

# Transnational Women's Movements

by Leila J. Rupp

This article traces the formation of a first wave of transnational organizing among women from the late 19th century through the Second World War. The International Council of Women, International Alliance of Women, and Women's International League for Peace and Freedom brought together women committed to improving the status of women. They worked with each other and a variety of other groups. Although these organizations primarily attracted elite, Christian, older women from Europe and North America, they developed a feminist internationalism they hoped would bond women from all around the globe. Their efforts at the League of Nations kept women's issues on the international agenda, showing that international feminism was not a creation of the 1970s.

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## Women's movements

The first wave of a transnational women's movement emerged in the late 19th century out of a variety of connections forged across national borders. Women travellers, migrants, missionaries, and writers made contacts across the Atlantic that prepared the way for more formalized interactions. A variety of movements, including abolitionism (→ Media Link #ab), socialism, peace, temperance, and moral reform, called women's attention to the cross-national character of their causes and brought together women from different nations in mixed-gender meetings.<sup>1</sup> With the first stirrings of organized feminism in the United States and Europe, connections among women solidified. The transnational development of feminist ideologies led to formalized contacts among women committed to women's rights rather than some other cause. The first international women's congress, the *Congrès international des droit des femmes*, convened in Paris in 1878 in connection with the World Exposition.<sup>2</sup> All of this activity laid the groundwork for the founding of international women's organizations, which institutionalized and perpetuated the impulse to work on behalf of women on the transnational stage.<sup>3</sup>

▲ 1

## The International Council of Women

In 1888, the second international women's conference, sponsored by the U.S. National Woman Suffrage Association in Washington, D.C., gave birth to the first lasting multipurpose transnational women's organization, the International Council of Women (ICW).<sup>4</sup> U.S. suffrage leaders Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902) (→ Media Link #ad) and Susan B. Anthony (1820–1906) (→ Media Link #ae) had travelled to England and France in 1882 and 1883, where they met with women reformers and worked to form an international suffrage association. This idea came to fruition when Anthony prodded the U.S. suffrage group to invite international representatives to attend its 1888 meeting. Despite the suffrage connection, the invitation went out broadly to women's literary clubs, temperance societies, labor groups, moral purity

societies, peace organizations, and professional groups.

▲2

The idea behind the ICW was that existing women's groups would organize into National Councils, which would then join the ICW. The first National Council was formed in the United States, followed by Canada, Germany, Sweden, Australia, Great Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands. By 1914, the ICW consisted of 23 National Councils, growing to 36 by 1939. As National Councils formed and affiliated with the ICW, the international body itself remained shadowy, taking little responsibility beyond planning the quinquennial congresses. The international structure began to solidify and the ICW took on substantive issues at the 1899 congress, when the leadership formed International Standing Committees on peace and on the legal position of married women. Later congresses added committees committed to suffrage, the traffic in women, trades and professions, public health and child welfare, and immigration.

▲3

From the beginning, the ICW presented itself as a general women's organization with a wide-ranging program. It was the most conservative of the major international groups, with aristocratic leadership in the early years (→ Media Link #af) and a commitment to avoiding controversial positions. By trying to chart a course acceptable to all women, it failed to please many. At the 1899 congress, the ICW leadership insisted that anti-suffragists deserved a hearing at a session on women's political rights. This eventually led to the establishment of the second transnational women's organization, the International Alliance of Women, originally named the International Woman Suffrage Alliance.

▲4

## The International Alliance of Women

In response to the ICW's position in 1899, German suffragists Lida Gustava Heymann (1868–1943) (→ Media Link #ag) and Anita Augspurg (1857–1943) (→ Media Link #ah) called an alternative meeting that advocated the founding of an international women's suffrage association.<sup>5</sup> In response, the U.S. suffrage organization once again invited international representatives to attend its meeting in 1902, where delegates from ten countries planned to hold a founding conference in conjunction with the next ICW congress in Berlin in 1904.

▲5

Unlike the ICW, the Alliance had a clear goal from the outset. Every two years, the organization held a congress in a different country in order to stimulate and support national suffrage activity. The original six national auxiliaries, in Australia, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United States, and Great Britain, grew to 26 in 1913 and 51 in 1929. Originally national auxiliaries were required to have no purpose other than suffrage, but as the first countries granted women the right to vote before and just after the First World War, the Alliance began to take up other questions as well, including prostitution, equal pay, the nationality of married women, slavery, and, especially, peace. By 1920, the rash of postwar enfranchisements had created a division between suffrage "haves" and "have-nots". Some leaders thought the organization should simply disband, others that it should continue to fight for voteless women everywhere, and others that it should take up the issue of peace. In the end, the group continued to fight for suffrage where it had not yet been granted but also took on other issues. As a reflection of the broadened program, the Alliance took the name "International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship", eventually becoming simply the "International Alliance of Women". Although its work increasingly overlapped with that of the ICW, and the two organizations discussed the possibility of merger, the Alliance maintained its separate existence and its character as an explicitly feminist organization.

▲6

## The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

Just as the issue of suffrage led to the emergence of the Alliance out of the ICW, the issue of peace led to the birth of a new organization from the Alliance. The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom was the brainchild of Alliance members who did not want the outbreak of the First World War to scuttle all work for peace.<sup>6</sup> The work of the ICW ground to a halt when the war began, and the Alliance had to cancel its 1915 congress, scheduled for Berlin. Dutch Alliance member Aletta Jacobs (1854–1929) (→ Media Link #aj) issued an invitation to plan a meeting, which took place in 1915 in The Hague. A "Call to the Women of All Nations", sent to women's organizations, mixed-gender

groups, and individual women, solicited participation from female delegates who agreed with two major resolutions: that international disputes should be settled by pacific means, and that women should have the vote. Women from both the neutral and warring countries, including Austria, Belgium, Britain, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the United States, met and called for continuous mediation, women's enfranchisement, the establishment of an international society of nations, the convening of a congress of women alongside the peace conference that would follow the war, and – the controversial contribution of Hungarian pacifist Rosika Schwimmer (1877–1948) (→ Media Link #ak) – the sending of envoys from the congress to the belligerent and neutral nations in an attempt to end the war. The Hague Congress set up an International Committee of Women for Permanent Peace and planned for the development of national sections. At war's end, the group held a congress in Zurich and took on the permanent name of Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF).

▲7

The new organization established headquarters in Geneva, starting right off, unlike the ICW and the Alliance, with a functioning international structure. In 1915, it claimed 13 national sections, growing to 22 in 1921. Unlike the ICW, which hoped for wide membership and eagerly totaled up the numbers in its National Councils, the WILPF considered itself a vanguard organization and valued adherence to principles over a large membership. It was the most radical of the three big international groups, although issues such as absolute pacifism, the necessity of revolutionary social transformation, and opposition to imperialism (→ Media Link #al) remained controversial within the ranks. In contrast to the Council and the Alliance, both of which sought to protect the autonomy of their national constituent groups, the League prided itself on its willingness to meet during the First World War, to speak out against fascism in the 1930s, and to take strong positions on the eve of the Second World War. As a result of its progressive character, the organization suffered periodic attacks from right-wing groups and the media.

▲8

Despite internal conflicts and the defection of those who abandoned pacifism as another war – one more clearly connected to the defense of freedom – threatened, the League kept to the course laid out at the 1915 Congress of Women, continuing to work towards the achievement of peace and the full emancipation of women.

▲9

## Transnational coalitions

These three major transnational women's groups, with related origins but different natures and trajectories, cooperated and competed with a host of other bodies in the years between the First and Second World War. Reaching across borders, women came together as socialists, advocates of single issues (such as equal rights), members of occupational categories, adherents of different religions, and inhabitants of different regions of the world. Some multinational bodies interacted on a regular basis with the Council, Alliance, and League, while others kept their distance. This was particularly true of the socialist women's movement, which rejected any cooperation with what it considered bourgeois women's organizations, at least until the period of the Popular Front, despite the presence of socialist women in groups such as WILPF. As the threat of fascism loomed and war seemed increasingly likely, some women from the big transnational groups participated in two Popular Front organizations, the *Comité Mondial des Femmes contre la Guerre et le Fascisme*, formed in Paris in 1934, and the women's commission of the *Rassemblement Universel pour la Paix* was, founded in 1936.

▲10

Among the bourgeois groups, cooperation took a number of forms from the very beginning. On the most basic level, organizations regularly welcomed "fraternal" delegates from the other bodies to their congresses. The three major organizations tried to plan the timing and location of their meetings to facilitate the attendance of members who belonged to more than one group and who had to travel from overseas. Organizations sometimes shared office space and often exchanged publications and reported each others' news. Even if they sometimes jealously guarded their autonomy and occasionally competed, they also managed to forge an institutional form for cooperation in the 1920s and 1930s.

▲11

Four coalitions emerged in the 1920s and 1930s to foster cooperation among the entire universe of transnational women's organizations. In 1925, the ICW took steps to form what came to be known as the Joint Standing Committee

of the Women's International Organisations to push for the appointment of women to the League of Nations. The body was designed to bring together organizations that were feminist or concerned especially with women's interests. It began its work by soliciting names of women qualified to serve on committees of the League of Nations. The Joint Standing Committee claimed some success in winning appointments of women to various committees, if generally those were specifically concerned with women and children.

▲ 12

Responding to pressure from organized women, the League of Nations itself set up the second coalition, the Women's Consultative Committee on Nationality. This group was to develop policies on the nationality of women married to citizens of another country. Traditionally, some countries allowed such women to keep their nationality while others required them to take the nationality of their husbands. This left some women in the position of becoming stateless, if their own nationalities were revoked while their husbands' countries did not grant them citizenship. The problem had been exacerbated during the First World War, when British women married to German men became enemy aliens while German women married to British men could claim British citizenship. The transnational women's organizations were divided on how best to remedy the issue, leading to an impasse in this committee.

▲ 13

The Liaison Committee of the Women's International Organisations, the third coalition, took on a broad range of issues. Why the bodies belonging to the Joint Standing Committee decided to form a new coalition rather than extend the focus of the old one is a mystery, but in any case the Liaison Committee, established in 1931, quickly took on a life of its own. It spun off the fourth coalition, the Disarmament (later Peace and Disarmament) Committee in 1931 to promote the success of the League of Nations-sponsored Disarmament Conference.

▲ 14

The formation of these four coalitions marks the high tide of the transnational women's movement before the Second World War. Like mixed gender or male transnational organizations concerned with a vast array of issues, from agriculture to law, women's societies multiplied in the interwar years as the League of Nations opened up new opportunities for members to converge on Geneva and lobby delegates.<sup>7</sup> Although relations within and among coalitions proved stormy, the desire among women's groups in the interwar period to coordinate work is striking. Rather than being a sign of discord and decline, the proliferation of transnational organizations provided strength and stability to the transnational women's movement.

▲ 15

## The composition of the transnational women's movement

In theory, the three major transnational women's organizations welcomed women of all stations from every corner of the earth. But in fact, the groups originated and grew primarily in Europe and the "neo-Europes", those places such as the United States, Canada, and Australia settled by European colonists. Despite grand pronouncements of universality, obstacles to the equal participation of all groups of women belied the global ambitions of the organizations, creating a movement of predominantly European-origin, elite, Christian, older women.

▲ 16

Almost all of the leading members claimed a European heritage, no matter where they lived. The official languages of English, French, and German reinforced Euro-American dominance, as did the location of almost all congresses in either North America or Europe. In addition, a kind of feminist orientalism pervaded the international women's organizations, assuming that women in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America needed the guidance of Western women to find their way to freedom and equality.

▲ 17

Besides this, only elite women – through wealth or national prominence – had the resources to travel long distances, especially across the Atlantic, to attend meetings and congresses. (→ Media Link #an) Wealthy women could pay their own way and help support the organizations, and prominent national leaders, if they lacked means, could count on the support of their organizations or patrons to help pay the costs of travel.

Further, the vast majority of members were Christians, and a Christian spirit pervaded the organizations. Jewish women encountered not only Christian assumptions and traditions but also anti-Semitism (→ Media Link #ao). Yet, a number of them, unlike women from other religions, also held central leadership positions. The sole Muslim woman to play a prominent role was Huda Sha`rawi (1879–1947) (→ Media Link #ap), a leading Egyptian feminist who served on the Alliance board. Muslim women faced not only Christian assumptions but a pervasive characterization of Islamic societies as backward and particularly degrading to women. Further, the issue of Palestine and Jewish immigration (→ Media Link #aq) was volatile, leading to a conflict between Sha`rawi and Rosa Manus (1881–1943) (→ Media Link #ar), a prominent Dutch Jewish Alliance member who was killed in the Holocaust.

▲ 19

The age of transnationally organized women represented a final limitation on membership, since most were of relatively advanced age. This was not a deliberate exclusion and was a structural one only in the limited sense that older women were more likely to have the resources to travel. Throughout the years, leaders lamented the absence of young women and longed for fresh blood. Over time, separatist organizing fell out of fashion among the younger generations, so the transnational organizations came to be seen as old-fashioned and unappealing to young women.

▲ 20

The elements of exclusion, however, served as a basis of solidarity for those within the fold. Elite, older, Christian, European-origin women asserted a common bond of womanhood. An ideology of difference between women and men, based on women's potential for motherhood and their systematic disadvantage compared to the men of their group, served as the rationale for organizing as women across national boundaries. Although there were certainly disagreements about particular issues among the members of all the groups, the relative homogeneity of the membership minimized conflict.

▲ 21

## Feminist internationalism

The women of the Council, Alliance and League shared not only a desire to gather across national borders but also an interest in their status as women in both national and global arenas. They perceived their femaleness as part of what defined the boundaries of their group, but their feminist consciousness went beyond any simple commonality of biology or socialization. Although they disagreed about precisely how to do so, they sought to improve their situation as women. Some claimed the label "feminist", others avoided it. There wasn't complete agreement about any one aspect of the feminist program either. They did, however, share a sense of themselves as a group with interests distinct from those of men; a perception that existing societal arrangements, differing as they did from country to country, disadvantaged women in relation to men; and a commitment to improving women's place in society.

▲ 22

The major women's issues that the three transnational organizations addressed were suffrage, equal rights, married women's citizenship, and policies around morality. On every one of these issues, women disagreed about the best way to win equality. Was universal suffrage critical or would any form of suffrage be acceptable? Was militant action on behalf of the vote essential or a danger? Did special labor laws for women protect them or discriminate? Should citizenship laws for married women be identical to those for men or should women have the right to choose which nationality they would prefer to maintain? Did laws and policies in the arena of morality protect women, for example, from trafficking, or impinge on their freedom? In earnest debates on these issues, as well as in hostile encounters, women worked out their common interests, pointing to their collective disadvantaged status and claiming their rights as women to make decisions about how best to improve their conditions.

▲ 23

## The trajectory of transnational feminism

Contact among the international women's organizations had been broken during the First World War, but that conflict paradoxically energized the transnational women's movement. The bulk of the diverse bodies devoted to women's interests on the international scene came into being in the interwar period. The Second World War was a different story. Already beleaguered by the Depression, the groups simply hung on as best they could. With the invasion of Belgium and the sacking of its Brussels office, the ICW passed the presidency and headquarters to Geneva. The office of the Alliance, in London, closed when Germany attacked Britain, and the Alliance made plans to turn the leadership over to members in Brazil and the United States if necessary. The *Maison Internationale*, headquarters of WILPF in Geneva, opened to pacifist refugees in 1933 and, once war broke out, the group turned to helping those fleeing Europe. But, at the end of the war, all three organizations regrouped and held congresses in 1946.

▲ 24

The world of 1946 was a different place for the transnational women's movement. Not only did the bodies have to reestablish contacts and confront the loss of members and national sections, but the escalating bipolar rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union split the world into hostile camps. In 1945, the communist-dominated *Union des Femmes Françaises* called an international congress in Paris that gave birth to a new group, the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF).<sup>8</sup> Well-funded, claiming to speak for 80 million women, and successful in organizing women throughout much of the Third World, WIDF competed with the existing groups and even challenged the right of the older organizations to represent women at the United Nations. As the Cold War enveloped the world of transnational women's organizations, rivalry between the two camps led to increased global organizing. Thus the Second World War marked a turn, not an end or a beginning, for transnational organizing among women.

▲ 25

The pattern of growth of the transnational women's movement challenges what has become a nearly hegemonic model of "first wave" and "second wave", based on the rise of women's movements in the Euro-American arena in the late 19th century, their ebbing after the First World War, and their resurgence in the 1970s. On a global level, women's movements emerged in countries newly free or struggling for political or economic independence and the transnational women's movement crested in the 1920s and 1930s. From a global perspective, then, the trajectory of women's movements is more complicated than the wave model would suggest.

▲ 26

## The impact of the transnational women's movement

The question remains: Did the activities of the transnational women's movement make a difference? One way to address this question is to consider the impact of organized women on the League of Nations. Before the formation of the League, only the WILPF made serious forays into the realm of world politics. The Alliance concentrated on winning women the vote, something that could be accomplished only on a national basis, and the ICW engaged in few concrete actions. The 1915 Congress of Women and the subsequent delegations to the warring and neutral nations represented a real departure for internationally organized women. The resolutions passed at The Hague, including the call for a permanent international conference to settle international disputes, foreshadowed Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points and the proposal for a League of Nations. When the war ended, women from the transnational groups worked hard to affect the peace and the formation of the League. They won an official hearing before the commission on the League of Nations and called for the admission of women into all permanent bodies of the League, the granting of woman suffrage, the suppression of the traffic in women and children, and the establishment of bureaus of education and hygiene.

▲ 27

Once the League of Nations was up and running, the transnational women's groups not only lobbied for the appointment of women and worked for peace, but also regularly lobbied on a range of issues and passed resolutions at their congresses that they forwarded to the League. Although women remained seriously underrepresented and were likely to be segregated in areas considered appropriate for women, the work of the transnational women's movement made sure that women's voices were raised, and heard, at the League of Nations. They kept social and humanitarian questions on the agenda, and though these were not considered the most pressing issues in the interwar period, they were, in fact, the areas where the League achieved its greatest success. When the Second World War ended, women from the transnational women's organizations played a critical role in winning a place for women's equal rights in the Charter of the United Nations and in fighting for the establishment of the Commission on Women. Their activism links the

pre-1945 transnational women's movement to what might otherwise seem like the emergence of such a movement in the 1970s.

▲28

Leila J. Rupp, Santa Barbara

## Appendix

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#### Notes






1. ^ See Anderson, *Joyous Greetings* 2000 and McFadden, *Golden Cables* 1999.
2. ^ See Wikander, *International Women's Congresses* 1992, pp. 11–26.
3. ^ This article is based on Rupp, *Worlds of Women* 1997.
4. ^ See International Council of Women, *Women in a Changing World* 1966.
5. ^ See Whittick, *Woman into Citizen* 1979.
6. ^ See Bussey / Tims, *Women's International League* 1965.
7. ^ See Miller, "Geneva—the Key to Equality" 1994, pp. 219–245.
8. ^ See Haan, "Hoffnungen auf eine bessere Welt" 2009, pp. 241–257.

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