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## Introduction: transnational women's activism

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Twenty-five years after the publication of the pathbreaking book by Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement*, which explored three international women's organizations: the International Council of Women (ICW); the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA); and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), research on transnational women's activism and international feminisms has flourished.<sup>1</sup> Among many publications was a special issue of *Women's History Review* dedicated to international feminisms in 2010.<sup>2</sup> Building on this precedent, the present forum introduces new research on the ICW from its founding in Washington DC in 1888 until the outbreak of the Second World War and on some of the national councils of women that were affiliated with it.

These articles fill a historiographical lacuna. While Rupp covered the international network that held the ICW together, neither her book nor later studies paid close attention to the founding and development of national affiliates in the countries under study in this forum.<sup>3</sup> These examples will help us to understand the broader evolution of early twentieth-century women's movements, which in diverse national environments faced common problems: class, religious, and ethnic divisions; conflicting political agendas; personal and factional tensions; and generational changes. The articles explore aspects of the leaders' life stories—stories that were shaped by intersecting national, gender, and class identities. As Gisela Bock reminds us, the interpretation of such biographies, in which friendships and familial relationships were closely connected to public activities, requires us to question such conventional dichotomies as public/private and work/family.<sup>4</sup>

Starting in the 1890s, the ICW leadership aimed 'to stimulate the sentiment of internationalism among women throughout the world' by creating affiliate groups, known as 'national councils' in many countries. The articles presented here look at how the ICW reached out to many parts of Europe and established, or failed to establish, branches in a number of countries, diversifying its chiefly Protestant membership by including such Catholic nations as Italy. The authors take us to different parts of Europe over a period of five decades: northern Europe (Finland and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland/Northern Ireland), southern Europe (Italy and Spain) and southeast Europe (Yugoslavia). Each country, with the exception of Spain, had an established national council: the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland/Northern Ireland

(1895), Italy (1903), Finland (1911) and Yugoslavia (1919). Apart from the contribution by Pat Thane on the national council of women in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland/Northern Ireland, which is ‘the first survey [...] in the context of wider women’s movements to which it was a major contributor’, the remaining articles concentrate on countries that usually figure only peripherally in studies of European women’s movements.

Founding a national council was no easy task, and often took many years to achieve. Nevertheless, Rupp notes that thirty-six national councils had been formed around the world before the outbreak of the Second World War.<sup>5</sup> The statutes of both the ICW and its affiliate societies called for an apolitical and religiously neutral stance. As Anne Cova stresses, these principles conferred advantages and disadvantages: while non-partisanship (defined as independence from political parties and churches) could increase membership by attracting women across a wide ideological spectrum, it could also limit their effectiveness in specific cases. In general, however, the leaders of the national councils were often very well connected to the political and religious worlds.

Furthermore, despite their proclaimed commitment to neutrality, the councils nonetheless became entangled in the political controversies of the nations where they worked. And these environments were diverse. At the time women’s councils were founded, Finland was a grand duchy under Russian control; Italy, though officially a unified nation, was in fact still a mosaic of provinces; Spain, too, was torn apart by regional conflicts; Britain faced Irish uprisings and labour unrest; and Yugoslavia was a new and shaky composite of mutually hostile ethnicities. The First World War brought a new emphasis on national borders and undermined the international ties of sisterhood that the ICW had promoted, strengthening nationalist sentiment even in such non-belligerent countries as Spain and in the new nation of Yugoslavia, where a council was founded one year after the war ended.

International as well as national politics shaped the national councils’ ideology and practice. As Cova points out, the councils established a dialectical relationship between the rights and the duties of women. In the wartime emergency, as they urged members to get involved ‘behind the lines’, the emphasis was on duties. This, however, was not a permanent change, for the post-war generation returned to the original vision, which connected duties with rights. Interwar council agendas stressed not only the advancement of women through education, professional opportunities, and legal reform, but these women’s obligation to use their new advantages for the benefit of society.<sup>6</sup>

Organizational and personal links among leaders—links that their voluminous correspondence attests—created the essential basis for founding a council. The articles often go beyond organizational history to look at key elements of their leaders’ life stories, including personal beliefs, social networks, and friendships. All the authors underline the central role played by the aristocratic president of the ICW, the Scottish marchioness Ishbel of Aberdeen and Temair (known as Lady Aberdeen, 1857–1939), who was president of the ICW almost without interruption for more than 30 years (1894–1899, 1904–1920, 1922–1936). She was linked to other aristocratic figures, including Baroness Alexandra Gripenberg (1857–1913) in Finland and Countess Gabriella Spalletti Rasponi (1853–1931) in Italy. Due to their close relationships with Aberdeen, during this period both held the important position of vice-president of the ICW.

The social composition of the founding groups raised a major problem in the women's movements of the era—class relations. The National Council of Italian Women (CNDI – *Consiglio Nazionale delle Donne Italiane*), which was founded in Rome in 1903, was headed largely by noblewomen. In other countries such as Britain, the leadership cohort was more middle-class than aristocratic, but was nonetheless drawn from a minority of educated women, whom the reformist socialist Beatrice Webb described as '[...] mostly middle-aged, mostly well-to do, but a good many hardworking professional philanthropists, guardians of the poor etc... sober and on the whole open-minded, thoroughly typical of provincial English middle class'.<sup>7</sup> It is not surprising that women in positions of responsibility tended to come from the middle and upper classes. After all, ICW activism required free time, financial resources, and educational attainments. Those who attended international conferences were often required to pay their own expenses and to speak several languages—abilities that were most common among privileged women. Especially in the inter-war era, moreover, a great many council members were aspiring professionals, who came mostly from the middle and upper-middle classes. Indeed, in the case of Spain, Sandra Blasco Lisa comments that '[...] the late incorporation of women into higher education and the later appearance of a large group of upper-middle class, liberal professional women may have retarded the progress of feminisms in Spain before the First World War', and was probably one reason for the failure to develop a national council in that country.

To be sure, these leaders did not form closed, self-centred cliques. Some of the councils, for example, the British National Council of Women of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (NCW), fought for social reforms that benefited women and girls in the labour force. Nonetheless, these groups' elite social composition could also limit their growth and outreach. The careers of the Italian Rasponi and the Finnish Gripenberg, as analysed by Anne Cova, Johanna Annola and Pirjo Markkola, show that in their respective countries both encountered difficulties with some women's associations that refused to join the councils precisely because of their aristocratic profile. 'Bourgeois feminism' was the derogatory term that socialist leaders used to deter working-class women from making common cause with middle and upper-class activists.<sup>8</sup>

Another difficulty, common among women's organizations in this era, arose from friction and rivalry among women's organizations, which competed fiercely for membership, money, and prestige. In her account of the Spanish case, Blasco discusses the dispute between the National Association of Spanish Women (ANME – *Asociación Nacional de Mujeres Españolas*) and the Union of Spanish Women (UME – *Unión de las Mujeres de España*) for leadership at the international level, a dispute that stood in the way of the foundation of a single national council of women and also disrupted plans to hold the first post-war IWSA congress in Madrid. Although annual congresses often stimulated the formation of new national councils, these efforts were not always successful, for some women's associations refused to affiliate with the ICW.

Conflicts among women's groups also complicated the founding of national councils in other nations. In Italy, the Women's Union (*Unione Femminile*) refused to affiliate with the CNDI and did not take part in the CNDI's first congress, which was held in Rome in 1908. In Finland, the two rival associations were the Finnish Women's Association (*Suomen Naisyhdistys*) with which Gripenberg was involved, and the Women's Alliance (*Naisasialiitto Unioni*). Annola and Markkola analyse both Gripenberg's

'international success' through the ICW (she represented Finland in the ICW's inaugural meeting in Washington DC in 1888), and her difficulties in creating a national council at home. Thane also mentions the 'acrimonious discussions' that took place in the UK before the foundation of a national council in 1895. These controversies arose from Aberdeen's pressure on the National Union of Women Workers (NUWW), which affiliated with the ICW three years after it was established, once more demonstrating the role played by the ICW's president. It is also important to distinguish between the date on which a national group was founded and the date it affiliated with the ICW, as these were not always the same. The naming of the association was also sometimes controversial. The NUWW affiliated with the ICW in 1898, but did not change its name to the National Council of Women of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (NCW) until 1918. Isidora Grubački and Irena Selišnik note that in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes/Yugoslavia, the national council was called the National Women's Alliance (NWA – *Narodni ženski savez/Narodna ženska zveza*), thus proclaiming a national identity that hardly existed.

Another problem that complicated the founding of national councils arose from religious differences. Cova examines the divisions between Catholic and secular women's associations and these tensions came to a head at the CNDI's first Rome congress (1908) with a split between the Italian council and the Catholic women's associations. It should be noted that Freemasonry in Italy, as elsewhere, was a form of resistance to Catholic hegemony, and that the opening speech at the 1908 congress was delivered by the mayor of Rome, a renowned Freemason. Blasco's account of Spanish organizing efforts also emphasizes Freemasonry's links to secular women's movements in many countries. The religious divide between a mainly Protestant organization like the ICW and some of its national sections founded in Catholic countries was not easy to overcome, yet the founding of the Italian branch showed that it could be done.

To these domestic tensions were added conflicts with such other international women's organizations as the IWSA, which, as its name suggests, focused on achieving the vote for women. In 1906, Finland became the first country in Europe to extend the franchise to all women—an achievement that might seem to create a favourable atmosphere for establishing a national council of women. It was, however, another five years before the Finnish council was established, and the delay was due to disagreements among women's associations. Nevertheless, the ICW and IWSA managed to cooperate in a number of areas, and many women joined both organizations and took part in the same congresses. Indeed, the presidents of the national councils all had a background in women's associations in their respective countries. For example, the case of Yugoslavia, examined by Grubački and Selišnik, shows that the same women belonged to multiple international and/or national organizations.

The person who initiated the idea of creating a country-specific national council was not necessarily its first president. In the UK, Louisa Hubbard (1836–1906) introduced the idea, with Louise Creighton (1850–1936) its first president; in Italy, Lavinia Taverna (1854–1938) was the initiator and Rasponi the president. In these articles, we meet the people who first thought of founding of each council, its president, and its leaders. In the case of the ICW, as the historian Karen Offen has shown, the American May Wright Sewall (1844–1920) was *de facto* president (1890–1893) and her successor was Aberdeen, who on several occasions asked the ICW's treasurer, the Canadian Sophia

Sanford, to travel to various countries in Europe and elsewhere to gather support for national councils.<sup>9</sup> Extensive experience in women's activism was the major qualification for organizational leadership. As a result, these women were not young when they rose to leading positions, and generational differences caused tensions in the councils' associations with groups that attracted a younger and more diverse membership.

Any discussion of women's organizational culture, especially in the past, raises a broader issue. We often refer to the movements introduced here as 'feminist', but is this term appropriate? In this case the question is especially complicated because some groups openly identified themselves as feminist and others did not. The associations affiliated to the national councils belonged to a very wide political and social spectrum and some avoided any association with a movement that was the butt of much ridicule, hostility, and misogyny. As Karen Offen points out, when deciding who was or was not a feminist we must avoid the use of criteria that are more appropriate to our own time than to the past. Offen defines 'feminism' as a 'comprehensive critical response to the deliberate and systematic subordination of women as a group by men as a group within a given cultural setting'—a definition that encompasses the wide variety of ideologies, agendas, and strategies that activists adopted at different times and in different places.<sup>10</sup> In order to do justice to this rich history, she refers to 'feminisms' rather than 'feminism'.

The women introduced here often disagreed on controversial issues: for example, not all supported woman suffrage. Nonetheless, the councils did respond critically to the subordination of women and contested it in many ways: by mobilizing women in reform movements that promoted the well-being of women and families; organizing them to work for suffrage and other rights; and creating national and international associations to support these efforts. Most of the people and groups included here may therefore be called feminist.

Taken together, the national histories gathered here explore what Rupp calls 'the limitations and possibilities of internationalism'.<sup>11</sup> It is an important story of women who, in an era of growing international hostility and hatred, worked to establish connections and to promote cooperation across national borders. Not only organizational histories but also individual life stories testify to their dedication to this hard, often frustrating work. These scholarly analyses broaden the scope of the discipline of women's and gender history, which began with national narratives but has now expanded to include transnational, international, and global approaches. A knowledge of the past can support feminists of the present who seek to establish communication and solidarity among women of many nations.

The guest editors thank the authors of all these articles and June Purvis, the editor of *Women's History Review*, for their creative contributions to the discipline of history and to the transnational study of feminisms.

## Notes

1. Among the numerous works: Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Margaret H. McFadden, *Golden Cables of Sympathy. The Transatlantic Sources of Nineteenth-Century Feminism* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999); Bonnie

- S. Anderson, *Joyous Greetings: The First International Women's Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Karen Offen, *European Feminisms, 1700–1950: A Political History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); Sylvia Paletschek and Bianka Pietrow-Ennker, eds., *Women's Emancipation Movements in the Nineteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); Gisela Bock, *Women in European History* (London: Blackwell, 2002); Eliane Gubin and Leen Van Molle, eds., *Women Changing The World: A History of the International Council of Women* (Brussels: Racine, 2005); Ann Taylor Allen, *Feminism and Motherhood in Western Europe, 1890–1970: The Maternal Dilemma* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Susan Zimmermann, 'The Challenge of Multinational Empire for the International Women's Movement: The Habsburg Monarchy and the Development of Feminist Inter/national Politics', *Journal of Women's History* 17, no. 2 (2005): 87–117; Anne Cova, ed., *Comparative Women's History: New Approaches* (Boulder: Social Science Monographs/Columbia University Press, 2006); Lucy Delap, *The Feminist Avant-Garde: Transatlantic Encounters of the Early Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Karen Offen, ed., *Globalizing Feminisms, 1789–1945* (London: Routledge, 2010); Francisca de Haan, Margaret Allen, June Purvis, and Krassimira Daskalova, eds., *Women's Activism: Global Perspectives from the 1890s to the Present* (London: Routledge, 2013); Oliver Janz and Daniel Schönplflug, eds., *Gender History in a Transnational Perspective: Biographies, Networks, Gender Orders* (New York: Berghahn, 2014); Marie Sandell, *The Rise of Women's Transnational Activism: Identity and Sisterhood Between the World Wars* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015); Krista Cowman, 'The Women's Movement and Internationalism in the Twentieth Century', *Moving the Social – Journal of Social History and the History of Social Movements* 55 (2016): 55–74; Glenda Sluga and Patricia Clavin, eds., *Internationalisms. A Twentieth-Century History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Lucy Delap, *Feminisms: A Global History* (London: Pelican Book, 2020); James Keating, *Distant Sisters: Australasian Women and the International Struggle for the Vote, 1880–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).
2. Ann Taylor Allen, Anne Cova, and June Purvis, eds., 'International Feminisms', special issue of *Women's History Review* 19, no. 4 (September 2010).
  3. The publication of the following articles is the result of the fruitful collaboration between its editors and of a call launched in 2020 by Anne Cova entitled 'The ICW and its national councils of women, 1888–1939' in the European Cooperation in Science and Technology, COST Action 18119 Who cares in Europe ? chaired by Clarisse Berthezène and co-chaired by Laura Lee Downs. The editors are grateful to both of them for their support to finance the editing of the articles by Stewart Lloyd-Jones thanks to the COST Action 18119.
  4. Gisela Bock, 'Challenging Dichotomies: Perspectives on Women's History', in *Writing Women's History: International Perspectives*, ed. Karen Offen, Ruth Roach Pierson, and Jane Rendall (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), 1–23.
  5. Rupp, *Worlds*, 15 (see note 1).
  6. Bock, *Women*, 121 (see note 1).
  7. Beatrice Webb quoted in Pat Thane, 'Well-bred and conventional ladies: The National Council of Women of Great Britain and Ireland', this forum.
  8. Marilyn J. Boxer, 'Rethinking the Socialist Construction and International Career of the Concept "Bourgeois Feminism"', *The American Historical Review* 112, no. 1 (2007): 131–58.
  9. Offen, 'Understanding International Feminisms as "Transnational" – An Anachronism? May Wright Sewall and the creation of the International Council of Women, 1889–1904', in Janz and Schönplflug, eds., *Gender History*, 25–45 (see note 1).
  10. Offen, *European Feminisms*, 20 (see note 1).
  11. Rupp, *Worlds*, 3 (see note 1).

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