The interwar years were a time of great change in Scotland, economically, socially and culturally. While the 1920s and 1930s are traditionally portrayed by historians as a time in which women experienced a ‘backlash’ and a ‘return to domesticity’ following the First World War, in fact women were entering public life in greater numbers than before. Many women’s organisations encouraged ‘active citizenship’ among their members after women gained the vote in 1918 (well some women over 30). What did this mean? Well basically getting involved in politics – both locally and nationally. This could involve standing as candidates for education or health committees on the local council, standing as councillors or standing as MPs. It could also mean canvassing on behalf of others or getting involved in campaigns for improved housing, maternity care or the demand of equal pay or equal access to the professions. Political actions could also be simply challenging the status quo and insisting on time of your own to attend a meeting or demonstration in your local village hall. The demands of women’s organisations in interwar Scotland were varied and not all were feminist, but this didn’t mean they weren’t political.

There was a wide range of women’s organisations active in interwar Scotland and a thriving associational culture. Not all groups agreed on or supported the same issues and often disagreed. Sometimes they were able to put aside their
differences in order to work together for a common goal. At other times they were not. During suffrage many women’s organisations came together, afterwards they may not have had the same shared goals. But pragmatic alliances continued to be formed on specific issues in the interwar years and there continued to be shared concerns.

The following sections will focus on four different women’s organisations that were active in Scotland in the interwar years:

**Glasgow Society for Equal Citizenship (GSEC)**

The GSEC was formed in 1902 and had originally been the Glasgow and West of Scotland Suffrage Society. Its leadership was solidly middle-class and the organisation had links with the Moderates, the Glasgow unionist or Tory party. It demanded equal political and civic rights for women. It focused its energies on campaigns that would ensure that women gained equal status with men in society, whether that be in the eyes of the law, within employment in the professions, or in the provision of healthcare. Legislative reforms remained its main concern throughout the 1920s and early 1930s. The GSEC also supported female candidates, sometimes members of its own executive committee, standing in local elections.

On the other hand while it supported the equality of women in their right to medical treatment and therefore supported improved maternity care, this was not their main interest. Similarly it didn’t support the campaign for improved working-class housing in Glasgow, which the Scottish Cooperative Guild was very much involved in. The GSEC advocated slum clearance rather than more general house building for the working-classes as it supported the moderate aim of ‘keeping the rates low’ ie taxes on middle class owned property which it was feared would be raised to pay for municipal expenditure on housing.

So class distinctions were certainly a barrier to cooperation between women’s organisations of differing class and political backgrounds in Glasgow.

Interestingly the GSEC disbanded in 1933, the same year the Labour Party took control of Glasgow Corporation. However the declining membership of the organisation maybe had more to do with its ageing membership and failure to attract new members.

**Edinburgh Women’s Citizens’ Association (EWCA)**

The EWCA formed in 1919 campaigned for many of the same ‘equality’ issues as the GSEC and supported female candidates standing in local elections. But it also
demanded improvements for women as women, for example improvements in maternity care, an endowment of motherhood i.e. family allowances which would be paid to the mother and crucially it also supported improved housing for the working-classes, which would have the biggest impact on working-class women who are housewives and mothers. Notably the EWCA’s leadership was also solidly middle-class and it too had links to the right politically, in its case to the Progressives, the Edinburgh Tories, but it had more success in attracting working-class membership. It is possible that this was because the divisions between the classes was less pronounced in Edinburgh but probably had more to do with the fact that the EWCA made a concerted effort to support the issues prioritised by working-class women such as improved housing and maternity care.

So class was less of a barrier to cooperation between women’s organisations in Edinburgh with the EWCA working together within a network of organisations to improve the lives of women both at a national legislative level and at a local level.

**Scottish Co-operative Women’s Guild (the Guild)**

The Guild was formed as a women’s section of the Scottish Cooperative Movement in 1893 and was a working-class organisation, which represented ‘respectable’ women who could manage their money and didn’t get into debt. Most importantly members of the Guild were also supporters of the Co-operative Movement, its ideologies and principles. It concentrated on promoting issues that would be of benefit to working-class wives and mothers, which included demands for improved housing conditions and better medical care for mothers. It also supported issues associated with ‘equality’ feminism such as the extension of the franchise to all women over the age of 21.

While the Guild cooperated with other women’s organisations, these were often other left-wing socialist organisations. It worked with middle-class feminists on particular issues only, such as signing petitions campaigning for improved maternity care etc. However the leadership of the Guild was very much concerned with furthering the Cooperative cause and promoting the election of women to boards of management within the movement. It also supported female candidates in local elections, for the dual aim of improving the lives of working class women and increasing the power of the Cooperative movement.

While not overtly ‘feminist’ the Scottish Cooperative Guild was had an important role in the women’s movement in interwar Scotland in terms of its aim to improve the lives of working class people.

**Scottish Women’s Rural Institutes (the Rurals)**

The Scottish Women’s Rural Institutes, formed in 1917, in contrast completely disavowed a feminist identity and considered itself to be non-political. Catherine Blair, a former suffragist, was the founder of the Scottish branch of the international Women’s Institute movement. She had envisaged the Rurals, as they became known by their members, as a space in which women could talk about their lives and have some recreation. The ‘dullness’ of women’s lives was also to be ‘combated’ through the formation of such women’s institutes in rural villages. The Rurals in Scotland, like their counterparts in England, also made a conscious decision to welcome all women irrespective of class or religion. In certain circumstances this curtailed the issues that could be discussed, and any subject deemed to be ‘controversial’ was not included on recommended lists of lecture topics or suggested demonstrations.

While the Rural were non-political and did not support female candidates standing for election etc, they did much in terms of campaigning for improved rural housing and were involved in all sorts of grass roots community campaigns for village halls, adult education and improvements in women’s health care. In addition they put women centre stage in such local campaigns. While not challenging women’s place in interwar Scottish society, the Rurals did help members to make their views known and at the very least provided overworked women with recreation and a space to be themselves away from their husbands and families.

Of all the four organisations the Rurals numerically were the most successful and are still going strong today. It is notable that in the late 1930s the Edinburgh Women’s Citizen’s Association began introducing drama and crafts classes like those of the Rurals.
These four organisations had many concerns with improving life for women in interwar Scotland. Here are some of the issues they promoted:

**Legal Equality**

*Obviously the demand for the vote was often made in terms of legal equality between the sexes, but for many women’s organisations the vote was only the beginning.*

The GSEC, like many overtly feminist organisations championed the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Bill 1919 to enable women to have ‘equality of liberty, status and opportunity with regard to public functions, dignities, honours, civil and judicial offices, posts or professions’. They were equally vociferous on demanding equal opportunity in industry and the professions, and especially the legal profession and argued that women should be able to become Justices of the Peace and Jurors.

Equal pay for equal work was also a priority with it being suggested that ‘no differentiation should be made on the grounds of sex between men and women doing work of equal value’.

The demand for an equal moral standard was an issue shared by many feminist organisations in interwar Britain and the GSEC argued that the ‘laws dealing with moral offences . . . should be framed so as not to differentiate between the sexes either in wording or in enforcement so that such offences shall be offences of all persons equally’.

The EWCA supported similar issues demanding equality for women on the same terms as men, but also for women as mothers. It supported widow’s pensions as ‘the present law does great injustice to widows with dependent children by giving them no means of obtaining public assistance except through the poor law’. The support for the Equal Guardianship of Infants Bill and support for the illegitimate Children Scotland Act was also to enable better legal rights for mothers.

The Guild also supported equal pay for equal work although there was the condition that this should be based on the value of work done, and ‘not that the payment should merely be made’. This could be interpreted as supporting the primacy of the male ‘breadwinner’ wage and opposition to female ‘dillution’ of skill. Interestingly the Guild also actively supported the introduction of a ‘family wage’ with a 1918 resolution stating that ‘everything that would mean a larger amount of money coming into the home through the father’ was better ‘than schemes where the mother must leave her home’. Similarly it also argued for an ‘endowment of motherhood’ in similar terms, as protecting the welfare of children as ‘the highest infant death rate occurred when women went out to work’.
Unsurprisingly given it’s ‘non-political’ stance the Rurals only considered ‘women’s position in regard to the law’ when visiting speakers came to lecture at individual Rurals. Advertisements and features in the Rurals' journal could also on occasion promote pamphlets produced by feminist organisations. In April 1926 for example a pamphlet entitled ‘Law and the Woman’ was described as ‘of inestimable value to all those who wish to know how the law of the land affects women and children'.

**Housing**

*Overcrowding and poor quality housing was widespread in Scotland in the interwar years and not just in urban areas. When we think of slums we think of the inner city, but conditions were just as bad if not worse in rural Scotland.*

The GSEC was committed to ‘slum clearance’ rather than ‘general needs provision’. Due to the 'level of taxation and the large number of unlet houses' the construction of Corporation housing 'should cease except for slum clearance' although members of the society should be encouraged to visit slum areas with a view to ‘getting an informed opinion and pressing for improved housing conditions’.

The EWCA suggested that ‘more could be done’ - ‘The rate of rent of municipal houses under construction have little relationship to the incomes of the people who, in their own interests and in the interests of the community, ought to move out of their present homes’.

It issued a questionnaire to municipal candidates on the matter of ‘the provision of adequate housing accommodation for the low paid wage earner with a large family’ and began its own ‘cheap money scheme’ for house building - Edinburgh Welfare Housing Trust – ‘erecting houses in the city at a reduced rent to selected families with young children’. The Housing Trust built 24 houses on two sites, all had a living room and kitchenette on the ground floor, and three bedrooms and a bathroom on the first floor, with the rent being 8/6 a week including rates.

The Guild was involved in the 1915 rent strikes which resulted in the rent restrictions act of the same year and continued to demand a return to pre-war rents.

The Guild opposed the Rent Restrictions Amendment Act in 1920. The president, Mrs MacDonald, argued the amendment would result in increased house rents, causing ‘great hardship on a large number of the poorer and casual workers’. MacDonald also praised the ‘vigorous protest being organised in certain districts against the increase in rents', clearly the Clydebank rent strikes of 1920. In the late 1920s further resolutions were passed supporting the extension of the Rent Restrictions Act, ‘until such time as an adequate supply of houses is available to meet the needs of the people’.
In 1932 the central council again passed a resolution demanding that ‘in view of grave unemployment and low wages prevalent among the working classes’ the government should introduce legislation for the immediate return to pre-war rents. ‘Until sufficient houses had been built to provide accommodation for the people, adequate protection should be given to tenants against expulsion from their homes’.

Demands for improved housing for the working classes continued throughout the interwar years, with resolutions calling on the government to ‘assume responsibility for providing better housing, and give assistance to local authorities to enable them to build new houses and deal adequately with the slums’.

The Rurals’ government appointed organiser, Agnes Campbell suggested that women’s activities must extend beyond the home as ‘there was a vast amount of work in which their special facilities might be usefully employed’, women’s ‘special knowledge and skills’ could be employed in ‘tackling such national problems as defective housing and ill health among children’.

Catherine Blair, founder of the Rurals, suggested in 1920 that ‘discontent among women’ with regard to housing was increasing, and she added that they were ‘becoming more articulate’.

Providing evidence to the 1919 commission on housing, Blair argued that houses should have ‘a living room and parlour, two or even three bedrooms, scullery, and bathroom’ with common complaints in rural areas including the lack of running water, no washing or drying facilities, ‘objectionable’ open ashpits, and inconveniently situated, primitive, and sometimes non-existent sanitary conveniences.

The President of Glamis SWRI, stated in 1935 that there was ‘no more burning question today than the housing problem’, all Rurals should ‘fearlessly tackle’ it. Members of the Rurals were to ‘bring forward a corporate plan for more space and greater comfort in their homes’, women should ‘satisfy their legitimate demands for betterment’ by arriving ‘at a general working plan of house construction’; ‘betterment of the home life’ would have practical results, in that the ‘rural worker’ would be happier, her work would be easier, and ‘her heart would be lighter’.

It was further argued in 1937 that improved housing in rural areas appeared to be ‘the only way to check rural depopulation’, and that government should give assistance to ‘landed proprietors’ who ‘could not face’ the expense of improving their properties, in order that young married people and elderly retired people would remain in rural communities.

**Maternal Mortality**

*This was an issue that affected both working-class and middle-class women. The government advised further medicalisation of child-birth to prevent women dying at the*
hands of neighbourhood handywomen. But all was not as it seemed. Deaths from puerperal sepsis were just as high in private hospitals. The scandal became more widespread as middle-class women continued to die in similar numbers to the working classes.

The GSEC suggested that ‘in view of the continued heavy maternal death rate, to grant facilities to the Maternity and Nursing Homes (Scotland) Bill’, but opposed municipal expenditure on welfare services. In March 1931 it did ‘not feel’ that it was ‘the time to urge for any increases in social services’ which would mean ‘increased taxation and a further burden on industry’.

The EWCA established a study circle entitled ‘The Problem of Maternal Mortality’ which involved lectures by experts in the field, and included ‘The Importance of Ante-Natal Work’, ‘Venereal Disease in Relation to Maternity’, ‘The Provision for Women during Child Birth’, ‘Puerperal Fever’ and ‘Maternity as it should be’. Like the GSEC the EWCA also advocated further medicalisation and adherence to government legislation including ‘adequate medical and nursing attendance will result in a reduction of maternal deaths’. But it also encouraged the establishment of home helps following ‘a very interesting’ account given by Miss Barker, Assistant Inspector of Midwives in Glasgow, of her work in relation to the ‘Home Helps Scheme in the city’. The EWCA proposed the establishment of a similar scheme in Edinburgh. Home helps assisted new mothers in the weeks immediately following childbirth, performing household chores and running errands, with childcare being her main duty. A year later, in 1931 the Medical Officer of Health had drafted a scheme that included a panel of suitable home helps.

The Guild’s president argued in 1918 that ‘the greatest and grandest subject which women could take up was the care of maternity and child life, for on that principally did the weal or woe of the nation depend’. She insisted that ‘there must be maternity centres, where mothers would get that care that they could not get in their own homes’ and ‘it was essential also to have a very careful watching and visitation scheme’ with it now being ‘possible to have in every town baby clinics, where doctors could give careful attention to the children’. In 1928 a resolution was passed urging the Ministry of Health ‘to take such steps as will lead to the establishment in every district of a complete maternity service for the protection of motherhood’. Mrs Hunter of the central council insisted that ‘motherhood was still the most dangerous of dangerous trades’ and ‘whatever is possible shall be done to tackle the vital task of lessening the risks of motherhood’. Finally, in 1930 the central council viewed ‘with grave concern the appalling and increasing death rate and disability among women in childbirth’. Mrs Hardstaff, president, was outraged that ‘half the several thousands of young mothers who lost their lives could have been saved if proper treatment and care had been available’.
In the same year the Guild demanded the establishment of a ‘complete maternity service for the protection of motherhood, to be directly under the control of the state or local authorities and to operate in conjunction with GPs’, and ‘all hospitals and infirmaries should be controlled and financed by the state’. In 1937 it was argued that ‘the state should recognise that a healthy nation is a wealthy nation and that working mothers should get the same care and treatment as royal mothers’.

The Rurals focused on child welfare rather than maternal welfare. Its 1928 handbook suggested lectures including ‘care of children, health, sick nursing and child welfare’. These were designed to be ‘open meetings’ where members were encouraged to invite friends and neighbours who they thought would benefit. This was essentially a community resource where mothers could gain information relating to child welfare.

Sources

**Primary sources:**


*Scottish Home and Country* (available in the National Library of Scotland)

**Publications:**


Annmarie Hughes, ‘Fragmented Feminists? The Influence of Class and Political Identity in Relations between the Glasgow and West of Scotland Suffrage Society and the


**Where can you find information about women’s organisations?**

Overtly feminist organisations, formed during the campaign for the vote and after were established in towns and cities throughout Scotland. Glasgow Society for Equal Citizenship and Edinburgh Women’s Citizens Association were part of a wide network of similar organisations including:

- National Council of Women
- National Federation of Women Workers
- National Union of Townswomen’s Guilds
- Women’s Freedom League
- Women’s International League
- Women’s Peace Crusade
- League of Nations Union
- Women’s Educational Union

You can search SCAN to identify the location of archives for such organisations, consult relevant publications, newspapers, local archives and museums. Scottish broadsheet and local newspapers are likely to be a key source of information, as are newspapers published by or associated with political parties. For more details, see the General guidance on sources, especially the sections on ‘Records of organisations’.

**Questions for investigation**

- Were any women’s organisations active in your area? What evidence is there of women’s activity in such organisations?
- Had any of these organisations began as suffrage organisations? Were they newly formed as a result of the vote?
- Were there joint meetings or demonstrations?
- Was citizenship and ‘active citizenship’ important to such organisations or prominent individual members? What did this mean?
- Was class a barrier to cooperation between women’s organisations in your area?
- Did members stand as candidates in local or national elections? Did members sit on local education or health committees?
- What sorts of issues did women’s organisations and prominent members promote in your area? Did demands for legal equality feature? What about housing? Were women in your area interested in improving maternal mortality?