

Education in Rural Areas in the Interwar period
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The role of the newly formed Women's Institute Movement in providing for the education and training of countrywomen 1919 – 1939

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Abstract

In Britain the Women's Institute Movement started in 1915, with financial support from the Government, in order to help to increase the food supply to a war torn country.

Once the war was over the National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI) rapidly became established as an independent voluntary organisation with the aims of furthering the education of country women and improving the conditions of rural life.

The education policy was set down by NFWI but implemented at all levels.

In this paper the main strands of the education and training programme will be described and the effect of this on the wider rural community will be evaluated.

The educational work of the WI in the interwar years included:

- Training in citizenship for the newly enfranchised women
- Encouragement to develop local co-operative craft industries
- Establishment of the WI Guild of Learners to revive traditional crafts
- Encouragement to develop local WI choirs and drama groups
- Through democratic processes to help women to influence decision makers.

The paper will review the resolutions passed at AGM between the wars that led to campaigns to improve educational provision not only for women but for all in rural areas.

In 1925 the inter-departmental committee of the Ministry of Education and the Board of Agriculture established a committee to consider and make recommendations on 'the general question of the practical education of women for rural life'. Lady Denman, Chairman of the National Federation of Women's Institutes was appointed Chairman. This paper will review the part played by the WIs in providing information incorporated in the resulting recommendations of the Denman Report published in 1928.

The material for this paper will come largely from the archives of the NFWI which were deposited in the Women's Library at London Metropolitan University in 2000 and are now open to public access.

Introduction – the beginning of the WI movement in Britain

90 years ago, on 16th September 1915, the first Women's Institute in Britain was opened in the village on Anglesey which is best known for having a very long name – usually shortened to Llanfair PG.

Photo Llanfair PG members

It was formed because local people had heard a Canadian woman, Madge Watt, explaining the benefits of such an organisation to the women of rural Britain. The WI movement had started in Ontario, Canada in 1897 as an offshoot of the Farmer's Institute. If the farmers were finding it helpful to meet together to learn how to improve farming methods their wives and daughters felt that they, equally, could benefit by meeting together to learn how better to do their work.

The WI movement was introduced into Britain with the support of the Agricultural Organisations Society (AOS) which was dedicated to helping small farmers work co-operatively. The AOS realised what an important role women played in helping on farms, and now in war time their further co-operation could lead to increasing the food supply.

The time was right for this new movement and it grew fast. By the end of the war there were 773 WIs in England and Wales with 12,000 members

Graph shows the number of WIs and members between 1915 and 1939

The growth was encouraged by the Board of Agriculture's Food Production Department, who in 1917 took over the responsibility for forming WIs. Also in 1917 the existing WIs were joined into an independent voluntary organisation - the National Federation of Women's Institutes, with its own constitution and elected executive committee.

32 year old Lady Gertrude Denman was elected Chairman (the term always used by WI).

Photo Lady Denman

Her vision for this new movement was more than helping with food production; she saw in it a chance for women, who had previously led very confined and narrow lives, to start to take a more active part in public life. Grace Hadow was elected Vice-Chairman.

Photo Grace Hadow

She was an Oxford don who wanted to extend the provision of further education to countrywomen, many of whom had left school as early as 12. Both women could see how the WI would provide a means of breaking down the deep social barriers that existed between women in villages. The partnership of Trudie Denman and Grace Hadow, continued until Grace's sudden death in 1940, was highly influential in the development of the movement in the interwar years.

Looking ahead to the end of the war, the Ministry of Reconstruction referred to the importance of adult education as '*a permanent national necessity, an inseparable aspect of citizenship*'. They also referred to the responsibility of the millions of new voters – the women who had just been granted the vote. A section on rural adult education described the WI as '*for the moment naturally*

pre-occupied with war problems' but 'already playing a great part in educating countrywomen in citizenship and self reliance'.ⁱ

1919 - Development of the WI post war.

Once the war was over the Board of Agriculture handed over full responsibility for running the organisation to NFWI providing a generous grant which allowed a small paid staff to be employed at the Headquarters in London, and provided money for forming new WIs and developing County Federations

The NFWI adopted a Constitution to meet post war needs:

(Slide)

- The main purpose of the National Federation is to provide an organisation with the object of enabling woman to take an effective part in rural life and development.
- ... the National Federation shall have the power to make provision for the fuller education of countrywomen in citizenship, in public questions both national and international, in music, drama and other cultural subjects and also to secure instruction and training in all branches of agriculture, handicrafts, domestic science, health and social welfare.ⁱⁱ

In the next section I will consider how this provision was made.

Part 1. The WI providing for the fuller education of women:

a) in citizenship

At the end of the war women (at least those over 30 years of age) had finally received the vote. Many members of the national executive committee had been active in the women's suffrage movement, and to them the WI provided an ideal vehicle through which to offer training to newly enfranchised women.

Very few of the women who joined the WIs had experience of running meetings. Paid and Voluntary Organisers were trained by NFWI to give them help. Miss Hirst Simpson, a paid organiser, developed a 'model syllabus' for schools for WI officers. In 1921 she drove round the Midlands in car provided for her by NFWI training WI members to run their meetings properly

Photo *Hirst Simpson and car 1921*

The syllabus was then used by organisers in other parts of the country. The training was supported by pamphlets published by NFWI. The first of these to be produced was on '*Procedure*' written by Lady Denman herself.

Photo - leaflet

Others followed on '*Duties of WI secretaries*', '*Planning work and programmes*'

Through the teaching in the officers schools women were introduced to terms like 'agenda', 'minutes', 'resolutions'. NFWI considered it was important so that when a woman was elected to serve on a parish, district or county council she would be familiar with procedure and be comfortable taking her place along-side the men.

Reading the minute books of local WIs from 1920 it is clear that they wished to educate themselves in citizenship. For example Battle WI , Sussex, reported

Mrs Deangate gave a most excellent lecture on 'the power of the vote' followed by a demonstration of dyeing.ⁱⁱⁱ

And Orford WI in East Suffolk had:

A lecture on 'The Duty of Women as citizens' followed by a demonstration of bandaging varicose veins^{iv}

When in 1925 there were Local Government elections the Editorial in February's *Home and Country* (the WIs in-house magazine published monthly since 1919) reminded members—

Countrywomen must use their votes to help to secure the return of the best candidates. The right women are wanted on County Committees. The Institute ought to be training its members in the knowledge of business procedure and of local government methods which are requisite for service on committees^v

The media could appreciate the role played by the WI in training in citizenship – but an editorial in *The Manchester Guardian* of May 27th 1923 showed that it also recognised the social benefits:

Slide

The Women's Institutes which were founded so widely and successfully in our villages and tiny country towns during and after the war fulfilled a double purpose. They gave to the political citizenship of the cottage housewife a wider social content than the vote itself could bestow and they have helped to break down the excessive individualism in village life providing in not too austere a way a meeting place and medium for discussion of the world as well as the parish^{vi}

b) Providing further education in a wide range of subjects.

Learning to run the WI empowered some women and helped them to move into public life. For many other women what they had learned at the WI meeting helped them in their daily lives of running a house, caring for children and helping on the farm.

The formal educational content of a WI meeting was usually a 20-30 minute talk often followed by a demonstration. I have reviewed the subjects of these talks and demonstrations as reported in *Home and Country* for the first three months of 1920

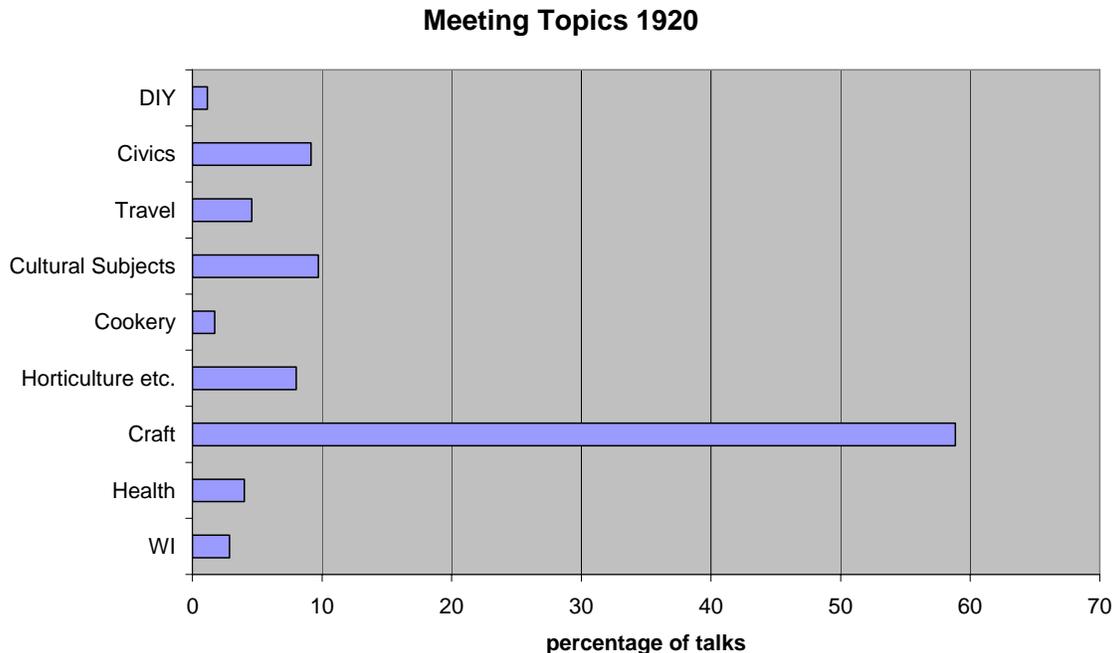


Figure 1

As Figure 1 (meeting topics 1920) shows, the majority of subjects were practical ones.

If we consider the headings in a little more detail they included:

DIY – household tasks like laundry

Horticulture – gardening, cheese making, looking after small livestock – poultry, rabbits

Health – including home nursing and infant welfare

Cookery – introduced ‘food values’ and talks about ‘vitamines’

Civics - included talks on ‘the power of the vote, and also talks about the League of Nations

Cultural subjects – included history , mostly recent history about the war; or local history; talks about books – some WI sets up their own libraries and had book clubs (there were no public libraries in rural areas at this time)

Travel – there were talks about visits abroad, often by the Vicar about a visit to Palestine, or a walking holiday in Norway or the Alps. There were also talks about experiences living abroad – living in India for example.

By far the largest topic was **craft** and the following figure shows the range of crafts covered.

Craft Meeting Topics 1920

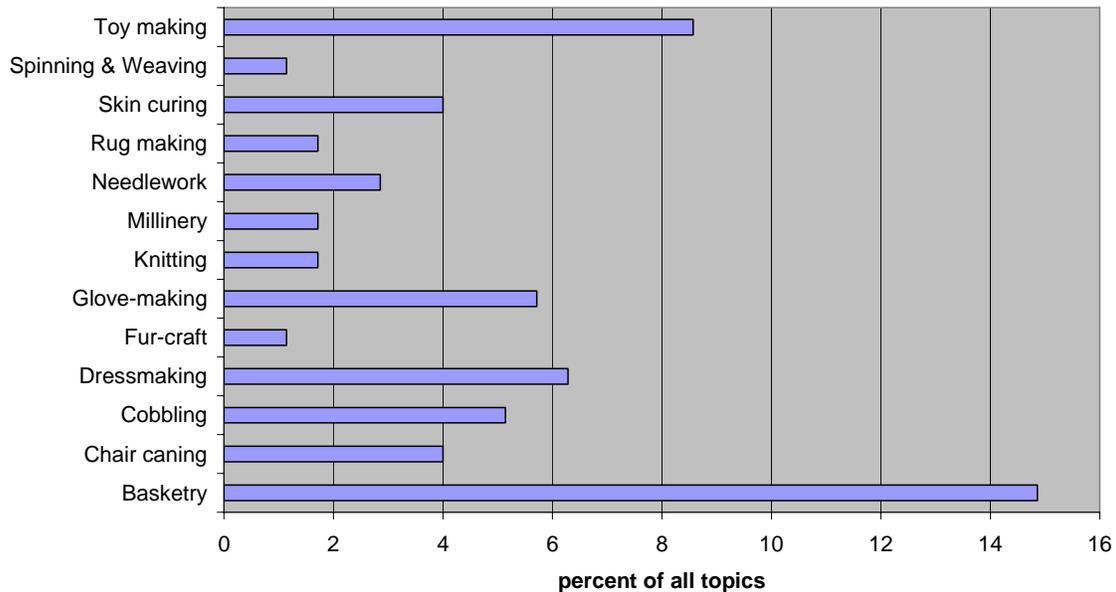


Figure 2

In the immediate post war years many talks and demonstrations were to help to 'make do and mend'. A single demonstration might generate enough interest to set up a series of classes. For example here in the photo is are classes in cobbling and tinkering

Photo cobbling and tinkering

Often the instructors in such classes were men teaching women things previously considered as 'men's work'. Other crafts taught helped with domestic economy by making children's clothes for example or by making hats.

Photo dressmaking/ upholstery

As women became proficient at these crafts some of them were expanded into profit making enterprises.

c) Development of local co-operative craft industries

NFWI encouraged the development of small co-operative craft industries as a way of helping with rural regeneration but it was also helping women to have some financial independence. NFWI employed an 'Industries organiser' paid for by a grant of £1,000 from the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust.

The first 'industry', started in Sussex, was toy making and then other industries developed, for example making Rush Baskets, and children's Smocks. Some Counties developed their own specialities, for example in Warwickshire there was skin curing, fur craft and glove making, in Devon dying, weaving and knitting

socks. On this slide we see the knitting industry in Dorset and the Micheldever WI rush and sedge industry in Hampshire

Photo *stocking knitters and rush baskets*

The industries were supported by cooperative buying of raw materials and marketing of the goods through WI outlets, or by fulfilling direct orders.

Photo *of WI 'shops'*

d) Raising standards of craft work

If craft work was to be sold it had to be of a consistently high quality, and so, in 1920, NFWI set up **The Guild of Learners**.

The Guild's aims were to revive dying rural crafts, set standards, and train teachers and demonstrators, so that the crafts could be handed on.

If a WI member chose to join the Guild she paid an extra small subscription. She could join as an **Associate**, and *undertake to become proficient in some handicraft connected with the home* or as a **Member**. Membership was only open to those women who could demonstrate that they were already proficient in some handicraft, and it was intended that they would *to use the knowledge for the furtherance of such craft in their neighbourhood*^{vii}

There were a series of proficiency tests which a member had to complete before she could train as a demonstrator, instructor or judge. Each one carried a certificate and badge. NFWI organised regular national craft exhibitions and sales. In 1932 the exhibition was held at the New Horticultural Exhibitions Halls, the exhibition was visited by Queen Mary, a WI member, who had been a regular visitor to the exhibitions since the first in 1917

Photo *of demonstrator Miss Somerville spinning, and of Queen Mary*

The Guild of Learners instructors, demonstrators and judges travelled widely though the rural areas and many of them also became teachers for the local authority, and were used as judges by other organisations.

The Times, reporting on the 10th anniversary of the Women's Institute Movement, wrote

By means of the Guild of Learners, increasingly competent instruction, and county exhibitions, the standard of handicrafts is being slowly raised.^{viii}

e) widening horizons

I reviewed the subjects of talks and demonstrations at WI meetings, as reported in *Home and Country* for the first three months of 1930 to compare with those of 1920. Both are shown in Figure 3

Slide figure 3

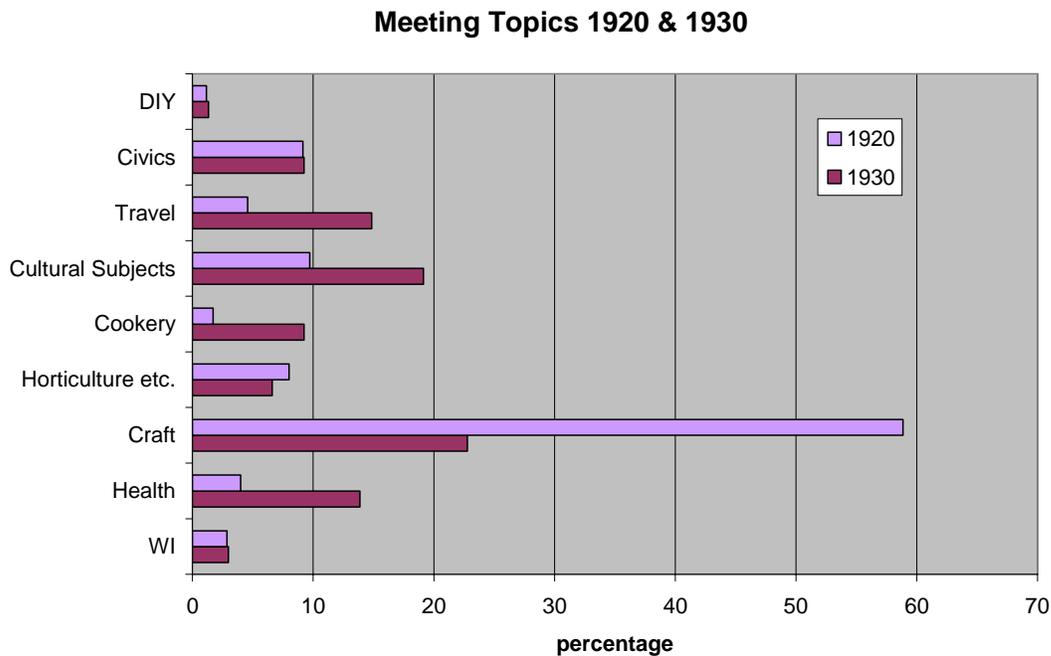


Figure 3

From this we can see that, although crafts are still the largest category, the subject matter of the programmes is now more balanced. with a wider range of subjects in the various categories:

- DIY** – now included talks on ‘chemistry in the home’, ‘electricity’, and home repairs
- Civics** – women in public life, careers for girls the probation service, women police, more than half those listed in this category were on the League of Nations.
- Travel** – these were wider ranging than in 1920 and many were illustrated by lantern slides.
- Cultural subjects** – drama and dramatists, literature – Shakespeare, Dickens, art and artists, music, song recitals and some illustrated by gramophone records.
- Cookery** – included providing well balanced meals for children and agricultural workers at a low cost. It also included food processing and bacon curing
- Horticulture** – less about small livestock and more about gardening
- Health** – home nursing, first aid, and ‘the body as a machine’, care of children - ‘the delicate child’.
- WI** – as in 1920 these were talks about how to run the WI better.

Craft – still the most popular of the subjects but the range of crafts had now changed, as the figure below shows:

Slide figure 4

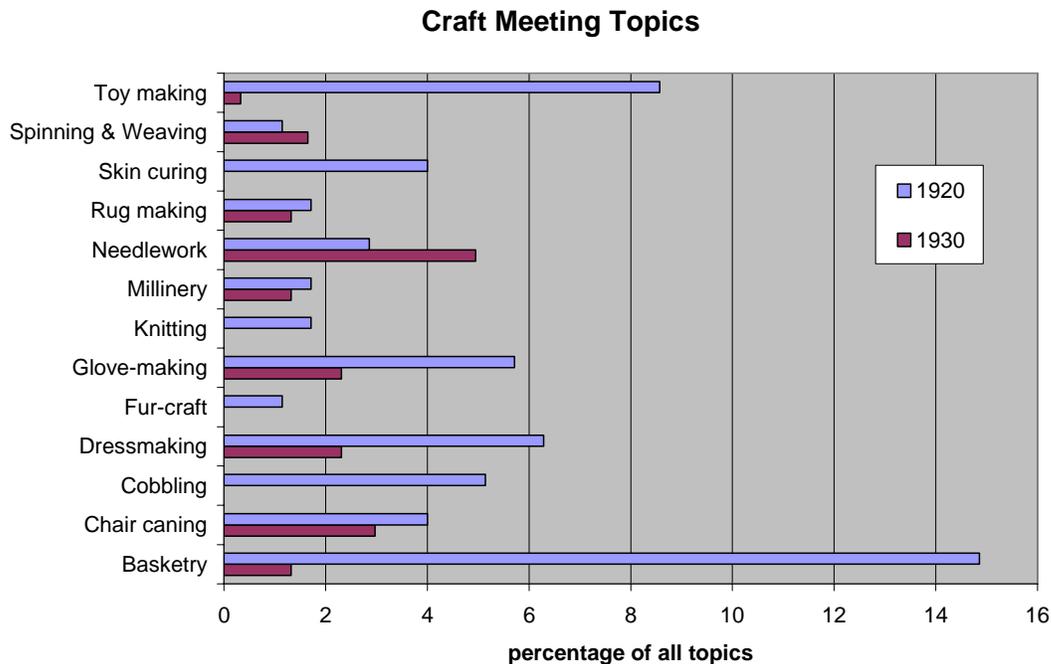


Figure 4

The crafts that had declined were the ones that had been associated with the industries. Throughout the 1920s the industries gradually declined; it became difficult to sustain the quantities required and to ensure standards, although a few continued until the late 1930s.

The emphasis now changed to reviving traditional crafts and passing on the skills, and this is reflected in the increase in 'needlework', a category which includes crafts such as Dorset feather stitching and patchwork and quilting.

f) Providing education in cultural subjects

Many of the women who joined the WIs had never had the opportunity to take part in leisure or cultural activities. One of the major changes in subjects covered in the WI meetings in 1930 compared with 1920 is the increase in interest in music and drama.

One notable feature is the number of WIs putting on ambitious outdoor historical pageants -the pages of *Home and Country* are filled with photographs and reports of them. – here are two of them

Photos of pageants.

Many of these involved the entire village – women, men, children and sometimes animals – one in Dorset for example had 500 performers and the report noted that it had only cost £24 to dress them all!

As the interest in drama developed some WI County Federations organised classes to help actors and producers, and drama festivals where WI drama groups competed against each other and a professional adjudicator made helpful comments on the performances..

In 1930 24 Federations held Drama Festivals^{ix}, 7 of which were joint Festivals of Music and Drama, and in Yorkshire and Norfolk they also included Folk Dancing. In County Durham the Festival lasted for three days and in Dorset their Festival took the form of a Shakespeare Competition

Also in 1930 15 Music Festivals were reported, here are the two winning choirs from Staffordshire

Photos Staffs choirs

By far the most ambitious was the annual Music Festival held in Lewes in East Sussex. It had started in 1921 when 11 WI choirs competed in a day long competition. The following year it extended to 2 days and opened to others in the community by having classes for those WI choirs that included men, as well as a class for church and chapel choirs.

By 1930 the Festival lasted 5 days, and including children. Schools from all over Sussex entered choirs, and, in later years percussion bands, pipe bands, violin bands and sometimes country dance teams. It was reported in *Home and Country* that:

.... it is noteworthy that the Board of Education thinks so highly of these festivals that the authorities count attendance at a festival as attendance at school.^x

In 1933 the Festival ran for six days, one day set aside for instrumental classes and 90 choirs entered involving 2,500 people.

Photo of Lewes Music Festival

A Festival of this size required a number of adjudicators, and it is indicative of the support given to such an amateur initiative that the list of adjudicators includes some very well known names. Harold Darke, a professor at the Royal College of Music was the sole adjudicator in the first few years, but others followed including Geoffrey Shaw, C. Armstrong Gibbs, Herbert Howells, Adrian Boult, and Malcolm Sargeant,.

There was an interesting development in 1934. The Festival organising committee approached the recently formed Sussex Rural Community Council to

suggest that East Sussex should set up a **Rural Music School** to encourage string playing in the villages by providing peripatetic qualified teachers. By the following year the Rural Music School was established and 70 adults and 50 children from 14 villages were receiving tuition.

WI choirs also entered competitions run by other organisations, Middlesex Federation reported that three of their WI choirs had been successful in the Senior Women's Institute Choirs Class at the London Musical Competition Festival, and both Monmouthshire and Gloucestershire reported choirs entering festivals organised by the Rural Community Councils, and in parts of Wales there were WI classes in local Eisteddfod

The previous part of this paper has considered the WI as a provider of adult education to women in rural areas, but it could not provide everything. There was some instruction which required a more co-ordinated educational programme, for example technical information on dairying or poultry management, for this NFWI had to call on the help of others.

Part 2. The WI as a pressure group influencing decision makers.

a) Relations with local education authorities

As we have seen, the WI trained many of its own craft teachers through the Guild of Learners; it also employed some directly, for example in East Sussex the Federation employed a toy making teacher and provided her with a bicycle so that she could visit WIs.^{xi} However many WIs also hoped to obtain teachers through their local education authority. Many local authorities responded to these requests.

In 1925 The Board of Education carried out an inspection and published their report in the form of a white paper.^{xii} *'Women's Rural Institutes and ... the Educational Work carried on under the various County Education Authorities in connection with them'*. The report noted that:

'the extension of educational activities amongst country women has steadily increased with the growth of the institute movement.....Not all country women are ready to receive the more formal type of instruction usually given in towns. Home occupations often prevent their following a course of lessons; as do also inclement weather and seasonal events such as haymaking and fruit gathering. It is therefore often found more convenient to arrange short intensive courses in crafts and to rely for other educational expansion in single lectures, demonstrations and discussions; much of this work is aided by local education authorities..... One of the important aspects of this work is that as a result of single demonstrations and lectures followed by discussions, regular though short courses have frequently been asked for.

Later in the report we read that

.... Northumberland provided between 20 and 30 courses of instruction as the outcome of single lectures given in the previous year. In Staffordshire, 100 short courses were held in one year, largely as a result of the policy in the previous year of holding single demonstrations.

However there were many local authorities who did not realise how they could, by co-operating with the spreading network of WIs, provide classes for those who had not had access to them before. When Federations heard from each other about successes like those reported above, they, not surprisingly decided that they wanted the same.

b) WI Campaigns to improve educational provision.

Throughout the interwar years NFWI campaigned for improved educational provision for all in rural areas. They were concerned about children's education too. The campaign followed the democratic process of debating resolutions at the AGM and then, when a mandate had been received, bringing the matter to the attention of the relevant authorities.

Photo of the AGM at The Queen's Hall 1923

Slides – words of resolutions passed concerning the education of children

A resolution passed in 1924 urged WIs to approach their Local Education Authorities to '*ensure instruction for all girls of 12 years of age upwards in plain cooking and such other domestic subjects ...*

The AGM in 1927*urged the county and other authorities to have special consideration for the needs of rural areas, both in the provision of teachers and in the conditions regulating classes*

In 1936 WI members from 25 Federations, along with Directors of Education attended a '*Country Schools Conference*' convened by NFWI, where they considered the special needs of rural families. The government took this interest seriously and Mrs Ramsbottom, Parliamentary secretary to the board of education addressed that years AGM in the Albert Hall

Photo of AGM being addressed by Mr Ramsbottom

The main concern of the WI however remained the provision of education to countrywomen.

Slide of words

In 1922 the delegates at the AGM resolved:

That this meeting recommends the NFWI executive committee to represent to the Government the great need for the continuance and

development of adult education in rural districts and the possibilities of economy by using the assistance of voluntary societies in this work.^{xiii}

and also urged *The Ministry of Agriculture to improve and extend the provision of special education for women as shall fit them for the women's side of indoor and outdoor farm life...*^{xiv}

There were few agricultural colleges or Farm Institutes that offered training to women. In 1925, partly as a result of this pressure from the NFWI, the inter-departmental committee of the Ministry of Education and the Board of Agriculture established a sub-committee to consider and make recommendations on 'the general question of the practical education of women for rural life'. Lady Denman was appointed Chair of this committee. The report: 'The Practical Education of Women for Rural Life', known as the 'Denman Report', was published by HMSO in 1928.

Slide of Denman report

This was the first time that there had been a co-ordinated approach to consider the possibility of :

Establishing educational institutions in which instruction of the more technical agricultural subjects would be specially adapted to the needs of rural women by being correlated with the instruction of domestic science.^{xv}

The report concluded that women's part in agriculture is of unique importance as she makes both an 'independent' and a 'co-operative' contribution to the industry, a contribution previously unrecognised. It called for improved provision in the agricultural education of women and also recognised that there must be better representation of women on the machinery controlling education.

There were a number of recommendations including providing more itinerant instruction in agricultural subjects of special interest to women (e.g. dairying, poultry keeping and horticulture) and also in farm household management. It proposed diploma courses at an Institute of Rural Domestic Economy. It also called for increased provision for women at Farm Institutes and the addition of a college for women providing recognised agricultural training.

The WIs welcomed this report, but it is clear that they were frustrated by the delay in its implementation. At the AGM in 1929 the meeting passed a resolution:

That this meeting urges the National and County Federations to take such steps as seem advisable towards securing the practical application of the recommendations contained in the Report on the Education of Women for Rural life.^{xvi}

A similar resolution was passed in 1930 and again in 1931. After a long struggle by NFWI the Ministry of Agriculture did finally recognise Rural Domestic

Economy (later called Rural Home Economics) as a branch of Adult Education, but many of the recommendations were never fully implemented as the Second World War intervened.

Conclusion

Slide of Llanfair PG and woman in Albert Hall and logos

The rapidly expanding Women's Institute Movement played an important role in rural areas in the interwar years the wars in providing educational opportunities to newly enfranchised women. This not only influenced the women themselves but also their campaigning brought about improvements for all.

END NOTES

ⁱ quoted in Inez Jenkins p 22

ⁱⁱ Constitution and Rules of the National Federation

ⁱⁱⁱ Battle WI minutes March 10 1920 East Sussex Record Office WI 15/1/3

^{iv} *Home and Country* Jan 1920

^v *Home and Country* Feb 1925

^{vi} editorial in the *Manchester Guardian* on May 17th 1923:

^{vii} from the rules of the Produce Guild

^{viii} *The Times* September 25 1925

^{ix} as reported in the Federation news sections in 1930 issues of *Home and Country*

^x East Sussex Federation report *Home and Country* June 1924 p591

^{xi} A Quarter of a century of Women's Institutes in East Sussex, Marjorie E M Walton published ESFVI 1947 p 11

^{xii} Report of HM Inspectors on the educational work of Women's Rural Institutes HMSO 1926

^{xiii} from the report of the 1922 AGM and listed in the Public Affairs handbook 'Speaking out'

^{xiv} Speaking out – a public affairs handbook, published NFWI, contains a list of the NFWI mandates from 1918 to date.

^{xv} Report of the sub-committee of the Inter Departmental Committee of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries and the Board of Education: The Practical Education of Women for Rural Life, published by HMSO, 1928 p3

^{xvi} Speaking out – a public affairs handbook, published NFWI, contains a list of the NFWI mandates from 1918 to date.