



I.B. TAURIS

THE RISE OF WOMEN'S TRANSNATIONAL ACTIVISM

Identity and Sisterhood Between the World Wars

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PLATES

1. Scandinavian delegates at the 1937 WILPF Luhacovice Congress (KvinnSam, Göteborgs Universitetsbibliotek)
2. Participants at the 1924 IFUW Conference in Kristiania (*Hvar 8 Dag*, 10 August 1924, Caroline Spurgeon Papers, PP 7/6/5/4, College Archives, Royal Holloway)
3. Madame Puech, the French Government delegate, and Miss Grace Yang, representative of China, to the 1924 IFUW Conference in Kristiania (*Dagbladet*, 30 July 1924, CS Papers, PP 7/6/5/4, RHUL Archives)
4. Journey home following WILPF's mission to China – Edith Pye and Camille Drevet at Welcome Party in Japan hosted at Dr Inazo Nitobe's House in March 1928 (from Professor Nagako Sugimori's private collection)
5. Session at the 1935 IAW congress in Istanbul (TWL.2009.02.30, LSE Library Collections)
6. Japanese delegates to the first Pan-Pacific Women's Conference in 1928 (www.ppseawa.org/about-ppseawa/history)
7. Opening meeting at the 1930 ICW Conference in Vienna (www.ncwaustria.org/history)
8. Hamid Ali, Indian delegate to the 1937 WILPF Luhacovice Congress (KvinnSam, Göteborgs Universitetsbibliotek)
9. 1936 IAW Board Meeting in Amsterdam (*The International Woman Suffrage News*, Centenary Edition 1904 – 2004 IAW-AIF)

10. Procession of delegates through the streets of Rome at the 1923 IAW Congress (*The International Woman Suffrage News*, Centenary Edition 1904 – 2004 IAW-AIF)
11. WILPF and the World Disarmament Campaign in 1932 with British activist Margaret Bondfield in the centre (WILPF collection, the Women's Library, LSE)
12. Margery Corbett Ashby, President of the IAW 1923–46, and Rosa Manus, prominent member of both the IAW and WILPF (*The International Woman Suffrage News*, Centenary Edition 1904–2004 IAW-AIF)
13. Huda Shaarawi, pioneering Egyptian feminist leader who founded both the Egyptian Feminist and the Arab Feminist Unions. She was also active in the IAW (Courtesy of Sania Sharawi)
14. Bertha Lutz, leading Brazilian feminist and member of the IAW (public domain)
15. Paulina Luisi, leading Uruguayan feminist and member of the IAW (public domain)
16. Sarojin Naidu, the first president of the AAWC, active in the AIWC and well-known Indian nationalist (public domain)

ABBREVIATIONS

AAUW	American Association of University Women
AAWC	All-Asian Conference of Women
AIWC	All-India Women's Conference
BAAW	Brazilian Association for the Advancement of Women
BCL	British Commonwealth League
BFUW	British Federation of University Women
BL	British Library
CC	Countries Collection
DCWIO	Disarmament Committee of the Women's International Organisations
EFSC	European Federation of Soroptimist Clubs
ERI	Equal Rights International
FIMA	Fusae Ichikawa Memorial Association
IACW	Inter-American Commission of Women
IAW	International Alliance of Women
IAWSEC	International Alliance of Women for Equal Citizenship
ICJW	International Council of Jewish Women
ICW	International Council of Women
ICWG	International Co-operative Women's Guilds

ABBREVIATIONS

IFBPW	International Federation of Business and Professional Women
IFUW	International Federation of University Women
IKFF	Internationella Kvinnoförbundet för Fred och Frihet
ILIHAW	International League of Iberian and Hispanic-American Women
IWSA	International Woman Suffrage Alliance
IWSN	International Woman Suffrage News
JS	Josephine Schain
JSCWIO	Joint Standing Committee of the Women's International Organisations
JWSM	Japanese Women's Suffrage Movement
JWU	Japan Women's University
KAF	Kvinnliga Akademikers Förening
KS	KvinnSam
LCWIO	Liaison Committee of Women's International Organisations
LJW	League of Jewish Women
LKPR	Landsföreningen för Kvinnans Politiska Rösträtt
LSE	London School of Economics
MCA	Margery Corbett Ashby
NCW	National Council of Women
NFOU	Northern Feminist Organisations' Union
NMC	Naruse Memorial Collection
PPU	Pan-Pacific Union
PPWA	Pan-Pacific Women's Association
PPWC	Pan-Pacific Women's Conference
RHUL	Royal Holloway University of London
SC	Sorabji Collection
SCA	Smith College Archives
SKN	Svenska Kvinnors Nationalförbund
SL	Schwimmer-Lloyd

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SSC	Sophia Smith Collection
WAN	William Allan Nielsen
WCTU	Woman's Christian Temperance Union
WIA	Women's Indian Association
WIL	Women's International League
WILPF	Women's International League for Peace and Freedom
WL	Women's Library
WUWIC	World Union of Women for International Concord
WWCTU	World's Woman's Christian Temperance Union
WYWCA	World Young Women's Christian Association
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association

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CONTENTS

<i>List of Plates</i>	vi
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
1. Introduction	1
Part I Establishing an International Framework	
2. The Internationalisation of the Women's Movement Prior to 1919	21
3. International Women's Organisations in the 1920s	46
4. International Women's Organisations in the 1930s	80
Part II Education, Travel and Regionalisation	
5. The International Federation of University Women	109
6. The Travels of International Women's Organisations in the Interwar Period	137
7. The Challenge of Regional Women's Organisations from the Late 1920s	171
8. Conclusion – An 'International Sisterhood'?	209
<i>Notes</i>	224
<i>Bibliography</i>	263
<i>Index</i>	283

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

*The similarity of the measures women in different countries are working for is evidence that the interests of women everywhere are fundamentally the same.*¹

This was the message delivered by Maud Wood Park, president of the National League of Women Voters in the United States, to the members of the International Alliance of Women (IAW) in the run-up to its 1923 conference in Rome. In her presidential address to this same conference, Carrie Chapman Catt declared that 'women of all nations, races and religions are united together in the demand for individual freedom'.² Similarly, Professor Caroline Spurgeon, president of the International Federation of University Women (IFUW), proclaimed at its 1924 conference in Kristiania (now Oslo):

Our [...] asset is that we are a body of *women*. This, I believe, in the present state of evolution with regard to the position of women, is a great bond and a great power [...] It is clear that women have a certain community of interest, and I believe they do, as a whole, tend to view things slightly differently from men, at a slightly different angle; and to place their values differently.³

Although striving for equality with men, members of international women's organisations in the interwar period often

emphasised what they perceived as the unique qualities of 'womanhood', referring to their 'special power as women, as mothers, teachers, [and] heads of households'.⁴ Notions of gender difference and shared female characteristics lay firmly at the heart of the broader women's movement that had begun to take shape towards the end of the nineteenth century. The struggle for female suffrage, as well as campaigns to obtain better educational and employment opportunities for girls and women and improved legal rights for married women, drew upon the co-ordinated efforts of women operating at local, national and international levels, and so a fundamental role came to be played by the transnational bodies that grew out of national organisations in North America and Europe committed to female emancipation. The relationship between feminism and internationalism during this period has underlined that, while transnational feminist networks developed out of initiatives coming from national feminist organisations, the development of transnational networks also helped to stimulate feminist organisations at the local, national and regional levels.⁵ Just as in countries such as Britain, where women's movements rather than declining after securing the vote in fact broadened their agendas, so too international groups became more determined to reach a wider collection of women following World War I, raising all sorts of challenges about how to bring about the new kind of 'sisterhood' that this internationalism demanded.⁶

By the time that World War I had ended, three major international women's organisations had been formed: the International Council of Women or ICW (1888), the IAW (1904), and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom or WILPF (1915). That they were closely related is reflected in Rupp's suggestion that they should be viewed as 'grandmother, mother and daughter', as one in effect gave birth to another.⁷ All three were secular, had no particular political affiliation, and, from the outset, welcomed female members from around the world. Integral to all their activities was the belief, something that they shared with other women's organisations of the same vintage, that women could, and should, organise across national borders and racial and language

differences since women in all societies were subordinated to men and being denied their rights.⁸ Hence, Lady Aberdeen felt moved to proclaim in her presidential address to the 1925 ICW conference in Washington that '[W]e impose no restrictions on those who join us [...] because we welcome all to our sisterhood, of whatever creed, party, section, or class they may belong'.⁹ In fact, terms such as 'sister', 'comrade', 'unity', 'bond', 'spirit', 'like-minded' and 'friendship' were all commonly used during the interwar period to describe what were regarded as the special connections that existed between the members of women's organisations.¹⁰

My purpose in the chapters that follow is to focus on the growth of international women's organisations in the interwar period, which involved expanding their membership into countries beyond Europe and North America.¹¹ Building on Rupp's groundbreaking and inspiring work *World of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement*,¹² this book focuses on what remains a relatively understudied aspect of interwar world history, exploring the realities of the expanding international women's organisations of the interwar period, and how they were experienced by women belonging to the different nationalities involved. It examines the experiences of women (both Western and non-Western) involved in these organisations, what 'international sisterhood' meant to them, and, importantly, how notions of 'sisterhood' were played out, and contested, in various international women's organisations at this time. By interrogating more closely than has been the case in earlier literature the range of different kinds of transnational gatherings and conferences that took place, this book seeks to identify the nature of the interaction between women from the 'non-West' and the West, how women from the 'non-West' were perceived by their Western counterparts (not only by Americans and British but also by Nordic and other Western women), and vice versa. Importantly my analysis also incorporates the IFUW, an international women's organisation that has been more or less completely overlooked during this period, despite its very interesting and clear connections with the other better-known organisations, in terms of agenda, membership and achievement. Higher education, the key issue for the IFUW, was also

of great significance to other international women's organisations in the interwar period. Not only were their memberships largely made up of educated upper and middle-class women, but their expansion into the non-West was also aided by non-Western students in the West, as they were often behind the development of national branches in their home countries.

Transnational or international?

The terms 'transnational' and 'international' have sometimes been used interchangeably by historians and are often loosely defined. However, there has been a marked increase in the use of the former and there is now much interest in transnational interpretations of history, which, broadly defined, examine movements and interactions of peoples and ideas that go beyond and cross the borders of nation-states.¹³ *Transnational* tends to emphasise and refer to the roles of non-state actors in these processes, while the term *international* deals with the interaction between nation-states and those representing these. In this way, a *transnational* organisation emphasises its members' goals, methods for achieving these, and their identities, regardless of the nationalities of their members, while an *international* organisation operates with the nation-state as a primary political unit and stresses co-operation between similar associations in different countries.¹⁴ This book has, thus, consciously chosen to include *transnational* both in the title and when describing the cross-border interactions of female activists of various nationalities representing their non-state networks in the interwar period under scrutiny here. Some of these organisations are more easily defined as *transnational*, for example WILPF, as it operated above national structures using peace as its unifying goal. Others, such as the ICW and the IFUW, display both *transnational* and *international* characteristics in that they engaged in *transnational* activism, yet are made up of a network of autonomous national associations.¹⁵ The use of terms is further complicated by the fact that *international* is incorporated in all these organisations' names, and the fact that these associations themselves often employed this term when describing their co-operation, congresses and goals of becoming, for

example, 'truly' *international* – that is, extending their memberships around the world. This book will therefore also use the term *international* when appropriate, especially when describing these organisations' memberships and activities.

Feminism

Like any historical assessment of women's experiences, this study of international women's organisations has encountered difficulties over the definitions of, and how to use, the contested terms 'feminism', 'feminist',¹⁶ and 'international sisterhood', with all their multiple meanings: for, as Tong has pointed out, 'feminism is not a monolithic ideology, [...] all feminists do not think alike, and [...], like other time-honoured modes of thinking, feminist thought has a past as well as a present and a future'.¹⁷ Indeed, while some members of the various international women's organisations certainly described themselves as 'feminist', others deliberately rejected the label. Yet, all these organisations at different times still often used it when referring to those women who were committed to women's rights. The IAW was the organisation that most readily embraced the term and referred to its affiliations around the world as 'feminist';¹⁸ the IFUW, on the other hand, was the association most uncomfortable with any explicit mention of feminism. However, whereas some of the IFUW's members announced in no uncertain terms in 1923 that it was not a 'feminist' organisation, others within the same organisation just a few years later in 1929 argued that it dealt with what they referred to as 'feminist' questions.¹⁹

It is important to place discussion of the concept of feminism in its historical context. For instance, firstly, while the winning of the vote for women in many European countries following World War I, together with the rise of anti-feminist sentiments and pressure on women to return to the domestic sphere in the interwar period, influenced the direction of feminist movements there, feminist movements elsewhere in the world were actually developing and growing stronger alongside nationalist movements during this same period. And, secondly, although the argument that the British