

THE NEED FOR WOMEN AS POOR LAW GUARDIANS.*

I HOPE that the subject of my paper will not be considered outside the scope of the Section of State Medicine. The position and difficulties of doctors who are serving the State under the Poor Law Acts have often been discussed here, and as my subject concerns the composition of the Board which appoints the dispensary and workhouse doctors, and which controls the management and nursing of the workhouse hospitals, I think it may fairly lie within our province. In England, under the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, there is no technical disqualification on the ground of sex to prevent women serving on Boards of Guardians, and yet for forty years after the passing of the Act no woman presented herself for election. Under the stimulus of the wider outlook which more advanced education gave them, women looked abroad for fields of usefulness and work beyond their own immediate homes, and in 1875 a woman came forward as a poor law guardian in Kensington and was elected. Since then the number of women guardians has increased at every election. In 1887 there were 50, and this year there are over 800. Their work has received the unqualified approval both of the ratepayers and the Local Government Board, and anyone who has followed the recent series of articles in the *British Medical Journal* on English workhouses will have observed that even that conservative journal notes the benefit of having women on the Boards.

In Ireland the Acts relating to Poor Law administration are different from those of England, and the fundamental Act—that of 1838—contains the words “male person” in the description of the qualifications of a guardian. This expression was probably inserted quite inadvertently; it had not then dawned upon the minds of law-makers that women might want a share in administration. Standing as it does, however, it of course excludes women absolutely until a short amending clause can be put through Parliament, and in the press of other business it is very difficult

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