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Authority Without Autonomy: British Women and Imperial Nationality

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Abstract. This paper examines how British imperial institutions could grant women public authority while denying them autonomous legal status. It compares two settings: nineteenth-century missionary activity and the campaign for married women's independent nationality from the 1914 nationality code to the British Nationality Act 1948. Missionary work shows how domestic femininity could support teaching, publishing, organising, and moral intervention without displacing gender hierarchy. The nationality campaign posed a different challenge because it asked the state to end the rule by which marriage automatically determined a woman's national status. This paper traces how interwar reformers used equal-citizenship claims, international comparison, and League of Nations debates to weaken the legitimacy of derivative nationality. It also shows why reform remained limited in 1933: ministers prioritised uniform nationality rules across the Commonwealth. Full reform became possible in 1948 when feminist arguments for individual legal personality converged with constitutional change, especially the breakdown of the common imperial nationality code after Dominion divergence. The paper argues that the shift from authority within assigned roles to independent status is central to understanding both the limits of imperial gender reform and the conditions under which legal autonomy became politically achievable.

Keywords: British women, Imperial nationality, Married women's nationality, Feminist activism, British Empire

1. Introduction

The relationship between British women and empire is difficult to explain through a simple contrast between exclusion and empowerment. Imperial institutions could widen the range of work that women performed, but the terms on which that work became legitimate mattered. A woman might exercise moral, educational, or political influence while her authority remained attached to wifehood, religion, race, or imperial membership. The harder question was what happened when women claimed a legal status that did not depend on those assigned positions. This essay uses the distinction between authority and autonomy to reconsider British women's relationship to imperial nationality. It retains missionary activity as a comparative frame, but makes married women's nationality the central case because nationality law exposed dependence at the level of formal political membership rather than social convention alone.

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The comparison is deliberately asymmetrical. Missionary writing shows how domestic femininity could be made publicly useful without being displaced. Interwar reformers, by contrast, asked the state to stop treating marriage as a mechanism that transferred a woman's national status. The 1914 code and the debates preceding the British Nationality Act 1948 therefore reveal a conflict between individual legal personality and coordinated imperial nationality [1, 2].

This essay argues that British imperial institutions could accommodate women's authority when it operated through recognised roles, but resisted claims that required the legal basis of those roles to change. Interwar feminists weakened the legitimacy of dependent nationality by internationalising the issue and using foreign law to criticise British delay. Comparative pressure alone, however, did not remove the government's concern with uniform nationality rules across the Commonwealth. Full reform became possible in 1948 because two developments converged. Feminist arguments had made derivative nationality harder to defend, while constitutional divergence within the Commonwealth weakened the institutional case for a common code. Their interaction explains the reform more clearly than a linear narrative of emancipation.

2. Gendered authority and imperial hierarchy

2.1. Domesticity as public authority

Early missionary discourse provides a useful starting point because it shows that public action and legal or institutional independence were not the same thing. In his 1836 introductory essay on missionary marriage, Rufus Anderson argued that a Christian family could serve as a model to non-Christian societies. His emphasis on the home did not free the missionary wife from domesticity. Instead, it turned domesticity into an instrument of evangelisation. The wife acquired public significance because the family itself was imagined as a mobile expression of Christian order [3]. Domestic ideology did not lose relevance abroad; in missionary settings, it could become more politically and religiously useful.

This mechanism cautions against describing missionary activity as a simple escape from nineteenth-century gender constraints. Women's expanded participation often came through categories already treated as respectable: wife, moral woman, sympathetic visitor, and teacher of other women. Missionary societies could therefore enlarge women's practical responsibilities while preserving a gendered division of authority. Midgley shows that early nineteenth-century debates opened forms of female agency in charity, education, publishing, and work among women who were represented as inaccessible to male missionaries [4]. Recent research on Theodosia Barker Dean also shows that missionary settings could create opportunities in translation and publication that exceeded a narrowly auxiliary role [5]. These activities were significant, but their legitimacy did not necessarily rest on a claim that women possessed the same institutional authority as men.

The imperial dimension also requires qualification. Missions were not simply extensions of the British state, and treating them as such would flatten important differences among religious organisations, officials, settlers, and local societies. Dachs shows how missionary ambitions could become entangled with demands for British intervention in colonial situations, while Porter warns against assuming a direct identity between Protestant missions and empire-building [6, 7]. The relevant point is therefore not that one imperial institution prescribed a single role for women. Rather, missionary discourse could make gender hierarchy compatible with expanded female action, while colonial hierarchy supplied another structure through which that action acquired authority.

The woman missionary could occupy two positions at once. Within the Christian family, she remained defined by marriage. In relation to people represented as objects of conversion or

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education, however, she could appear as a bearer of religious and civilisational knowledge. Missionary rhetoric made these positions mutually reinforcing. This is why the distinction between authority and autonomy is more precise than a simple claim that empire either empowered or oppressed women.

2.2. Agency without independent status

The 1836 appeal published under the name "Lydia" makes this structure clearer. It addressed British Christian women through the language of sisterhood and directed their attention toward women in Asia who were portrayed as needing religious rescue [8]. This language could create a duty to act, but the relationship was not reciprocal. British women appeared as listeners, speakers, contributors, and possible workers; the women who justified the appeal appeared mainly as objects of knowledge and intervention. A civilisational hierarchy therefore coexisted with a gendered language of solidarity.

The pattern anticipates a problem identified in later histories of imperial feminism. British women could claim authority as representatives of colonised women when colonial conditions were presented as disorders that British activism was competent to diagnose and correct [9]. The agency involved could be real even when its terms of legitimacy were unequal. Cleall's study of missions to blind and deaf children similarly shows that women-led institutions could develop new educational practices while retaining Orientalist assumptions about "the East" [10].

This distinction matters for nationality because missionary authority did not require the institutional basis of women's status to be rewritten. A wife could do more by being a wife within a hierarchy that gave that role public value. A Christian woman could enter extensive religious work because femininity itself had been assigned an imperial function. Independent nationality made a different kind of demand. It did not ask government to make marital dependence more useful. It asked government to stop using marriage as the legal mechanism through which a woman's political membership was determined.

The contrast that structures the rest of the essay is summarised in Table 1. These categories are not stages in a predetermined sequence; they identify different institutional logics. Missionary authority could expand because it remained compatible with hierarchy. Interwar claims to independent nationality created sharper institutional conflict because they challenged the rule that made a wife's legal status derivative. By 1948, reform became possible because both the legitimacy of that rule and the constitutional mechanism supporting it had changed.

Table 1. Competing logics of women's status in the British imperial order

Configuration	Institutional basis	Analytical consequence
Missionary authority	Respectable feminine roles become useful to evangelisation and imperial work [3, 4].	Action expands without requiring an independent legal or institutional status.
Interwar nationality claim	Marriage should not automatically alter either spouse's nationality [1, 11].	Autonomy requires a change to the rule that makes the wife legally derivative.
1948 settlement	Independent nationality operates within a revised Commonwealth structure [12, 13].	Feminist delegitimation and constitutional divergence make reform compatible.

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3. Marriage, nationality, and equal citizenship

3.1. Derivative nationality and the legal wife

The British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act 1914 made the legal problem unusually explicit. Section 10 provided that the wife of a British subject was deemed a British subject and the wife of an alien was deemed an alien [14]. The provision organised nationality around the marital unit. A British-born woman who married an alien could lose British nationality, while an alien woman could become British through marriage to a British man. The issue was not only that the rule could produce hardship. It made the husband's status the legal reference point through which the wife's relationship to the state was defined.

Nationality was not an abstract label. It affected passports, protection, movement, and family relations across imperial settings. The experience of British communities in twentieth-century China shows how codified nationality shaped the practical meaning of British status at the edges of empire, where legal classification could affect access to official protection and extraterritorial privilege [2]. The marital rule therefore had consequences beyond symbolic gender hierarchy. A change of status could alter the institutional resources available to a woman and influence whether officials treated her as a member of the protected British community.

Formal law also operated within a wider field of administrative discretion. Migration controls across the British Empire were applied through judgements about race, class, health, morality, and gender. Recent work on migration control argues that supposedly general rules often produced uneven outcomes because officials exercised case-by-case discretion [15]. Dependent nationality could therefore interact with broader assumptions about desirable membership, especially in interracial or cross-national families. The gendered structure of nationality cannot be separated from imperial systems that regulated mobility and belonging more generally.

A comparison with the United States and the Canadian borderlands supports this point without treating the legal systems as equivalent. Debates over derivative citizenship could become disputes about family separation, motherhood, and the state's power to classify a woman as foreign [16]. Legal personality mattered because nationality rules were implemented through administrative decisions, not only through abstract doctrine.

The 1914 rule also shows why the language of family unity could be politically persuasive. If marriage was assumed to create one national unit, assigning husband and wife the same nationality could appear administratively coherent rather than discriminatory. Yet that coherence depended on an unequal choice of legal centre. The husband's nationality defined the family, and the wife's status changed to preserve unity. The law did not simply prefer sameness between spouses; it specified whose identity would produce that sameness. Reformers' demand for independent nationality was therefore more than a technical adjustment. It challenged the gendered arrangement hidden within an apparently neutral preference for a unified family status.

3.2. Equal citizenship as an individual claim

The 1923 equal-citizenship questionnaire reported by the Aberdeen Journal stated the reform principle in a form that reveals its scope. Candidates were asked to support the "Right of British married women to retain their nationality, and alien women not to acquire British nationality by marriage" [11]. The two parts of the demand should be read together. Reformers did not seek only to protect British-born women from losing a valued status. They also opposed the automatic

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acquisition of British nationality by foreign women. The problem was not the direction of transfer, but the use of marriage itself as the trigger.

This distinction is analytically important. A campaign concerned only with British women's retention of nationality could have been understood as a defence of a privileged national identity. The second demand makes the underlying principle clearer: neither a British wife nor a foreign wife should have her national status automatically rewritten by her husband's nationality. The married woman was thus recast as a legal subject whose relationship with the state should survive marriage unless she chose to change it. Autonomy here does not mean the absence of social ties or family responsibility. It means that marriage should no longer operate as a statutory transfer of political membership.

The campaign also had a longer organisational history than a single newspaper questionnaire suggests. Chrystal Macmillan treated married women's nationality as a question of full citizenship and linked British lobbying to legal work on the international stage [17]. This continuity matters because it prevents the 1948 reform from appearing as a sudden postwar discovery of equality. Women's political activism did not end with enfranchisement, nor can it be neatly divided into isolated "waves." Organisations carried campaigns, skills, and institutional memory through periods that older narratives sometimes described as politically quiet [18].

A rights-based reading must still account for divisions within feminism and the limits of imperial citizenship. British-subject status did not have the same meaning across the empire. In the interwar Caribbean, political actors used the language of citizenship to make claims about mobility, protection, and political voice even though racial hierarchy limited the practical value of imperial membership [19]. The demand for independent nationality among married British women therefore arose within an imperial order in which formal membership already had unequal effects. Equal nationality could remove one gender hierarchy without creating equal imperial citizenship more broadly.

This constraint clarifies both what the campaign sought and what it could not achieve. Reformers challenged the rule that a wife assumed her husband's national status. They did not dismantle racialised mobility regimes, colonial political inequality, or every gender difference in nationality law. Independent nationality was therefore an important component of equal citizenship, but it was not equivalent to complete citizenship equality.

The limits of reform also appear in the language of sympathetic hesitation. In 1923, parliamentary candidate F. C. Thomson supported the principle but raised financial and taxation questions concerning married couples [11]. Such a response is revealing because it no longer depends on a direct defence of female subordination. Equality can be acknowledged in principle and still delayed through administrative objections. As the campaign developed, similar arguments appeared around conflicts of law, statelessness, Commonwealth consultation, and imperial uniformity. The political question had shifted from whether wives deserved an independent legal status to whether the state was prepared to reorganise related institutions on that basis. Figure 1 summarises this shift from authority grounded in an assigned role to a claim for independent status.

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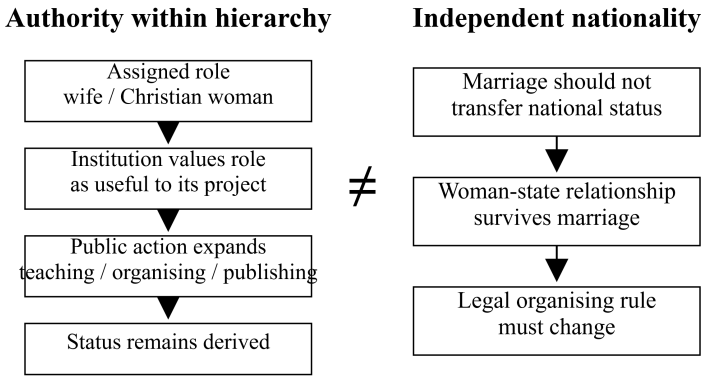

Figure 1. From assigned role to independent status (based on [1, 4])

4. International pressure and commonwealth constraint

4.1. Comparison, prestige, and feminist strategy

After the First World War, married women's nationality became an international feminist issue. The Hague Codification Conference of 1930 and subsequent League of Nations debates gave campaigners a forum in which national rules could be compared and challenged [20, 21]. This internationalisation did not produce a single feminist programme. Women's organisations differed over strategy and legal priorities, while the League often balanced claims for sex equality against state sovereignty and the search for interstate agreement [21]. The international arena therefore mattered less as a direct route to reform than as a source of arguments, networks, and comparative evidence that could be used in national campaigns.

The political value of international law is clear in the campaign at The Hague. Even when activists failed to secure the immediate legal outcome they wanted, married women's nationality became a test of whether women could influence the international rules that defined their status [22]. Research on interwar international feminism also shows that Geneva mattered not only as a site of institutional lobbying, but as a source of political resources that organisations could carry back into domestic campaigns [23]. International engagement changed the scale of the argument. British law could now be judged as one national model among competing legal systems rather than treated as an internal settlement between Parliament and British women.

Helena Normanton used this comparative field strategically in a 1933 Daily Telegraph article. By asking whether British women preferred to be "worse off" than women in Soviet Russia, she turned foreign law into a judgement on British political conditions [24]. The Soviet comparison was provocative because it drew on a state that sat outside conventional British claims to constitutional superiority. If such a political rival could recognise a form of female legal autonomy that British law denied, the comparison weakened the assumption that British institutions naturally represented political progress.

The phrase "worse off" performed two kinds of work. First, it challenged the claim that independent nationality was impractical by pointing to states that had already separated a woman's status from her husband's. Second, it reversed the usual direction of comparison. British law itself became the object of measurement rather than the standard by which other societies were judged. The contrast with missionary rhetoric is striking. Missionary discourse often justified British women's action by identifying deficiencies elsewhere. Interwar nationality campaigners instead used developments abroad to identify a deficiency at home.

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A Times report on a March 1933 deputation shows the same strategy at a larger scale. The deputation argued that about half the world's population lived under nationality codes that gave women an independent position and concluded that "This country must not be left behind" [25]. The statistic was political as well as descriptive. It created a comparative benchmark against which British law could be judged. Reform was presented not only as justice for individual women, but also as evidence that Britain remained politically advanced.

Feminist strategy also contained an unresolved imperial dimension. Normanton complained that women in many countries had greater control over nationality than women in "our Imperial Commonwealth" [24]. The possessive language matters. She did not need to stand outside the Commonwealth to criticise it. Membership itself became leverage: if British women were relatively dependent, Britain should reform in order to sustain claims to political leadership. The 1933 deputation likewise opposed indefinite delay in the name of Dominion agreement rather than rejecting Commonwealth consultation altogether [25].

This was politically useful but conceptually ambivalent. International comparison undermined claims of British political superiority, yet the proposed remedy could still imagine Britain as the state that should lead Commonwealth reform. The movement set imperial self-description against imperial practice without necessarily abandoning imperial leadership. This fits a broader history in which British citizenship policy was shaped by transnational and settler-imperial mobility rather than by the boundaries of a self-contained national state [26].

4.2. Uniformity, the 1933 Act, and the politics of delay

The 1933 parliamentary debates show the limit of comparative shaming. The government acknowledged that existing law could cause serious hardship and supported action to reduce statelessness, but it did not accept fully independent nationality for married women. Home Secretary Sir John Gilmour argued that nationality law could not be changed by Britain alone because it formed part of a wider imperial system and broader reform required Commonwealth agreement [27]. This evidence is important because the institutional constraint appears directly in ministerial argument rather than only in feminist criticism.

The British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act 1933 was therefore a partial reform. It protected a British woman from losing British nationality through marriage when she did not acquire her husband's nationality, thereby reducing the risk of statelessness [28]. It did not establish the broader principle that marriage should be irrelevant to nationality in every case. The state corrected one severe consequence of dependence without abandoning the legal framework in which a wife's nationality remained derivative when another nationality was available.

The distinction between relief and principle is central. A government can repair the most visible harm produced by a rule while retaining the rule's organising logic. In 1933, statelessness was treated as an exceptional problem to be corrected. Independent nationality would have required the state to begin from a different premise: a married woman possessed a nationality of her own, separate from her husband's. Baldwin shows that ministers repeatedly invoked the imperial character of British nationality law and disagreement among the Dominions to block reforms that had substantial support within Britain [1]. The obstacle was not simply a failure to recognise personal hardship. It was a reluctance to make the individual woman's legal status the point around which the wider system had to be reorganised.

The government's position should therefore be read as a constitutional argument rather than dismissed as bureaucratic evasion. A common nationality code helped define the legal relationship between Britain and the self-governing Dominions. Ministers treated that coordination as a value

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worth preserving. Yet recognising the constitutional value of uniformity does not make the policy neutral. When the government described imperial nationality unity as central to the issue, it also decided which relationship should receive priority [27]. The legal relationship among Commonwealth states was placed ahead of a married woman's claim to an independent relationship with the state.

This ordering of priorities also helps explain why the League could not resolve the British issue from outside. International organisations were reluctant to impose a single principle of equality on states that disagreed over nationality and family law [21]. The Commonwealth argument was a specifically imperial version of a wider conflict between individual equality and state control over nationality.

The constitutional explanation still needs qualification. It is not enough to say that a neutral common code happened to delay reform for women. The code itself contained a gendered rule, and British ministers spent years defending coordination around that rule. Administrative uniformity therefore helped preserve marital dependence after direct moral defences of female subordination had become less persuasive. Normanton's complaint that women were being sacrificed to uniformity exposed the distributional choice hidden inside technical language [24]. The issue was not whether uniformity had value, but who was expected to bear its cost.

Figure 2 places the legal and political milestones in chronological order. The timeline helps avoid two misleading interpretations. The first is that the 1933 Act solved the problem; it did not. The second is that nothing changed before 1948. In fact, the period saw sustained feminist organisation, international comparison, limited statutory relief, and growing constitutional divergence within the Commonwealth. The 1948 settlement depended on the interaction of these developments rather than on a single turning point.

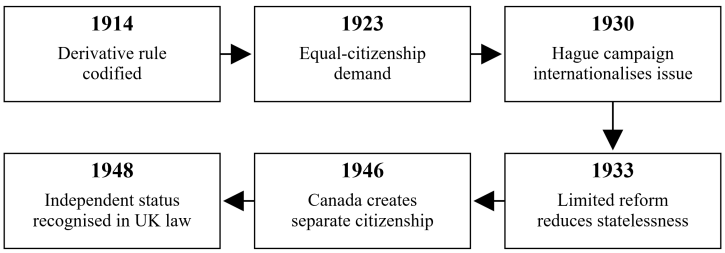

Figure 2. The reordering of married women's nationality, 1914-1948 (based on [1, 17])

5. 1948 reform and the reordering of imperial citizenship

5.1. The breakdown of the common code

The British Nationality Act 1948 is best understood as a constitutional reordering in which a long-standing feminist demand became compatible with a new Commonwealth structure. The Act removed the automatic effect of marriage on a woman's nationality: a British woman no longer lost her status simply by marrying an alien, and an alien woman no longer became British solely through marriage [12]. Government language had also changed. In the House of Lords, the Lord Chancellor described reform of married women's status as long overdue, indicating that the older rule had lost much of its political legitimacy [29].

Equally important was the institutional explanation offered in the same debates. The earlier system had depended on Commonwealth countries maintaining broadly similar nationality laws and

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changing them in coordination. By 1948, that method was no longer sustainable. The Lord Chancellor noted that Canada's Citizenship Act 1946 had already displaced the old arrangement and that the new British legislation would allow each Commonwealth country to define its own citizenship while retaining a shared status [29]. Lord Pethick-Lawrence explicitly linked the old requirement for uniformity to the long delay over married women's nationality [29].

The Commons debates confirm this reading. Home Secretary Chuter Ede said that reciprocal amendment of substantially similar nationality laws had proved impracticable, while the Attorney-General traced the growing divergence among Commonwealth countries and the effect of separate Canadian citizenship [30]. Hansen places this change in a broader constitutional context: the 1948 Act sought to preserve a Commonwealth relationship after Canada had effectively broken the old common meaning of nationality [13]. Reform of married women's status was therefore connected to, but not identical with, the reorganisation of imperial citizenship.

Canada should not be reduced to a simple egalitarian model. The 1946 legislation made women's nationality independent of marital status, but women who had lost status under the earlier rules still faced difficulties with repatriation, and the new regime remained racially unequal [31]. Canada's significance for Britain lay less in its perfection as a model than in its unilateral action. That action showed that the common code could no longer compel the Dominions to move in step.

The 1948 settlement did not mark the disappearance of empire. The Act created citizenship of the United Kingdom and Colonies while retaining the wider status of British subject. Postwar mobility policy continued to operate through imperial and Commonwealth frameworks [32]. The institutional change was narrower but still important: uniform nationality law across the Commonwealth was no longer treated as the necessary form of constitutional unity. Once that common code had begun to break down, reforming married women's nationality no longer threatened a system that was itself being replaced.

5.2. Equality after institutional change

Institutional change alone cannot explain why the new flexibility was used to recognise married women's independent status. A different Commonwealth structure removed an obstacle, but it did not determine the content of British reform. Decades of feminist campaigning had already supplied the principle that could fill the new legal space. In 1948, ministers could criticise the treatment of a wife as an extension of her husband and defend her right to choose her nationality without marriage automatically intervening [33]. The contrast with 1933 is not that officials suddenly discovered hardship. It is that the institutional rationale for denying individual choice had weakened at the same time that the argument for individual choice had become politically acceptable within government.

This interaction makes a purely voluntarist feminist explanation incomplete. Campaigners had presented strong arguments for equality well before 1948, yet those arguments repeatedly failed against the government's commitment to Commonwealth uniformity. A purely structural explanation is also insufficient. The breakdown of the common code did not itself create the idea that a married woman should possess an independent nationality. Feminist organisations had spent decades turning dependent nationality into a political problem and making the rule harder to justify. Reform occurred when a delegitimised gender rule lost the institutional framework that had protected it.

A useful comparison appears in postwar employment. The removal of marriage bars in teaching and the civil service reflected labour demand and administrative reform, but formal abolition did not immediately eliminate discrimination [34]. Nationality involved a different legal mechanism, yet the comparison shows how equality can emerge through the interaction of sustained political pressure and changing institutional incentives.

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Figure 3 therefore presents 1948 not as an endpoint but as a point of convergence. One line consists of feminist organisation, international comparison, and the declining legitimacy of derivative nationality. The other consists of Dominion divergence and the breakdown of the common code. Their convergence made reform both politically defensible and constitutionally workable. This model does not treat a general "decline of empire" as a sufficient cause. It identifies specific changes in imperial structure that altered the opportunities for gender reform.

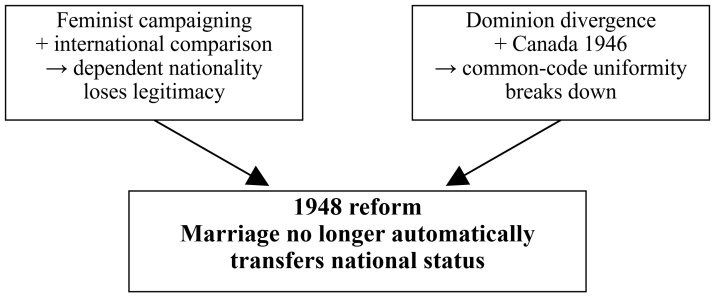

Figure 3. Why reform became possible in 1948 (based on [13, 21])

6. Conclusion

The history of British women and imperial nationality is more clearly explained by distinguishing authority from autonomy than by asking whether empire simply empowered or restricted women. Missionary writing shows why. Domestic femininity could acquire public force when it was made useful to evangelisation and colonial hierarchy. British women could teach, publish, organise, translate, and claim moral responsibility without the institutions that authorised those activities recognising an independent legal status. Their agency was real, but it was often derived from roles that the existing order already knew how to value.

Married women's nationality presented a different institutional problem. The 1914 law did not merely limit a sphere of activity. It made marriage the legal mechanism through which a woman's national status followed her husband's. The equal-citizenship demand reported in 1923 challenged that mechanism in both directions: British women should not lose nationality through marriage, and foreign women should not acquire it automatically. This was a specific claim to independent legal personality, not a request for a more useful role within dependence.

Interwar campaigners strengthened that claim through international comparison. The Soviet example and the 1933 deputation's warning that Britain should not "lag behind" turned foreign law into evidence that independent nationality was both practicable and a test of British political standing. Yet the campaign's language also revealed an unresolved attachment to Commonwealth leadership. Reformers often wanted Britain to lead the imperial system toward equality rather than abandon that system as a political frame. Their strategy could delegitimise British delay, but it could not remove the government's commitment to a common nationality code.

The result was not complete liberation from imperial or gender hierarchy. The 1948 Act retained a Commonwealth framework, preserved other inequalities, and operated within a broader system of racialised mobility and unequal citizenship. Its significance is more specific. Marriage ceased to be the automatic legal route through which a British woman's nationality was determined. That reform became possible when a claim to individual status met an institutional order that could no longer preserve dependence through uniformity. Imperial structures had been able to expand women's

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responsibilities when those responsibilities served existing hierarchies. They were less able to absorb a claim that required the terms of legal membership themselves to change.

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