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# WOMEN'S LEGAL LANDMARKS: CELEBRATING FEMINIST LEGAL HISTORY

Erika Rackley and Rosemary Auchmuty

Women's legal history in the UK and Ireland is full of landmarks, turning points in law's response to women's lives and experiences. 2019 marks the centenary of women's formal entry into the legal profession. This was a key legal landmark for women. But it was not the first. Nor was it the last. Feminists have long had recourse to law as a key means of achieving equality. From 'Votes for Women' to #repealthe8th, the East End of London to Greenham Common, whether it has involved Sunday morning kidnappings, cows on Chiswick High Road, marital property, family allowances, tax reform, women bishops or image-based sexual abuse, women, feminists and women-led organisations

have been there campaigning and making the arguments for change.

The Women's Legal Landmarks Project was a unique interdisciplinary collaboration involving feminist scholars engaging in the process of 'landmarking' key legal events, cases and statutes for women in the UK and Ireland. By identifying and celebrating the legal landmarks for women that have been – and continue to be – significant in women's fight for justice and equality, we are able to reflect on how far women have come – and still have to go.

# WOMEN'S LEGAL LANDMARKS

**c. 940** Cyfraith Hywel (The Laws of Hywel Dda) advanced and recognised the rights of women in medieval Wales.



**1854** A Brief Summary of the Most Important Law Concerning Women by Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon offered a concise, unadulterated account of the main provisions governing the legal status of women.

**1918** Representation of the People Act 1918 gave the Parliamentary vote to all men over 21 and women over 30 who met (or whose husband met) minimum property qualifications.



**1918** Maternity and Child Welfare Act 1918 introduced arrangements for attending to the health of expectant and nursing mothers, and for children under five years of age, in England and Wales.

**1919** Article 7 of the Covenant of the League of Nations stated that its Secretariat would be open to both women and men.

**1958** Life Peerages Act 1958 provided for the appointment of women as life peers enabling women to sit in the House of Lords for the first time.

**1964** Married Women's Property Act 1964 enabled a wife to share housekeeping money (and any property derived from that money) equally with her husband, allowing married women without independent income to acquire their own money.

**1967** Abortion Act 1967 allowed women in England and Wales and Scotland to have a termination in certain defined circumstances.

**1975** Sex Discrimination Act 1975 protected women and men from discrimination 'on the grounds of sex' and, in certain instances, marital status.

**1976** Opening of the first Rape Crisis Centre

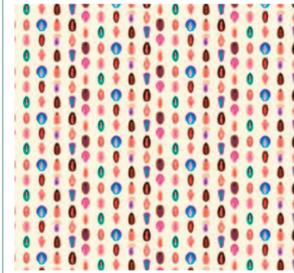


**1976** Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act 1976, s 4 provided anonymity for rape complainants.

**1977** Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977 enabled women to make a direct and legally enforceable claim upon the state when facing a housing crisis.

**1985** Prohibition of Female

Circumcision Act 1985 made it a criminal offence to practice, or aid and abet the practice of, FGM, except for specific medical purposes.



**1988** Finance Act 1988, s 32 ensured that the income of a woman living with her husband was not treated as his income for income tax purposes.

**1995** Fifteenth Amendment of the Constitution Act 1995 removed the ban on divorce from the Irish Constitution.

**Grounds for divorce:** Under the terms of the Fifteenth Amendment, 1995, a court may grant a decree of divorce in circumstances where:  
(i) at the date of the institution of the proceedings, one another for a period of, or periods amounting to, not less than one year, or periods amounting to not less than two years, or periods amounting to not less than three years, or periods amounting to not less than four years, or periods amounting to not less than five years, or periods amounting to not less than six years, or periods amounting to not less than seven years, or periods amounting to not less than eight years, or periods amounting to not less than nine years, or periods amounting to not less than ten years, or periods amounting to not less than eleven years, or periods amounting to not less than twelve years, or periods amounting to not less than thirteen years, or periods amounting to not less than fourteen years, or periods amounting to not less than fifteen years, or periods amounting to not less than sixteen years, or periods amounting to not less than seventeen years, or periods amounting to not less than eighteen years, or periods amounting to not less than nineteen years, or periods amounting to not less than twenty years;  
(ii) there is no reasonable prospect of a reconciliation;

**1999** Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999, s 41 excluded evidence and questions on a complainant's sexual history unless specific requirements were met.

**1999** *Islam v Secretary of State for the Home Department; R v Immigration Appeal Tribunal and Another, ex parte Shah* recognised gender as a protected characteristic and women as a particular social group within the meaning of the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951).

**2005** UK Ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (OP-CEDAW).

**2009** Policing and Crime Act 2009, s 14 created a strict liability offence in England and Wales to pay for, or promise to pay for, the sexual services of a person who has been coerced, deceived, forced or threatened by a third party into prostitution.

**2011** Concluding Observations of the UN Committee against Torture, Recommendation to Ireland Regarding the Magdalene Laundries.



**2015** Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015 was the first legislation in the United Kingdom to explicitly and specifically address violence against women as opposed to 'domestic violence' generally.



**2016** Abusive Behaviour and Sexual Harm (Scotland) Act 2016, s 2 criminalised some forms of image-based sexual abuse.

**c. 940**

**1900**

**1950**

**1975**

**1985**

**1995**

**2005**

**2018**

**1857** Matrimonial Causes Act 1857 gave women in England and Wales legal standing to use the civil courts to seek a decree of divorce or nullity.

**1882** Married Women's Property Act 1882 enabled a married woman to hold, acquire and dispose of her property.

**1888** Match Women's Strike at the Bryant and May factory in Bow, East London, advanced women's claims to a fair wage and better conditions of work.



**1919** Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919 enabled women to enter the legal profession and to become JPs.



**1928** *DPP v Jonathan Cape and Leopold Hill (the Well of Loneliness trial)* marked a high point of the legal and social visibility of lesbianism, with discussion extending beyond the courtroom into daily newspapers.

**1944** Education Act 1944 abolished the so-called marriage bar – a practice that had been an obstacle to the employment of married women teachers.

**1948** British Nationality Act 1948 allowed a British woman to retain her nationality when she married a foreign man.

**1967** National Health Service (Family Planning) Act 1967 enabled women in England and Wales to obtain contraceptive advice and services freely on the NHS, regardless of their marital status or reason.

**1968** Dagenham Car Plant Strike was a key step toward the enactment of the Equal Pay Act 1970.



**1971** Opening of the first Women's Refuge



**1978** *Davis v Johnson* confirmed that a husband's proprietary right to occupy the matrimonial home could be suspended, in the event of his physical abuse of his wife or partner.

**1979** Health (Family Planning) Act 1979 legalised the selling and importing of contraceptives, in certain circumstances, in Ireland.

**1980** *Williams & Glyn's Bank v Boland* established that wives could have overriding beneficial interests in the family home.

**1981-2000** Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp



**1990** Criminal Law (Rape)(Amendment) Act 1990, s 5 formally erased a husband's immunity from prosecution for marital rape in Ireland.

**1992** *R v Ahluwalia* allowed evidence of 'battered women's syndrome' to support the defences of diminished responsibility and provocation in homicide.

**1994** *Webb v EMO Air Cargo (UK) Ltd (No 2)* established that dismissing a pregnant woman was contrary to the Sex Discrimination Act 1975.

**2002** Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 allowed political parties in the UK to use positive discrimination to tackle persistent under-representation of women in Parliament and other elected bodies.

**2003** The National Assembly for Wales became the first legislative body in the world to have an equal number of men and women members.



**2012** Electoral (Amendment) (Political Funding) Act 2012 introduced a political gender quota in Ireland.



**2014** Bishops and Priests (Consecration and Ordination of Women) Measure 2014 enabled women to be consecrated as bishops.



**2017** Appointment of the first Woman President of the UK Supreme Court, Brenda Hale.



**2018** Thirty-sixth Amendment to the Irish Constitution repealed the '8th Amendment' which imposed near absolute ban on abortion in Ireland.

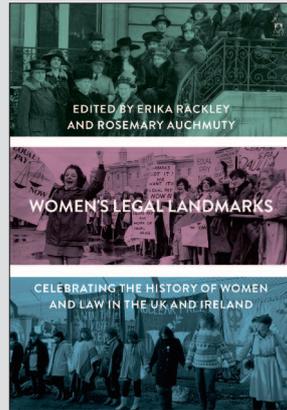


## About the Women's Legal Landmarks Project

The Women's Legal Landmarks Project was a unique interdisciplinary collaboration involving feminist scholars engaging in the process of 'landmarking' key legal events, cases and statutes for women in the UK and Ireland. Our aim was to offer a scholarly intervention into the recovery of women's lost history by combining legal and historical expertise to create the first scholarly anthology of legal landmarks for women. Together we worked to produce a collection of landmarks that demonstrated women's agency and activism in the achievement of law reform and justice.

## Find out more

*Women's Legal Landmarks: Celebrating the History of Women and the Law in the UK and Ireland* edited by Erika Rackley and Rosemary Auchmuty is out now.



Or visit our website:  
<https://womenslegallandmarks.com>



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- 7 **1981-2000: Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp**  
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