**Celebrating Priscilla Wakefield: financial inclusion heroine and forgotten Feminist Economist**

Susan Johnson 9th November 2018

Priscilla Wakefield - the “Mother of Microsavings”[[1]](#endnote-1) - is credited as being the founder of savings banks[[2]](#endnote-2). She was a Quaker from Tottenham, North London, and from the Barclays family of banking fame. On 22nd October I had the pleasure of joining citizens and activists to celebrate her achievements and unveil a new plaque in her honour. This was, to the day, the 220th anniversary of the founding of the Tottenham Benefit society for Women and Children, and she subsequently founded Tottenham Savings Bank in 1804. Her philanthropic initiatives also included a School for Industry for girls, a “Lying-in” charity for women (i.e. offering maternity support), and she wrote many educational books for children which were very popular.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Her journey from the Benefit Society to the Savings Bank is a micro prefiguring of the learning journey of the microfinance sector some 200 years later. The Benefit Society offered savings services to women and children, along with loans, and intended to offer pensions too as well as funeral insurance. Clearly an ambitious agenda for such a small organisation. She recognised that for poor people it was easier to save in small amounts: “it is much easier to spare a small sum at stated periods, than to lay down what is sufficient for either purpose at once”[[4]](#endnote-4), and that it was hard for poor people to find a safe place to physically put their savings. Expanding to the Tottenham Savings Bank expanded the savings service from women and children to include men. ‘Safety’ for the savings was provided by Trustees holding up to £100 each. These savings were invested in government bonds offering a 5% return which meant that poor savers received interest – a benefit that had previously only been available to the wealthy. These developments were therefore steps to expanding from an initially more aid based model to one that had greater sustainability, was more inclusive, was savings led and seeking to offer a wide range of financial services.

In the arena of microfinance her legacy has been noted if not widely celebrated[[5]](#endnote-5) and other writing has attributed her initiative as contributing to Henry Duncan’s inspiration to establish a saving bank in every district of Scotland.[[6]](#endnote-6) That in turn set off the journey towards financial inclusion in the UK and beyond. However, It took more than 30 years for the modern microfinance sector to understand what Priscilla started to work out in 5!

However, even less well known is her writing “Reflections on the Present Condition of the Female Sex with recommendations for their improvement” also in 1798. This was a response to Adam Smith’s Wealth of Nations and his assertion that everyone is a burden on society who does not contribute productive work. Recognising that his terminology of “general terms of man” applied to both sexes, her approach was to deconstruct its analysis for its implications for women. She commences a discussion of the extent women are able to contribute productive work, particularly noting that the upper classes do not, as they have “frivolous occupations”. She points out the need for “an enquiry into the causes of their deficiency”, that is, to understand why they are not able to participate in the labour market. She challenges the lack of education for women, and asserts that there are lots of jobs they could do while remaining within the social norms of the time: “while not endangering their virtue or corrupting their manners”! She suggested that women could be teachers and serve in shops which serve women. She berates the fact that men are in these occupations and argues that they should move to other occupations and let women take these jobs. She then goes on to berate the fact that when women do do the same jobs they get paid less. Not much has changed!

At the end of the 18th century in the wake of the French Revolution her contribution was much overshadowed by Mary Wollstonecraft’s Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) - in which she also argues that women only appear to be inferior because of their lack of education. Wakefield clearly does not take a rights-based approach but does pick up on this issue of education. With the concern to find ways to improve the lot of the poorer classes and avoid rebellion, more successful popular writing of the time by women included Hannah More’s tracts which addressed the ways the lot of the poorer classes could be improved.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Her concerns that women should be able to enter the workforce and contribute outside the household mirrors those of Ester Boserup writing in 1970 which set off analysis of the division of labour between men and women in agriculture in developing countries and led to the Women in Development approach. This - similarly – to Wakefield, was concerned with women being able to participate in the labour market and explored how the sexual division of labour meant that women did not.

The founding text of modern feminist economics is widely regarded as Marilyn Waring’s “If Women Counted” (1988) which went beyond the concern for women to be able to participate in the labour market to critique the way women’s unpaid work was not included in National Accounts. Dimand argues[[8]](#endnote-8) that Wakefield “took for granted that all useful labour was productive labour, and that the labour of women, whether within the household or in the market sphere, was useful and productive.”

Hers was a class-based analysis and her concerns for women’s education and participation in the work force were mainly directed towards the upper classes who she saw doing little of either household work in the home or economic work outside it. The Benefit society and Savings Bank were directed towards the poorest. These two areas of concern therefore did not so directly meet in her writings. So what would might she have made of modern microfinance?

I suggest that her two main concerns in “Reflections” are similarly relevant to this field. First, while she would at first have been encouraged by the provision of microfinance to women, and the possibility for loans to be used to “supply themselves with materials for work, a pig or any other thing”[[9]](#endnote-9) in order to address their poverty. This is where the microfinance movement started with microenterprise seeing women’s labour as frequently under or unemployed and saw loans as the ability to enable them to contribute. The high presence of women in retail business might also have satisfied her at first, but over time however she might well have noted that women tend to be stuck in certain occupations in the informal sector, especially retail, and ask why. Second she would also have noted that many of these occupations involved low returns to labour and often lower returns than those achieved by men in similar sectors. Her response would clearly have recognised the need for education and training as well as the need for social norms to change - as she had proposed - and women to be enabled to enter occupations dominated by men. She would not have been happy with an entirely minimalist approach to microfinance, recognising the need for these additional services to address the constraints women face. Moreover, feminist economists in this field have concluded that programmes need to have the intention of empowering women if they are to achieve that goal, this particularly involves working to address the social norms that constrain their activity.[[10]](#endnote-10) Oxfam’s current WE–CARE programme being a great case in point its demonstration of the need to find ways to recognise women’s reproductive work, even extending this to the time they are *responsible* for reproductive work and not just the time they actually spend doing it.[[11]](#endnote-11)

While her approach centred on obligations rather than rights, her call to “enquire into the causes of their deficiency” is a founding question of feminist economics. Hers was a class-bound analysis which questioned some social norms while accepting others. Thus while not as radical approach as those promoting women’s rights, she was an early feminist voice contributing to discussion of these constraints. Her lament that “Time will open the eyes of the public to the advantages of a benefit club for women. How slow is the progress of human reason”! is one that contemporary feminist economists would wholly endorse in relation to many contemporary concerns!

1. See <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/priscilla-wakefield-mother-microsavings-has-her-own-blog> accessed 8th November, 2018 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Moss, M., 2011. Henry Duncan and the Savings Bank Movement in the UK *200 Years of Savings Banks: A Strong and Lasting Business Model for Responsible Regional Retail Banking.* Perspectives 63: WSBI and ESBG. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For more information see: <https://www.priscillawakefield.uk/> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Wakefield, P., 1804. Extract from an account of a female benefit club at Tottenham *Reports of the Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor Vol.III 1802 No. LXXXIV* Available at: <https://archive.org/details/b2197195x_0002/page/n5>. Accessed 9th November 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See for example: Roodman, D., 2012. *Due Diligence: An Impertinent Inquiry Into Microfinance.* Center for Global Development; Stone, R., 2011. Two hundred years of savings banks: The wheel turns full circle. *Enterprise Development and Microfinance,* 22(2), pp. 94-107. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Moss ibid.. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Dimand, R., 2003. An Eighteenth-Century English Feminist Response to Political Economy: Priscilla Wakefield's *Reflections* (1798). In: C. Nyland & R.W. Dimand, eds. *The status of women in classical economic thought.* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Dimand ibid. p. 196 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Wakefield ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Kabeer, N. & Subrahmanian, R., 1999. *Institutions, Relations and Outcomes: A Framework and Case Studies for Gender Aware Planning.* Delhi: Kali for Women. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. [http://wee.oxfam.org/we-care accessed 9th November 2018](http://wee.oxfam.org/we-care%20accessed%209th%20November%202018)

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The Centre for Development Studies invites you to join in discussions on International Development [↑](#endnote-ref-11)