

European Women and the Main International Women's Organizations

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Abstract

European women's organized struggles for their rights and social justice began in the early nineteenth century and were almost immediately transnational in character. From the 1860s, women's international activism became more formally structured. The three main international women's organizations of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century were the International Council of Women (ICW, 1881), the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA, established in Berlin in 1904, from 1926 called the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship, IAW), and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF, The Hague, 1915). All three were bourgeois in character and dominated by women of European origin. From 1907 onwards, socialist or socialist feminist women also created international structures to enhance women's rights, with the German Clara Zetkin as a key figure. The three main international women's organizations of the post-1945 world were the ICW and IAW and the newly established left-feminist Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF, Paris, 1945) as the third of the "Big Three." As recognized by the United Nations, these three made crucial contributions towards enhancing women's rights and status, not just in Europe but globally.

Article

The history of women's organized struggles for their rights and social justice began in the early nineteenth century and almost immediately was transnational in character. An early pioneer was the British Quaker, Elizabeth Fry (1780–1845), who in 1821 established the *British Ladies' Society for Promoting the Reformation of Female Prisoners*. This Society probably was the first nation-wide "women's organization," understood here as organizations constituted by women to enhance women's status and rights. In the 1830s and 1840s, Fry made a number of trips to the European mainland to advocate her ideas about prison reform and help set up organizations of women working on behalf of female prisoners, referred to as "those of their own sex."

More broadly, early feminism and socialism developed together in England and France in the post-French Revolution context, led by internationally minded activists. Partly from this same group emerged what historian Bonnie Anderson called "the first international women's movement," consisting of a network of connections between some twenty French, British, German, Scandinavian and North American women who agitated for social, economic and political rights, and used their international connections to spread information and ask for and offer solidarity. Included in this early network were the German Mathilde Franziska Anneke (1817–1884), the Swedish Frederika Bremer (1801–1865) and the French Jeanne Deroin (1805–1894). The political repression following the 1848 revolutions in Europe meant the end of this international women's movement. But women's international activism re-emerged and became more formally structured, as with the Swiss Marie Goegg-Pouchoulin's International Association of Women (1868–1871), and Josephine Butler's 1869 British Ladies' National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act, which in 1876

became the British, Continental and General Federation for the Abolition of Government Regulation of Vice.

International Women's Organizations in the Pre-1940 World

The three main international women's organizations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were the International Council of Women (ICW), the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA, from 1926 the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship, IAW) and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). The first, the ICW, was founded at a conference convened by the US National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) in Washington, D.C. in 1888. In order to realize its two main aims, "to provide a means of communication between women's organizations in all countries" and "opportunities for women to meet together from all parts of the world to confer upon questions relating to the welfare of the commonwealth and the family" (ICW Constitution, 1888), the ICW held Council meetings, first every five, later every three years. The IWSA also organized huge international congresses, which helped to create public and political support for women's suffrage. The WILPF emerged at the famous International Congress of Women, convened by Dutch feminists Aletta Jacobs (1854-1929) and Rosa Manus (1881-1942), and held in The Hague in 1915 in the midst of World War One. The WILPF was formally established under this name in 1919. Notably, the Council, the Alliance and the League all began with national sections in Western Europe or what Leila Rupp has called the "neo-Europes" (the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand). Rupp also characterized the international movement of which the ICW, the IAW and the WILPF formed the core as "bourgeois and dominated by women of European origin" (Rupp 1997, 5).

Socialist or socialist feminist women also created international structures to enhance women's rights, with the German Clara Zetkin (1857-1933) as a major example. Among other things, she was involved in establishing the International Socialist Women's Secretariat (1907-1915). In Copenhagen in 1910, at the second international socialist women's conference, Zetkin, together with Luise Ziets (1865-1922) proposed what became "International Women's Day," with "agitation for women's suffrage" as the day's initial focus. From 1920 to 1926 an International Women's Secretariat existed within the Communist International. Social-democratic women also held international conferences in the 1920s and 1930s, and regularly from 1948 onwards; they reorganized themselves in the International Council of Social Democratic Women in 1955. In the interwar years, socialist or left-feminist women further established the International Federation of Working Women (1919-1923), the International Cooperative Women's Guild (1921-1963), and the World Committee of Women against War and Fascism (1934).

Women's involvement with global governance began with the international women's organizations gaining a small foothold in the League of Nations immediately after World War One. It was especially the International Council of Women that played an important role in this process, among other things by initiating in 1925 the Joint Standing Committee of Women's International Organizations, which pushed for the appointment of women to the League of Nations; in 1931 the organizations belonging to the Joint Standing Committee in turn established the somewhat bigger Liaison Committee of Women's International Organizations, which was active for decades. The main achievement of the international women's organizations in the League of Nations was getting women's rights acknowledged as an issue that belonged on the international agenda, similar to, for example, slavery, and the protection of youth and of minorities.

The Big Three International Women's Organizations of the Post-1945 World

The three main international women's organizations of the post-1945 world were the well-established

ICW and IAW, with the left-feminist Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) as the third of the "Big Three." The WIDF was founded in Paris in late November 1945 but in early 1951 moved its headquarters to the eastern sector of Berlin, after the French government in January 1951 forbade the WIDF to be further active in France. The WIDF's aims were the struggles against fascism and for peace, women's rights—"shared action to organize women in all countries of the world to defend their rights and to achieve social progress"—and the happiness of children, with a strong commitment as well to anti-colonialism and anti-racism. Among the WIDF's leading women were the Frenchwoman Eugénie Cotton (1881–1967, WIDF President, 1945–1967), the Bulgarian Tsola Dragoicheva (1898–1993), the Spanish Dolores Ibárruri (1895–1989), the Italian Maria Maddalena Rossi (1906–1995), and the Swedish Dr. Andrea Andreen (1888–1972), and from colonized and newly independent countries for example the Indian Kapila Khandwala, the Nigerian Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti (1900–1978), or the Iraqi Dr. Naziha al-Dulaimi (1923–2007).

In 1947, the ICW, the IAW, and the WIDF received Consultative Status B with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (UN), along with ten other international women's organizations. All three organizations were actively involved in the UN-Commission on the Status of Women. Due to Cold War politics, the WIDF lost its Consultative Status in 1954, to be reinstated in 1967. The WIDF's main contributions to enhancing women's status worldwide were its proposal to the UN to hold an International Women's Year (1975) and its work towards the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (1967) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979). If we take a long-term perspective, it is clear that the "Big Three" —ICW, IAW, WIDF—made crucial contributions towards enhancing women's rights and status, not just in Europe but globally, a process in which they sometimes worked together and always built on each other's contributions. It was no coincidence, therefore, that in 1975 the ICW, the IAW and the WIDF were the only international women's organizations with the highest consultative status at the UN, confirming their status as the main international women's organizations of the twentieth century.

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