

Original Research Article

Opportunities and challenges: A study of women's petitions in mid-17th-century England

Xiaoyan Fu

Yili Normal University, Yining, Xinjiang, 835000, China

Abstract: The 17th century in England witnessed profound social transformation, during which the public identity of women gradually emerged. The outbreak of the English Civil War created new opportunities for female participation in public affairs. As the conflict undermined—And in many cases effectively erased—The traditional patriarchal image of the English father as the domestic patriarch, women in England partially filled the resulting vacuum of patriarchal authority. In doing so, they departed from prevailing social norms that confined women to the private sphere, stepping beyond the household to assert their right to engage in public political affairs. Through collective actions such as petitioning, they not only demanded political participation but also sought to reshape their own image and roles at both the personal and national levels. Nevertheless, the long-established tradition of British patriarchy, which systematically devalued women's status, meant that the women's petition movement achieved only limited success. Even so, the active involvement of English women in petitioning during the mid-17th century undeniably constituted a novel attempt at open engagement with national political affairs.

Keywords: English Civil War; women; petitioning; rights

1. Introduction

Seventeenth-century Britain experienced a rapid transition from a feudal to a capitalist society. The profound upheavals triggered by this transformation affected all strata of society across political, economic, and cultural spheres, and it was within the crucible of this socio-political turbulence that the public identities of most women took shape.^[1] In the scholarship on the English Bourgeois Revolution, scholarly attention has largely focused on men who held dominant positions within the patriarchal system. Women, despite being an active group in the revolution, have often been overlooked due to their status as "the other," and research on their participation remains scarce. Consequently, this paper adopts the women's petition movement during the English Bourgeois Revolution as a case study, transforming women—Previously treated as objects in traditional historical narratives—Into subjects of historical inquiry. It focuses on the process through which women's political consciousness emerged during this period, aiming to illuminate one facet of early modern British social transformation.

2. The "opportunities" afforded to women by the English Civil War

Prior to the English Civil War, women resided within a profoundly patriarchal society in which male dominance was systematically reinforced by a comprehensive patriarchal political theory. Under this social paradigm, women were deemed ineligible to participate in public affairs. Although women in certain rural areas, towns, and parishes did actively engage in religious and political matters, the impact of these activities remained limited, confined to small circles and lacking any large-scale organisational framework.

Following the outbreak of the English Civil War, the ensuing military and political upheavals exerted a nationwide impact. As one contemporary observation holds, "Women were liberated by the Civil War, whether they were noblewomen maintaining their households in the absence of their husbands, or women from the lower and middle classes".^[2] The Civil War created opportunities for women to engage in public affairs, fostering more frequent interactions across social classes and regions. To some extent, it enabled women's activities to transcend geographical constraints and extend into broader spheres. Overall, this period witnessed a marked expansion in both the breadth and depth of British women's participation in political and religious life.

Firstly, the poverty and disease precipitated by the Civil War inflicted severe material hardship on

both men and women across Britain. The war dealt a heavy blow to the English economy, and women in the domestic sphere felt its impact with particular acuity; the food crisis rendered the sustenance of many households increasingly precarious. To maintain their families' livelihoods, women in England at this time "temporarily set aside their roles as housewives and made their own contributions in the political sphere".^[3] They actively engaged in protest activities to defend their households, a development that served as one of the factors driving the participation of lower- and middle-class women in petition campaigns.

Secondly, the Civil War exacerbated the gender imbalance, a phenomenon that profoundly shaped the politics and culture of seventeenth-century British society. During the Civil War, male mortality rose sharply; estimates suggest that one in every three or four adult males in Britain served in the conflict, and a total of 84,830 soldiers perished.^[4] The heavy death toll led to a marked increase in the number of widows, who frequently bore the responsibility of raising young children while striving to maintain their households. Moreover, the wartime context instilled in these widows a new and proactive sense of rightful entitlement, as evidenced by their petitions for pensions and similar claims. In texts concerning women published during the English Civil War—including, but not limited to, books, pamphlets, and articles—the figures of husbands and fathers are fleeting; even when male figures do appear, they serve primarily to facilitate women's legitimate participation in public affairs. This absence of patriarchy operates within the lacunae of traditional marital narratives and shifting historical accounts.^[5] Women benefited from circumstances in which the traditional image of the father was diluted or even erased by the war; they filled the void left by patriarchy and reshaped their own images and roles at both the personal and the national level.

Furthermore, as monarchical ideology—which principally embodied the king's will and was upheld by the royal family—began to waver during this period, forward-thinking women in Britain, galvanised by the war, began to move beyond the domestic sphere and participate actively in public debate. In Tudor England, the family was regarded as the fundamental unit of governance, and this familial model rested on the principle of wifely subordination to the husband. In traditional patriarchal societies, royal authority constituted the highest form of male authority, and the self-evident legitimacy of male rule served to underwrite the legitimacy of monarchical power. Under the Stuarts, this foundation was theorised; such political theory incorporated women into the structure of political discourse, for it simultaneously acknowledged women's subordinate status within the family and affirmed the legitimacy of the monarch's authority.^[6] The circumstances began to shift during the English Reformation, when the contest over religious authority between the English monarch and the Pope furnished women with both an opportunity and a justification for resisting the authority of Church and king alike. English women's challenge to patriarchy was rooted in the Civil War, for the compelling reason that if a tyrannical king could be deposed, a tyrannical husband could likewise be resisted. Consequently, the active participation of English women in the political and religious conflicts of the 1640s and 1650s laid the groundwork for their critique of the patriarchal political system.

3. Women's petitioning and the demand for equal rights

In England, the traditional pattern whereby political participation was largely confined to elite noblewomen was fundamentally disrupted in the mid-seventeenth century by the Civil War and the establishment of the English Republic. The outbreak of the conflict brought food shortages, disease, and death directly into the lives of lower- and middle-class women. At the same time, a surge of radical political ideas provided these women with opportunities to engage in public affairs. They actively organised demonstrations and petition campaigns to articulate their political views. During the English Revolution, public petitioning became an effective means for women of the lower and middle classes to voice social criticism and advance political demands.

The petition was one of the most common forms of formal communication in early modern Europe. Its Latin root, *petitio*, imbues the term with multiple connotations: It implies a request, a prayer, or a plea for help, yet it can also denote a demand or a criticism. In English, the word "petition" encompasses "appeal", "supplication", and "address" as well as "protest" and "accusation." As Amanda Jane Whiting observes, "A petition is a combination of a problem and a request; the 'petitionary mode' combines a 'habitually deferential' tone with a contradictory 'critical' undertone".^[7] Moreover, as the Civil War dismantled the geographical constraints that had previously structured British society, and as press censorship collapsed during this period, what had earlier been small-scale petitioning gradually developed into large-scale collective action. David Zaret and other historians emphasise both the remarkable surge in organised

collective petitioning during the English Civil War and the importance of petitioning within early modern British parliamentary culture, noting that the House of Lords and the House of Commons could submit petitions to the King in the form of rights petitions (seeking justice by asserting existing privileges) or grace petitions (requesting new privileges as a favour).^[8] Petitions not only provided a channel of communication between ordinary people and those in power but also engendered a mode of political participation with broad popular involvement. Individuals or groups from all walks of life submitted petitions to institutions or authorities, demanding the rectification of perceived abuses of power, the confirmation and implementation of expected courses of action, or intervention in complex disputes where conventional mechanisms of resolution had failed.

During the English Civil War, the domestic sphere was frequently disrupted by the conflict, prompting British women from all walks of life to become actively engaged. They openly expressed their political views and sought to influence the conduct of their male relatives by articulating their own perspectives. Moreover, some British women took an active part in the fighting, providing food and shelter to the side they supported. Political protest by lower-and middle-class women assumed a markedly radical character. In many parts of England, adult women—Regardless of marital status—Regarded themselves as citizens possessing rights and obligations; accordingly, they advanced political views, protested against food prices, and laid claim to public rights. The articulation of these demands often followed a discernible pattern: groups of women would organize to petition and present their claims.

In early 1642, lower-class English women, severely affected by the economic dislocation, launched an independent petition campaign without the assistance of fathers, husbands, or other male relatives—A development unprecedented in English history. Guizot provided a detailed account of this large-scale petitioning movement: "Petitions rained down like snowflakes from every corner of the country and from citizens of all classes; apprentices, small shopkeepers, poor labourers and women surrounded Westminster Hall to submit their petitions".^[9] Approximately four to five hundred women took part, comprising labourers, artisans, shop assistants, and other working women. They petitioned Parliament, complaining of the decline in trade and demanding an end to domestic strife, as well as relief for Protestants involved in the Irish conflict; Parliament initially paid no heed to their entreaty. A few days later, the women presented a more detailed petition, in which they declared: "It is generally considered a strange thing for women to express their views through petitions, as this is not befitting our gender; yet our duty to love God and our country compels us to do so".^[10] This petition asserted that women, like men, were members of the commonwealth and shared a responsibility to avert the calamity engulfing the nation; they demanded that Parliament cease the fighting and restore peace to their lives.

On 11 September 1648, numerous English women took part in a male-dominated petition campaign that called for an end to the rule of the monarchy and the nobility, the establishment of a more orderly parliament representative of the people's will, the cessation of conscription, and the realisation of religious toleration and equality before the law.^[11] Another major petitioning campaign by English women occurred in April 1649, a moment marked not only by severe economic crisis but also by political confrontation among the army, Parliament, and the radical Levellers. On this occasion, a large number of Leveller women assembled at Parliament to protest the economic crisis and demand the release of imprisoned Leveller leaders. Parliament responded with contempt: "You are petitioning for matters of which you have no understanding. Parliament has already provided answers to your husbands, who represent you in law; you ought to go home and wash the dishes". A week later, the women petitioners submitted another petition, couched in even stronger language, which read: "Are we not as interested as the people of this country in the freedoms and safeguards contained in the Petition of Right and the other good laws of this country? Can our lives, bodies, liberty, or property be taken away through due process of law? When our friends, four loyal and upright men, are dragged from their beds and forced from their homes by soldiers, must we sit quietly at home, indifferent to their suffering? 'As long as we have life and breath, we shall never leave them'".^[12] This statement underscored these women's right to defend their families and loved ones, revealing the emergence of an entirely new consciousness: Namely, that Leveller women now demanded to participate in political activity alongside men, and they buttressed their campaign with a petition bearing ten thousand women's signatures. Anne Laurence likewise observed: "The petitioning campaign launched by the Leveller women, whilst ostensibly aimed at rescuing their husbands, was in fact an action taken for their own benefit".^[13] Furthermore, between 1649 and 1650, the widows of soldiers who had perished in the English Civil War launched a petition demanding that Parliament honour the promise made to soldiers in 1642 to provide for

their wives and children; this was one of the few women's petitions to be issued in print at the time.^[14]

The awakening of political consciousness among English women was a gradual process. In 1642, female petitioners stressed that women sought not "equality with men, whether in authority or wisdom," but merely to "follow the male examples set before us"; they further acknowledged that their actions "might be considered strange and unbecoming of women".^[15] By 1649, however, the women petitioners rejected the notion that their husbands should speak on their behalf: "We are not at all satisfied with the answers you have given to our husbands." They confronted criticisms such as "When women meddle in state affairs, the country will certainly not fare well ... their husbands are to blame for not finding them better work." Indeed, in a petition dated May 1649, they declared: "We are equal to men in the state and in the home, and share the same interests as men; we ought therefore to share in rights and freedoms just as men do".^[16] In so doing, they advanced a nascent conception of equality, freedom, and rights shared by men and women. Through the petition campaigns they mounted during the Revolution, English women articulated their political rights and demands, giving expression to an emergent, though still inchoate, political consciousness.

4. The dilemma under the prohibition of public speech

Between 1642 and 1660, English women, acting individually or collectively, submitted numerous public petitions bearing tens of thousands of signatures to the ruling authorities. These petitions gave voice to the grievances of a vast number of women, coalescing into a unified cry that articulated their shared plight. Throughout the revolutionary period, however, petitions from women were frequently rejected by those in power on the grounds that such female political engagement was unprecedented and unlawful. Men hostile to women's collective action sought to discredit these petition campaigns by alleging that the petitions had in fact been written by men and that the petitioners themselves were women of low moral character. In August 1643, when three thousand women assembled at the gates of Parliament to petition for peace, supporters of the war derided them as "lowlifes" "whores" and "the dregs of the suburbs".^[17] The period between 1640 and 1650 witnessed a proliferation of satirical cartoons, ballads, and pamphlets that attacked women, while contemporary newspaper reports likewise cast women's involvement in political affairs in a negative light. Some female activists provoked such anxiety among their male contemporaries that men frequently joked about women entering Parliament. An anonymous writer of the time quipped that, were women to be granted rights, they would "especially feel superior to their husbands, to the point of becoming arrogant and overbearing".^[18]

Under early modern English law, women were doubly obscured; their legal status was subsumed under the patriarchal authority of their husbands, rendering them, in theory, incapable of independent action. In July 1653, a group of twelve female petitioners led by Catherine Chidley were informed that, as women—And many of them wives—They were not complete persons in the eyes of the law, and that the law would therefore afford them no redress.^[19] At that time, political participation by British women was widely regarded as a mere extension of the political interests of male relatives; women's political activities were routinely dismissed as "cronyism", publicly derided as ineffectual, or invoked as evidence that women were being manipulated.

The patriarchal system that prevailed in early modern Britain consigned women to a subordinate position in society and required their silence in political matters, as they were regarded as "the weak"—Inherently inferior by nature. During the English Revolution, however, women deployed public petitions to assert their rights to self-defence, dignity, reputation, and faith before local and national governing bodies. In this sense, British women petitioners served as a conduit linking the household, the village, and the institutions of the state; by harnessing the petition movement to convey their views to the authorities, they directly defied the patriarchal edict of silence imposed upon them. Yet the entrenched tradition of patriarchy and its deep-rooted denigration of women's status meant that the petition movement achieved only limited success. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that the active participation of women in petitioning during the English Revolution pioneered a new mode of engagement through which British women could enter openly into the political affairs of the nation.

5. Conclusion

In the mid- to late seventeenth century, British women actively participated in petitioning; through the submission of public petitions, they brought a range of concerns directly before Parliament, from

debt relief to demands for the release of imprisoned radicals, with some campaigns escalating into large-scale mobilisations and protests. As one scholar observed: "Liberated wives, rebellious daughters, female philosophers, female artists and others began to resist male authority—A phenomenon that pervaded the entire Restoration period".^[20] However, the concept of equal rights advanced by English women in their petitions at this time differed from that later advocated by nineteenth-century feminists; the rights they asserted constituted a struggle against the prejudices directed at women within a patriarchal society. The petitions submitted by British women during the revolution had little tangible impact; Parliament neither endorsed their demands nor accorded their public protests serious consideration. Nevertheless, they explicitly demanded equality with men, while expressing the hope that Parliament would give attentive hearing to their petitions and address their grievances. At this juncture, British women neither raised slogans characteristic of bourgeois democratic movements, such as those that would later emerge during the French Revolution, nor launched a feminist campaign for gender equality of the kind that would develop in the nineteenth century. Consequently, the petitioning activities undertaken by women amid the temporary breakdown of law and order during the English Revolution constituted an interlude rather than a fully fledged movement. Yet they challenged the patriarchal order, articulated the demands of the female community, and took an important step towards the awakening of female consciousness.

About the author

Xiaoyan Fu (1996.04-), female, from Chengdu, Sichuan, Lecturer at Yili Normal University, Master of History, Research Interests: British History.

References

- [1] Patricia Crawford. *The Challenges to Patriarchalism*, p.125. Lois Schwoerer, *Women's Public Political Voice*, p.60.
- [2] Richard Wilkinson. "How Humane was the English Civil War", *History Review*, 2001, p. 5.
- [3] Keith Lindley. *Popular Politics and Religion in Civil War London*, Brookfield, Scholarly Press, 1997, p. 410.
- [4] Catharine E Gray. *Women Writers and Public Debate in 17th-century Britain*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p.23.
- [5] Catharine E Gray. *Women Writers and Public Debate in 17th-century Britain*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 24.
- [6] Suzuki Mihoko. *The History of British Women's Writing, 1610–1690*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 66.
- [7] Amanda Jane Whiting. *Women and Petitioning in the Seventeenth-century English Revolution: Deference, Difference and Dissent*, 2015, p. 2.
- [8] Karin Bowie and Thomas Munck. 'Early Modern Political Petitioning and Public Engagement in Scotland, Britain and Scandinavia, 1550–1795', *Parliaments, Estates and Representation*, 38:3, pp. 271–278.
- [9] Guizot *History of the English Revolution of 1640* [M]. Translated by Wu Guangjian. Shanghai: Shanghai Sanlian Bookstore, 2011, p. 165.
- [10] Anon *A True Copie of the Petition of the Gentlewomen, and Tradesmen's Wives, in and about the City of London. Delivered to the Honourable Knights, Citizens, and Burgesses of the House of Commons in Parliament*, 4 February, London, 1641, p. 6.
- [11] Amanda Whiting 'Some women can shift It well enough: A Legal context for understanding the women petitioners of the seventeenth-century English revolution', *Australian Feminist Law Journal*, 2004, p. 2.
- [12] Anon *The Humble Petition of Diverse Well-Affected Women, of the Cities of London and Westminster, the Borough of Southwark, Hamlets, and Places Adjacent*, London, 1648.
- [13] Anne Laurence. *Women in England 1500–1760: A Social History*, p. 243.
- [14] Amanda Whiting. 'Some Women Can Shift It Well Enough: A Legal Context for Understanding the Women Petitioners of the Seventeenth-Century English Revolution', *Australian Feminist Law Journal*, 2004, p. 23.
- [15] Lawrence Stone. *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England: 1500–1800* [M]. Translated by Diao Xiaohua. Commercial Press. 2011. p. 233.
- [16] Anon. *The Humble Petition of Diverse Well-Affected Women, of the Cities of London and Westminster, the Borough of Southwark, Hamlets, and Places Adjacent*, London, 1648.
- [17] Jacqueline Eales. *Women in Early Modern England, 1500–1700*, UCL Press, 1998. p. 54.
- [18] Ann Hughes. *Gender and the English Revolution*, p. 55.
- [19] Jacqueline Eales. *Women in Early Modern England, 1500–1700*, UCL Press, 1998. p. 57.
- [20] Joan K. Kinnaird. "Mary Astell and the Conservative Contribution to English Feminism", *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 1979, p. 53.