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#### Recommended Citation

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**DORIS STEVENS: A “FASCIST” FEMINIST? STEVENS, THE INTER-AMERICAN COMMISSION OF WOMEN, AND THE UNIÓN ARGENTINA DE MUJERES, 1936-1939**

**By**

**JEANNETTE HUNKER**

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR ALEMU  
PROFESSOR BACSÁN**

**DECEMBER 7, 2022**

## Acknowledgements

Scripps College sits upon the ancestral homeland of the Gabrielino-Tongva people.<sup>1</sup> I would like to acknowledge the painful history of genocide against indigenous communities across the lands we call California, the United States, and the Americas. I would also like to recognize the resilience of the Gabrielino/Tongva peoples<sup>2</sup> and other indigenous communities as peoples of the past, present, and future of these lands. Colonialism and its evils are ongoing, and we must take action to decolonize our world, starting with re-educating ourselves.

I would like to thank my readers, Professor Amy Alemu and Professor Bacarán, for their support of my research this semester. Thank you to the entire History Department for preparing me to write this paper since my first year at Scripps.

I cannot give enough thanks to the Honnold/Mudd librarians Nazia Islam, Ashley Larson, and Adam Rosenkranz for helping me find sources. Their tireless efforts to search the depths of scholarship on my topic was invaluable.

My inspiration for the paper came from reading Katherine Marino's *Feminism for the Americas* in HIST157 "Gender and Sexuality in Latin America," with former Visiting Assistant Professor at Claremont McKenna College, Romina A. Green Rioja—special thanks to Professor Green for introducing me to this transformative work.

Thank you so much to all my friends for believing in my potential, especially in times of doubt.

Finally, thank you especially to my mom, dad, and my boyfriend, Anjan. Your love and support have helped me feel proud of my accomplishments here at Scripps.

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<sup>1</sup> There are different words to denote the Indigenous peoples of the present-day Los Angeles region. The Gabrielino Tribe website includes the title "Gabrielino-Tongva Indian Tribe, a California Indian Tribe know [sic] as San Gabriel Band of Mission Indians" (<https://gabrielinotribe.org/>). Historically, there were many different groups that came to be called "Gabrielino" or "Tongva." Individuals may identify with certain titles over others.

<sup>2</sup> I use "peoples" as opposed to singular "people" to acknowledge the numerous and diverse indigenous communities that lived and live in present-day California.

## Introduction

Doris Stevens (1888-1963), former member of the National Women's Party and leader of the United States' women's suffrage movement of the early twentieth century,<sup>3</sup> earned the title "An Apostle of Action"<sup>4</sup> for her commitment to women's voting rights. After the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified in 1920, Stevens would continue to support women's rights legislation domestically and internationally. One of her goals, a goal of the National Women's Party, was to pass the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) in the United States. The NWP presented the ERA to Congress in 1923. The party's inability to gather widespread American support for the ERA led leaders such as Stevens to seek collaboration with feminists across Latin America.<sup>5</sup> Since most Latin American countries did not yet give women the right to vote, Stevens, among other U.S. feminists, saw herself as a leader of women's suffrage, and women's rights as a whole, in Latin America.<sup>6</sup> One of the most prominent international women's rights organizations of the time was the Inter-American Commission of Women (IACW). The IACW was created in 1928 at the Sixth International Conference of American States to "[act] as an advisory body" to the International Conference of American States (ICAS).<sup>7</sup> Stevens served as chair of the IACW from 1928 to 1939.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Mary K. Trigg, *Feminism as Life's Work: Four Modern American Women through Two World Wars* (Rutgers University Press, 2014), 6; Katherine M. Marino, *Feminism for the Americas: The Making of an International Human Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 1-3.

<sup>4</sup> Qtd. in Trigg, *Feminism*, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Marino, *Feminism*, 1-3.

<sup>6</sup> Marino, *Feminism for the Americas*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Inter-American Commission of Women, p. vi.

<sup>8</sup> Trigg, *Feminism as Life's Work*, 6.

One of the organizations associated with the Commission that Stevens worked with was the Unión Argentina de Mujeres (UAM).<sup>9</sup> Led by Ana Rosa Schlieper de Martínez Guerrero (1884-1983),<sup>10</sup> Susana Larguía,<sup>11</sup> and other women who will not be discussed in this paper, these leaders formed the organization in 1936 when the Argentine government proposed a law that would reduce married women's status to that of minors.<sup>12</sup> Chilean journalist, feminist, and IACW representative Marta Vergara<sup>13</sup> introduced Stevens to members of the UAM, calling the organization “ ‘the best group of women that could be found in Argentina.’ ”<sup>14</sup> The UAM was one of several national and international women's organizations that gained momentum during the Spanish Civil War, the rise of German fascism, and concurrent right-wing movements in the Americas.<sup>15</sup> Firmly anti-fascist, the UAM supported women's suffrage, economic equality, and improved maternity legislation.<sup>16</sup> Upon meeting Stevens, UAM members were eager to work

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<sup>9</sup> The organization's name is literally translated as “Argentine Union of Women.” Not to be confused with the Unión de Mujeres de la Argentina (“Union of Argentine Women”), an organization which replaced the UAM in 1947 and was affiliated with the Argentine Communist Party (PCA). For more information about the Unión de Mujeres de la Argentina, see María Eugenia Bordagaray, “Anarquistas, comunistas y los debates en torno al divorcio. Argentina, 1932-1954,” in *La Manzana de la Discordia* 9, no. 2 (2014): 19-30; and Valobra, “Tradiciones y strategies de movilización social en los partidos opositores durante el Peronismo. El caso del partido Comunista y la Unión de Mujeres de la Argentina,” in *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 30, no. 60 (2005): 155-182.

<sup>10</sup> “Ana Rosa Schlieper de Martínez Guerrero,” *Social Networks and Archival Context*, n.d., accessed Dec. 7, 2022, <https://snaccooperative.org/view/60890861#resources>. Marino refers to Ana Rosa Schlieper de Martínez Guerrero by the first part of her surname, “Schlieper,” while many of the primary sources refer to her as “Ana Rosa S. de Martínez Guerrero,” or simply as “Ana Martínez Guerrero.” For purposes of conciseness, and to follow Marino's choice, I will refer to this feminist as “Schlieper” for short. In another study, it would be interesting to investigate if news articles and other sources from the time purposefully abbreviated “Schlieper” so as not to draw attention to her German heritage, or if this were simply

<sup>11</sup> I could not find a reliable source that indicated her birth and death years.

<sup>12</sup> Marifran Carlson, *¡Feminismo! The Woman's Movement in Argentina from its Beginnings to Eva Perón* (Chicago, Illinois: Academy Chicago, 1988), 172; Marino, *Feminism for the Americas*, 139.

<sup>13</sup> Marta Vergara was, for a period of time, a member of the Communist Party. Although she would eventually abandon the party out of frustration with its lack of commitment to women's issues, Vergara maintained a strongly left-wing, communist-influenced vision of feminism. Her endorsement of the UAM says volumes about the UAM's leftist, anti-fascist politics. This, as I will discuss later, eventually made their goals incompatible with Stevens's not-so-antifascist politics. For more information, see Marino, *Feminism for the Americas*, in which Vergara serves as one of Marino's main feminists of focus.

<sup>14</sup> Marta Vergara, *Memorias de una mujer irreverente* (Santiago de Chile: Zig-Zag, 1962), 142. Quoted in Marino, *Feminism for the Americas*, 139.

<sup>15</sup> Marino, *Feminism for the Americas*, 146.

<sup>16</sup> Marino, *Feminism for the Americas*, 139.

with Stevens on the Equal Rights Treaty.<sup>17</sup> Through 1938, Stevens and her UAM collaborators sent letters back and forth discussing their collaborative projects. Susana Larguía, writing on behalf of the UAM, and Stevens usually began their letters with warm salutations and ended with endearing complimentary closes. In one letter, Larguía signed off one letter to Stevens with “a warm embrace.”<sup>18</sup> Stevens signed off her response letter with “a fervent embrace” for members of the UAM.<sup>19</sup>

In later years, Stevens would look back on her time in the IACW as “the best working years of my life.”<sup>20</sup> Stevens’s fond memories of the IACW contrast with the circumstances of her departure from the organization. A number of Latin American feminists in the IACW, who came to view Stevens as a “‘fascist’ and a ‘dictator,’”<sup>21</sup> eventually united against her leadership. Stevens’s already tense relationship with the Roosevelt Administration put her in an increasingly precarious situation. At the 1938 Conference in Lima, Peru, Roosevelt administration affiliates and representatives in the IACW, including Larguía and Schlieper, convened to plot Stevens’s removal.<sup>22</sup> Stevens later wrote to her husband that “‘The Argentines behaved like rats’” when Larguía and Schlieper refused to defend Stevens and her legislative proposals at the Conference.<sup>23</sup> Ultimately, in Lima, the Pan American Union unanimously voted Stevens out of the IACW and replaced her with Schlieper as the new chair.<sup>24</sup> For a year, Stevens attempted,

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<sup>17</sup> Marino, *Feminism for the Americas*, 139.

<sup>18</sup> Susana Larguía, letter to Doris Stevens, Dec. 30, 1937. My translation.

<sup>19</sup> Doris Stevens, letter to Susana Larguía, Jan. 31, 1938.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Marino, *Feminism for the Americas*, 167, footnote 127: Transcription of recorded narrative of IACW, ca. 1960, box 126, folder 5, Doris Stevens Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Marino, *Feminism for the Americas*, 146.

<sup>22</sup> Marino 162,

<sup>23</sup> Letter from Stevens to Jonathan Mitchell (Stevens’s lover), Dec. 29, 1938, box 25, folder 5, Doris Stevens Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. Quoted in Marino, 163.

<sup>24</sup> “Elects Successor to Doris Stevens: Pan-American Board Selects Argentine Woman to Head Inter-American Commission,” *New York Times*, Nov. 2, 1939 (ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times), p. 10.

with the support of NWP members and diplomats, to take back her former position at the IACW, but without success.<sup>25</sup>

At first, Stevens's expulsion from the IACW struck me. How could an internationally successful women's-rights activist become an enemy in an international women's organization? On a personal level, how could Stevens's relationship with UAM members take such a dramatic turn? In this paper, I intend to answer these questions by investigating other questions: Who was Doris Stevens? What was the Inter-American Commission of Women, and the UAM? Why would Stevens and the UAM agree to work together in the first place, and what likely sparked their initial interest in collaboration? My interest in an Argentine women's group stems back to my interest in studying abroad in Argentina, which did not happen due to COVID-19 concerns as well as academic conflicts. Additionally, Argentina had a strong extreme-right-wing presence during the 1930s,<sup>26</sup> underscoring its significance on an international scale leading up to and during World War II. Finally, on the level of interpersonal interaction, learning about Schlieper's replacement of Stevens in the IACW, especially after having worked with Stevens, fueled my interest in examining that relationship Stevens had with the UAM.

I argue that Stevens and UAM leaders initially collaborated because of their shared interest in international women's civil and political rights with men; however, Stevens's lack of an anti-fascist commitment eventually isolated her from Unión members, and from the Inter-American Commission of Women as a whole. The correspondences between Stevens and Larguía, which I acquired from online versions of documents kept in the Harvard University Schlesinger Library, serve as the main primary sources of focus here. Additionally, I consider

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<sup>25</sup> Marino, *Feminism for the Americas*, 167.

<sup>26</sup> Sandra McGee Deutsch, *Las Derechas: The Extreme Right in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, 1890-1939* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

anecdotes from various feminists, including Stevens, which I contextualize within the histories of the scholars I consult. Unless indicated otherwise, I provide my own translations for Larguía's letters and in a few other instances.

## **Historiography**

Much of the popular discourse in America surrounding feminism emphasizes the contributions of first-wave feminists—those from the nineteenth to the early-twentieth century, especially those involved in the Women's Suffrage Movement—as well as Second-Wave feminists—those active in the later twentieth century. The scholars I engage with in this paper generally agree that the interwar period was a significant period for feminists in the U.S. and Latin America. In *Feminism as Life's Work: Four Modern American Women through Two World Wars* (2014), Mary Trigg explores the lives of four White, middle-class, educated American women—including Doris Stevens—who were intellectually and socio-politically active in the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s. Attitudes about sexuality and relationships had changed after World War I. The “modern” feminists of the 1910s, '20s and '30s pushed away from an old Victorian era of separated gender spheres and embraced more liberal notions of heterosocial and heterosexual relationships.<sup>27</sup> After the full ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, suffragettes such as members of the National Women's Party (including Stevens herself) looked for other policies on which to base their platform.<sup>28</sup>

Katherine Marino's *Feminism for the Americas: The Making of an International Human Rights Movement* (2019) is possibly the first “book-length, transnational [history] of Pan-American feminism,” built upon the scholarship of writers who have focused on different

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<sup>27</sup> Trigg, “Introduction,” in *Feminism as Life's Work*.

<sup>28</sup> Trigg, *Feminism as Life's Work*, 8.

regions, years, or figures.<sup>29</sup> Marino disagrees with scholars who argue that international feminism did not truly exist until the 1970s. Instead, Marino insists that the transnational struggle for women’s rights began far earlier—the early twentieth century—in Latin America.<sup>30</sup> Marino discusses *feminismo americano*,<sup>31</sup> a Pan-American feminist movement that prioritized not strictly “women’s” rights, but of overall socioeconomic and political rights. Marino challenges the notion that “women’s rights are human rights” was originally a European or U.S. feminist concept. Instead, she argues that Latin American feminists pioneered the philosophy through anti-imperialist, anti-fascist, international activism.<sup>32</sup> Both Trigg’s and Marino’s books, especially Marino’s, discuss the role of racial, cultural, and class-based bias among the discussed feminists. Trigg’s work, which focuses on Stevens and three other White, educated, middle- and upper-class women, mentions that a number of African American women’s groups formed out of a lack of identification with White women’s groups, which often held implicitly or explicitly racist views (Trigg 8). Louise Michele Newman’s book *White Women’s Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States* (1999) offers broader context for White feminist activist philosophy, such as that held by Stevens. Newman traces the relationship between racial thought and women’s issues in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, including discussions of racism and imperialism. While Newman does not extensively discuss feminists

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<sup>29</sup> Marino, *Feminism for the Americas*, 243, n. 15.

<sup>30</sup> Marino 2-6. Marino disagrees with Samuel Moyn, who argues in *The Last Utopia* that the 1970s witnessed the true birth of “human rights.” For more information about Moyn’s work, see Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010). For a history of notable Afro-descended women activists in the Americas, see Imaobong D. Umoren, *Race Women Internationalists: Activist-Intellectuals and Global Freedom Struggles* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018).

<sup>31</sup> literally “American feminism.” In many cases, “americano” in Spanish means “from the Americas,” not necessarily from the United States. As I will discuss later in the paper, followers of *feminismo americano* often embraced Pan-Hispanic or Latin American solidarity against U.S. imperialism.

<sup>32</sup> Marino, *Feminism for the Americas*, 6.

after the early 1900s, her analysis of late-nineteenth and turn-of-the-twentieth-century feminists reveals the lasting legacy of earlier race- and gender-based thought on activists such as Stevens.

For the histories surrounding Argentina and Argentine women's rights in the interwar period, Marifran Carlson's *Feminismo: The Woman's Movement in Argentina from its Beginnings to Eva Perón* (1988) offers a comprehensive overview of the history of Argentine women's gender-based activism before the Peróns. Jill Hedges' extensive research on Argentine history in her book *Argentina: A Modern History* (2011) explains Argentine politics during the "Infamous Decade" (Spanish: *Década infame*), which directly affected UAM members. In *Las Derechas: The Extreme Right in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, 1890-1939* (1999), Sandra McGee Deutsch traces the evolution of extremist right-wing groups in Argentina. Contrary to what some historians think, and to what some Argentines believed at the time, Deutsch believes that there was a significant fascist presence in Argentina. For instance, she argues that the *nacionalistas*—the right-wing group that helped Uriburu overthrow Yrigoyen—were fascist because of their rejection of the left, even though some *nacionalistas* did not identify as "fascist" because they were not Italian or German.<sup>33</sup> While Argentine groups such as the *nacionalistas* had connections to both German Nazis and Italian Fascists,<sup>34</sup> it is important not to conflate Argentine right-wing authoritarianism as strictly or necessarily "fascist," or at least not as identical to German Nazism or Italian Fascism. At the very least, not all fascist Argentine entities identified as so. Still, UAM members' fierce anti-fascist stance, and the conflict brought about by Stevens' association with

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<sup>33</sup> Sandra McGee Deutsch, *Las Derechas: The Extreme Right in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, 1890-1939* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 245.

<sup>34</sup> Deutsch, *Las Derechas*, 244.

fascism, demonstrate that these feminists perceived fascism as an acute threat to their interests as Argentine women.

The following section of the paper discusses Stevens, her upbringing, and her political development, particularly in the context of the National Women's Party (NWP).

### **Doris Stevens and the NWP**

Born in Omaha, Nebraska, Stevens was raised by a Presbyterian and staunchly Republican family. Her parents had a strained relationship, but her mother's frustration with the family situation supposedly encouraged Stevens to become a feminist. Stevens attended Oberlin College, where she first became involved in the women's suffrage movement. She had two main agendas: "same rules for girls and boys (legal side), permit dancing between boys and girls (Social side)." Apparently, Stevens had several romantic relationships in college. Her rejection of traditional American values associated with femininity, her close relationship with her mother, and her involvement in the suffrage movement strongly influenced her future feminist beliefs and actions.<sup>35</sup>

After graduating from Oberlin College and working different jobs, Stevens eventually joined the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) as an organizer, and then the Congressional Union (National Women's Party) when it broke away from NAWSA.<sup>36</sup> Stevens was strongly influenced by Alice Paul, a figurehead of the women's suffrage movement in the early twentieth century. A young woman when she joined, Stevens "represented the 'new' and singular type of woman the National Women's Party came to symbolize."<sup>37</sup> Besides

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<sup>35</sup> Trigg, *Feminism as Life's Work*, 29-33.

<sup>36</sup> Trigg 42; 58.

<sup>37</sup> Trigg 42.

women's voting rights, Stevens supported contraceptives and "marriage reform."<sup>38</sup> According to Mary Trigg, Stevens's "militant flair, her radical, unorthodox feminism, her meritocratic views" as well as her organizing and fundraising skills, charismatic public presence, and physical attractiveness, made her an ideal representative for the NWP.<sup>39</sup>

Stevens was a "liberal feminist," referring to a philosophy based on late-nineteenth-century feminism, and which believed that women's oppression was rooted in their restrictions in the "public sphere." Liberal feminists believed that just because one was born with a biological sex did not assign them to a particular social gender. Some have critiqued liberal feminists for their embracement of a male-oriented worldview, "individualism," and for the movement's White-dominated, heteronormative, and classist traits. Trigg compares the liberal feminists to radical feminists, the latter of which believed in the need for uprooting patriarchal structures rather than operating within them.<sup>40</sup> White, middle class, and advanced degree holding, Stevens represented a privileged sector of U.S. feminism. She held racist and classist beliefs; when Stevens went to jail for her activism, she complained in her *Jailed for Freedom* that she had to occupy the same space as the Black women in the jail.<sup>41</sup> Stevens's prejudices do not stand out when considering the context of (White) feminist politics of the time. From the last few decades of the nineteenth century to around 1920, women's organizations were largely divided by race. National Women's Party members often dismissed the specific, intersectional forms of discrimination against Black women, considering them "race" issues as opposed to "feminist" issues of the Party's concern.<sup>42</sup> Stevens also looked down upon lower-class people, who

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<sup>38</sup> Trigg 58.

<sup>39</sup> Trigg 6; 58.

<sup>40</sup> Trigg 12-13.

<sup>41</sup> Trigg 6; 64.

<sup>42</sup> Louise Michele Newman, *White Women's Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 13.

represented a portion of her audience as a party public speaker. Her biases led her to develop more conservative politics later in her life.<sup>43</sup> It also shaped her interactions with Latin American *feministas* when Stevens was chair of the IACW, particularly by the end of her time there, when her overtly racist beliefs towards her Latin American counterparts became more apparent.<sup>44</sup>

### **Stevens and the IACW: NWP feminism vs. *feminismo americano***

The ERA would grant women certain individual rights ranging from property management rights to the right to serve on a jury. Many Progressive reformers opposed the ERA for fear that “‘equal rights under the law’” would destroy the regulations they achieved to protect women in work environments.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, the Party lacked commitment to racial justice or significant class-based reform, so it lacked coalition with race- or class-based movements.

As a U.S. feminist, Stevens upheld parts of U.S. feminists’ agendas that came at odds with some of the main goals of Latin American feminists and feminists organizations. Whereas mainstream U.S. feminism, as exemplified by the NWP, prioritized women’s individual rights and legal equality with men, *feminismo americano* generally emphasized broader economic and social reform. This included maternity legislation, such as financial support for mothers, which was nearly absent from U.S. law (Marino 132). *Feminismo americano* also united many IACW Latin American feminists and their affiliated feminist organizations against U.S. imperialism.

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<sup>43</sup> Trigg 64.

<sup>44</sup> See Marino, 161, when she includes an example from a letter Stevens’s lover Jonathan Mitchell wrote to Stevens. When Stevens’s indicated her frustration with the IACW’s lack of support for her, Mitchell indicated his belief of the inferiority of the “‘colored races’” and told Stevens to “‘act as if you knew they were dirt beneath your feet.’” While I will not focus specifically on Stevens’s racism in this paper, her prejudice undoubtedly contributed to her sense of U.S. cultural and racial superiority, and to her domineering attitude that, along with her collaborations with dictators, contributed to her label as a “fascist.”

<sup>45</sup> Marino, *Feminism for the Americas*, 3; Louise Michele Newman, *White Women’s Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminist in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 102.

The superiority complex that U.S. feminists generally held over their Latin American counterparts struck many *feministas* as imperialist, especially since women's issues played a major role in U.S. involvement in Latin America. Many *feministas* united under "Pan-Hispanic" and "Latin American" identities, with a shared sense of *raza* ("race") and language that fell hand-in-hand with their opposition to Anglo-American authority.<sup>46</sup>

In the next section of this paper, I will briefly explain general Argentinian politics in the interwar period to contextualize the Unión Argentina de Mujeres and the evolution of the organization's relationship with Stevens.

### **Argentine Feminist Politics Between the World Wars**

The interwar period was an important period for many Argentine feminists. After World War I, Hipólito Yrigoyen's election in 1916, and the subsequent ratification of women's suffrage in the U.S. in 1920, more Argentine feminists got involved in international feminist politics on a scale larger than before the war. Argentine feminists had achieved several goals—such as limited workday hours for women, married women's equal civil rights with men, and unmarried and widowed mothers' rights over their children—but they lacked a solid base and overall public support for their agenda.<sup>47</sup>

Although Yrigoyen was re-elected in 1928 with a significant majority, several right-wing opposition groups had united to plan Yrigoyen's overthrow. In 1930, after the Depression had caused many Argentines to lose their jobs, Yrigoyen lost support, giving his opponents an

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<sup>46</sup> Marino, *Feminism for the Americas*, 4. See footnote 9, where Marino briefly explains that U.S. officials and women activists often used "women's issues" as an indicator of national progress. Women's voting rights was one of these issues, since throughout the 1930s, many Latin American countries had not yet granted women suffrage. Also see Newman, *White Women's Rights*, for more context about imperialist and racist thought among White, U.S. women.

<sup>47</sup> Carlson, *¡Feminismo!*, 153-154; 165-166.

advantage.<sup>48</sup> On September 6, 1930, a military coup d'état overthrew President Hipólito Yrigoyen, who had been president since 1916, and installed General José Félix Uriburu as the next leader.<sup>49</sup> This had been the first military coup in Argentina since 1853.<sup>50</sup> This coup marked the beginning of a phase of Argentine history often referred to as the “Infamous Decade” (Spanish: *década infame*), which lasted until 1943.

Despite the threats to democracy posed by the new regime, feminists still had hopes for progress on women's rights, including suffrage. Two notable feminists, who would eventually work with UAM members and with Doris Stevens, were Alicia Moreau de Justo (1885-1986) and Carmela Horne de Burmeister (1881-1966). In 1930, educator and social worker Carmela Horne de Burmeister founded the Argentine Association for Women's Suffrage. Unlike earlier women's suffrage activists, Burmeister was not strongly associated with political parties, thus avoiding the political attacks other suffragists experienced. The AAWS's lack of explicit religious or political affiliations made it more popular. By the 1930s, however, many of the established feminists were older, and the overall feminist movement lacked a solid base of younger inheritors. Compared to some other Latin American countries at the time, Argentina did not have the most progressive feminist politics. This was especially apparent considering Argentina's high percentage of European immigrants, which in other countries with high immigrant populations corresponded with a more liberal culture.<sup>51</sup>

A combination of domestic and international politics made 1936 especially important for Argentine feminist politics. President Agustín P. Justo (1932 to 1938), proposed changes to the

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<sup>48</sup> Carlson 169.

<sup>49</sup> Jill Hedges, *Argentina: A Modern History* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 46; Carlson, *¡Feminismo!*, 169.

<sup>50</sup> Hedges, *Argentina*, 46.

<sup>51</sup> Carlson, *¡Feminismo!*, 170-174.

1926 Civil Code, which would have reduced married women's status to that of minors, including by limiting their abilities to work and manage finances.<sup>52</sup> This sparked the creation of the Unión Argentina de Mujeres.<sup>53</sup> Justo intended to keep women from acting as professional competition to men. Ocampo, then President of the UAM, as well as Moreau, Burmeister, and hundreds of members from their respective organizations petitioned the Argentine government not to pass Justo's proposed changes to the Civil Code. Ultimately, they succeeded, and Justo's policies failed to pass in the Argentine Congress.<sup>54</sup>

That same year, President Franklin D. Roosevelt held the Pan American Peace Conference in Buenos Aires, hoping that Argentina would join the U.S. to oppose authoritarian regimes in Europe. Due to economic export conflicts between Argentina and the U.S., the Argentine government rejected Roosevelt's proposal. However, some Argentine feminists were optimistic about working with the U.S. on women's issues out of the belief that Roosevelt had more progressive views on women's issues. These feminists were unaware that Roosevelt prioritized "hemispheric solidarity" over women's policies and was more than willing to ignore issues of suffrage at the Conference. In spite of Roosevelt's apparent ambivalence, Stevens and hundreds of other representatives petitioned the Argentine government to pass Argentine women's voting rights. The petition ultimately failed, and the Argentine Congress refused to pass women's suffrage.<sup>55</sup> However, by the 1938 Lima Conference, the Argentine government

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<sup>52</sup> Carlson, *¡Feminismo!*, 177; Marino, *Feminism for the Americas*, 139;

<sup>53</sup> Marino, *Feminism for the Americas*, 139;

<sup>54</sup> Carlson, *¡Feminismo!*, 178.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 176-178.

was considering the expansion of women's voting rights to the national level. The UAM was among several organizations that supported the expansion of voting rights in Argentina <sup>56</sup>

### **Unión Argentina de Mujeres**

The UAM's main principles were the "cultural and spiritual" advancement of women, women's political and civil rights, protection of mothers, prevention of child labor, improving the living and working conditions of female workers (including with a living wage), reducing prostitution by helping women have access to other means of living, and promoting peace.<sup>57</sup> I could not find much personal information about Schlieper or Larguía. According to Marino, Schlieper's appearance and purported political neutrality significantly influenced her selection as chair of the IACW. Martínez Guerrero was White, blonde-haired, and blue-eyed. The *Pan American* magazine juxtaposed an image of an elderly indigenous woman, the supposed representation of "an age that is passing" with an image of Schlieper, "the 'new woman' – of Latin America."<sup>58</sup> Ironically, this message contradicted the antiracist, anti-classist message feminists such as Schlieper promoted. As for Martínez Guerrero's political alignments, she was not by any means a politically neutral individual. Although Martínez Guerrero did not identify as a communist, her politics positioned her on the left side of the political spectrum. In 1941, she founded the Junta de la Victoria, an anti-fascist, pro-ally, Popular Front organization, and the

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<sup>56</sup> "Woman Suffrage in the Americas," p. 16-17 "Political Rights," p. 19 "Argentina," In Lima Conference: Report of IACW, December 1938. Papers of Doris Stevens, 1884-1983 (inclusive), 1920-1960 (bulk), MC 546; T-182; M-104, 75.11., Box: 75. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

<sup>57</sup> Inside of a pamphlet of the Unión Argentina de Mujeres, directly preceding Victoria Ocampo, "La mujer, sus derechos y sus responsabilidades," Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

<sup>58</sup> Marino, *Feminism for the Americas*, 174-175.

largest Argentine women's group of its time.<sup>59</sup> I found very little about Susana Larguía, besides that she co-founded the Unión<sup>60</sup> and that she was the aunt of Marxist-feminist thinker Isabel Larguía.<sup>61</sup> In the next section, I will explain the role of both the Popular Front,<sup>62</sup> the Roosevelt Administration, and Schlieper and Larguía themselves in the process of Stevens's expulsion.

### **The Popular Front, the Roosevelt Administration, and Stevens's Removal from the IACW**

Many Latin American feminist organizations gained momentum during the tumultuous period between the World Wars. The Great Depression enabled right-wing forces across the Americas to gain power. In response, the Popular Front, an international coalition that involved both working-class and bourgeois organizations, formed in opposition to rising fascism. Many Latin American feminist organizations joined the Popular Front with the belief that fascism fundamentally threatened women's rights.<sup>63</sup> For example, the Frente Único Pro-Derechos de la Mujer, (FUPDM, or "The Sole Front for Women's Rights"), founded in 1935 by a group of communist feminists, became the largest women's group in Mexico.<sup>64</sup>

At first, for political reasons, Stevens tried to appeal to the socialist economic and social interests of Popular Front *feministas*. Particularly, Stevens sought to encourage support of the Equal Rights Treaty by claiming that it could work alongside maternity legislation. This was political move influenced by Stevens's collaboration with Vergara.<sup>65</sup> When Stevens began

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<sup>59</sup> Marino, *Feminism for the Americas*, 173-174. For more information about the Junta de la Victoria, see Sandra McGee Deutsch, "Argentine Women Against Fascism: The Junta de la Victoria, 1941-1947," in *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 13, no. 2 (2012): 221-236, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2012.675707>.

<sup>60</sup> Marino 139.

<sup>61</sup> Virginia Vargas, *Desde la Cuba revolucionaria: feminismo y marxismo en la obra de Isabel Larguía y John Dumoulin* (Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2018), 10.

<sup>62</sup> Spanish: *la frente popular*.

<sup>63</sup> Marino 121.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 135-138.

working with the FUPDM in 1937, members approved of Stevens because she condemned Ecuadorian dictator Federico Páez when he sought to strip women of constitutional voting rights.<sup>66</sup> However, they came to see her actions as patronizing and lacking the true anti-imperialist and antifascist spirit that Popular Front feminists embraced.

The ‘final straw’ moment happened in March 1938, during the Mexican oil controversy. Historically, the United States and Britain had controlled Mexican oil and oppressed oil workers. When President Lázaro Cárdenas nationalized Mexican oil, the U.S. imposed economic sanctions that put Mexico in an economic crisis. The FUPDM asked for Stevens’s support in this dire situation, explaining that the nationalization of Mexican oil provided opportunities for the improvement of Mexican women’s working conditions. Specifically, FUPDM asked if Stevens could help find other feminist organizations that could offer their support. Stevens dismissed this plea on the basis that “the IACW’s list of Latin American feminist groups was too long to send.” Ignoring what was largely the United States’ fault for the issue, Stevens also claimed that the U.S. and Mexico would be able to “work out a happy solution” and that no one in the State Department “expresses any desire to put pressure on Mexico on behalf of the oil companies.”<sup>67</sup>

This was not the first time Stevens had made herself an enemy to her Latin American counterparts. In 1931, Stevens suggested to Cuban feminist Ofelia Domínguez Navarro that she work with authoritarian President Gerardo Machado to promote women’s rights in Cuba. Stevens angered Domínguez Navarro with this suggestion because it ignored the rights abuses of Machado’s regime.<sup>68</sup> It was likely that Domínguez Navarro had let FUPDM members know

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<sup>66</sup> Marino 150.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 150-151.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

about Stevens's insensitivity to her concerns.<sup>69</sup> In August 1938, Stevens and Dominican feminist Minerva Bernardino visited Dominican General Rafael Trujillo. Trujillo had supported Franco in Spain and had been largely responsible for the death of fifteen-to-twenty-thousand Black Haitians and Dominicans in the Dominican Republic. This is something one historian "has called 'the single most important act of fascist aggression in the hemisphere...enacted upon black laborers during this period.'<sup>70</sup>" Stevens openly complimented Trujillo for his "'achievements.'"<sup>71</sup> This reinforced what already appeared to many Popular Front feminists as Stevens's complete disregard for their interests and goals. Meanwhile, Stevens was apparently unaware that her actions were objectionable.<sup>72</sup>

Stevens was just as unpopular with the Roosevelt administration and affiliated women's organizations as she had become with Popular Front *feministas*, if not more so. The NWP had opposed Roosevelt's New Deal policies, disapproving of the gender-based differences it codified, including differences in men's and women's wages (Marino 101). During the 1933 Montevideo Conference, during which State Department officials prioritized general U.S.-Latin American relations over women's issues, Stevens had asserted her influence and that of the IACW so strongly in unexpected ways that the State Department saw her as a diplomatic liability (106). Her tense relationship with the State Department continued after the Montevideo Conference. At least a full year before the 1938 Lima Conference, though possibly as early as 1933, members of the League of Women Voters, the National Women's Trade Union League, and women in Roosevelt's administration had been plotting to remove Stevens.<sup>73</sup> Since Stevens

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 156.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Marino, *Feminism for the Americas*, 157; Trigg, *Feminism as Life's Work*, 163. Marino indicates the year 1933 as the starting point of substantiated efforts to remove Stevens, while Trigg indicates that these efforts began in 1935.

had referred to maternity legislation as “fascist”—while pretending to support it for political reasons—the administration affiliates decided to paint Stevens as a “fascist” herself (Marino 157). In order to officially take away Stevens’s position, the Roosevelt administration depended on the nature of her appointment in the first place. In 1928, Stevens had been selected as chair of the IACW by the Pan-American Union, *not* by Washington (Marino 158). The Roosevelt administration decided to reformulate the IACW as “an ‘official’ body composed only of representatives appointed by respective governments” (Marino 158). This would allow the administration to replace Stevens with an “official” U.S. representative.

In preparation for the Lima conference in December 1938, Stevens put her trust in UAM members for their allyship. However, this support would go challenged when a Roosevelt administration official told Larguía and Schlieper that the administration did not support Stevens and that Stevens had an association with fascism. The two feminists were angry to know that Stevens had this affiliation. Nor were they pleased when Stevens told them they would be housed in Lima by the Peruvian Benavides administration. Popular Front organizations had considered this regime “the seat of Nazi-fascism in the Americas.” During the conference, presumably without telling Stevens, Roosevelt administration affiliate Elise Musser, Larguía, Schlieper, and Mexican feminist Esperanza Balmaceda came together to plan Stevens’s removal.<sup>74</sup>

In the next section, I examine the earliest correspondences I came across between Larguía and Stevens, looking for insight into their intentions working together. In their words, I look for clues that predict the change in the relationship between Stevens and the UAM. During and after this analysis, I briefly recontextualize the letters in the history I discussed beforehand.

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<sup>74</sup> Marino, *Feminism for the Americas*, 157-164.

### Primary Source Analysis: Letters between Stevens and UAM members

The earliest letter I came across was written by Susana Larguía and addressed to Stevens, dated December 30, 1937. In a warm but respectful tone,<sup>75</sup> Larguía sentimentally mentions that “a year had passed since your [Stevens’s] departure,” presumably from the 1936 Buenos Aires conference, but that “the memory of you is as alive among us [UAM members] as it was the first day [we worked together].”<sup>76</sup> Immediately afterwards, Larguía explains that “although we employ different methods from you all more in alignment with our environment and level of evolution, we have worked towards the same goal; to reclaim women’s rights.”<sup>77</sup> Larguía acknowledges that the Unión’s philosophies and “methods” differ from Stevens and an unspecified cohort of “you all,” presumably the National Women’s Party members or Anglo-American feminists as a whole. The implication is that the UAM is interested in working with Stevens on common-ground issues, but that, due to the circumstances of each respective nation, their feminist approaches will be different. Still, Larguía’s indication of different “levels of evolution” between the UAM and Stevens’s cohort may suggest the belief that Stevens and her [most likely American] feminist “group” is more “evolved” in feminist terms than the UAM. This suggested hierarchy, particularly involving Stevens’s leadership style, was one that, as Marino argues, made so many Latin American feminists oppose Stevens. Larguía may have intended this rhetoric as a strategy for gaining key political support from Stevens, the chair of the IACW. However, it is difficult to know Larguía’s intentions at this stage of the UAM’s

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<sup>75</sup> Larguía opens the letter with “My Dear Doris” (“Mi Querida Doris”) but addresses Stevens with the formal “Usted” pronoun.

<sup>76</sup> Susana Larguía, letter to Doris Stevens, Dec. 30, 1937, in *Doris Stevens Papers*. Inter-American Commission of Women. Correspondence and Office Files. Argentina: Union Argentina de Mujeres, 1937-1938; includes Susana Larguía. MC 546, folder 61.8. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts. [https://iif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:425314326\\$1j](https://iif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:425314326$1j).

<sup>77</sup> Larguía, letter to Stevens, Dec. 30, 1937.

relationship with Stevens. Whatever they may be, Larguía's efforts to communicate with Stevens indicate her belief that the UAM could benefit from Stevens's support.

Larguía continues by explaining that the Argentine media overall has not given the UAM the attention it desires, but that working with the *El Mundo* newspaper, one "of quality and nothing sectarian," could help boost the UAM's reputation. She mentions that involvement with the newspaper would show readers the organization's collaboration with the United States. Larguía writes "I believe that knowing what U.S. women have accomplished and are accomplishing will be a magnificent example for our own efforts." Larguía indicates that U.S. feminists could send in articles to be translated for the newspaper. The plan, according to her, is to write "periodically, in a moderate tone, until the readers get accustomed" to their feminist philosophy. Larguía laments that getting the support of both working-class men and women is difficult; "Women have such terror of the word "communism" that in doubt, they are capable of letting themselves be gagged, tied up at their feet and hands and converted into baby-making machines without offering the least resistance."<sup>78</sup> Larguía clearly presents herself in opposition to this apparent internalization of misogynistic conservatism. This sentence may suggest that the misogynistic, anti-communist forces are fascist, which would align with Marino's characterization of the UAM as anti-fascist.<sup>79</sup> Considering the circumstances of the UAM's founding—that is, Justo's blatantly anti-women's-rights proposal to the Civil Code<sup>80</sup>—it makes sense that Larguía would demonstrate a concern about the potential for the extreme oppression of Argentine women. It also makes sense why Larguía and her collaborators in *El Mundo* would

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<sup>78</sup> Larguía, letter to Stevens, Dec. 30, 1937. My translation.

<sup>79</sup> Marino, *Feminism for the Americas*, 139.

<sup>80</sup> Marino 139.

feel the need to moderate their rhetoric in the midst of a reactionary, authoritarian political climate.

Larguía and Schlieper would eventually come to believe that Stevens's political tactics were actually a threat to their sociopolitical interests. A revealing quote from Stevens foreshadows what would ultimately damage her relationship with many *feministas*, including Larguía and Schlieper. In a letter Stevens wrote to Larguía on April 13<sup>th</sup>, 1938, Stevens indicates her disapproval of President Roosevelt. She then explains that, in spite of the Roosevelt Administration's opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment, as well as opposition from within Congress, Stevens and her U.S. feminist allies (presumably National Women's Party members) had presented the ERA measure before the Senate. Stevens uses this example to express her belief that "women must work with presidents as they come and go, whether they possess substance or shadow. So long as they are the titular heads of the government, we use them to strengthen our own numbers of awakened women."<sup>81</sup> Recalling Stevens's suggestion to Ofelia Domínguez Navarro in 1931 that she work with Machado, and Navarro's rejection of this idea, Stevens's belief here had already turned her into an enemy for many Latin American feminists, as I explained with the FUPDM. Stevens's praise of General Trujillo in August of that year, and the international controversy that sparked, would reinforce her political estrangement with many IACW *feministas* and the Roosevelt administration. Although Larguía indicated no obvious disagreement in the following letter she wrote back on May 6,<sup>82</sup> she and Schlieper likely would have thought quite differently about Stevens at the Lima Conference later that year, when the Roosevelt administration warned them about her "fascist" tendencies, and when Stevens's agreed

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<sup>81</sup> Doris Stevens, letter to Susana Larguía, April 13, 1938, p. 2, Harvard University Schlesinger Library, Cambridge, MA.

<sup>82</sup> Larguía, letter to Stevens, May 6, 1938, Harvard University Schlesinger Library, pp. 1-2.

to house herself and the two UAM feminists in the Benavides-provided housing. After having fought to prevent Justo's misogynistic reforms to the 1926 Civil Code, UAM members had reasons to doubt the intentions of authoritarian leaders in their own nations and abroad when it came to women's rights. Clearly, Larguía was still, at this time, concerned about Argentine government's capacity for the abuse of women. Schlieper and Larguía must have felt infuriated that Stevens, an international feminist leader who promoted "women's rights," would work with national leaders whose politics contradicted the broad, radical feminist visions of Popular Front *feministas*. As previously explained, Stevens's connections with dictators across Latin America, and her accusations of being "fascist," ultimately distanced her from UAM members and with the IACW.

### **After Stevens's Removal**

In January of 1939, President Roosevelt appointed Mary Winslow to replace Stevens as the U.S. representative for the IACW.<sup>83</sup> According to a November 1<sup>st</sup> New York Times article, in his reasoning for appointing Winslow, Roosevelt explained that Stevens had *not* been an "official" member of the Commission, even though she was chairperson. Apparently, however, "the Latin Americans" had assumed that Stevens was an official member, and that her spot did not need to be filled.<sup>84</sup> Stevens still had the support of the National Women's Party and World Woman's Party; both organizations petitioned the Pan American Union to keep Stevens in her position. A letter signed by "Mrs. Stephen Pell," chair of the NWP, and Alice Paul, chair of the World Woman's Party, emphasized Stevens's role in helping the IACW attain "its present

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<sup>83</sup> "Miss Winslow Appointed: Named to Inter-American Commission for Women," *New York Times*, Feb. 2, 1939 (ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times), p. 17; "Send Envoys a Plea for Miss Stevens: National and World Woman's Parties Want Inter-American Commission Kept as It Is," *New York Times*, Feb. 20, 1939 (ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times), p. 2.

<sup>84</sup> "Elects Successor to Doris Stevens: Pan-American Board Selects Argentine Woman to Head Inter-American Commission," *New York Times* Nov. 2, 1939 (ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times), p. 10.

remarkable record of achievement” on equal rights legislation. The letter also insisted that Stevens had always represented the United States in the commission, so there was no reason to doubt her position.<sup>85</sup> However, as mentioned earlier, Stevens and her allies were ultimately unable to reseat Stevens in the IACW.

By voting Stevens out of the Commission, and voting in a Latin American chair, Popular Front *feministas* had achieved a victory. However, her absence did not resolve the issues of U.S. imperial influence. According to Marino, “Popular Front feminists struck a Faustian bargain” with the U.S. government.<sup>86</sup> The new rule that the governments in the Pan-American Union must appoint their own representatives gave the U.S. more power and influence within the commission.<sup>87</sup> This increase in U.S. State Department led to a decrease in the Commission’s focus on “feminism” or women’s rights. Instead, U.S. commission representatives often emphasized general Pan-American collaboration, especially against fascism.<sup>88</sup> Though few *feministas* wished for Stevens to return, even Vergara referred to her when she wrote that the IACW had lost ““the last [U.S.] feminist of importance”” in return for women who had much less interest in women-specific concerns.<sup>89</sup> Nevertheless, in spite of Stevens’s absence and the new dynamic of the Commission, feminists including Schlieper and Vergara worked together to reinstate women’s issues and “ ‘equal rights’ ” as a priority.<sup>90</sup>

It is unlikely that Stevens ever identified as a “fascist.” However, in the minds of many leftist IACW *feministas*, Stevens’s unapologetic collaboration with dictators must have seemed dangerously close to fascist, if not outrightly so. Her relationship with President Benavides was

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<sup>85</sup> “Send Envoys a Plea for Miss Stevens,” p. 2.

<sup>86</sup> Marino 173.

<sup>87</sup> Marino, *Feminism for the Americas*, 173.

<sup>88</sup> Marino, 173-178.

<sup>89</sup> Marino 295, n. 25.

<sup>90</sup> Marino 180.

probably the most extreme example. These collaborations speak volumes about Stevens's priorities as a "feminist." Indeed, Stevens was willing to work with leaders of "substance or shadow"—including leaders whose actions cast oppressive shadows over people within and outside their countries—in order to pass women's rights legislation. It is no wonder that these *feministas* saw Stevens as a " 'fascist'" and " 'dictator.'"

Stevens's contributions to the U.S. suffrage movement must be acknowledged. However, as exemplified by her work in Latin America, Stevens's legacy was more mixed than the heroic "Apostle of Action" narrative often attributed to her suffrage activism.<sup>91</sup> Critical and honest considerations of figures such as Stevens are important for de-centering White, Anglo narratives surrounding feminism. A consideration of the mixed contributions of figures such as Stevens, and the response from collaborators such as UAM members and other Popular Front feminists, offers a more nuanced understanding of feminism in the U.S. and Latin America during the Interwar period. Furthermore, studying the feminists from this time period decenters the historiography surrounding the pre-Nineteenth-Amendment "First-Wave" and 1960s-onward "Second-Wave" U.S. feminist movements. As Marino mentions, a study of this time period also brings attention to global human rights activism *before* the late-twentieth century. In Argentina, the consideration of feminism pre-Perón decenters the popular narratives surrounding Eva Perón and her contributions to women's rights.

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<sup>91</sup> Historians such as Trigg have examined other problematic aspects of Stevens's political career, including her anti-lack racism and classism, as I briefly mentioned.

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