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Henrietta Rodman and the Fight to Further Women's Economic Autonomy

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In 1909 at the graduation ceremony of an American college for teachers the class clown wrote on a placard: 'Know ye sisters, that all who enter this profession are condemned to spinsterhood'.¹ Though her conclusion was correct it was hardly a joke to thousands of women who were forced to choose between their work and marriage. While women predominated in the profession, patriarchal traditions continued to rule it throughout the early twentieth century in the United States. School boards, usually dominated by conservative businessmen, often thought of themselves as a bulwark against a society spiralling out of control. Thus, they were more prone to repel women's rights than support it. Prior to the turn of the twentieth century women who worked were more pitted than admired, since the majority did so out of dire necessity and in factories or domestic service. In 1900, 45.9 per cent of all single women, 55.3 per cent of divorcees and 31.5 per cent of widows worked outside the home, compared to 5.6 per cent of married women.² However, by the late 1920s married women constituted over 25 per cent of the female labor force, among these an expanding percentage of middle-class women who took up work in the professions.³

Higher education was a significant driver of this trend. Between 1913 and 1920 women's enrollment in coeducational colleges and universities in the United States increased by 76 per cent compared to 48 per cent by men and by 50 per cent in single-sex colleges.⁴ Educated women sought work not just for economic motivations but for intellectual and social fulfillment as well. Although female chemists, lawyers, judges, college presidents and professors, religious, charity and social workers tripled between 1910 and 1920, the overall percentage of women in the

professions remained small. Four out of five women in the professional class were women teachers.⁵ As I have argued in a previous work, despite assumptions about female teachers as moral conservators and models of appropriate feminine conduct, female teachers during this period were a powerful force in the women's movement.⁶ Thus some of the ideological shifts relating to thinking about women in the workforce during the dynamic period between 1900 and 1920 can be attributed to female teachers.

This chapter focuses on Henrietta Rodman and her leadership in the New York City campaigns for the marriage and maternity rights of teachers. Despite the focus on Rodman these campaigns were supported by the efforts of a multitude of activists, including teachers, women's club members, suffrage leaders and labor unionists. In this period, teachers both former and current filled the ranks of the club women who helped drive the reforms of the Progressive Era. Rodman was an organization woman who deftly cultivated her membership in at least 15 groups to take up the cause of marriage and maternity rights for teachers. In addition she and friends developed the League for the Civic Service of Women as an umbrella group under which activists from a variety of other organizations collaborated on the issues.

The campaigns for marriage and maternity rights illustrate efforts by female teachers to expand their profession from short term to, in some cases, lifelong careers. Previous to this period female teachers were expected to leave their careers upon marriage, an expectation that lasted, in some communities, well into the middle of the twentieth century.⁷ When school officials learned that teachers sometimes disregarded this norm, the city's school board codified the expectation in new employees' contracts. Still some teachers were not sufficiently intimidated and simply hoped that a collective vow of silence among their colleagues would keep them employed. Henrietta Rodman promoted the vow of silence, but because of her notoriety as a teacher-leader the exposure of her secret marriage was reported nationwide. So she capitalized on the publicity to expound on the incoherence of the rule and its inherent injustice, and to further her activities on behalf of working women.⁸

Although she recognized that some teachers simply wanted their employer to stay out of their private lives, she declared that the feminist demand to maintain one's employment regardless of marital or maternal status was one embedded in the search for gender equity. Drawing on feminist theorists, such as her friend Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Rodman asserted that women's lack of economic self-determination lay at the

root of female subordination. Opposition to lifting the marriage ban provided teachers with a tangible manifestation of the ways in which patriarchal assumptions limited women's economic enterprise. Moreover the constraints placed on teachers had parallels in other fields where, increasingly, protective legislation was used to delineate the conditions and hours under which women could work. Although its supporters understood protective legislation as a benefit to female laborers, it imposed a two-tiered system bounded by gender in which higher paying positions were forever closed to women regardless of their willingness to take on the risks involved. Women's reproductive potential had always defined their economic insecurity but in the early twentieth century it was written into law. Thus, in this period, to argue for labor equality was to radically reconceptualize not only past assumptions but to take on other women who regarded themselves not only as progressive but also as feminist. Rodman's friend and sister activist, Leta Hollingworth, a University of Chicago PhD, explained, 'Each woman who sets out upon a way of life different from that of the dependent housewife is still an explorer [...] The New Woman of today is consciously experimenting with her own life to find out how women can best live'.⁹

The discourse of feminism, which supported the ambitions of the emerging cohort of professional women in 1910, was particularly trenchant in large cities like New York (the second largest city in the world after London in 1910). The second wave of feminism urged women to seek economic opportunities outside the home; to investigate their skills and contributions to society. Women teachers were particularly well suited to understand this directive and to instruct their own students in it as well. Theirs was the first generation of middle-class women to begin deliberately to create plans to combine motherhood and work. The rise in female college attendance, a drop in the marriage and fertility rates (and the attendant eugenics movement) all provided arguments to justify the feminist contention that motherhood and career would have to blend. Moreover, sharp increases in the cost of living and static male salaries clarified that opportunity costs were too great for many families to bear the loss of one parent's income. Beyond mere economics, feminism also justified working mothers on the grounds of equity. Should not mothers have the same option to work as fathers? Why should not parenthood be shared? Among the teachers who self-consciously regarded themselves as pioneers in forging new inroads into work and family relations, was Henrietta Rodman (29 August 1877–22 March 1923), an English teacher at a public girls' high school, Wadleigh, in New York City.



Figure 8.1 Henrietta Rodman c. 1915–1920. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC.

Henrietta Rodman was a multifaceted feminist and education reformer. Her commitment to social and cultural advancement was relentless. Issues such as teachers' rights, children's rights, labor rights, socialist education, immigrant education, suffrage, ethnic and race activities, vocational guidance, anti-war activities, communal housing design, birth control, and sex education caught her attention. She taught high school during the day, adult classes at night and at Columbia University during the summer, and lectured widely. All of this took place in a relatively short period between 1903 and 1923, marking the beginning of her career as a high school teacher and ending with her death at age 45 when the youngest of her three adopted children was just seven years old.

Henrietta Rodman was born into a family with roots deeply planted in the states of New York and Rhode Island since the mid-1600s. The Blackwell family on her mother's side can be traced back to 1637 when the island of Minnehanonek (renamed Blackwell's Island but today known as Roosevelt Island), in the East River passage to the Long Island Sound, was inherited by her ancestor Colonel Blackwell, who was a member of the Second Continental Congress. The earliest Rodman ancestor in the New World, John Rodman, was banished

from New Ross, Ireland for contempt of court about 1655 when he, a Quaker, refused to remove his hat as a display of honoring the authority of the court. The exiled Rodman went to Christchurch, Barbados, where he established a sugar cane plantation. His son, Thomas (1640–1728), left the West Indies islands for Newport, Rhode Island, in the United States in 1675 where he became a noted physician/surgeon. Several generations lived in that state before moving on to New York around 1820.¹⁰

Henrietta's father, Washington, was born in 1824 and graduated from Columbia University in 1842, and the General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church in 1845.¹¹ In 1847 he was assigned as the first rector of the newly erected Grace Church at West Farms in Fordham, New York, a position he held until 1867.¹² During this time he also established the first hospital in the United States for people suffering with chronic illnesses, an institution still in operation today. Henrietta followed in her father's footsteps as a visionary who displayed moral courage in the face of doubt and antagonism. She often referred to her family heritage, and in particular her father, as a key to her activism.¹³ Henrietta grew up in the old Blackwell mansion with her parents, step-sister and two brothers in Astoria, in Queens, New York. She graduated from the nearby State Normal School of Jamaica in June 1900.¹⁴ That same year she began teaching in the local primary school before being advanced to high school teaching in 1903 at the public girls' school Wadleigh. In 1903 she also completed her Bachelor's degree at her father's alma mater, Columbia University.

Rodman's activities, philosophies and friendships with the literati, artists and movers and shakers of the period provides a mechanism for assessing the ways in which women as individuals and as group members shaped the thinking and social and political practices of a new century. Floyd Dell, her colleague in several organizations, a journalist, playwright and author of several autobiographical books detailing his years in Greenwich Village, New York, traces the launching of the Village's bohemian culture to Rodman's split with the Liberal Club in 1912. The club, a lecture society, was originally founded in 1907 by like-minded reformers/progressives in the Gramercy Park area of New York City, where residents lived in mansions denoting their status as the sanctified leaders of society. The *New York Times* attributed, and later retracted, the split to Rodman's free love philosophy, which was said to have broken up the marriage of at least one of the club's founders.¹⁵ Others claimed it was her insistence on the admission of African American members and speakers, most notably W.E. B. Du Bois, and James Weldon

and his wife Grace Nail, as well her desire to include anarchist Emma Goldman as a member. Members sympathetic to Rodman's point of view followed her to the quarters of the new Liberal Club (sometimes referred to as the Little Club) in the center of the Village, an area largely inhabited by poor Italian immigrants and a growing population of African Americans. While the new Liberal Club hosted luminaries such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, George Middleton, Eugene O'Neill and Mary Heaton Vorse, it also provided the space for debuting the talents of those who would later become household names among the intelligentsia (such as Edna St Vincent Millay, Rheta Childe Dorr, Carl Jung, Harry Kemp and John Reed). Aside from lectures and readings, the club staged art exhibitions and plays, held dances (usually to raise the rent), and generally provided a refuge for old members and a launching place for those new to the area. Members began lifelong friendships or met spouses through the club including Henrietta, who met her husband Herman de Fremery there in 1912.¹⁶

Rodman lived out her philosophies in ways few women of her generation could even conceive. As a daughter of the late Victorian Age, she spent her adulthood helping to shape the Progressive Era through organizations like the Liberal Club, Heterodoxy, the Feminist Alliance, the League for the Civic Service of Women, the Friends of India and the New York Civic Club – the first organization (1915) of its type in the city to admit both male and female and White and Black members on an equal basis.¹⁷ She was also an active participant in the birth control movement, the peace movement during World War I and the New York City Teachers Union. In some ways Rodman appeared to adhere to social dictums of the period by her engagement in the seemingly dignified career of public school teaching. Yet she was able to turn her position within the schools into a sort of bully pulpit where she could not only advocate for educational, cultural and feminist reforms but use the cloak of nobility that was extended to female teachers to confuse and amuse those following her exploits.

Married teacher cases tested the dominant social belief (supported by law) that a woman's labor belonged to her husband. In many jurisdictions school boards argued that the married female teacher strained to fulfill both the tasks belonging to her spouse and the school, performing neither adequately. The teacher-mother not only stole time from her paid position in order to perform her unpaid duties, but even more shamefully, she failed in the execution of her most fundamental and natural womanly function, as mother. Such charges have stalked working women for generations, yet the efforts to find answers to the

problems extend to the beginning of the twentieth century. Beyond the individualized solutions of birth control, adequate child care, hiring a housekeeper and finding suitable living quarters, feminists such as Rodman incisively sought to reframe the debate as a social problem rather than a woman's problem. Biology was not destiny, she claimed. Women's ability to give birth did not automatically qualify them for full-time child-rearing any more than marriage suited them for full-time housekeeping. If men could perform multiple functions as father, worker and citizen, why could not women? Henrietta Rodman, and the other members of her new organization, the League for the Civic Service of Women, tackled the issues from a variety of angles, usually simultaneously, using legal and rhetorical persuasion, forming coalitions with other women's, educational, and civic groups, writing letters to newspapers, meeting with politicians, and keeping the subject of teacher-mothers in the forefront of public discussions over several years.

Marriage and the classroom

In 1914, 1,300 of the 18,000 public school teachers in New York City were thought to be married women.¹⁸ Many of these were secret marriages, since women hired after 1909 were denied employment. The rule, Section 67 of the bylaws of the Board of Education of New York City, specifically stated:

No married woman shall be appointed to any teaching or supervising position in the day public schools unless her husband is incapacitated, from physical or mental disease, to earn a livelihood, or has continuously abandoned her for not less than three years prior to the date of appointment, and proof satisfactory to the Board of Superintendents is furnished to establish [...] such [...] physical and mental disability or abandonment.¹⁹

The onerous bylaw had been established after teachers who had been fired for becoming married had brought several cases before the courts in New York, between 1902 and 1906.²⁰ One judge decided that marriage was insufficient ground for a teacher's dismissal, since the school charter had allowed dismissal only for 'gross misconduct, insubordination, neglect of duty, or general inefficiency'. The issue was further complicated by the fact that prior to 1898 New York City (NYC) schools were geographically divided into five independent districts: Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, Staten Island and Manhattan. Thus, some teachers had

been hired in districts where the presumption that marriage diminished women's teaching capacity was codified into contracts, while others had not. The courts appeared divided on the issue. In *Murphy v. Maxwell* (1903) the judge agreed with the Board that a married woman had no fundamental right to contract for work, reasoning: 'While single, her services belong to herself. When married, they belong to her husband'.²¹ In order to avoid further legal cases the Board decided to compromise by denying future married applicants teaching positions, but allowing current employees to remain in rank after marriage.

Détente proved short-lived when Engrey F. Norman, a married woman who had taught for 23 years passed the exam that qualified her for a school principal position. Norman had been hired prior to consolidation of the school districts when Brooklyn had no rules against married teachers. She contended 'I have won a promotion and I am entitled to it'. The Board disagreed, preferring to view the promotion as equivalent to a new hire and thus restraining Norman with the 1909 prohibition against hiring married women. Norman asked the courts to compel the Board to affirm her promotion, but her petition was refused. The case justified Henrietta Rodman's often repeated contention:

The moment a woman teacher announces her marriage she puts herself, no matter what her abilities may be, in a class that is not in line for promotion. The only way a teacher can protect her interests is to keep silent on the principle that her wifehood and spinsterhood are strictly personal and private affairs.²²

But Katherine Edgell, another local teacher, tried a different tactic. She asked for a leave of absence to bear her child, which her school principal granted. The document was then sent to the district school superintendent who offered no response. The Board waited until Edgell took her leave and then cited her for neglect of duty. Infuriated, Rodman began speaking out in various community forums including a City Federation of Women's Clubs meeting. Rodman asked the several hundred women in attendance at the annual mass meeting to sign her petition that encouraged a new state law banning discrimination against women employees on the basis of marital status or maternity. She argued: 'A woman has a right to her career and motherhood at the same time [...] A life of work should not deprive women of the joy of motherhood, nor should motherhood deprive the world of her work'. Many of the women signed the petition eagerly including one who had been a teacher and mother of six. Others declined, including the Federation

president who declared that a career and children were too much for one woman to attempt.²³

Adherents to this belief found validation in the work of Swedish theorist Ellen Key who advocated a state welfare system for mothers. Although Key believed that motherhood was woman's highest state she saw no absolute necessity for marriage. Since the mother provided future workers for the state, the state should provide the necessary financial support during childhood. However, the mother usually envisioned in the Key scenario was working class and in a taxing and sometimes soul-crushing job. Married, middle-class women were considered privileged to raise their children without economic concerns. Key idealized motherhood and chastised middle-class women who pursued jobs outside the home. She felt they depressed the market by taking jobs from men and diminished the social respect for motherhood.²⁴ Key particularly disdained American women's passion for gender equality and economic self-sufficiency, believing that working mothers were inadequate mothers.

Rodman, on the other hand, identified with the theories of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, an avowed *humanist* in distinction to Key's *maternalist* ideology. Gilman held that biology should not impair nor determine one's life course. She favored a communal kitchen and nursery which would relieve working women from the drudgery of household duties after a full day as wage earners.²⁵ Key's position found many adherents among feminists of the period who advocated for protective labor legislation in order to prevent health hazards to potential mothers. This split would be mirrored in the ongoing struggle between feminists who supported the Equal Rights Amendment and those who supported protective labor legislation from the 1920s to the 1970s.²⁶ It was also seen in the attitudes of some of the New York City school board members.

Rodman's name became associated with working mothers when it was revealed that she was secretly married. The story was covered by no fewer than five New York City daily newspapers, two featuring it on the front page, which heightened her status as a potential martyr for the cause. Her friends worried that she had given the Board an opportunity to dismiss her for failing to inform them of the change in her marital status. Reporters asked school administrators about whether Rodman was likely to be brought up on charges. Dr Edward Stevens, district superintendent of high schools, replied that he felt the regulation about self-reporting was 'elastic'. He admitted there were probably more married women in the ranks than generally supposed, but claimed, 'No one can tell, certainly not those of this office', perhaps inferring an

official disinterest in prosecuting such cases.²⁷ Joseph Barondess, one of Rodman's few defenders on the Board, declared the present rule was 'not only inhuman, but uncivilized, and uncultured as well'.²⁸ However, board member Abraham Stern derisively dismissed the issue with a sexist comment: 'If a woman marries she is sure to disclose it to her friends... Women can't keep a secret twenty-four hours'.²⁹ Despite her fears, Rodman was undeterred, and launched the League for the Civic Service of Women, an organization dedicated to gaining an extension of the Board's sick leave policy to allow maternity leave for mothers. By mid-summer the League gained the endorsement of the City Mothers' Club and the Women Lawyers' Club as well as many prominent community people in its membership, including several university professors, clergy people, well-known writers, attorneys and physicians.³⁰ The 150-member group formed initially around Katherine Edgell's case, but soon became involved in others, including that of Bridgett Peixotto. Peixotto had tried to keep her pregnancy a secret by requesting leave for a nose and ear infection. However, someone anonymously notified the Board that she had in fact given birth. The Board sought her dismissal not only on charges of 'neglect of duty' but also on 'gross misconduct' for falsifying her leave documents. Both charges barred her from ever teaching in the city schools again. The Edgell and Peixotto cases heightened public interest and sympathy for the teacher-mothers as newspapers often reported on them and in almost every instance Rodman provided expert commentary.

With Edgell and Peixotto's cases still pending appeals, the Board vowed to prevent any more embarrassing episodes by seeking out teachers who might also be pregnant and pressing charges for their immediate dismissal.³¹ Within a month they developed a list of 15 suspects.³² Some Board members, including Abraham Stern, wanted all on the list discharged immediately, while Gen. George Wood Wingate demanded all married teachers, whether on the list or not, be dismissed. Thomas Churchill, the Board president, suggested that a study of the efficiency of married versus single women teachers would be a more prudent first step. The League supported none of these options and commenced a campaign to gain more sympathetic members on the Board since five positions would be vacated at the beginning of the next year. Specifically they wished to see Stern and Wingate gone.³³ Other women's groups became involved in the effort including the Federation of Women's Clubs, which jockeyed to nominate their own constituents to the positions.³⁴ Some members probably saw retirement from the Board as the easy way out. Besieged by infighting, with quarrels between the

corporation's attorneys on the best way to handle the teacher-mother court cases, and pressure from the Mayor to broaden its leave policies, the tension was becoming unbearable.³⁵

The League was unrelenting: on 24 November it brought together over 800 people to a meeting in protest at the Board's policies and in celebration of the recent court decision favoring the return of Peixotto to her teaching position. Justice Seabury reasoned in the case:

The fact that legislation has sanctioned the employment of married women as teachers, married women being lawfully employed as teachers and excusable for absence by personal illness, the idea that because the illness resulting in absence is caused by maternity, it therefore becomes 'neglect of duty' is repugnant to law and good morals.

Yet, everyone was aware the Board planned to appeal the decision and the situation was far from settled.³⁶

Over the next few months other cases surfaced involving women who refused to change their marital status on employment documents, wanted maternity leave, or gave birth without Board permission. Peixotto's case wended in and out of various courts.³⁷ The League kept up the pressure on the Board to settle the disputes by keeping the new cases in the press, holding debates, and engaging other women's organizations in petitioning the mayor, the governor and the state commissioner of education to intercede. On 1 October Rodman declared the League's intention to officially introduce into the next state legislative session a bill making it a misdemeanor offense for an employer to refuse employment on account of marriage or parenthood. Citing the support of League members including John Dewey, Rev. Anna Howard Shaw, Inez Haynes and Professor James T. Shotwell, Rodman asserted, 'The present conditions are immoral [...] We believe we are acting in the interest of public opinion when we suggest these changes'.³⁸ She felt sure that labor unions would back the legislation.

On 13 October Rodman again startled the public with her announcement that a young 27-year-old pregnant teacher, the daughter of a Methodist minister, planned to embarrass the Board by remaining in the classroom as close to her due date as possible.³⁹ The story was quickly picked up by the United Press and circulated in newspapers around the country. Members of the Board fumed as the publicity increased.⁴⁰ The following day the League again sent a letter, signed by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Crystal Eastman, Marion Cochran and other notable

women's rights activists, to the state commissioner of education, copied to the press, asking for his intervention with Board. Simultaneously they released an open letter to Lora M. Wagner, the now named pregnant teacher, who planned to test the limits of pregnancy in the classroom. It said in part: 'We are heartily in sympathy with you in your struggle for the most fundamental rights of women – to work and bear children. We believe that no board can successfully oppose this righteous demand based as it is upon the needs of society'. The press loved it.⁴¹

After that the League rarely let a week go by without gaining some press coverage. The most significant update occurred when Rodman announced that Wagner had given birth just 13 hours after leaving her classroom on a Friday afternoon. Newspaper journalists besieged the hospital where mother and child were ensconced. Rodman stood guard, acting as spokesperson for the new mother; relaying the child's birth weight, the mother's condition and the doctor's prognosis, along with insights about possible impending actions against Wagner by the Board. She suggested: 'It may grant her customary sick leave; it may permit her to stay away a year without pay, which we will request her to do; or it may bring charges of neglect of duty because of her failure to attend school'. She added optimistically, 'I don't think they will bring charges because Mrs. Wagner has ably demonstrated her capability by teaching up to twelve hours before childbirth. [...] The Board's argument [...] thus falls flat'. She also revealed Wagner's strategy was to forestall charges by asking for 20-day increments of sick leave until she reached the maximum of 90 days allowed and then return to her classroom. Wagner's husband, a chemist, proudly noted that many of the mothers of his wife's pupils 'have expressed their admiration of her to me'.⁴²

That admiration was not likewise extended by the Board. The idea that a young woman would remain in the classroom while in such a 'delicate condition' appalled more than a few. John Martin called Wagner a 'reckless woman who had jeopardized the life of herself and her child by acting under the advice of women agitators'. The Rev. Dr James Farrar claimed, 'I cannot conceive that a woman would be doing her duty either to her child or herself if she did not devote her whole attention to the child'. Yet, not everyone opposed the teacher-mothers. Joseph Barondess, also a laborer organizer, defended Wagner, calling the Board 'a body of persons with 16th century ideas'. Dr Ira Wile, a gynecologist, sneered that the Board did not have the honesty of teacher-mothers, preferring instead to hide behind technicalities in order to cover their obsolete ideals. He asked rhetorically, 'Are you going to stand up and say it is a crime to bear a child'? Such arguments apparently fell flat.

Only five of the 39 members favored giving Wagner a maternity leave. Ironically, two of these were the only single women on the Board, while the other three women, all married, voted for Wagner's dismissal.⁴³ One of the final comments made in the meeting was by William Willcox who thought it was important to set a demarcation in leave policies between those 'whose illness is accidental and those who voluntarily assume by marrying responsibilities which interfere with their school work'.⁴⁴

Female economics and the 'baby crop'

The 'voluntariness' of the pregnancy was an unspoken but politically charged undercurrent in the arguments surrounding teacher-mothers. Birth control was officially illegal in New York City and a volatile issue even among progressives. Rodman was arrested for the distribution of birth control pamphlets.⁴⁵ She introduced Margaret Sanger to New York City feminist society in a meeting at her apartment in 1914. Although Sanger was initially annoyed by the women she met there, since they saw birth control as only one issue within a very wide feminist agenda, she eventually came to rely upon them.⁴⁶ In 'polite society' birth control, like pregnancy, was referred to in the most oblique terms. At a meeting with the Mayor, Charlotte Perkins Gilman claimed the inevitability of the teacher-mother victory by arguing that by allowing women teachers to marry the Board had opened the door to the natural outcome that they would become pregnant. She then pointed out the paradoxical alignment of the Board's position with birth control advocates. That the Board was seen to be promoting birth control among its married teachers was no doubt abhorrent to many, but Gilman, Rodman and the rest of the League members took glee in the incongruity. Unable to enforce celibacy among its single teachers, they argued, the Board was forced to demand a reproductive embargo among its married staff.⁴⁷

Men of the old guard were perplexed. General Wingate of the Board complained that the female teachers first lobbied for equal pay for equal work on the ground that they did the same work as men. Once they got equal pay they demanded maternity leaves based on sex. Was sex to be a consideration or not? Undergirding that question was another: should motherhood be considered a profession? A significant contingent of female activists, who subscribed to a maternalist philosophy, believed it should. But so did many of the old guard. Wingate maintained that teacher-mothers were trying to hold two jobs; that of mother and teacher. He scowled: 'If male teachers should undertake to run for

offices, be doctors, lawyers, or work in any profession outside their school hours we would demand their resignation'.⁴⁸

Historian Ladd-Taylor maintains that between 1890 and 1920 motherhood became a central organizing principle of Progressive Era politics. She notes, 'Virtually every female activist used motherhood rhetoric and virtually every male politician appealed to motherhood'. This is clearly seen in both sides of the teacher-mother equation but through wholly different lenses. Ladd-Taylor argues that three major groups of stakeholders promoted the motherhood trope: the *sentimental maternalists*, represented by National Congress of Mothers responsible for the mothers' pensions advocated by Ellen Key in the 1910s; the *progressive maternalists*, generally single, well-educated professionals who produced in-depth research about the material conditions of mothers' work but who rejected sentimental language of motherhood; and the *feminists* who made use of the language of motherhood to challenge male hegemony.⁴⁹ This latter group most certainly described Rodman and the League for the Civic Service of Women, which endorsed alternatives to the traditional nuclear family and sought to free mothers from household drudgery to pursue paid work.

Apprehensions about 'race suicide' made motherhood political. An unprecedented wave of millions of immigrants, mostly impoverished people from southern and middle-eastern Europe, sent US cities like New York reeling from the demands on its social support systems. Politicians, including President Theodore Roosevelt, voiced fears the birth rate of this new population would soon surpass that of the native-born Americans, thereby endangering the natural landscape of traditional values. Simultaneously the increasingly influential eugenics movement claimed that college-educated women did a disservice to their country because they failed to marry and produce children in excess of the lower or immigrant classes. Such arguments were nurtured within the Board, as seen in the publications of member John Martin and his wife, Prestonia Mann Martin, rabid anti-feminists, who claimed:

The woman's movement is a movement toward national suicide. Already the existence is conclusive that the effects of feminism upon the inalienable function and immemorial duty of woman – bearing of children – are so appalling as to threaten the perpetuation of the nation. As living in a dark and airless tenement makes the victim susceptible to tuberculosis, so higher education renders women susceptible to the germs of feminism. Feminism does not operate

so injuriously by mutilating women's bodies as by starving their instincts.⁵⁰

Thus, maternity became associated with a sense of patriotic duty and an ideal for middle-class women.

The League was not above trading on eugenicists' fears to benefit their own arguments. They asked: Was not their desire to become mothers a community service? Why did the Board hope to limit the reproduction of some of the finest women in the city?⁵¹ In a meeting with the Mayor, Beatrice Forbes Robertson-Hale congratulated him on being an ally to the teacher-mothers and summarized the League's argument:

Any educational system which tends to create a large class of sterile women on the one hand, or on the other impair its own efficiency by continually dismissing tried teachers in favor of beginners, is bound to fail. The present policy of the Board creates a feeling of deep resentment among teachers and their friends, for it not only penalizes maternity and removes many of the finest teachers from the schools, but it seems to indicate an autocratic attempt to regulate the private lives of citizens by dictating to them the circumstances under which they shall work.⁵²

Such rhetoric seems to have covered both poles of the maternalist-feminist continuum. On one hand they demanded the right for women to choose employment and on the other they claimed that the city's anti-mother stance conflicted with the deeply held middle-class American values of motherhood.

Of the 27 teacher-mothers who eventually came under scrutiny by the Board in 1914, only 19 could be followed through the census records. Of these all but three were still teaching in 1920 and 12 were teaching in 1930. In fact, by 1930 several teacher-mothers' daughters had also joined the teaching ranks. Their longevity signifies a historical turning point in the teaching profession, when women as a group came to see the potential of a lifelong teaching career as compatible with motherhood. Family planning was likely a factor in the teacher-mothers' strategies. The majority of those who continued to work throughout the 1920s had fewer children than those who left the field. Typically the longest-term teachers had only one or two children. Exceptions included one who had four children, two of whom joined her in the public schools by 1930. Some managed child-rearing through extended family situations where a grandmother or aunt was responsible for the

child while the mother was at school. Peixotto hired a day nurse and lived close to the school so that she could go home during lunch to nurse her child. Katherine Edgell, whose husband was also a teacher, had two young sons in 1920, but had added a daughter by 1930. They coped by hiring a 23-year-old live-in maid. In three families both mother and father taught in the schools, sharing a similar schedule and at least the possibility of joint parental and household duties.

To some the teacher-mothers' decision to hire staff to fulfil their 'motherly duties' was seen as abandonment of their natural roles and bordering on child cruelty. In 1913 the Women's Health Protective Association was invited by Henrietta Rodman to add their support to the teacher-mothers. Much to her surprise every member but one expressed strong sentiments against the teacher-mothers, charging them with child neglect while 'devoting their time, health and strength to teaching other people's children'. Mrs A.E. Fraser, president of the organization, explained, 'When a woman is teaching in the schools her children are left at home in the care of servants, which in the case of teachers are not the best type because they cannot afford to hire efficient help'.⁵³ The New York State Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage expressed a similar sentiment when they declared that such feminist principles were 'wholly detrimental to the welfare of the child, and therefore dangerous to the future of the race'. To the idea that a highly trained expert could share the mother's burden its president Alice Chittenden replied, 'Why should not the mother be the expert and specialist for her own child'?

A pyrrhic victory

In the wake of the Mayor's decision not to interfere in the Board's decisions about maternity leaves, Henrietta Rodman wrote a satirical letter to the humor column of the *New York Tribune*. In it she invited readers to witness the new sport of 'mother baiting' played by the Board of Education, in which the object of the game 'is to kick mothers out of their positions in the public schools'. She continued, 'the game is rather rough, but like wife-beating, which used to be so popular, it is played for the benefit of women'.⁵⁴ The Board was not amused. Seizing an opportunity previously ignored, they ordered Superintendent of Education William H. Maxwell to charge Rodman with insubordination. Rodman learned of the charges at one of the 'stormiest meetings ever held by the Board of Education'. After a two-hour debate which ended in the new mother Lora Wagner's suspension, School Superintendent

Maxwell caught Rodman at the door to warn her that he planned to order her suspension as well. Startled, she asked on what grounds, to which he replied that she was guilty of 'discourtesy' for writing the letter. A hostile discussion ensued into which Board President Churchill was drawn as he passed by the couple. The episode ended with Rodman fighting back tears and Churchill stomping off 'white with rage'.⁵⁵ However, the next day Rodman told reporters that she thought the incident 'amusing' because 'I have been spiritually prepared for something for so long – I knew they would get me for so long – that it should come about in so trifling a matter'. She continued, 'I don't mind a fight. My grandfather [...] was a Revolutionary leader, and my grandfather [...] an Abolitionist. There is fighting blood in me'. The event created significant sympathetic press coverage for Rodman, including one item written by her oldest daughter Alice, who noted that the Board had just recently awarded Rodman with a standing of 'superior merit' as a teacher.⁵⁶

The press also covered the League's great debate that night on the teacher-mother cases at which Rodman spoke only briefly. Looking 'pale and tired' she announced to the audience that she intended to report to work on Monday despite the order for her dismissal. Noting that between them she and Wagner had been charged with 'three-quarters of the offences contained in the by laws of the Board of Education, insubordination, misconduct, and neglect of duty', which she felt 'shows a very grave lack of proportion on the part of the Board'.⁵⁷

On Monday both she and Wagner showed up to their respective schools only to be turned away. Rodman left for the Mayor's office where a delegation from the League was waiting for her. The Mayor cancelled his morning appointments to meet with the group. With reporters present Rodman spoke first, declaring the right of women to employment and motherhood. Her attorney Jean Norris asked Mayor Mitchell to consider the issue 'stripped of its sentimentality'. She argued the public policy 'in reduced terms', is 'We can't discharge you if you marry and remain sterile, but we can and will if you attempt to exercise the highest social duty known to the race'. Charlotte Perkins Gilman ended their conversation on the same note, declaring: 'Biologists agree that celibacy is a wrong condition', adding that since women are suited to motherhood and teaching they are in essence 'synonymous'.⁵⁸

Two days later Rodman was formally arraigned before the Board in a closed session. When asked by the reporters the reason for the secrecy, the Board's attorney replied only that Rodman's trial would be public. It was not.⁵⁹ Rodman's defense was based on two letters that

School Superintendent Maxwell had written to the Board of Education in September 1913 defending his own right to free speech. He argued: 'I felt and I still so feel that I am standing for the rights of every public school teacher to set forth his own views on questions of public interest or any question of public policy'. Concluded Rodman:

Logically, if I am insubordinate then so was Dr. Maxwell. I felt at the time that his act was an example to the teachers and I followed it. At the time I wrote to the *Globe* saying that the teachers should follow it and now I have done so. As to the Board, it simply doesn't understand the feminist movement. It calls us agitators and dangerous characters. Naturally I don't expect much justice from such a source.⁶⁰

It was a good ploy but many doubted it would succeed. When questioned by reporters whether she was afraid of what the Board might do Rodman admitted:

I'm afraid of the Board of Education. And yet at various times in my life I have been in conflict with it. That is the difference between anti-suffragists and feminists, of which class I am one. The anti-suffragist knows she is a coward and stays at home and asks a man to protect her. The feminist knows that she is a coward and goes out into the world and tries to overcome her cowardice.⁶¹

On 23 December Rodman had her hearing. Afterward a reporter asked her about a rumor that if she offered an apology she would be let free of the charges. 'I had no apology to make', she insisted. Her defense was that she had not given away her right to free speech when she became a teacher. The hearing committee disagreed and recommended her suspension until 1 September 1915 (retroactive to 13 November 1914). Her suspension amounted to a fine of \$1,800, her salary for that period. Teachers began sending condolence cards with money enclosed almost immediately.

The press's criticism of the Board was harsh. In a letter to the *New Republic*, which had resolutely stood on Rodman's side throughout the ordeal, Board president William Willcox defended himself stating in part:

[L]oyalty is demanded in governmental affairs and in business affairs as an imperative requirement, because of the general conviction that

a disloyal employee, like a wheel is out of gear, is an obstacle rather than a help in any organization. On this theory the Board would have been quite justified in dismissing Henrietta Rodman from service. In merely suspending her they have treated her very leniently, but this punishment will be of little value unless it shall serve to impress upon her and upon our teachers throughout the school system the importance which the Board attaches to a spirit of loyalty.⁶²

Rodman furiously responded, proclaiming: 'My defence is the oath of citizenship required of every teacher and pupil in the schools - "I pledge allegiance to my flag and to the Republic for which it stands - one nation indivisible, with liberty and justice for all"'. She explained that to her these were not merely empty words, but she had 'understood that I was swearing to devote my life as a citizen to working against injustice and oppression, toward the ideals on which the republic is founded. I believed the policy of the Board of Education toward teacher-mothers was a denial of liberty and justice'.⁶³ Teachers continued to try to compensate her for her loss of salary but she appreciatively rejected them with the announcement that she had been offered the position of education reporter for the *New York Tribune*, the same newspaper which had published her offending letter. For the eight months of her suspension she made almost daily reports about the New York City schools, freely evaluating their shortcomings and the Board's weaknesses. It was a divine justice. Not to be outdone, the *New York Times* ran a well-publicized interview with Rodman in their Sunday supplement entitled, 'Feminism and the Baby'. She had succeeded in bringing most of the educational and popular press to her and the teacher-mothers' defense.⁶⁴

Meanwhile a subcommittee of the Board tried to resolve the teacher-mother problem by recommending a two-year maternity leave. Although the press generally hailed it as a victory, Rodman and the League for the Civic Service of Women thought otherwise.⁶⁵ They preferred the length of leave be left up to the woman and her physician. Simultaneously, State Commissioner of Education John H. Finley was reviewing some of the individual teacher-mother cases. On 12 January 1915 he ordered the Board of Education to restore Bridgett Peixotto with back pay, finding that 'Maternity requiring absence at a period of childbirth is a natural consequence of the employment of potential mothers as teachers'. The Board made it immediately clear that the ruling applied to Peixotto only and they had no intention of extending the ruling to the other teachers involved.⁶⁶ In February Finley ordered Lily Weeks' reinstatement but denied Lora M. Wagner, Sara Breslow and

Jeanette V. Ortman the same outcome. Finley reasoned that Breslow and Wagner had failed to exhaust all other means of appeals at their local level. Ortman was denied because she had not revealed her marriage to the Board.⁶⁷ A week later the Board unexpectedly announced that it would restore 16 other teacher-mothers to duty, including Breslow and Wagner. The suffragist periodical, the *Woman Voter*, celebrated the victory, maintaining that

cases like that of Mrs. Bridgett Peixotto epitomize the whole question of equal civic rights for women, the whole question of women's right to economic independence, and the right of the individual to be judged upon the basis of efficiency or inefficiency in work rather than by the opinions of others as to the regulation of her private life.

However, Rodman was not celebrating. She warned that the Board was 'inviting further militancy' by adopting along with the new maternity leave a bylaw that required the woman teacher to notify the city superintendent as soon as she became aware she was pregnant and to apply for and accept a two years' leave of absence. Neither Rodman nor the League were in favor of a two-year mandatory leave without pay, the prying eyes on every potentially pregnant woman's belly, nor the continuing assumption that the Board had the right to determine what was best for the working mother.⁶⁸

In June Rodman learned that State Commissioner Finley had rejected her final petition for appeal. Finley reasoned that Rodman's 'excellent record of training', and her status 'as not only one of the best teachers in the city of New York, but also as a teacher of English' had left her vulnerable to the criticism that she knew the difference between satire and gross misconduct. Charlotte Perkins Gilman defended Rodman's action in a lengthy article in her journal the *Forerunner*. She began: 'Heroes are often inconvenient, and quite generally unwise. Martyrs are almost always a nuisance. Martyrdom in itself is a standing reproach to all those who remain unmartyred, and that comfortable majority naturally resent it'. Then she reasoned that if Rodman's letter had really constituted personal offense each individual Board member should have sued her for damages. But they knew the charge would not stand in court, so they resorted to the 'petty tyranny' of 'mere vengeance, executed on the flimsiest excuse on this ridiculous misuse of the term gross misconduct'. As a further act of vengeance the Board removed Rodman from her beloved Wadleigh High School where she had taught since 1903. She was placed at Julia Richman High which held a reputation for being far less

scholastically oriented. Rodman said she realized the intent of the Board in forcing the transfer but that she was making no objection to it.⁶⁹

If the Board anticipated that Rodman's punishment would silence her they were mistaken. During her 'unpaid vacation' she expanded her contacts, solidified her relations with the press and continued to pressure the Board to revise the new maternity leave bylaw to one that was less onerous and more respectful of the individual needs of teachers. Moreover she spent a great deal of time engaged in the peace movement. When she returned to teaching in September 1915, the war in Europe had crept into the daily conversation of US citizens. A lifelong pacifist and member of the new Woman's Peace Party, Rodman resolved to fight for the right of free speech for teachers who opposed militarism. Her efforts in this new activity would see her facing off with the Board throughout the war years and into the Red Scare that followed. It was clear that Rodman would not rest. She needed a cause, often several simultaneously, at which to throw her seemingly bottomless energy. It was also clear that she had not learned the lesson of obedience as the Board had hoped. She would continue to oppose its knee-jerk reaction against free speech among teachers. It was an especially vulnerable stance for her to take during a period of ever-increasing surveillance of employees for anti-American attitudes.

Free speech was the enduring thread throughout Rodman's life's work. She felt that society was educable and that with sufficient instruction would see the reasonableness of her arguments; whether they revolved around the economics of marriage, the benefits of mediation over war, birth control as a fundamental human right, or the importance of erecting feminist apartment houses to free women from the drudgery of housewifery and motherhood. To preclude this educational process by striking down free speech was an anathema to Rodman. Her ancestors had fought and died for the right of free speech among other rights and she was determined to push forth their legacy.

Unlike her well-published friend Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Rodman gave little time to writing, and beyond the year she spent as a *New York Tribune* reporter, she left a tiny written legacy. Instead she excelled at getting press coverage for her causes. In turn, the public, sensitized by the rationality of Rodman's claims, demanded change; putting pressure on school board members, state and national education bureaucrats, teacher organizations, and even court officials to rethink what had so recently been commonly held beliefs about women and work. What happened in New York City not only gained attention throughout

the nation and beyond, it struck a chord in the burgeoning women's movement in large cities and small towns alike.⁷⁰ As a result, a spiral of re-education about women's economic rights began to expand to broader and broader audiences. Teachers and boards of education in other cities could draw on this information when it was time for them to decide how to approach the issue.⁷¹ Free speech was essential to this process. A teacher shortage during World War I had an impact on shifting thinking about married women and work, but without the activities of feminists like Rodman and members of groups like the Feminist Alliance, the change might have taken far longer.

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9 Lives, Networks and Topographies of Time and Place: New Turns in the History of Women and Education

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Writing histories of women: Developing theoretical perspectives

The late 1970s saw the start of significant growth in women's history, particularly in Western Europe and North America where some universities acknowledged the burgeoning interest by opening women's studies departments and research centers and academic publishers added publications in women's history to their catalogues. The literature that emerged was often exciting, as scholars wrestled with the purpose of such history; should they write women into mainstream history, or should they develop new ways of writing history? On the one hand, concern with 'women's issues' marginalized women's history, but on the other hand fitting women's history into the 'empty spaces' in mainstream history was unsatisfactory to scholars who criticized the 'patriarchal nature of the predominant historical discourse'.¹ Historians did important work in uncovering 'lost' women, and identifying examples of women's agency.² Within the history of education, scholarship followed a similar pattern. Those interested in the history of female education mined the archives of universities, schools, philanthropic associations and education societies, to identify women and champion their initiative and industry.³ But dissatisfaction with such discourse led scholars to become weary of 'stories designed to celebrate women's agency [which] began to seem predictable and