
*Women's Organizing after Suffrage:
The Women's Joint Congressional Committee and the Sheppard-Towner Act*

Tamara Dukich
Tulane University



In 1921, the 67th U.S. Congress passed the Promotion of the Welfare and Hygiene of Maternity and Infancy Act, more commonly known as the Sheppard-Towner Act. This legislation provided federal funding to states to develop maternal hygiene education programs that would promote the health of mothers and their children. The Act is particularly interesting because it signifies one of the first times that the federal government passed social policy legislation to promote rather than to regulate women's reproductive healthcare. Although public support for the Act was mixed when it was debated in Congress, its passage was ultimately due to the pressure of the Women's Joint Congressional Committee (WJCC) and other women's groups within the post-suffrage era of the early 1920s.

Women, often organized in women's clubs, had been integral to lobbying efforts for legislation that stood to benefit both women's and the general public's welfare long before they had the right to vote.¹ Scholars who have examined women's political activism after suffrage have lamented the demise of women's coalitions after 1920. Before suffrage, women organized powerful non-partisan and bipartisan coalitions to oppose slavery, to support temperance, and to promote public hygiene. Women struggled to organize distinctive women's coalitions after suffrage; scholars generally agree that partisan battles over race and class made it more difficult for women to appeal to other women *as women* once all women were enfranchised to participate in partisan politics. This makes WJCC's advocacy for the Sheppard-Towner Act distinctive because members organized as women on behalf of women in the immediate post-suffrage era.² An analysis of WJCC's advocacy for the Sheppard-Towner Act reveals that women's relationship with partisan politics did not change overnight after enfranchisement. Indeed, in 1921, politicians were remarkably responsive to the WJCC's campaign, which resembled earlier women's lobbying efforts. Thus, directly after the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, women's groups had a special window of opportunity in American history to enter the mainstream male political arena and pressure legislators to act in their interests. The WJCC's lobbying effort on behalf of the Sheppard-Towner Act represented a unique moment in U.S. women's political history, whereby women used

¹ Linda Gordon, *Women, the State, and Welfare*. (Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 36-37. It is important to note that individual states and municipalities granted women the right to vote before 1920. Most commonly, cities permitted women to vote on issues that affected households and children, including school board elections and tax bond measures. But before the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, women's suffrage was piecemeal.

² Kristi Andersen, *After Suffrage: Women in Partisan and Electoral Politics before the New Deal*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 4-5.

the pre-1920 strategy of organizing as women on behalf of women's interests, while leveraging women's newly won right to reward or punish politicians at the ballot box.

Representatives from the nation's most prominent women's groups convened in Washington, D.C. a few months after the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to consider how they might exercise their newfound status as political stakeholders.³ Maud Wood Park, a leader of the newly-established National League of Women Voters (NLWV), proposed establishing a coalition of powerful women's groups, including the American Home Economic Association, the Association of Collegiate Alumnae, Women's Christian Temperance Association, National Council of Women, National Congress of Mothers and Parent-Teacher Associations, in order to organize and unify future legislative efforts.⁴ Park worried that the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment might cause women to walk away from women's groups in order to participate in partisan political organizing. She hoped the establishment of a coalition of women's groups would enable women to continue to effectively organize on behalf of women's interests. Shortly after the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, the Women's Joint Congressional Committee was organized and would serve as a lobbying medium for the political interests of millions of women represented by more than a dozen national organizations.

WJCC was an unusually far-reaching coalition, aided by the organizational structure of its affiliates, such as the National League of Women Voters, which had national headquarters with state and local branches. The presence of WJCC affiliates in cities and towns across the United States enabled the coalition to mobilize its membership to lobby on behalf of legislation that affected women. However, the diversity of affiliate organizations meant that the WJCC had *many* interests. For this reason, WJCC had subcommittees that focused on particular issues or legislation.⁵ In its initial year, WJCC had nine lobbying subcommittees, which included infancy and maternity protection, independent citizenship for married women, regulation of the meatpacking industry and child labor, appropriations to social hygiene and education, and Prohibition.⁶ By organizing so swiftly after suffrage, WJCC became a feminist reform powerhouse and had the tools and numbers to influence public policy.

With the threat of WWI looming, Americans were more likely to respond to the interests of healthy children (their future soldiers) and healthy families (their patriots and citizens) at home than they were to radical progressivism. In a decade of political conservatism, WJCC knew that it had to capitalize on gendered ideologies in order to persuade legislators to approach women's issues with the seriousness they reserved for those issues they perceived to be for the "public good." For this reason, WJCC focused on "maternalist" politics, meaning that they emphasized the value of mothering and their roles as caretakers of families and people and therefore society as a whole, to ensure that "female" issues seeped into the public discourse.⁷ Equating their female citizenship to their duties as mothers and wives was integral to passing WJCC's gender-specific, progressive

³ Jan Doolittle Wilson, *The Women's Joint Congressional Committee and the Politics of Maternalism, 1920-30*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007, 1.

⁴ Wilson, *Politics of Maternalism*, Appendix A.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷ Gordon, *Women, the State, and Welfare*, 45.

social welfare goals.⁸ Nowhere was this better exemplified than with their lobbying efforts in support of the Sheppard-Towner Act.

The Sheppard-Towner Act

The United States Children's Bureau, an agency created by Congress in 1912 to promote children's welfare, initiated a study that would later culminate in the Sheppard-Towner Act.⁹ When she became the Bureau's chief, Julia Lathrop focused the agency's attention on the alarmingly high infant mortality rate in the United States. She was eager to know why babies in the U.S. fared so poorly compared to infants in Europe. Lathrop found that there was a significant correlation between high infant mortality rates and poor economic conditions, and that rural areas had especially high rates of infant mortality during the first month of life. Importantly, Lathrop found that mothers who did not receive prenatal advice or care had significantly higher rates of infant death than those with accessible public health nurses, prenatal education, and infant welfare centers. Based on these findings, the Bureau proposed the appropriation of federal money to states for the creation of educational programs and infant and maternal health centers.

Lathrop and her colleagues advocated intensely for federal involvement in infant mortality and child-related issues just as World War I was coming to a close.¹⁰ The first time that Congress introduced Lathrop's plan in 1918, sponsor Congresswoman Jeanette Rankin (R-MT) was unable to pass it. One year later, Senator Morris Sheppard (D-TX) and Congressman Horace Towner (R-IA), reintroduced the bill, now titled the Sheppard-Towner Act. The bill called for annual appropriations totaling \$4 million to the states, wherein the administration of infancy and maternity programs were consigned to state divisions of child welfare.¹¹

The Sheppard-Towner Act instantly gained support from members of Congress who advocated for reform and supporters of Progressivism, meaning they believed in the government's capacity to "better" society. Congressman Towner's relationship to WJCC was integral, as he often met with members to update them on the status of the legislation. Other members of Congress were also instrumental in ultimately calling the bill to vote in the Senate. These legislators maintained their faith in the government's ability to create public good, and, in light of the nation's participation in the Great War, captured public support for a bill that promised to care for the nation's children, and perhaps also its future soldiers.

WJCC led the lobbying effort in support of the Sheppard-Towner Act. When the bill appeared to linger in the Public Health and National Quarantine Committee as the clock was winding down for the congressional session, members of the Children's Bureau and the WJCC began to pressure committee members to look favorably upon the bill before its submission to the Senate floor. Lathrop testified in favor of the bill. The League of Women Voters, whose members confidently spoke on behalf of all women, their citizenship as mothers, and their concern for

⁸ *Ibid*, 109.

⁹ Dorothy Bradbury, *Four Decades of Action for Children: A Short History of the Children's Bureau*. (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1956), 6-10.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 10-12.

¹¹ Senate Committee on Public Health and National Quarantine, *Protection of Maternity and Infancy Act: Hearings on S. 3259*.

infants and families, claimed that the Sheppard-Towner bill was the “wish” of American women everywhere.¹²

The WJCC formed a Sheppard-Towner Subcommittee, which drummed up support for the bill nationally. They secured endorsements from national organizations and lobbied members of Congress. The subcommittee also spearheaded a large publicity campaign, submitting editorials to newspapers all over the country and thousands of letters to senators and state representatives, enabling legislators to see how much grassroots support there was for the bill.¹³

The WJCC arranged for women from powerful groups to testify in favor of the bill. Leaders from the League of Women Voters, the Congress of Mothers and Parent Teachers, and the National Organization of Public Health Nurses joined WJCC member Florence Kelley to speak on behalf of the Act. Kelley gave an impassioned and critical account, attempting to sway Congress by equating politicians’ indifference to the bill as their indifference to dying children. She ended her statement by asking: “The question that is arising amazingly in people’s minds now is, ‘Why does Congress wish to have mothers and babies die?’”¹⁴ WJCC and its allies appealed to politicians’ sympathy for women and children and to both men’s and the government’s responsibility to *protect* women and children.

The bill was reintroduced a couple of months later, and the WJCC remained committed to ensuring it would pass. Members consistently rallied support from other groups, and came through on the state and national levels in the forms of letter writing or op-eds as the bill bounced around committees in the new Congressional session. The pressure from women’s organizations was enormous, and permeated through every committee. This was exemplified when Maud Park of the League of Women Voters (and of course, the WJCC, too) suggested in a committee hearing that nearly every national women’s organization in the United States supported the measure, and that her testimony represented the sentiment of millions of women. Park capitalized on the gendered language of WJCC’s testimonies, saying that this bill was “their” first priority because women best understood the needs of mothers and children. But by linking motherhood to women’s citizenship, women’s interests and politics at the time obscured gender equality. The lobbying effort on behalf of the Sheppard-Towner Act suggested that the state should support women because of their identities as mothers. In other words, women were worthy of political consideration because of their capacity to contribute to the wellbeing of the nation’s children rather than because of their status as individual, autonomous citizens.

When the bill finally reached the floor in the Senate, these notions of gendered citizenship permeated the testimony offered by members of Congress. For example, Senator William Kenyon (R-IA) explained, “It’s the one bill that the women of the country are asking of Congress.”¹⁵ In the House, John Cooper (R-OH) proclaimed, “Women know far, far better than men what women

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Wilson, *Politics of Maternalism*, 38-39 and 40-42 and Frank Vanderflip, “WOMEN URGE STATE TO AID MOTHERS; Mrs. F.A. Vanderflip Pleads for the Acceptance of Funds Under Sheppard-Towner Act. OPPOSED BY CATHOLICS.” *New York Times*, 1922, 17.

¹⁴ Harriet A. Frothingham. Filed complaint. Supreme Court of the District of Columbia, National League of Women Voters Papers, Series II, Box 18, Library of Congress, qtd. in Jan Doolittle Wilson, *The Women’s Joint Congressional Committee and the Politics of Maternalism, 1920-30*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

¹⁵ *Protection of Maternity and Infancy Act Hearings Before the Committee on Public Health and National Quarantine, Senate. 67th Congress, First Session. S. 3259.*

must undergo and what are the real needs of mothers and infants.”¹⁶ Congressmen invoked the testimonies offered by WJCC members, which strengthened the argument that women across the country supported the Act, and, further, that women were entitled to the tools that would enable them to be better mothers to their children.

Interestingly, however, the maternalistic rhetoric did not separate women as independent from the patriarchal structure. In fact, it played into it. Sheppard-Towner as a social policy, although aimed at women, was proposed with the intention to benefit women in their capacity as mothers, and, ultimately, to benefit those whom they nurtured: their husbands, families, and children. The Sheppard-Towner Act was not a threat to men because it did not give women the ability to be independent from their duties as mothers, but it provided them with tools to be *better* mothers with *better* health outcomes. WJCC and members of Congress were convinced that women knew best for their children, and although this notion seemed to be integral to the passage of the bill, it still perpetuated the stereotype that women should be at home, care for the family and the baby, and be relieved from the need to work. The gendered logic that framed the Sheppard-Towner Act revealed the U.S. government’s willingness to “help” women in their roles as mothers as long as it did not threaten the traditional, patriarchal structure of the American family, which was idealized as including male breadwinners and female caretakers.

Although the Sheppard-Towner Act passed in a landslide vote, with the House passing the bill 279 to 39 and the Senate passing the bill 63 to 7, the numbers did not reflect the impassioned opposition during the Congressional hearings. The minority believed that the federal government was infringing on the rights of states and families by taking such a vested interest in personal matters such as postnatal care. Several opponents argued that the federal government should never police powers of the state. Prominent groups such as the American Medical Association (AMA) argued that that certified doctors, rather than nurses or midwives, were the only valid proponents of women’s healthcare and maternal education.¹⁷

Congressman Towner addressed the opposition, stating, “I confess that I have been very much surprised at the intensity of the opposition to this bill from certain quarters. I think I am justified in saying that in a great measure that arises from an entire misapprehension regarding the bill.”¹⁸ The Act provided matching federal grants-in-aid to states, marking the first time that the government gave money for state welfare programs pertaining to healthcare. Many opponents tapped into popular opposition to socialism after the First World War and asserted that the Act signaled a step toward “state medicine.”¹⁹ Others interpreted the Act as an overreach of the public sector into the private practice of medicine. Prominent organizations that opposed the Act included the AMA, anti-suffragist women’s groups, and factions of Catholic voters.

Though it was clear many groups with a strong public presence opposed the Sheppard-Towner Act, it ultimately swept Congress with resounding support from both parties. The Nineteenth Amendment and the unified mobilization of women’s groups, especially by the WJCC and the League of Women Voters, were the driving forces behind the passage of one of the first

¹⁶ *Protection of Maternity and Infancy Act Hearings Before the Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, House*. 67th Congress, First Session. H.R. 2366. July 12-16, 18-23, 1921.

¹⁷ Forrest Butterfield, “Why Finance the Unfit to Bear Children?” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 1923, p. 8 and “The Sheppard-Towner Bill - Public Health or Politics?” *Journal of American Medical Association*, 78 (1922): 435.

¹⁸ *Hearings Before the Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, House*. P. 7, 251.

¹⁹ Gordon, *Women, the State, and Welfare*, 36-38.

social security measures in American history. Perhaps politicians feared that their re-election was now in the hands of the women that were pressuring them to pass the bill. It is also likely that supporters' deployment of maternal rhetoric caught the attention of politicians who still supported reform in the wake of the Progressive Era. Undoubtedly, the WJCC's relentless advocacy on behalf of the Act was key to its passage. As Senator Kenyon said, "If the members would have voted on that measure secretly in their cloak rooms, it would have been killed as emphatically as it was finally passed in the open under the pressure of the Joint Congressional Committee of Women."²⁰ Although the Sheppard-Towner Act was later revoked, its implementation was a significant moment in the history of American women because it was the first time that a woman's group had lobbied successfully for a social security policy, and, in the same token, gave politicians the impression that women in the post-suffrage era had power, since the WJCC was so well organized in their lobbying effort of the Act. The WJCC's strategic use of materialist appeals proved to be a double-edged sword. On one hand, it enabled women to secure one of the most radical social policies in support of women's reproductive health. But it came at the expense of considering women as autonomous individuals, entitled to the full range of rights and protections of citizenships. Instead, the Act passed largely because Congress sought to protect women's capacity to contribute to families and to care for children, and, in the process, to further strengthen the patriarchal social structure of the American family.

²⁰ S. Winslow to H. Frothingham, (March 28, 1921) Putnam Papers, Box 17, 300, Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library, Harvard University, qtd. in Jan Doolittle Wilson, *The Women's Joint Congressional Committee and the Politics of Maternalism, 1920-30*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

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