PART 1: 1792-1840s

Introduction: Women’s Status in early 19th century

ALTHOUGH feminist ideas have circulated in Britain for over 3 centuries, an organised woman’s movement did not emerge until the mid-19th century. How can we explain this? As we have seen, Wollstonecraft’s 1792 *Vindication* was an endeavour to apply the liberating ideals of the French Revolution to the position of women in Europe, a call to arms to change the subordinate position of women in society. But the *Vindication* was regarded as so revolutionary, that it was banned from every ‘decent’ home, and it was not until the latter decades of the 19th century, in the 1880s and 1890s, that Wollstonecraft was rehabilitated with the emergence of new discussions and perspectives of feminism. In essence, following Mary’s death, there was a temporary rupture of feminist debate partly because of a conservative backlash following the French Revolution. This backlash against radicalism made any possibility of social reform difficult. Certainly, this was not a climate in which debates about women’s rights or radical changes in sexual relations or family life could be countenanced. Moreover, demands for changes to women’s status met with resistance; the British only had to look across the Channel where, following the Revolution, French women had been allowed the extension of certain rights and powers. As far as the English were concerned, French women appeared to be ‘rising above themselves’, and the British were reluctant to have English women emulating their French counterparts. Not surprisingly, when discussions about women’s rights arose, they were generally tied to wider debates about female immorality, particularly following Godwin’s revelations about the Pro-French Revolutionary Wollstonecraft’s free
sexuality. Extending social/political power to women, it was argued, would only result in their immorality and ultimately bring ruin to the whole of society.

This does not mean however that women did not agitate for changes to their social subordination. Beginning from the early 1800s, what became known as the ‘Woman Question’ assumed greater urgency, as women [and some men] began to make known their dissatisfaction with the social, legal and political constraints that limited women’s public opportunities, and to agitate for women’s full citizenship. [census of 1801]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Women’s political and legal status at the start of the 19th Century</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • In the eyes of the law, women did not exist as legal beings in their own right. Their persons were ‘merged’ or under the direction of first their fathers, and on marriage, their husbands [if unmarried, their brothers also]. They were termed to be under couverture, literally translated as ‘covered’.
| • No married woman could sue or be sued in a court of law; she had no power to sign a contract, could not legally make a gift of any kind without prior consent of her husband.
| • When married, all her property, down to the petticoats she wore, passed into the hands of her husband (could be wasters); anything she earned or inherited was his, and her earnings were paid directly to him.
| • She could make a will only with her husbands consent and even then he could revoke the will, even after her death.
| • She could not sue for divorce nor remove their children from his home without his consent.
| • Her husband could gain a separation from her on the grounds of her adultery, she could not when he was the adulterer.
| • Husbands legally entitled to beat their wives, provided the stick was not thicker than his thumb.
| • Children were understood to be the possession of her husbands. |

Indeed, as Harriet Bradley argues in this week’s KEY READING, in many ways, women’s lives became even further limited, as a result of social and economic changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution which, resulted in a major economic transition. The workplace and the home which had previously been the same, now began to separate. As the workplace moved outside the home, male and female spheres of activity also separated. Thus women, still the primary caretakers of the children found themselves
assigned to the private, or domestic sphere, while men were forced to follow their jobs into the public sphere. Not only were women excluded from waged labour, but their roles and responsibilities became increasingly restricted to the home, as new ideals of domesticity for women took shape.

So, it was not until the decade of the 1820s, a period characterised by the renewal of interest in broad scale, political, social, parliamentary and legal reform that radical demands for women’s emancipation began to be openly made again. Before then, few women in Britain were audacious enough to openly demand women’s rights (for the notion of women’s rights was generally linked to social fears of immorality etc.), and interestingly, many of the voices calling for women’s rights in this early period emanated from male proponents of women’s rights.

In 1825 for instance, the socialist, William Thompson and his partner Anna Wheeler published what is generally regarded as the first political statement in favour of the extension of political rights to English women. In *Appeal of One Half the Human Race, Women, Against the Pretensions of the Other Half, Men*, Thompson argued for restrictions on women’s rights to be removed, for the greater good of society as a whole. The *Appeal* had been penned in response to an article in an 1824 edition of the Encyclopaedia by James Mills (who incidentally was the father of J.S. Mills, one of the foremost advocates of women’s rights in the second half of the 19th century). Mills had argued against rights for women, but Thompson’s *Appeal* stringently rebutted Mills conservative arguments, and argued instead that the existing laws under which women were subordinated were in dire need of reform.
Early 19th century concerns: The Case of Caroline Norton

So, in the first half of the 19th century, in the absence of an organised women’s movements, change proceeded slowly. One reason was that even though legislation [back to hand-out] narrowly defined the parameters of women’s opportunities, the reality was that few families lived entirely according to the letter of the law – life would have been unbearable for most women (and most men) had this been the case.

But the point is that husbands were given rights over their wives, which if he chose to exercise, could be vicious and cruel to the extreme. It was precisely those women who were having to face the full extent of their husband’s brutality who were most in need of the law’s protection, but such women invariably found that the law was indeed an ass and entirely biased against women – especially once married. Women who went up against the law, particularly against an errant husband could find themselves deprived of their children, impoverished without home or money, and socially ostracised. Recall the infamous case of Caroline Norton, which I discussed last term. Recap. Briefly, Caroline Norton was the wife of an earl…abuse throughout marriage, separated in 1836, after Norton threw Caroline out of the marital home, sent their 3 sons off to live with relatives, refusing Caroline access to them. He barred her from the marital home, initiated divorce proceedings on the grounds of his wife’s supposed adultery with Lord Melbourne. Norton failed to prove that Caroline and Melbourne had committed adultery and he failed to gain the desired divorce…Caroline, desperate to regain her children, wrote letters and correspondence to her Whig friends in Parliament, demanding that the rights and access and custody of a mother to her children should be recognised in law. But despite their support, Caroline failed to gain custody. She then turned to her friend, a
barrister to help her try to change the law. They wrote pamphlets on the question of women’s rights to custody of their children, and her writings generated a great deal of spirited and public debate. While some sections of society supported her case and arguments, the conservative press were immensely hostile towards her. Nevertheless, as a result of Caroline’s petitioning, in 1839 an Infants Custody Act was passed which gave mothers right of custody to all children under the age of 7, provided that she was ‘of good character’. Ironically the passage of this law did nothing to help Caroline Norton, for her sons were living in Scotland, and thus beyond English legal jurisdiction. In 1842 a tragic event happened that gained her public support and empathy. Her youngest son William, then aged 8, fell off of his horse while out riding with his father, and later died of blood poisoning that had developed because his father neglected to have his scratch seen to. Although she was later given limited access to her remaining sons, Caroline never regained custody of them, and moreover had to wage further battles through the courts for maintenance from her husband.

Caroline Norton’s case was much publicised during the early 19th century, and her arguments were to have significant impact on later 19th century feminists. Yet while she championed women’s rights under marriage, she refused to enter directly into any feminist protest. She appealed for changes in the laws affecting married women, but rejected appeals to women’s rights or the idea of their sexual equality with men, instead affirming her belief in ‘the natural superiority of men’. Rather, Norton argued for the right of women to be protected from the excessive abuses of men. In many ways though, Norton was representative of women of her age. Few openly demanded ‘women’s rights’
and indeed, many women eagerly subscribed to the emerging ideology of separate spheres which extolled motherhood and wifehood as women’s natural role.

**The ideology of separate spheres**

The central issue for many women and those interested in the ‘woman question’ at this period was the middle class assumption of separate spheres, which dictated that the only proper place for a respectable woman was in the home providing care, nurturance and comfort to her husband and children. The ideology of Separate Spheres was developed to explain why this separation was necessary, by defining the 'inherent' characteristics of women. These traits supposedly made women incapable of functioning in the public realm. Women were classified as physically weaker, yet morally superior to men. This concept was reinforced by religious view of the mid-nineteenth century. It was women's **moral superiority** which best suited them to the domestic sphere. Women were also expected to teach the next generation the necessary moral virtues to ensure the survival of the society. The ideal of separate spheres, with its emphasis on female domesticity, came to dominate social and political thought during the first half of the 19th century.

**Disseminating the ideology of separate spheres in popular culture**

In particular, the Victorian era, 1837-1901, is characterised as the domestic age *par excellence*, epitomised by Queen Victoria, who came to represent a kind of femininity which was centred on the family, motherhood and respectability. With Queen Victoria's devoting herself to her husband Prince Albert and to a domestic life, the ideal spread
throughout nineteenth century society. Victoria became an icon of late-19th-century middle-class femininity and domesticity.

The popular Victorian image of the ideal wife/woman came to be known as "the Angel in the House," who was expected to be devoted and submissive to her husband. The Angel was passive and powerless, meek, charming, graceful, sympathetic, self-sacrificing, pious, and above all--pure. The phrase "Angel in the House" comes from the title of an immensely popular poem by Coventry Patmore, in which he holds his angel-wife up as a model for all women. Believing that his wife Emily was the perfect Victorian wife, he wrote "The Angel in the House" about her (originally published in 1854, revised through 1862). Though it did not receive much attention when it was first published in 1854, it became increasingly popular through the rest of the nineteenth century and continued to be influential into the twentieth century. The following excerpt will give you a sense of the ideal woman and the male-female relationship presented by Patmore's poem:

Man must be pleased; but him to please
Is woman's pleasure; students to look up poem for seminar

The importance of the domestic space for women was emphasised and reworked in a series of sermons, advice manuals, and handbooks authored by men and women, designed to explain to women the importance of their religious and moral duty to family -- this selflessness, acceptance of responsibility towards family, was to be woman’s mission. For instance, the popular advice book Letters to Young Ladies (1835) by Lydia Howard Sigourney contained guidance on subjects such as the improvement of the mind,
dress manners and accomplishments, suitable books, conversation, doing good, and self-motivation. There was great demand by women for this type of prescriptive reading.

**Separate Spheres: Dissenting voices**

Though the ideology of separate spheres for women was taken up throughout Victorian society, they were many detractors – not everyone eagerly subscribed to the adage ‘men for the field and women for the home’. Many women writers used literature to question and challenge the limiting, stifling, domesticated angel in the house ideal. For instance, The Bronte sisters’ novels clearly address the ‘condition of women’ by criticizing the ideology of separate spheres, confining feminine ideals, and women's limited professional and educational opportunities. Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* exposes the ills of female economic dependency, and women’s limited lives. Charlotte Bronte’s heroine Jane Eyre reflects:

“It is in vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquillity: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it. Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh
at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex”.

For Virginia Woolf, the repressive ideal of women represented by the Angel in the House was still so potent that she wrote, in 1931, "Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer."

The paradoxes of Separate Spheres ideology: constraints and opportunities

As Barbara Caine argues in the KEY READING however, the idea of woman’s mission that was so fundamental to 19th century gender relations, was paradoxical in the sense that it both disciplined women’s social, political, and sexual desires and confined women to the domestic space, but at the same time, its’ insistence on women as the moral guardians of their families and society offered them a new and extended scope for action beyond the domestic space.

The idea of a woman’s mission was the outcome of an evangelical revival of the late 18th century. Evangelicanism was a branch of Methodism/Protestantism that stressed the moral reformation of all sections of society, and women’s morally superior qualities made them ideally suited for reform work within the public sphere. Expectations of women’s moral usefulness enabled some women to become involved in ‘good/social works’, for their responsibility for the moral welfare of society extended not only to their children, but to those who were less fortunate. Women’s special qualities, the capacity to nurture and care for children and others, made them naturally suited to this role.
Social issues that previously had been beyond the purview of women could now be legitimately taken up by women as women’s interests—as we have previously seen, women’s involvement in anti-slavery campaigns later inspired women to become involved in numerous other social issues such as prostitution, men’s sexual immorality, poverty. Their involvement in these various forms of social and charitable work brought women together in forums, enabled them to learn vital organising skills, and most importantly provided a forum through which women could come together to discuss their own subordinated position, and to begin to organise to challenge their second-class citizenship.

They demanded not only political rights for women, but insisted that women be able to use and exercise their specific and superior moral qualities in all areas of life. Thus mid-Victorian feminism may be described as woman-centred, that is, it placed emphasis on women’s special qualities, women’s collective activities, etc. They turned their attentions to:

- Expanding the range of employment opportunities open to women
- Improving the content and quality of women’s education
- Enabling women access to higher education
- Demands for woman suffrage [gathered pace in late 19th century
PART 2: 1850-1860s

Challenging Separate Spheres: The Ladies of Langham Place

Although the ideology of separate spheres retained a potent grip on gender relations in British society at mid-century, at the same time, there were significant developments that saw the gradual emergence of an organised British women’s movement, especially between the decades 1850-1860. During this period, a number of women who would become influential in the early organized British feminist movement emerged.

Among these were BARBARA LEIGH Smith Bodichon and her friends who started to meet regularly during the 1850s in Langham Place in London to discuss the need for women to present a united voice to achieve reform. This earned them the name of the Ladies of Langham Place. They included Bessie Raynes Parker and Anna Jameson. Issues they took up focused on education, employment and marital law. One of the causes they vigorously pursued became the Married Women’s Property Committee of 1855. They collected thousands of signatures for petitions for legislative reform, some of which were successful. Along with Bessie Parker, Smith wrote many articles, both separately and together, on education and employment opportunities, and like Caroline Norton in the same year, Smith summarized the legal framework for injustice in 1854 in her “A Brief Summary of the Laws of England concerning Women”.

Barbara Smith is often regarded as the unconventional and most influential leader of the Victorian Women's Movement. She had attended the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, from which she drew tremendous inspiration. Back home in London, she went onto
lead four great campaigns; to reform the Married Women's Property Act, for middle-class women's right to paid work, for higher education and for the vote on the same terms as men. Politically acute, she recognised the importance of influencing public opinion. To this end, in 1858, Smith founded the English Woman's Journal [edited and run by women, though male shareholders] was a pressure group periodical providing a forum for a national exchange of ideas and information by women determined to campaign for improvements in women’s status and rights. So successful was women’s response to this journal that Smith and her friends set up the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women (SPEW) still exists today!. The Langham Place Ladies continued to provide inspiration, infrastructure and funding for much of the women’s movement for the remainder of the century.

Challenging Separate Spheres: Campaigning in the 1860s

The campaigns launched by the Ladies of Langham Place gave women the opportunity to test their new political skills, for disparate elements to come together, and for them to join forces with other social reform groups. One was the campaign for the Married Women’s Property Act, eventually passed in 1882. Next was the campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866 and 1869, which brought together women’s groups and utilitarian liberals such as John Stuart Mill. Women in general were outraged by the inherent inequity and misogyny of the legislation and for the first time women in large numbers took up the rights of prostitutes. Prominent critics included, Blackwell, Nightingale, Martineau and Elizabeth Wolstenholme. Josephine Butler, already experienced in prostitution issues, a charismatic leader and a seasoned
campaigner, emerged as the natural leader of what became the Ladies National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts (1869). This demonstrated the potential power of an organised lobby group. The association successfully argued that the Acts not only demeaned prostitutes, but all women and men too, containing a blatant double sexual standard. Butler's activities resulted in the radicalisation of many moderate women. The Acts were repealed in 1886. On a smaller scale was Annie Besant’s campaign for the rights of match girls and against the appalling conditions under which they worked.

How did the ideology of separate spheres affect working class women?

The industrial revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries brought the separation of work from home for the working class as well. Recent criticism of the debate, such as that by Amanda Vickery, has argued that ‘separate spheres’ was a projection of an idealised society rather than a reflection of concrete realities. This was especially the case for working class women, who could not rely on their husband’s low wages to maintain their family households.

The Chartist [working class movements for extension of the franchise and democracy] movement in the 1830s and 1840s involved w/c women as well as men, and there were 80 local Female Political Unions and Chartist Associations. However, the movement's charter made no mention of a woman's right to vote, and its female supporters therefore campaigned only for their menfolk.
Women, especially in the textile factory districts, often had to go out to work until their children were old enough to take their place as the second wage-earner, because men's wages were not enough to support a family.

At the same time, conditions in nineteenth-century industrial towns made heavy housework a necessity, and as there were no alternatives for the sick, the very young and the very old but to be cared for in the family home, women took on these duties too. These women endured a double burden of waged labour and unwaged domestic work. No wonder they gave up factory work to take care of the home whenever they could afford it. The demand for a 'family wage' for men that would enable wives to stay at home and do the job properly (a target which was hardly ever achieved as far as the majority of the working class were concerned) was popular with women workers as well as with men--women cotton workers on strike in Preston in 1854, for example, fully supported it. Ultimately the disgraceful conditions and appalling physical danger under which women and children worked in factories led working class people began to fight to defend the family as a place of refuge for women and children, the sick and the unemployed. By the end of the 19th century, as Harriet Bradley suggests, the ideology of domesticity had clearly spread to the working class, with trade unions endorsing the ideal of the family wage and the non-working domestic based wife [even if few working class trade union members could attain this ideal!].

These developments, taken together provided the springboard for more strident demands by women for greater freedoms and social opportunities, and by the latter decades of the
19th century, there were clear improvements in women’s lives – though in several areas, - the vote, sexual freedom, etc. there was still a long way to go. In next week’s lecture, we focus on new feminist discourses at the end of the 19th century, which were to herald in even greater transformations in women’s lives.