

Redefining ‘the woman with the basket’: the Women’s Co-operative Guild and the politics of consumption in Britain during World War Two

Over recent decades, historians of gender have transformed our understanding of the impact of total war on British society. Feminist scholars in particular have been drawn to this field of research because, as Margaret and Patrice Higonnet suggested in an influential essay, war ‘crystallizes contradictions between ideology and actual experience’.¹ Mass mobilisation necessitated by total war blurred boundaries between military and home fronts and between men and women. Dominant conceptions of gender roles were put under intense pressure, making possible greater awareness of their constructed and hence malleable nature.² Understandably, women who experienced the most dramatic change have attracted the most scholarly attention; women in uniform, for example, who threatened to destabilise definitions of gender that conceived of the soldier as the epitome of masculinity.³ Women conscripted into the paid labour force were often called upon to perform the physically demanding or skilled tasks that historically had been bound up with ideas of masculinity, and these too have been subjected to detailed investigation.⁴ Running through both these historiographical strands is an interest in memory, little wonder as the full range of women’s experience has been marginalised if not effaced from public memory. Oral historians have addressed this lacuna by attending to women’s own narratives of their experience of industrial and military mobilization.⁵ Knowledge of the way in which war shaped the activities and ideology of feminist groups and women’s voluntary organizations, which sought to enlarge female notions of citizenship particularly during the Second World War, has also been significantly enlarged, by studies of bodies such as the Women’s Institute (WI), the Women’s Voluntary Services (WVS) and Townswomen’s Guilds.⁶

The working-class housewife, however, remains at best a shadowy presence in this literature, despite some useful leads concerning individual attitudes.⁷ Their agency is also underplayed by those social historians who have explored wartime austerity, including the effects on ordinary consumers of rationing and the black market.⁸ For sure, recovering the experience of a protean category that has left no straightforward archival trace presents the historian with major problems, though there can be no doubt about the importance of a group that constituted the majority of adult women, about 55 per cent or 8.75 million in 1943 when mobilization was at its height.⁹ Nor should we doubt how profoundly affected the lives of these women were by the demands of wartime, as they had not only to feed and clothe their families in a context of acute scarcity, but had often to juggle the demands imposed by part-time work as many of them were conscripted by the state into the paid labour force. The government certainly recognised how vital it was to get housewives on side, though it often chose to exalt them for what were seen as innate nurturing qualities, rather than provide practical help for the difficulties that they routinely faced, including when shopping, for instance.¹⁰ The propaganda film *They Also Serve* (1940), sponsored by the Ministry of Information and directed by Ruby Grierson (1904-1940), portrayed the working-class ‘mam’ as a timeless figure, stoic and sensible, the bedrock of family relations and national stability.¹¹ It was a heroic representation but also patronising and thoroughly depoliticised. A more sophisticated, nuanced view informed the rousing work of the novelist J. B. Priestley, which although mostly concerned like later historians with women in the services and the factories, similarly placed the working-class housewife on a pedestal as indigenous equivalent to the courageous Stalingrad mother.¹²

In line with the relative absence of the housewife from existing accounts, the most important organization that claimed to speak for working-class housewives at this time – the Women’s Co-operative Guild (WCG) – has been almost totally overlooked by historians of

gender and war. The best scholarly study of the Guild stops short at the Second World War, and Gillian Scott's work, moreover, has probably served to discourage further research, owing to its teleological argument about the purported eclipse of the Guild's earlier feminist agenda and its increasing domination by an authoritarian leadership.¹³ Established in 1883 to represent the interests of female consumers, particularly the working-class married woman or 'the woman with the basket' as she was known in co-operative circles, the WCG had nearly 90,000 members when war was declared. These women regarded themselves primarily as housewives, particularly if they had children as most did. Their experiences differed in many respects to those of single women in their twenties and thirties and married women with no young children that benefited most from the greater opportunities for paid employment made possible by war. An autonomous body, the Guild was part of the Co-operative movement, the influence of which within working-class communities in Britain from the mid-nineteenth century onwards would be difficult to over-estimate. The basic building block was the retail store, owned and run democratically by members of local societies. Profits from trade were divided between members according to the value of goods purchased during a quarter, membership being conferred by ownership of a £1 share that could be bought with accumulated dividends. Most societies were affiliated to and elected the leadership of two central, federal organisations; the Co-operative Union, which gave legal advice and promoted co-operative education, and the Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS), which practised bulk buying and produced a wide range of goods.¹⁴ By the late 1930s, there were approximately 8.5 million members of around 1,200 local retail societies operating over 12,000 shops, and the CWS owned more than 300 factories and warehouses. It was the biggest distributor of tea in the country, milled a third of total flour imports and baked one in five loaves. At the end of the war the Co-operative movement was feeding at least a quarter of the population.¹⁵ In many respects, war exerted positive effects on the movement. When

National Registration was introduced in Britain by the war ministry in September 1939, consumers had to register with particular outlets for basic foodstuffs and co-operators benefited from their ownership of an extensive network of distribution and supply. Moreover, government policy of 'Fair Shares for All' was regarded as dovetailing with the mutualistic ethic of co-operation.¹⁶

This article considers the practice and ideology of the WCG, focussing particularly on the Guild's wartime mobilization and reconfiguration of the working class consumer-housewife or 'the woman with the basket'. It reconstructs the views of national and local activists through a close reading of various publications that were aimed specifically at women, particularly the Guild's weekly magazine, *Woman's Outlook*, and the women's pages of the movement's national paper, the *Co-operative News*, which had included a 'Woman's Corner' since the Guild's formation. *Woman's Outlook*, which first appeared in 1919, sold between 30-40,000 copies a week between the wars, while the *Co-operative News* had a weekly circulation of between 80-90,000 copies.¹⁷ By the late 1930s, the *News* devoted two full pages to women's issues, comprising articles, detailed reports of Guild meetings and editorial opinion and this coverage did not contract during war either, despite restrictions imposed by government on newsprint. Both the women's pages of the *Co-operative News* and *Woman's Outlook* were edited by Mary Stott (1907-2002), a talented journalist from a middle-class background whose employment by the Co-operative Press in 1933 resulted in a great awakening. 'I loved and venerated the women of the co-operative movement', Stott later recalled, 'whose courage, persistence and loyalty seemed to me often heroic, for though most of them were under-educated and many were scarcely above the poverty line, they learned to speak in public, go on deputations, organise and preside at great conferences.'¹⁸ When war broke out Stott left *Woman's Outlook* largely in the hands of Leonora Crossley (1904-1989), while she concentrated on the *Co-operative News*.¹⁹

For many co-operators, ‘the woman with the basket’ had utopian potential, being the basis on which an entirely different social and economic order could be built, but the description could also be restrictive and limiting. Quite simply, the complex and changing roles of many working-class women was not adequately captured by the figure of ‘the woman with the basket’; employment opportunities had expanded in light industries between the wars, especially for young single women, for example, a constituency that was also in the vanguard of the so-called new consumerism in this period.²⁰ Furthermore, not only did the prioritisation of the working-class mother have potentially exclusionary effects, the mother was hardly a stable category either. Eileen Yeo’s elucidation of three recurring archetypes of the mother as protecting, empowering and disciplining in social science discourse between the mid nineteenth and mid-twentieth century is helpful here, for these archetypes can also be found in the Guild’s discourse during World War Two.²¹ The archetypes frequently overlapped of course, though shifts of emphasis can be discerned. The first section below considers the Guild’s protecting and nurturing activities on the home front, including humanitarian efforts and participation on food committees and other official bodies, which was initially hampered by the Guild’s longstanding commitment to pacifism. Misgivings were overcome, however, with the Guild maintaining pressure on the Food Minister, Lord Woolton (1883-1964), and subjecting rationing to sustained scrutiny. The article then moves on to explore how housewives were empowered by debates within the Guild over post-war reconstruction, which focussed on plans for social security to begin with but soon broadened into a critique of capitalist ‘combines’ and demands for economic as well as social transformation, on an international as well as national scale. The final section suggests why the organization faced serious problems at the end of the war, despite its undoubted successes. Co-operative women were largely excluded from the business side of the movement and this held them back. However, equally important were generational conflicts

between women themselves that were exacerbated during war and in its immediate aftermath. I argue that the rather inflexible moralism of the WCG tended to isolate it from young female consumers especially, women whose gender roles were not adequately captured by 'the woman with the basket' designation and whose seemingly profligate consumption habits and wayward behaviour leaders of the Guild sought to discipline.

The WCG and the home front

The commitment of many of the Guild's leaders to absolute pacifism caused difficulties during the war, with membership falling from 87,000 in 1939, to 65,000 in early 1940 and just over 51,000 in 1945, though this decline was not as inexorable as Scott suggests.²² Neither was it unique; other women's organizations such as the Townswomen's Guild and women's sections of the Labour Party suffered setbacks despite enthusiastically embracing the war effort from the outset, due to the disruption caused by wartime conditions, including the blackout, requisition of meeting places and increased work demands.²³ Pacifism certainly ran deep within the WCG, which introduced the white poppy on Armistice Day 1933, promoted the Peace Ballot the year after and passed numerous anti-war resolutions at annual Guild congresses. The Spanish Civil War exposed contradictions, although the official pacifist stance did not preclude sustained engagement with the international situation nor humanitarian support for the Republican cause.²⁴ As war approached in the summer of 1939 tensions re-emerged, Congress passing a resolution opposing conscription and participation in Air Raid Precautions. After war started, the Guild's leadership came out against the evacuation scheme and the WVS.²⁵ Such moves may have caused some women to let their membership lapse but most adopted a more pragmatic attitude and took part regardless; the Guild had over 1,800 branches in 1939 and only lost about a hundred of these during the war. Members engaged enthusiastically in the evacuation scheme, knitted clothes for troops, made

jam, entertained wounded servicemen and provided relief in the capital's deep shelters, activities that were compatible with the archetype of the protecting mother.²⁶

Nevertheless, the Guild was initially slow to get involved in important aspects of war work and was consequently under-represented on the emergency committees established by government to ensure the well-being of civilians. Immediately after war broke out *Woman's Outlook* urged members to volunteer to sit on these committees, which it was feared were being packed by unsympathetic individuals who were likely to protect private traders and who did not understand or care sufficiently about the particular difficulties facing working-class women.²⁷ By the spring of 1940 the *Co-operative News* reported that there was one member of the Guild on the Central Prices Regulation Committee, five on Regional Prices Committees, 155 on local Food Control Committees, 223 on local Excess Prices Committees, 52 on Military Tribunals, 175 on Wartime Hardship Committees and 164 on Citizens' Advice Bureaux.²⁸ However, as there were over 1,400 local Food Control Committees alone throughout the country, the Guild was hugely outnumbered by non-co-operators.²⁹ As late as February 1942 at a rally in Bradford, Mrs Thirlwell complained about how the WCG 'ought to have been leading the way instead of being the tail end of war-time committees as many guildswomen are.'³⁰ Some leaders of the Guild tried hard to convince members that participation was ethically justified, including Cecily Cook (1890-1962), the general secretary of the WCG, who reassured them that 'Women were bound to do all sorts of things called for by the war. If a mother knitted socks, she was doing it for her son, not for the war. If women were getting good meals for shelterers or for evacuees, they were doing it through the desire to help human beings.'³¹ Cook emphasised the protecting role, typically, though as war continued mothers driven to more militant action – particularly those engaged in the fight against fascism in the Soviet Union – attracted widespread admiration, with local branches taking the lead in the 'Help for Russia' appeal sponsored by the National Council of Labour,

some even backing calls for military aid. At a day school at Ashington, for instance, local activist Mrs Horn 'referred approvingly to the equality of the sexes in Russia' and called for a similar revaluation of the domestic sphere and motherhood at home, including wages for 'home-makers'.³²

Fundamental to the protecting role of the housewife was the feeding of families, and historians who neglect the Guild have followed the line adopted in official accounts of the Ministry of Food that appeared at the end of the war, which sidelined the important efforts made by the WCG to ensure people were fed by making rationing a success.³³ Not only that, building on the experience of the Food Council during the First World War, the Guild also sought to politicise consumption in ways that were meaningful to working-class housewives.³⁴ It pressed for a comprehensive rationing scheme from the outset, in order to avoid the difficulties encountered during the earlier conflict when government had refused to countenance rationing until it was forced to give way in 1917 by the threat of disorder and food riots. When Cabinet debated the introduction of limited food rationing in late October 1939 it was divided, Winston Churchill (1874-1965) stubbornly opposed to any move away from the free market. Public discontent forced intervention within a few months, however, and bacon, butter and sugar were rationed from the spring of 1940.³⁵ The Guild welcomed limited rationing but also emphasised that vital foodstuffs were not covered and that many loopholes remained. It performed an important and hitherto unacknowledged role here, maintaining pressure for intervention by means of numerous meetings and articles published in the co-operative press. Some societies went further, leading the way by introducing fairer and more efficient rationing schemes themselves, as Penny Summerfield noted in her important study.³⁶

On rationing the Guild was far in advance of other women's groups; treatment of the subject in *Labour Woman*, for example, the monthly magazine aimed at women's sections of

the Labour Party, was slight compared to *Woman's Outlook*.³⁷ In its pages, Leonora Crossley wrote extensively about the micro-politics of consumption in a regular column on 'The Shopping Basket'.³⁸ Employing an anti-monopoly discourse popularised by co-operators during the interwar period, Crossley regularly attacked the black market and organised rackets or 'ramps' that were driving up prices.³⁹ She cited the report produced in spring 1941 by Sir Douglas McCraith (1878-1952), chair of the North Midland Food Price Investigation Committee, which demonstrated how prices had been inflated by 'unscrupulous speculators'. Growing unrest in the country was exacerbated by the Ministry of Food, which Crossley argued had 'failed most lamentably to suppress profiteering.' Guildswomen at countless conferences were asking why prices of numerous goods had risen so sharply, Crossley continued, and McCraith's report clearly revealed that this was due to the covert operations of the 'speculative gambler, who has no patriotism and no consideration save for his own pocket.'⁴⁰ Unsurprisingly, continuing inequalities of class figured prominently in Crossley's articles. She called for the repeal of the Purchase Tax that was intended to restrain consumption of luxuries but which hit the poor hardest as many goods had been wrongly categorised.⁴¹ The fact that eating in restaurants was off ration caused continual complaint also, Crossley remarking that, 'until the "luxury" has been taken out of eating I cannot agree that this is yet a war of equal sacrifice for all.'⁴² Thus, while strongly supporting rationing, Crossley consistently spotlighted its inequitable effects, believing that the experience of war would transform the consciousness of ordinary consumers, making them more aware of 'the meannesses to which a capitalist economy gives scope.'⁴³

After his appointment in April 1940, Crossley berated the Minister of Food, Lord Woolton (1883-1964), for his 'blithe spirit of "laissez faire"', as he preferred to avoid coercing manufacturers and wholesalers, recommending consumers boycott greedy retailers instead of intervening directly to control prices.⁴⁴ Woolton has been kindly treated by

historians but he was not treated this way by the Guild.⁴⁵ As head of Lewis's department store group before the war, Woolton was understandably regarded by co-operators as biased in favour of private enterprise and although he was careful to appear neutral, no doubt regarded the Guild as a thorn in his side, studiously avoiding any reference to them in his published memoirs.⁴⁶ However, he understood far better than Churchill did how vital the food issue was for the maintenance of public morale, explaining to the Prime Minister in July 1940 that it was important to give 'the public the *impression* (my emphasis) of an endeavour to treat all classes alike'. Woolton consequently devised various schemes to build popular support for government policy, including free milk for poor mothers and their children, British Restaurants that sold low cost meals, and food supplies for shelterers and victims of air raids.⁴⁷ The Guild pressed Woolton to extend rationing into a comprehensive scheme, but was initially rebuffed. A low point was reached at the Guild's Annual Congress held at Middlesbrough in 1941, Crossley observing 'how delegates let themselves go about Lord Woolton!'⁴⁸ He was urged to consult working-class housewives who had practical experience of food problems, put rationing on a properly co-operative basis and enact tough price controls. As usual, the immoral behaviour of middlemen was seen to lie at the root of current difficulties, Caroline Ganley (1879-1966) denouncing 'the way in which speculators had been able to get supplies of goods and make great profits.'⁴⁹ When a system of points rationing was rolled out from November 1941, the WCG was broadly supportive as it was seen as partial solution to the problem of wealthier consumers hogging unrationed goods.⁵⁰ Employed by government to monitor public morale, Mass-Observation reported on 'Food Tensions' the following March and concluded that food policy was working at last, though its findings ought to be treated with caution as the report was based on a sample of just 75 'predominantly middle class' housewives.⁵¹ Nevertheless, the food situation did ease from this time and although direct evidence is lacking it seems reasonable to suggest that the

WCG's efforts to educate both working-class consumers and Woolton may have helped effect this turnabout in the popular mood. Unsurprisingly, Guild activists were keen to claim credit for their organisation. Before Woolton was appointed to the post of Minister of Reconstruction in November 1943, they grudgingly accepted that he had done a reasonable job, thanks in no small measure they maintained to the Co-operative movement and the Guild.⁵²

Reconfiguring 'the woman with the basket'

Although the idea of the protecting and empowering mother frequently overlapped in co-operative discourse, the latter archetype came more to the fore as war continued. The radical potential of working-class housewives empowered through co-operation was emphasised by the Guild's influential early general secretary, Margaret Llewelyn Davies (1861-1944), in her preface to the official history in which she argued that the organization had demonstrated to women that 'the market basket' was a 'revolutionary weapon', transforming them 'from buyers, ignorant of the economic results of their acts, into intelligent Co-operators, conscious that they can undermine Capitalism'.⁵³ Debates over post-war reconstruction from autumn 1940 reenergised this utopian sensibility, with local conferences organised on the theme, 'Towards a New World'. 'We must create a disturbance about these ideals', declared Mrs Dunn at a meeting in Manchester, 'The whole resources of the world must be used for the common good'.⁵⁴ Social issues such as housing, education and health – especially maternity rights – had featured prominently on the Guild's agenda for decades, so it was unsurprising that pressure was put on Sir William Beveridge (1879-1963) to take full account of housewives' needs as soon as the Inter-Departmental Committee on Social Insurance and Allied Services was formed in June 1941. The committee's report published in December 1942 was broadly welcomed, especially its recommendations concerning marriage and

maternity grants, provision for widowhood and separation, a state medical service and pensions.⁵⁵ Local branches lent support and called on government to make it law as soon as possible.⁵⁶ However, the reception was not uncritical and aspects of the report that tended to undermine the status and autonomy of married women caused real concern; here the Guild's view went beyond the attitude of other women's organizations such as the WI, which expressed appreciation for Beveridge's support for family life.⁵⁷ *Woman's Outlook* downplayed its significance, suggesting that it represented not a 'revolution' but rather a 'tidying up' of existing services. Guildswomen argued that the children's allowance should be paid to mothers and questioned the assumed dependency of married women inscribed in a report that 'emphasises strongly...that the married woman is not in the same economic position as the single woman.'⁵⁸

Feminist scholarship has explored the 'maternalist' dynamics of state welfare that informed the Beveridge Plan, which defined the married woman primarily in terms of her 'natural' domestic role and family responsibilities.⁵⁹ Such limitations on female agency were extensively discussed at the time by the Guild, which demanded clarification of housewives' status within the new scheme and refused to accept vague promises about the future introduction of comprehensive medical care.⁶⁰ Although anxieties persisted, the implementation of the scheme was nevertheless thought vital and so the Guild backed its immediate introduction at its annual conference in summer 1943 and began a nationwide campaign in support. It organised countless meetings, pressured Labour and Co-operative MPs to intensify their efforts in parliament and collected signatures for a mass petition to the Prime Minister.⁶¹ Despite an enthusiastic initial response, this petition fizzled out and there is no evidence that it was ever presented. Taken at face value, this might seem to support arguments in favour of working-class apathy towards welfare reform, though the issue is more complex.⁶² Not only were there deep misgivings about the Beveridge Plan within the

WCG, the petition was also competing with another that was being sponsored by the Guild simultaneously that concerned the legal status of married women's savings. Under the Married Women's Property Act any savings made by housewives – including accumulated dividend deposited with co-operative societies – remained the property of the husband, and the Guild fought vigorously to get an inequality recently upheld by the High Court of Appeal overturned. This feminist cause, far less problematic than the Beveridge Plan, soon took up much of the Guild's attention, general secretary Cecily Cook arguing that it highlighted the urgent need for the 'protection of the economic status of the housewife.'⁶³ This agitation, however, was also pushed aside by the exigencies of war. Nevertheless, the Guild continued to question the gendered nature of welfare, particularly the unfair treatment of working-class housewives, agitating successfully, for instance, for the payment of children's allowance to mothers rather than fathers.⁶⁴

Within the Guild, debates on reconstruction went much further than the co-ordination and extension of social services. Successfully harnessing the economic power of 'the woman with the basket' that Llewelyn Davies had talked about was regarded as imperative and establishing a meaningful peace necessarily involved confronting economic threats. Towards the end of the war, consequently, Guild branches frequently discussed the 'Menace of the Combine', blaming war not only on fascist foreign policy but also on the increasing power of monopolies. The Labour and Co-operative MP George Darling (1905-1985) had warned of the dangers posed by concentrations of capital in his 1941 text, *The Politics of Food*. Companies such as Unilever, Tate & Lyle, Rank and Spillers and the Vesty Trust, Darling wrote, 'placed the consumer at the mercy of business men whose only concern was to make profit. They were ready to fight anybody who tried to limit their right to exploit the consumer in their own way.'⁶⁵ Gordon Schaffer (1905-1997), a fellow traveller journalist on *Reynolds's News* – the Sunday paper owned by the Co-operative movement – developed a similar

analysis in a widely-read pamphlet which argued that US and German combines such as Standard Oil and IG Farben had conspired together before the war to reduce supplies of goods and inflate prices, weakening the ability of democratic countries to resist the Nazis. Such firms had continued to prosper even during the conflict, moreover, Unilever expanding into Iraq and elsewhere: 'Even in a war against Fascism the cartels march with the liberating armies', Schaffer wrote.⁶⁶

This critique was popularised by the Guild as part of its attempt to demystify the workings of the economy in the popular mind. The way in which big business penetrated daily life and threatened co-operation, creating 'false scarcity' and artificially raising prices, were common topics. At a conference in Blackburn, for example, Mrs Slater exposed the holdings and operations of Unilever that encompassed an extensive network of productive plant and retail outlets, including Liptons and Mac Fisheries. Taking her cue from Schaffer, Slater also highlighted links between Imperial Chemical Industries and IG Farben, declaring that co-operation was the only way to 'get rid of the evil of combines.' She warned that if monopolies were not checked they would regroup after the war and undermine the Atlantic Charter's declaration of 'freedom from fear and want for all peoples in all lands'. She also stressed how economic and political spheres were now thoroughly intertwined and accused Unilever and other large companies of influencing representatives in the House of Commons to safeguard the interests of combines. This underlined the urgent necessity for housewives' politicisation, otherwise the movement would soon be 'sabotaged' when hostilities ended.⁶⁷ These conferences on monopoly power were pervaded by a sense of the coming struggle, certainly, but they were far from pessimistic. Guildswomen regarded the future positively, as full of opportunities for women, working-class housewives especially.⁶⁸ Wartime experience encouraged optimism. At a meeting in London, for instance, Mrs Shade of the Guild's central committee observed how war had proven government could ensure effectively that supply

equated with demand, arguing that this had to continue during reconstruction. She instanced the problems that would inevitably be faced in relation to housing, when cement manufacturers and other capitalist building ‘rings’ and ‘syndicates’ would buy up land and exploit the situation for shareholders’ advantage, a subject that many other speakers highlighted towards the end of the war and in its immediate aftermath.⁶⁹ The hope was that sinister combinations of capital – the discourse was frequently melodramatic – would be vanquished domestically by the ‘people’s combine’, the Co-operative movement and its commercial powerhouse, the CWS, which many believed needed to expand into many other sectors of the economy. There were calls for the movement to branch out and open garages, sweet shops, newsagents, tobacconists, theatres and cinemas, moves that were supported by socialist intellectuals G. D. H. Cole (1889-1959) and J. B. Priestley (1894-1984).⁷⁰

The Guild maintained that organised working-class consumer power was the best defence against capitalist monopoly at home, then, but it also encouraged members to think internationally about these issues. After all, capitalist monopolies operated across national borders and co-operation it was argued had to advance globally to meet this challenge. Planning along co-operative lines could end the grotesque structural inequalities of the global trading system, which had led to periodic gluts in some parts of the world and starvation in others. Without such transnational change, lasting peace would prove elusive. This approach can be traced back within the Guild to the 1920s, but it was rearticulated and extended in the context of total war.⁷¹ The propagandist activity of the International Women’s Co-operative Guild was important here, especially the work of its first president, the Austrian socialist co-operator Emmy Freundlich (1878-1948), who lived in exile in Britain from 1939 and who enjoyed almost cult status among British co-operative women, having been imprisoned by the Dollfuss regime in 1934. Freundlich had unwavering belief in the crucial role housewives could play in the democratic remaking of a peaceful ‘new world economic order’ and she

lectured tirelessly on this subject, believing that war mongering international cartels and combines had to be defeated if ‘a mothers’ peace’ was to be achieved.⁷²

Conflicts of gender and generation

The WCG overcame the limitations of its pacifist leanings, contributed to the home front in important ways and endeavoured to empower ‘the woman with the basket’ over the course of the war. There was a great deal of optimism and strong signs of rejuvenation when it ended; four of the 21 Labour and Co-operative women MPs elected to parliament in 1945 were guildswomen, and membership recovered to more than 62,000 by 1949.⁷³ However, the organization’s membership and influence declined inexorably from the late 1940s. How can we account for this decline? The remainder of this article discusses conflict between but also within the sexes as explanations for the problems the Guild faced, which undermined its long-term aspirations.

Women were marginalised within the Co-operative movement, the most obvious sign of which was their limited involvement in the management of local societies. In 1943 and despite the call up, only 471 women sat on management committees, which represented about 4 per cent of the total of over 12,000.⁷⁴ The culture of co-operation was therefore inherently gendered, women’s role being commonly regarded as primarily social or educational in keeping with their protecting or nurturing abilities as mothers. Conversely, and despite the fact that women typically shouldered major responsibility for shopping and domestic budgeting, male co-operators frequently regarded themselves as better suited for the harsh world of business management. Most important, the CWS had not only a ‘dysfunctional’ relationship with retail societies as recent historians have argued, it was also thoroughly male dominated, as Guild members pointed out and sought to remedy, with little success.⁷⁵ Mary Ellen Cottrell (1868-1969), who had sat on the Consumers’ Council during the First World

War, was the only woman ever to serve as a director of the CWS and there were few women in managerial positions, though many thousands were employed by the wholesale.⁷⁶ Out of scores of buyers and managers of drapery and allied sales departments in 1938, for example, only two were women, which compares unfavourably with their treatment by private businesses such as department stores, which afforded women greater opportunities: 28 out of 47 top managers at Fenwick's store in Newcastle were women in 1932, for example. Women employed by the CWS were also paid less, notwithstanding the Guild's efforts.⁷⁷

Regardless of the movement's rhetoric and the Guild's ambitions, the CWS cast female consumers in a largely passive role. Male directors, elected from local retail societies, regularly lectured them about the need to remain loyal to goods produced by CWS factories and workshops, but they made little effort to listen to 'the woman with the basket', let alone afford her any real power. The friction this caused sometimes led to bitter complaint. CWS clothing and footwear in particular was criticised for being dowdy and unfashionable before war ended, and directors were encouraged to research consumer taste and the reasons for the movement's trading weaknesses, recommendations similar to those made in the late 1930s in a study undertaken by the team led by sociologist Alexander Carr-Saunders (1886-1966).⁷⁸ Consumer dissatisfaction intensified after hostilities ceased. In autumn 1945, the Guild began campaigning on the need to sell more CWS goods through the stores, as it was estimated that only between a third and one eighth of the value of all commodities sold were produced by the movement. Quality was an issue but also style, which according to activists such as Gladys Lloyd was a major problem as many consumers, especially young women, now had rising expectations and made purchasing decisions based on more than just value for money.⁷⁹ In late 1945 the WCG approached the CWS suggesting it might consult with an advisory committee established by the Guild and composed of co-operative shoppers to increase consumer voice but their request was flatly refused, the CWS maintaining that its

male buyers already provided the organization with all the information it required. The subject was discussed at numerous conferences where defenders of the CWS were treated with derision.⁸⁰ Letters were also exchanged between Sir Robert Lancaster (1883-1945), chief executive of the CWS, and the Guild's president, Clara Bamber, though the former proved entirely unsympathetic.⁸¹ Even if the CWS had been more willing to listen, however, the 'collectivist' structure of the business necessitated long runs of standardised product lines, unlike competitors such as Marks and Spencer, which had proven more able to adapt to changes in consumer taste and the desire for affordable but stylish clothing between the wars.⁸²

Serious obstacles blocked the real and not just the discursive empowerment of female co-operators within the movement, and this no doubt undermined the WCG. Just as important, however, was the employment of the archetype of the disciplining mother by national and local leaders of the Guild. Two transgressive figures in particular generated deep-seated anxieties and were often singled out as needing to be brought into line: the 'juvenile delinquent' and the 'good time girl'. Fears concerning the purported rise in juvenile delinquency were expressed soon after the conflict began, caused it was believed by the disruptive effects of war. Mass mobilization was blamed for undermining traditional structures of authority within working-class families and communities and the unusual circumstances of wartime now provided more opportunities for wrongdoing. Impressionable young people were seen as especially vulnerable to temptations that could eventually land them in court. Early in 1940, for instance, the Guild joined forces with middle-class women's organizations on the Women's Police Campaign Committee to press for more female police officers because the blackout provided 'opportunities for misbehaviour of all kinds by young people'.⁸³ Two years later Cecily Cook wrote to Herbert Morrison (1888-1965), the Home Secretary, expressing the Guild's deep concern regarding underage children who were drawn

to 'amusement palaces' where they played on slot machines and where they could be led astray by the 'bad characters' that frequented such places. She also urged Morrison to introduce tighter control over cinemas, as young people often asked adults to help them gain admission to see harmful 'A' rated films.⁸⁴ Other opinions were expressed within the Guild on this subject, certainly. Some emphasised that the major reasons why young people committed crime were the same as they had been before the war, namely deprivation and poverty. Others contested the idea that there was any causal link between the supposed weakening of social discipline and the rise in juvenile crime, pointing out that figures had been inflated by the creation of new crimes, such as riding on sidewalks and stealing apples, and that consequently fears were largely unfounded.⁸⁵ Notwithstanding such disagreements, it seems likely that the dominant moralistic stance did little to endear the Guild or the movement to a younger generation of consumers, a view expressed by Catherine Hitchcock from Leatherhead who took the editor of the woman's pages of the *Co-operative News* to task for linking the blackout to bad behaviour, posing the question, 'What is the use of constantly urging young people to join the organizations of our movement if they are to be so gratuitously insulted in this way?'⁸⁶

The other figure that obsessed disciplining mothers in the Guild was the 'good time girl' whose aggressive sexuality posed a serious threat to hegemonic ideals of femininity. She carried a small handbag containing not much more than lipstick and cigarettes, rather than a basket, and was heading for the dance hall or the pub, not the co-op store. As the historian Sonya Rose has argued, groups that were perceived as deviant during the war such as 'good time girls' and prostitutes, numbers of whom had swelled with the expansion of the armed forces, were deemed both unpatriotic and unworthy of the rights of citizenship.⁸⁷ Although once again there were differences of opinion within the Guild here, many subscribed to this view, fearing that otherwise 'normal' young women could easily degenerate into 'good time

girls' in the febrile context of total war, and they organised to help stop this slide into depravity.⁸⁸ The Guild formed a Vigilance Committee in Bristol early in 1942, described by the editor of the *Co-operative News* as 'an enterprising and most successful piece of citizenship work', which campaigned on various issues, including the welfare of young women employed in industry and the forces, but it also saw itself as a moral guardian, reporting later that year that it had requested the Watch Committee 'to appoint more women police in the area where there are coloured troops that have attracted the attention of very young girls.'⁸⁹

Sexual anxieties did not abate after war ended either. The women's pages of the *News* published an unashamedly sexist address by Mr A. N. Stroud, vice president of the large Plymouth Society and local magistrate, who maintained that female employment had 'been at the expense of the children', and who upbraided parents of 'girls in their early teens' for allowing them 'to dress four or five years older than their years, to use powder, lipstick, and eyebrow-black on their faces, and to stay out late.'⁹⁰ In *Woman's Outlook*, Leonora Crossley compared the 'good time girl' unfavourably with the 'healthy, normal young woman', and although she stressed that poverty lay at the root of the 'craving for affection and beauty' that led the former to sleep with men and steal 'the pretty clothes and adornments which they are unable to buy', Crossley was as keen to condemn their 'anti-social behaviour' as Stroud had been a few years before.⁹¹ The Guild continued to perform a policing role throughout the Attlee years, even writing to the Prime Minister to complain about the sale of condoms in slot machines.⁹² The precise effects of the organization's rigid moralism may be difficult to gauge, but it seems unlikely that they would have been positive.

Tensions within the movement were heightened by the 'New Look' fashion launched by Dior in 1947, which a number of scholars have suggested exposed the pent-up desires of female consumers in austerity Britain. In a well-known account, the historian Carolyn

Steedman interpreted her own mother's aspiration for a 'New Look' coat as reflective of her political subjectivity, a statement about individual expression and social mobility, which drew her towards the Conservative Party and the promise of 'freedom of choice' for the mass of consumers.⁹³ The well-known lower middle-class diarist, Nella Last, whose life was transformed by the WVS during the war, collected her dividend from the Barrow-in-Furness society, altered her dresses to suit the 'New Look' and wept when Churchill lost the 1950 general election.⁹⁴ Unsurprisingly perhaps, this extravagant, overtly feminised fashion characterised by wasp waists and long skirts, was vehemently attacked by leaders of the WCG like Mabel Ridealgh (1898-1989), Co-operative and Labour MP for Ilford East, who regarded the 'New Look' as both morally repugnant and a direct threat to the policy of restraint required to remedy the economic crisis and build the 'New Jerusalem'.⁹⁵ Leonora Crossley joined the debate, lending her support to a small number of mill girls in Burnley who threatened to refuse to work overtime in order to make material that could be used to manufacture ridiculous fashions 'for the "butterflies" who do not help to produce it.'⁹⁶

The difficulty with this interpretation was that most young consumers who wanted 'New Look' clothes were not 'idle women' as Crossley maintained, and neither were they a homogeneous group in terms of their engagement with fashion or their political leanings.⁹⁷ My own mother, Noreen Gurney (1921-2010), who worked in an armaments factory during the war, voted Labour in 1945 and believed passionately in the National Health Service – though was never a party activist – bought her milk from the co-op but shopped around and loved fashionable clothes as much as Steedman's mother did. Moreover, although a young mother with a baby during the Attlee years, like many others of her generation she went back to work part-time as soon as she could, and took great pleasure in spending the money she earned on 'luxuries' for herself and her family; she was a 'good working mother' in Dolly Scott Wilson's terms.⁹⁸ My mother not only refused to buy clothes from the co-op, she was

also critical of the stores that she remembered as old-fashioned and unfriendly and the local society, which she thought a bit sanctimonious and ‘cliquey’: ‘there was rich and poor in the co-op you know’, she once reminded me. The figure of ‘the woman with the basket’ simply did not adequately capture her complex experience of and views about her own gender role and she had little time for the proliferating band of experts who tried to lecture her about the negative effects of women’s work on young children and family life in post-war Britain.⁹⁹ Many other women of my mother’s generation must have had similar misgivings about the trading practices and moral rigidity of the Co-operative movement, and the voices of some of them were heard very occasionally in the movement press. Margaret Olney wrote to *Woman’s Outlook* in spring 1946, for instance, to complain about the inefficiency that she witnessed when she shopped on behalf of her elderly mother, a life-long member of the Liverpool stores. Goods had to be bought at different counters, which added substantially to the labour of shopping, and Olney advised co-operators that they ought ‘to make things a bit easier for the long-suffering housewives.’¹⁰⁰ The movement admittedly made efforts to address such problems in the late 1940s by pioneering self-service, but its product range remained limited and woefully behind the times.¹⁰¹

Conclusion

The contribution made by organised working-class housewives to the struggle on the home front in Britain during the Second World War deserves to be more fully recognised by historians. The voice of the Guild during this crucial period has been drowned out by organizations like the WVS and Townswomen’s Guilds, which helped consolidate the social leadership of middle-class women at this time.¹⁰² In contrast, the WCG had provided vital training in citizenship for working-class women since its foundation in the late nineteenth century and it continued to do so during and immediately after the war. Thousands of

'ordinary' housewives gained invaluable experience of democratic association at branch meetings, finding a space where they could discuss ideas, learn to speak in public and develop organizational skills.¹⁰³ The pacifist policy that developed between the wars held the Guild back to an extent early on but this was overcome and also proved a source of strength as well as vulnerability. Pacifism was bound up with the Guild's internationalism, encouraged members to think about the structural causes that had led to war – including the often hidden workings of international syndicates and combines – enabling them to move beyond notions of German war guilt, which garnered significant support from leading Labour Party figures but was roundly rejected by the WCG.¹⁰⁴ The avoidance of conflict in future, leaders of the Guild maintained at the end of the war, depended as much on achieving international food security as it did on bringing about 'social security' at home. In this way, the archetype of the protecting mother overlapped with and transmuted quite naturally into a far more empowered archetype, one determined to campaign for the regulation of capitalist monopoly and transnational food planning necessary for the construction of a 'new world order'. The Guild's agenda, therefore, remained both radical and feminist.¹⁰⁵

Nevertheless, the brief revival experienced at the end of the war helped to conceal the Guild's weaknesses, including most importantly the alienation of young female consumers, which helped narrow its appeal to that of a sect. The legitimation and success of the figure of 'the woman with the basket' was dependent on the existence of a particular family and sexual economy. Total war further undermined that economy and the relevance of the figure and the Guild failed to reinvent itself and address young women sympathetically, preferring to admonish them instead; in this changed context the archetype of the disciplining mother came to the fore. This was what sealed the Guild's fate post-war rather than the centralisation of power and autocratic leadership that in Gillian Scott's view had weakened the organisation irrevocably during the interwar period. Many members were well aware of the root cause of

the Guild's increasing marginalisation and often complained about how younger women who had made the effort to join frequently found its meetings off-putting. There was talk in some branches – Halifax, for example – of ‘constant warring’ between generations in the organization; while young guildswomen themselves objected to how older co-operators jealously guarded their influence on committees, pointing out that the average age of committee members was around sixty.¹⁰⁶ In their 1947 report on four co-operative societies in London, Mass-Observation drew attention to the Guild's aging membership and concluded; ‘If younger women are to be attracted to the Guild, and if it is to acquire any new vigour, it must be given a very definite reorientation, clear incentive and intention.’¹⁰⁷ Generational divisions were later remarked upon by Joyce Butler (1910-1992), Labour and Co-operative MP for Wood Green from 1955 to 1979, who considered that the ‘present day age-separation has been rather more responsible for preventing some older Guilds renewing themselves with a natural intake of younger women than the more commonly-held view that younger women cannot manage afternoon meetings because they are out at work.’ Olive Waterman's criticism of the Guild was more direct: ‘Young women today demand something more positive and relevant to their own considerable problems. We do not offer them anything.’¹⁰⁸ My mother imagined herself as part of a distinct generation that was not prepared to accept passively ideas about gender roles that had been dominant before the war and much more work needs to be done to reconstruct the outlook of working-class women like her, for whom the Co-operative movement was rapidly losing its attraction.¹⁰⁹

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- 9 Field, *Blood, Sweat and Toil*, p. 131; Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain*, p. 103.
- 10 Summerfield, *Women Workers in the Second World War*, p. 118.
- 11 Ruby Grierson was the sister of John Grierson, the well-known pioneer of documentary film. *They Also Serve*, the last film she made before her tragically early death, was produced by the Realist Film Unit for the Ministry of Information.

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