>74</sup> However, being on the side of the poor consumer was rather different from giving her a voice, or even recognizing that she was female.

If there is little evidence of working-class housewives’ self-organization, there were local attempts by grassroots activists to reach the unorganized housewife and draw her into a woman-focused politics of food. Aiming for solidarity rather than imposing leadership made for a crucial difference between the NWC and New York’s socialists. The NWC’s determination to connect with ordinary housewives’ experience suggests a radical version of Kaplan’s female consciousness—the NWC built a political campaign on women’s sense of domestic responsibilities. However, unlike in New York, Margaretta Hicks was not just seeking to recruit housewives to existing socialism. She wanted to create a socialist women’s politics of consumption.<sup>75</sup>

Hicks was not alone in recognizing that housewives could create a British politics of food with much wider reverberations. In early 1915, a United Suffragists’ (US) meeting linked peace and the price of food: “back our demand that Women’s Voice shall be heard in any Peace Settlement, and that

the Housewives of the Nation shall help to decide the Price of Food." One member of the US, John Scurr, argued that rising food prices was not merely "a 'domestic' question; but . . . is nothing short of *the vital* question of national and international politics—and it grows acuter every week." By arguing for "the necessity of admitting the housewives (who have to provide the food) to the councils of the nation," Scurr recognized that women should speak for themselves,<sup>76</sup> opening up the possibility of a women's politics of food. Just as women could take action as housewives on the cost of living, so they should be enabled to speak as consumers.

### *The Effects of Women's Neighborhood Activism*

Women's cost-of-living protests outside Britain mobilized housewives in the short term but rarely led to formal politicization. Did the less dramatic women's politics of food in wartime Britain have longer-lasting effects?

During the war, one clear gain was winning the argument in some localities for working-class women to participate in a range of organizations focusing on food. This gave these women the experience of working within mixed-sex community networks and making the case for the relevance of the housewife's experience. There was also informal neighborhood campaigning by women, often facilitated by working-class women who were already politicized and experienced activists in a range of women's politics. The most obvious example is Margaretta Hicks in London. But most of this action was short term, and sustained organization is much harder to trace, although Sylvia Pankhurst's work in London's East End is an exception.<sup>77</sup> The most successful initiatives seem to have been those that made a difference in women's daily lives. Examples were the campaigns to create a cost-price restaurant by women in Kentish Town, or later in the war the energy put into neighborhood-based National Kitchens under FCC regimes.<sup>78</sup> Women members of FCCs often championed this work.

In the long term, it can be argued that the politics of food drew a wider range of women into local politicized structures. This could then be capitalized on when significant numbers of women were enfranchised in 1918. Local activism on the food supply seems to have built networks between women activists, and between them and other community groups. Individuals who linked women's organizations across traditional boundaries—for example, those who were part of suffragist, peace, or women's labor or socialist groups and also participated in mainstream labor organizations (trades councils and political parties)—could make a significant difference in bringing together new alliances of activist women, occasionally with the unorganized.

Annot Robinson is one example from Manchester. Particularly in her local community of Ancoats, she was active on the Women's War Interests Committee and with the Women's Peace Crusade, was President of her local branch of the ILP, and sat on the Trades Council and on the FCC.<sup>79</sup> Her focus was local rather than national, and she acted as a link between a

number of different organizations (women's and mixed-sex). She was part of a network of Manchester women for whom the war acted as a catalyst for a woman-focused politics.<sup>80</sup>

Robinson, along with many other unsung women, took part in a women's politics of food that informed women's neighborhood activism after the war. This was part of the slow empowerment of working women below the national radar in the interwar period. The existence of a local politics of food enabled some women to broaden the political agenda to include what had previously been seen as domestic and beyond political intervention. This included the provision of communal kitchens and the "nationalization" of the food supply. Such achievements had considerable potential to connect an expanded realm of politics with the everyday life of ordinary women, if the case could be made for their continuation beyond the emergency of wartime and into peacetime reconstruction.<sup>81</sup>

### *Conclusion*

So what was the character of women's politics of food on the British home front? How does it compare with contemporary protests elsewhere? It was undoubtedly less dramatic and less violent. However, food shortages and the cost of living were the focus of action of varying degrees of intensity, peaking in the last years of the war when conditions became most acute. The ordinary housewife was swept up in this, but neighborhood activists were more likely to be women who had already been touched by some form of women's politics. Those occasions when shopping for necessities connected organized women with queuing housewives were, however, significant. Although the effects were much more diffuse than the sudden but short-lived protests in Melbourne and New York, they were longer lasting.

One could argue that Kaplan's term "communal strike" applies to some of the threats of industrial action made in 1917–1918 to support consumer demands. Men did come to the aid of women in the food queues, and government action did occur as a consequence. However, it is harder to show that these actions were initiated by housewives. Similarly, the term "female consciousness" only has limited applicability in the British context. It is evident in the sense that women's identification with food was based on the sexual division of labor. Yet the dominant language of the British politics of food was not the starving housewife demanding the means to feed her children, but an ungendered appeal for justice in the distribution of a scarce resource and for democratic control. Part of the problem of discerning female consciousness in Britain is that the genderless consumer dominated the rhetoric, seemingly undermining the possibility of such a consciousness. Similarly, although—as overseas—organized women had a key role to play in the local politics of food, it made a difference that socialist women did not aim to divert housewives to other, more "mainstream" issues. Nevertheless, British attempts to build a socialist politics of consumption could not be sustained throughout the war.

Priorities were rather different by the time the food crisis became acute in the winter of 1917–1918.

The crucial difference between Britain and other countries was the fact that in Britain “the consumer” was rarely recognized as a gendered figure. This precluded housewives, or organized women on their behalf, claiming a privileged position in food politics on the basis of their daily experience in queues. The genderless consumer may occasionally have allowed professional Labour women to speak at the national level on behalf of the housewife, even though they had little direct experience of the daily struggle to feed families; however, it appeared to have the opposite effect at the local level. All too frequently men spoke on behalf of the marginalized working-class woman.

But we need to know more. A study along the lines of Belinda Davis's on everyday life in wartime Berlin would make clearer what mobilized the wartime working-class housewife in her neighborhood and the extent to which the politics of food broke down the barriers between domestic life and what was understood more widely as politics. It is already clear that food was one issue forming part of a new women's politics on the British home front, bringing together suffragists, pacifists, laborists, socialists, and what Sheila Rowbotham terms the rebel networks.<sup>82</sup> But much of the detail about how this worked at the neighborhood level still eludes us. Although the new national structures prompted by the food crisis may have helped to contain working-class resentment, local community organizations such as the FVCs offered a different kind of opportunity. These spaces could be shaped by ordinary people, and through them women, so often excluded from decision-making bodies both formally (in terms of the franchise) and informally (through the masculinist culture of the labor movement) might gain a foothold in local political life. Their expertise on what had been traditionally seen as a domestic issue might embolden them to participate in spaces where there was a possibility to mold the agenda. The extent to which such women were then themselves transformed, politically and personally, is still a matter of speculation—although some of the women who surfaced in these new political spaces took part in community and local politics after the war.

We shall know more about the transformative potential of a local women's politics of food during the peculiar conditions of wartime when we engage in the archaeology of neighborhoods where the food crisis was experienced and a politics of food enacted. The British wartime politics of food was a form of social mobilization overlooked in the separate historiographies of labor and of women. Here were new possibilities for women's activism, if rarely in the forms seized by urban women in other cities across the globe. Food in Britain challenged fundamental assumptions about the terrain of politics by exposing the domestic and the everyday to political scrutiny and creating new possibilities for politicization. The outcome for many of the women swept up in the food question was not only the introduction of a national system of rationing with some semblance of democratic control, but the creation of a new space for women's politics that had the capacity to outlast the extraordinary challenges of the wartime home front.



## NOTES

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1. Dana Frank, “Housewives, Socialists, and the Politics of Food: The 1917 New York Cost-of-Living Protests,” *Feminist Studies* 11 (1985): 259.

2. Maureen Healy, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in World War I* (Cambridge, 2004), 40.

3. Barbara Alpern Engel, “Not by Bread Alone: Subsistence Riots in Russia during World War I,” *The Journal of Modern History* 69 (1997): 697.

4. Judith Smart, “Feminists, Food and the Fair Price: The Cost of Living Demonstrations in Melbourne, August–September 1917,” *Labour History* 50 (1986): 113–131.

5. Sir William Beveridge, *British Food Control* (London, 1928), 315; Avner Offer, *The First World War: An Agrarian Interpretation* (Oxford, 1991).

6. John Burnett, *Plenty and Want* (London, 1966), 222–223. See also Thierry Bonzon and Belinda Davis, “Feeding the Cities,” in *Capital Cities at War. Paris, London, Berlin 1914–1919*, ed. Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert (Cambridge, 1997), 305–341.

7. Matthew Hilton, *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 2003), 61.

8. Jay Winter, *Socialism and the Challenge of War* (London, 1974), 202.

9. See the vast correspondence in the Papers of the War Emergency: Workers’ National Committee, Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Manchester (hereafter WNC) and, for example, in Manchester Food Control Committee Minute Books, 1917–1920, Manchester City Archives.

10. WNC 12/128.

11. Karen Hunt, “Negotiating the Boundaries of the Domestic: British Socialist Women and the Politics of Consumption,” *Women’s History Review* 9 (2000): 389–410. See also June Hannam and Karen Hunt, *Socialist Women: Britain, 1880s to 1920s* (London, 2002), chap. 6.

12. Beveridge, *British Food*; Hilton, *Consumerism*, chap. 2; Matthew Hilton, “The Female Consumer and the Politics of Consumption in Twentieth-Century Britain,” *The Historical Journal* 45 (2002): 103–128; Winter, *Socialism*, chap. 7; Royden Harrison, “The War Emergency: Workers’ National Committee, 1914–20,” in *Essays in Labour History 1886–1923*, ed. Asa Briggs and John Saville (London, 1971).

13. Temma Kaplan, “Female Consciousness and Collective Action: The Case of Barcelona, 1910–18,” *Signs* 7 (1982): 546.

14. For a useful overview, see Susan R. Grayzel, *Women and the First World War* (London, 2002).

15. Hannah Mitchell in *Manchester & Salford Women’s Citizen*, October 1926; Karen Hunt, “Making Politics in Local Communities: Labour Women in Interwar Manchester,” in *Labour’s Grass Roots*, ed. Matthew Worley (Aldershot, 2005), 79–101. For a prewar gendered critique of socialism by socialist women, see Teresa Billington-Greig, *The Consumer in Revolt* (London, 1912); Hunt, “Negotiating the Boundaries”; Hannam and Hunt, *Socialist Women*, 156–160.

16. I understand “women’s politics” to be the range of spaces in which women might take political action, including not only formal politics (parties and pressure groups) but also informal politics (participation in civil society more broadly conceived). See Karen Hunt, “Rethinking Activism: Lessons from the History of Women’s Politics,” *Parliamentary Affairs* 62 (2009): 211–226.

17. Hilton, “The Female Consumer,” 115, 112.

18. Temma Kaplan, “Women and Communal Strikes in the Crisis of 1917–22,” in *Becoming Visible. Women in European History*. Second edition., ed. Renata Bridenthal, Claudia Koonz and Susan Mosher Struand (Boston, 1987), 430, 429.

19. Kaplan, “Female Consciousness,” 545.

20. Smart, “Feminists, Food”: Frank, “Housewives, Socialists.”

21. Belinda Davis, “Food Scarcity and the Empowerment of the Female Consumer in World War I Berlin,” in *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*, ed. Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough (Berkeley, 1996), 289. See also Belinda Davis, “Food, Politics and Women’s Everyday Life during the First World War” in

*Home/Front: The Military, War and Gender in Twentieth Century Germany*, ed. Karen Hagemann and Stefanie Schüler-Springorum (Oxford, 2002), 115.

22. Healy, *Vienna*, 9.
23. Martin Pugh, "Women, Food and Politics, 1880–1930," *History Today* 41(1991): 14–20; WNC 11/23, 30.
24. For a critical account of one local authority relief committee, see E. Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Home Front: A Mirror to Life in England during the First World War* (London, 1987 [1932]), 40–42. Various women's suffrage organizations set up their own relief committees, such as the Women's Suffrage National Aid Corps.
25. *Justice*, August 13, 1914.
26. *Justice*, September 10, 1914.
27. WNC 9/2/4.
28. Some Citizen Committees lasted the duration of the war, such as York's. We do not know enough about how these and the more explicit relief committees functioned as a means to politicize women in particular and the extent to which class and gender tensions affected their operation.
29. Beveridge, *British Food*, 2; Burnett, *Plenty and Want*, 218.
30. *The Times*, August 30, 1917.
31. Barbara Winslow, *Sylvia Pankhurst: Sexual Politics and Political Activism* (London, 1996), 69.
32. WNC 10/3/55.
33. Beveridge, *British Food*, 195–197; Manchester FCC Minute Books, 1917–1920.
34. For example, *The Times*, December 17, 1917; Manchester FCC Minute Books, 1917–1920.
35. WNC 9/2/52.
36. WNC 29/4/25.
37. WNC 10/1/85–95.
38. WNC 9/2/30/6.
39. WNC 12/181.
40. WNC 10/1/86; 10/1/88.
41. WNC 10/3/84.
42. Robert Smillie's phrase (*The Times*, December 31, 1917).
43. *Herald*, January 27, 1917. Note the reference to the West Cumberland food riots.
44. For example, Walsall Workers' War Emergency Committee considered a no-rent strike and a boycott of beer and tea in 1915 (WNC 11/213, 214).
45. WNC 12/168.
46. *The Times*, December 10, 1917; Minute Book of Manchester Central Independent Labour Party, February 12, 1918, Manchester Central Library, M42/1/7. See also a similar threat from Glasgow shop stewards (*The Call*, February 14, 1918).
47. *Herald*, November 24, 1917.
48. Burnett, *Plenty and Want*, 218–219.
49. Beveridge, *Food Control*, 2.
50. Minutes of Manchester FCC, April 8, 1918.
51. Minutes of Manchester FCC, March 25, May 13, June 10, 1918; WNC 10/1/175; WNC 10/1/187.
52. *National Food Journal*, March 13, 1918.
53. *Daily Herald*, March 9, 1914.
54. WNC 11/10, 11.
55. *Justice*, August 20, 1914.
56. WNC 11/170; 9/1/57.
57. *Justice*, September 10, 1914.
58. *Justice*, February 18, 1915.
59. *Justice*, September 17, 1914.
60. *Herald*, November 6, 1915. For the Glasgow rent strikes see Joseph Melling, *Rent Strikes: People's Struggle for Housing in West Scotland 1890–1916* (Edinburgh, 1983).
61. *The Times*, March 16, 1917; *The Call*, March 29, 1917.
62. WNC 10/4/8.
63. Frank Trentmann, "Bread, Milk and Democracy: Consumption and Citizenship," in *The Politics of Consumption: Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America*, ed. Martin Daunton and Matthew Hilton (Oxford, 2001), 145.

64. Anthony James Coles, "The Moral Economy of the Crowd: Some Twentieth-Century Food Riots," *Journal of British Studies* 18 (1978): 157–176; Julia Bush, *Behind the Lines: East London Labour 1914–1919* (London, 1984), 81–82.
65. Belinda Davis, *Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics, and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin* (Chapel Hill, 2000), 57.
66. Kaplan, "Female Consciousness," 562.
67. WNC 5/1/2/5.
68. *The Common Cause*, June 21, 1918.
69. WNC 10/1/121.
70. See James Hinton, "Militant Housewives: The British Housewives League and the Attlee Government," *History Workshop Journal* 38 (1994): 129–156.
71. *Justice*, November 5, 1914.
72. Healy, *Vienna*, 92; *Housewives League Magazine*, January–June 1916; Frank, "Housewives, Socialists," 268.
73. *Justice*, November 5, 1914; WNC 19/2/56; *Rugby Advertiser*, July 28, 2008.
74. *The Times*, December 5, 1917.
75. See Hunt, "Negotiating the Boundaries"; Hannam and Hunt, *Socialist Women*, chap 6.
76. *Herald*, February 20, 1915.
77. Pankhurst, *Home Front*; Winslow, *Sylvia Pankhurst*.
78. *Justice*, March 4, 1915; WNC 14/4.
79. Kate Rigby, "Annot Robinson: A Forgotten Manchester Suffragette," *Manchester Region History Review* 1 (1987): 11–20.
80. See Alison Ronan's study, "'A Small Vital Flame': Anti-War Women's Networks in Manchester, 1914–1918" (Ph.D. dissertation in progress, Keele University).
81. For communal kitchens, see Karen Hunt, "Gendering the Politics of the Working Woman's Home," in *Women and the Making of Built Space in England, 1870–1950*, ed. Elizabeth Darling and Lesley Whitworth (Aldershot, 2007), 112–114.
82. Sheila Rowbotham, *Friends of Alice Wheeldon* (London, 1987).