

Josephine Butler, 1828–1906

‘It is a fact, that numbers of moral and religious people have permitted themselves to accept and condone in man what is fiercely condemned in woman.’ —Josephine Butler

JOSEPHINE BUTLER WAS AN ENGLISH FEMINIST and social reformer who devoted her life to improving the intellectual, spiritual and financial prospects of women of all classes. She campaigned for women’s suffrage, the right of women to better education, the end of coverture in British law (a law that made women the property of their husbands upon marriage), the abolition of child prostitution and an end to the human trafficking of young women and children into European prostitution.

Butler grew up in a relatively wealthy and politically connected progressive family which helped develop her a strong social conscience and firmly held religious ideals. Her father, John Grey, was a strong proponent of social reform and a campaigner against the slave trade, and his cousin was Earl Grey, British prime minister between 1830 and 1834. After her marriage to an Anglican divine and teacher Butler began to campaign for women’s rights in British law.

In 1867 Butler joined Anne Jemima Clough in establishing courses of advanced study for women. In 1868 she published *The Education and Employment of Women*. In her pamphlet, she argued for improved educational and employment opportunities for single women. Later that year she was appointed president of the North of England Council for the Higher Education of Women and became involved in the campaign to persuade Cambridge University to provide more opportunities for women students. This campaign resulted in the provision of lectures for women and later the establishment of Newnham College.

In 1869 she became involved in the campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Act, legislation that attempted to control the spread of venereal diseases—particularly in the British armed forces—through the forced medical examination of prostitutes, a process she described as surgical or steel rape. Butler toured the country making speeches denouncing the acts and attracted large audiences to hear her explain why these laws needed to be repealed. Many people were shocked that a woman would speak in public about sexual matters. The campaign achieved its final success in 1886 with the repeal of the Acts.

Butler also formed the International Abolitionist Federation, a Europe-wide organisation to combat similar systems on the continent. This came about as a result of touring European countries to gain support in the campaign against commercial sexual exploitation and state regulation of prostitution. Butler was influential in France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Belgium and the Netherlands, where groups of women were stirred into action to campaign for the civil rights of prostitutes.

Butler became involved in the campaign against child prostitution. In 1885 she joined with Florence Booth of the Salvation Army and William Thomas Stead, the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, to expose white slave traffic. They used the case of Eliza Armstrong, a thirteen year-old daughter of a chimney-sweep, who was bought for five pounds by a woman working for a London brothel. As a result of the publicity that the Armstrong case generated, Parliament passed the Criminal Law Amendment Act that raised the age of consent from thirteen to sixteen. Her final campaign was in the late-1890s, against the Contagious Diseases Acts which continued to be implemented in the British Raj.

Josephine Butler wrote more than ninety books and pamphlets, the majority supporting her campaigning. Although Josephine Butler worked with, and campaigned for, women who were regarded as immoral by contemporary standards she was able to keep her own reputation intact by her firm adherence to the acceptable rules assigned to her sex by Victorian society: marriage, motherhood, morality and piety.

Her campaign strategies changed the way feminist and suffragists conducted future struggles. After her death in 1906 the feminist intellectual Millicent Fawcett hailed her as ‘the most distinguished Englishwoman of the nineteenth-century’.*

PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPH OF JOSEPHINE BUTLER IN HER CAMPAIGNING POSE, COLLECTION OF THE WOMEN’S LIBRARY, LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS.

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