



**WOMEN, THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS AND THE  
UNITED NATIONS:  
A STORY IN THREE PARTS**

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(Boston)**

**Global Network of UNESCO Chairs on Gender  
(Buenos Aires)**

**December 2020**



E-published in December 2020 by the UNESCO/UNITWIN Network on Gender, Culture, and People-Centered Development (Boston) with the Global Network of UNESCO Chairs on Gender (Buenos Aires)

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# WOMEN, THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS AND THE UNITED NATIONS: A STORY IN THREE PARTS

Marilyn Carr D.Phil

## Preface

*At the end of World War I in 1919, twenty-seven countries came together in Paris to discuss the terms of peace and signed the Versailles Treaty that set out these terms. A key part of the Versailles treaty was the creation of the League of Nations (LON), which according to Woodrow Wilson would “mediate international disputes and foster cooperation between different nations in the hopes of preventing war on such a large scale in the future.”*

*When it is remembered at all, LON is often thought of as a lost cause, which failed to stop the emergence of yet another world war in 1939. What is not remembered is the extraordinary role LON played in establishing the world’s first international civil service and, by necessity, in embarking on international technical cooperation programmes to respond to the health, nutrition, refugee, human rights and economic problems that arose as a result of WWI. Also not remembered is the key role that women played both in lobbying for the League and in moulding its work.*

*There had never been an international civil service – it was all put together from scratch in 1919 – and when the time came for the League of Nations to end and the United Nations to take its place in 1946, many of its staff rules and regulations, most of its programmes/organizations and many of its experienced staff were simply moved over. The LON Health Organization became WHO, its nutrition programme became FAO, its Mandates Section became the Trusteeship Council, its Refugee Programme became UNHCR, its work on child welfare formed the basis of UNICEF, its Intellectual Cooperation Section in part formed the basis of UNESCO and its Committee on the Status of Women was revived as the UN Commission on the Status of Women.*

*The 100<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of the League in 2019 presented an opportunity to re-evaluate the work and achievements of the League, but research on the role played by women has been sparse and scattered. This article is an attempt to focus on their contributions. Hopefully, it will help to highlight how much we owe the women who not only lobbied strongly for a League of Nations in the first place, but also lobbied for equal job opportunities within its ranks and equal attention to issues of importance to women. Well ahead of its time, LON had women working on affairs of international importance long before the foreign offices of nation states opened their doors to women, and it was the first (inter)governmental organization to introduce maternity leave and allow married women to continue in their jobs. As we shall see in Part I of the story, the women who currently work in the UN owe a great deal to the tireless work of International Women’s Organizations (IWOs) which, in the period between the two World Wars, had a membership of forty-five million.*

*Part II shows how these women continued to partner with those inside the Secretariat throughout its life to ensure their issues were given adequate attention, and having made breakthroughs at the international level, were able to use their considerable membership to take these victories back to their own governments. A handful of scholars have recently taken an interest in the history of women in international organizations in the 1920s and 1930s and this article draws heavily on their work.<sup>1</sup> This is supplemented by materials available in various archives<sup>2</sup> and my contributions to the volume “Eric Drummond and his Legacies: The League of Nations and the Beginnings of Global Governance” that I co-authored.*

*Finally, in Part III, we see how the work of earlier generations of women formed the basis of future work on gender equality in the UN.*

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<sup>1</sup> Eisenberg, J. “The Status of Women: A Bridge from the League of Nations to the United Nations,” JIOS Vol 4 (2) 2013; Galey, M. (1995), “Forerunners in Women’s Quest for Partnership,” Gyoung Sun Jang. (May 2009), *The Sexual Politics of the Interwar Era Global Governance: Historicizing the Women’s Transnational Movements with(in) the League of Nations, 1919-1940*; Miller, C. (1992), *Lobbying the League: Women’s International Organizations and the League of Nations*; Pedersen, S. (undated), *Women and the Spirit of Geneva between the Wars*; Rupp, L. (1997), “World’s Women: The Making of an International Women’s Movement,” Stienstra, D. (1994), “Women’s Movements and International Organizations.”

<sup>2</sup> Crowdy-Thornhill, R. E. (undated), *To Ourselves Unknown*.

## Part I: Lobbying the League: 1890 to 1919

*“If the world is to be rebuilt, women will have to do it.”*

General Smuts to Lady Aberdeen at the Paris Peace Conference

Although women of the world started meeting across borders as early as 1878, and the first international women’s organization, the International Council of Women (ICW), was established in 1888, our story starts with the remarkable Conference held in The Hague in April/May 1915 (during war-time), which brought together women from neutral as well as belligerent countries.<sup>3</sup> One Finnish delegate who could not get out of her country to attend says the “mere fact that women of belligerent countries want to meet as sisters seems to me like the dawn of a new time promising a better future for humanity.”<sup>4</sup> Chaired by Jane Addams<sup>5</sup> – the first American woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize and Founding President of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) – the recommendations for peace arising from the Conference were taken by Addams and her colleagues to several world leaders including Woodrow Wilson.<sup>6</sup> However, despite Wilson telling Addams that the plans designed at The Hague were “the best [plans] put out by anybody, and sure enough the famous ‘Fourteen Points’ which he argued for at the end of the war (unsuccessfully) bear[ing] a striking resemblance to the suffragists’ work”, women found that they had no place at the table at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference.<sup>7</sup>

Meeting with the many women leaders who had travelled to Paris in 1919, Wilson promised that he would raise the question of their participation, and finally they were allowed to make submissions to the Labour Commission and the League of Nations Commission (the only NGO entity to do so). This resulted in two issues of concern to women being inserted in Article 23 of the Covenant of the League of Nations, namely, that the League “will endeavour to secure and maintain fair and humane conditions of labour for men, women and children;” and the League is entrusted with “general supervision over the execution of agreements with regard to the traffic in women and children.”<sup>8</sup> Dame Rachel Crowdy, the Head of the Social Section of the League Secretariat, was later to comment that “I was never clear how article 23 found its way into the Covenant ... presumably the delegation of women who paid their famous call on the drafters of the Covenant in Paris in the Spring of 1919 included social reform in their programme.”<sup>9</sup>

But when it came to the issue of eligibility of women for all posts in the League, the more aggressive approach of Jane Addams and her cohorts was less successful than that of the backdoor diplomacy of Lady Aberdeen – the very well connected British aristocrat who was then the President of the ICW.<sup>10</sup> Some history books record that it was Lord Robert Cecil (a key figure in the founding of the League of Nations), and not women’s groups, who raised the issue of posts in the Secretariat being open equally to men and women and obtained agreement-in-principle to the inclusion of such a clause (Article 7) in

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<sup>3</sup> Rupp, L. op. cit. pp. 27-28.

<sup>4</sup> Annie Furuhielm to Aletta Jacobs, April 14, 1915, Schwimmer-Lloyd Collection, Box A-57, New York Public Library.

<sup>5</sup> In 1931, Jane Addams was “the first American woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and is recognized as the founder of the social work profession in the United States.” (Stuart, P. H. *“Encyclopedia of Social Work”* National Association of Social Workers Press and Oxford University Press: 26 March 2019, <https://oxfordre.com/social-work/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199975839.001/acrefore-9780199975839-e-623>). When ill health forced her to drop out of medical school, she decided there were other ways to help the poor, and in 1889, she started Hull House, a settlement house in Chicago with her college friend and paramour Ellen Gates Starr. In 1915 she was elected national chair of the Woman’s Peace Party and was invited by the European women peace activists to preside over the International Congress of Women in the Hague in 1915 at which she was elected President of the International Committee of Women for a Permanent Peace – later becoming the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) of which she was President from 1918 to 1933. She donated her Nobel prize money to WILPF. (Cullen-Du Pont, K. (2000), *Encyclopedia of women’s history in America*, (Infobase Publishing); Other sources: *Wikipedia*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane\\_Addams](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane_Addams). Retrieved July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Stienstra, D. op. cit. p. 54

<sup>7</sup> Wiltshire, A. (1985) *Most Dangerous Women: Feminist Peace Campaigners of the Great War*, p. 92.

<sup>8</sup> Stienstra, D. op. cit. pp. 55, 57.

<sup>9</sup> Crowdy-Thornhill, R. E. op. cit. Part 3, Chapter 1.

<sup>10</sup> Lady Ishbel Maria Aberdeen was the third daughter of the first Baron Tweedmouth who although receiving a good education in English, French, maths, history and geography was not allowed to attend college but met the famous politicians of the day at her parent’s house, which prepared her for a lifetime of political involvement. In 1877, she married the 7<sup>th</sup> Earl of Aberdeen who was a Liberal and a member of the House of Lords, and Lady Aberdeen supported him by hosting social events. She was a close friend of Lord Cecil, Eric Drummond and Gladstone. In 1893, the year she arrived in Canada as the wife of the Governor General, she was named the first President of the International Council of Women (ICW) – a position which she held on and off until 1936 – and used her political connections to lobby for women’s issues at the League of Nations. Sources: Shackleton, D. F., *Ishbel and the Empire: A Biography of Lady Aberdeen* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1988), pp. 19, 27, 152; *Wikipedia*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ishbel\\_Hamilton-Gordon,\\_Marchioness\\_of\\_Aberdeen\\_and\\_Temair](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ishbel_Hamilton-Gordon,_Marchioness_of_Aberdeen_and_Temair). Retrieved July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

the Covenant. This essentially is correct. However, according to Lady Aberdeen's biographer – it was she who put the idea of Article 7 into Cecil's head in the first place, and it was doubtful that it would have come about without her personal connections and interventions.<sup>11</sup> At a later date, another powerfully connected British woman, Margaret Corbett Ashby,<sup>12</sup> President of the International Alliance of Women (IAW), was to play an important role in monitoring the implementation of Article 7 and putting pressure on the League to adhere to its terms. In 1927, Princess Radziwill (then liaison between the Secretariat and the IWOs) identified Corbett Ashby as "one of the prime movers behind the publicised accusations that the League was not fulfilling the provisions of Article 7 concerning equality of women in the Secretariat."<sup>13</sup>

The networking between upper class (British) women within the international women's movement, and men such as Cecil to whom they were either related or had close social connections, was to play a significant role in promoting women's issues throughout the history of the League. However, the high-level status of these women was not without its problems. There was concern that the leadership of the international women's organizations was too aristocratic, colonial and welfare oriented. By definition, being a key player in an international organization demanded a great amount of leisure time and personal wealth – something found mainly in the upper classes – of Great Britain, but also other European countries. Lady Aberdeen, who paid for all of ICW's expenses during the early years of her Presidency, finally closing the purse strings out of fear of setting a precedent for future officers,<sup>14</sup> was succeeded by a Belgian Baroness. There was a feeling among many women activists – especially the younger generation and the Americans, that the Lady Aberdeens of the world were too old fashioned in their ways, being committed to doing things for others (the charity approach), rather than enabling others to acquire rights to do things for themselves.

By 1919, the perceived need to do things in a different way had already led IAW to split off from ICW, and WILFP had in turn split off from IAW. WILFP in particular, with its American leadership, was much more aggressive and concerned with women's equal rights, than with the somewhat conservative, welfare-oriented ideals of ICW. Women (including those from defeated nations) who could not get to Paris in 1919 met instead at the International Women's Congress in Zurich where WILFP played a lead role. Although too late to influence peace negotiations, this aimed instead to react to negotiated terms. The Congress came up with a Women's Charter which called on member states of the League to "hold that it is injurious to the community to restrict women to a position of dependence, to discourage their education or development, or limit their opportunities . . . and recognize women's services to the world as an essential factor in the building up of the world's peace."<sup>15</sup>

As we shall see in Part II, the clash of ideals between the IWOs was to continue throughout the League's lifetime and beyond and had a significant influence on the place that women had in the League and the way in which women's issues were handled. But all of the major women's organizations played a crucial role in raising the status of women and women's issues within the League and in getting social and humanitarian priorities onto the League's agenda.

## **Part II: Women and the League of Nations: 1919 to 1938**

*"The League's involvement in social and humanitarian activities was the result of pressure from voluntary societies largely composed of women."* Vera Brittain

*"While most countries were still deliberating over the suitability of women for diplomatic service, women were already at work in Geneva."* Carol Miller

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<sup>11</sup> Miller, C. op. cit. p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> Margery Corbett Ashby read classics at Newham College, Cambridge, and although passing her examinations, because she was a woman, the University refused to grant her a degree. In 1907, she was appointed Secretary of the National Union of Women Suffrage Societies. Two years later, she became involved in the International Alliance of Women (IAW), was IAW's representative at the Paris Peace Conference, and was elected President in 1923 until her retirement in 1946. She was actively involved in lobbying for women's issues at the League of Nations, and in 1932 she was the British Delegate to the Geneva Disarmament Conference. Her last political demonstration was at the age of ninety-eight when she took part in the Women's Day of Action in London. Source: Simkin, J., "Margery Corbett Ashby," (Sept. 1997, updated Jan., 2020), in *Spartacus Educational*. <https://spartacus-educational.com/Washby.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> Miller, C. op. cit. p. 47.

<sup>14</sup> Rupp, L. op. cit. p. 20.

<sup>15</sup> Stienstra, D. op. cit. p. 58.

While the international women's movement played a crucial role in ensuring that posts in the Secretariat should be equally open to women and men, in reality, things did not work quite as they had planned. For much of its existence, approximately 50% of the Secretariat's staff members were indeed women, but the vast majority were clustered in the lower grades. Only twenty-two women ever made it to the heady ranks of the First Division. Most were in the Second and Third Divisions where they worked for an international organization but were not considered to be performing international roles.

In 1919, when Eric Drummond (the first, youngest and longest serving Secretary General of the International Civil Service) was starting to recruit the first Secretariat staff members from his temporary base in London, he was deluged by applications from women candidates who were vastly overqualified for the jobs that were available. According to Pedersen in an unpublished paper *Women and the 'Spirit of Geneva' between the wars*, many had a lot of experience in working as administrators during the war years with 56% of the British Civil Service being made up of women in 1918.<sup>16</sup> At the end of the war, however, the men returned, and women needed to look elsewhere to develop their careers. The International Civil Service was the obvious place. But high level posts in the Secretariat had already been filled with men who had relevant foreign office and international experience, and most women who applied for jobs in the League were hired into the clerical and supportive tasks thought to require a good educational standard and superior technical skills but not administrative ability or initiative. Attracted by the lack of alternatives at home, by the idealistic cause of the League, and by the favourable employment conditions in the Secretariat (maternity leave, no marriage bar, relatively high salaries and, for those relocating to Geneva, tax free income plus travel and housing allowances), a great many women with a university education chased after jobs such as copy typists and low-level clerical jobs, which allowed them to get a foot in the door but were well below their capabilities.<sup>17</sup> The result was that the League's clerical and secretarial staff, and especially its British contingent, was both socially more elite and educationally much better qualified than was the office staff of any purely national administration.<sup>18</sup>

Forming the backbone of the Secretariat throughout Drummond's tenure as Secretary-General these women included: Nancy Williams who had a First in Classics from University College Wales who accepted the position of stenographer in 1920 and was very quickly running virtually single-handedly the entire Personnel side of the League and only after many years succeeded in being promoted to 'Member of Section,' and Gertrude Dixon who had a Ph.D from King's College London and became private secretary to Jean Monnet when he was DSG at the Secretariat, and despite taking over the editing of the League of Nations Official Journal after his departure and becoming responsible for the final checking of many of the crucial Council and Assembly documents, was only promoted after a decade of undertaking such high level work.<sup>19</sup> Some of these women such as Dixon (who had worked with Monnet for the wartime Commission on Wheat Supplies) benefited from previous exposure to international work during the war and their connections to senior Secretariat Staff during that period. Others included Joan 'Tiger' Howard --- private secretary to Drummond and a kinswoman of his wife. Still others such as the Canadian Mary McGeachy simply talked their way into the League, yet although spending a lifetime doing important and interesting work, failed to be promoted out of their lowly clerical grades.<sup>20</sup>

While some of these overqualified women did eventually claw their way into the First Division, very few were recruited directly into senior positions. Unlike men who had relevant experience in national civil services, women needed appropriate skills and experience in other spheres. One such woman was Dame Rachel Crowdy with her medical skills and wartime experience of administering the relief effort in Belgian and France. Appointed initially because of the need to have a senior woman in the First Division, and allocated at first to the nascent Health Section where she worked on developing the plans for the League's Health Organization, Crowdy was quickly moved to be Head of the new Social Section, which had responsibility for trafficking in women and children and in opium and other dangerous drugs.

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<sup>16</sup> Pedersen S. (undated), op. cit. p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> The lure of the League also extended to university students. The Mistress of Girton College remarked that "a job at the League of Nations was a 'very common desire,' but her girls were clear-eyed about how few opportunities there are and how almost hopeless it is, to get a post at Geneva." McCarthy, H. (2004), *Women of the World: The Rise of the Female Diplomat*, p. 123.

<sup>18</sup> Pedersen, S. (undated), op. cit. pp. 6-11.

<sup>19</sup> Pedersen, S. (undated), op. cit. p. 10.

<sup>20</sup> Mary McGeachy is the only woman in the LON Secretariat to have a biography written about her (M. Kinnear, *Women of the World: Mary McGeachy and International Cooperation*). She is also the inspiration behind the character Edith Campbell Berry in the novel about the early days of the Secretariat written by Moorhouse, F. (1993), *Grand Days: A Novel*.

Crowdy's skills and experience were equal to those of her male counterparts, but despite Article 7, gender discrimination existed even at this level, and she was never promoted to the rank of Director with its much higher salary. She commented "women and men were paid equally when in positions of the same grade, but they were not always in the grade appropriate to their skill or the work they were doing."<sup>21</sup> Even so, she was the highest-ranking woman ever to be appointed to the Secretariat, and her position owed much to the lobbying of the international women's movement, which was undoubtedly responsible for the Council's demand that the Head of the Social Section should be a woman. Crowdy certainly repaid the lobbyists by working from within the Secretariat to get issues of importance to women on the League's agenda. In addition to supporting women delegates at the Assembly, she pushed for the appointment of non-governmental women experts/assessors on committees and commissions dealing with issues such as trafficking in women, which otherwise would have been composed of a dozen or so men appointed by states sometimes notorious for their laxity on such questions. This network of women delegates and experts/assessors was instrumental in making social and humanitarian issues more important as well as making them one of the most successful areas of the League's activities.

In spite of being at the centre of this dynamic women's network, Crowdy was never an official liaison officer, and she certainly was not in support of a women's section within the Secretariat (as proposed by some powerful women lobbyists). She hoped that "no women's section will be formed... women are being admitted to the League on an equal footing with men, but at once appear to weaken their position and lose their equality of footing if they try to form a section ... There is no 'Man's Section', so why should we need one?"<sup>22</sup> In this she was helped by the rift among the international women's organizations, with some such as ICW also being opposed to the idea of a separate women's section.<sup>23</sup> A continued push for an annual Women's Conference under the auspices of the League was also fought off with Drummond pointing out that this could prejudice the cause in getting women appointed as delegates to the Assembly. A compromise was reached with the formation of the Council for the Representation of Women in the League of Nations (CRWLN), which monitored the League's performance on implementing the principles set forth in Article 7.

When Crowdy left the Secretariat, she was replaced by a Swedish male diplomat who was immediately accorded the status of Director with a much higher salary. This may not have surprised Crowdy herself because, as early as 1929, she had warned of the "strong tendency of replacing by men the women who had developed small posts into great administrative offices because these posts had become too important for women."<sup>24</sup> But it caused much consternation among the international women's organizations. Drummond was largely successful in appeasing their protests by appointing Princess Gabrielle Radziwill of Lithuania, a senior woman in the Information and Press Section, as an official liaison officer with IWOs (and other international NGOs). Radziwill (and Mary McGeachy after her) continued to support the Secretariat's stance of supporting the 'social' feminists versus the 'equal rights' feminists and fought off the attempt by the latter to have an Equal Rights Treaty endorsed by the Council. Again, a compromise was reached with the suggestion (put forward by Radziwill on behalf of the 'social' feminists) that there should be a worldwide field survey of the legal, social, economic and political status of women under the control the Committee on the Status of Women that was formed in 1937. This work was halted with the outbreak of war and the dissolution of the League but was continued in the United Nations after 1945.

Women in the First Division and upper echelons of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division of the Secretariat were career women with an average age on entry of thirty-six years, and eighty-six percent of them never married (despite there being no ban on marriage in the staff rules). At the time, they were very involved in international life – either through active participation in international women's (or other voluntary) organizations or through travelling in Europe and beyond to give lectures and radio broadcasts in either a professional or personal capacity. But despite their outward going nature, the women of the Secretariat were far from being household names.

By contrast, women delegates and experts were normally well known in their countries being from aristocratic and well-connected families and/or being members of parliament or celebrated academics.

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<sup>21</sup> Miller, C. op. cit. p. 91.

<sup>22</sup> Miller, C. op. cit. p. 30.

<sup>23</sup> Lady Aberdeen to Drummond, June 1919, LNA 23/311/259 R 1356.

<sup>24</sup> Miller, C. op. cit. p. 94.



Some of these women, such as Marie Curie,<sup>25</sup> Grace Abbott,<sup>26</sup> and Eleanor Rathbone<sup>27</sup> remain household names today. In total, there were seventy-six women delegates and assessors on League Advisory Committees. Although they covered a range of qualifications, skills and experience – from disarmament to scientific innovation – they tended to be confined to the 5<sup>th</sup> Committee which dealt with social and humanitarian affairs, and out of numerous committees (at least 100), women appear to have been represented in only 13 – mainly social and humanitarian. Senior men in the Secretariat tended to regard such issues as “a minor element in the structure of the League having no great influence on the general course of international affairs,”<sup>28</sup> and this sort of thinking tends to continue in today’s United Nations with women and women’s issues being relegated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Committee, while the ‘important’ political and economic matters are covered elsewhere. Women delegates such as Helena Swanwick<sup>29</sup> were scathing on this matter referring to the 5<sup>th</sup> Committee as “a sort of rag-bag of miseries and forlorn hopes.”<sup>30</sup> However, they jumped at the chance to enter the bustle and whirl of Geneva during the annual Assembly when, as Swanwick comments, “the League provided a rare glimpse into a world of masculine political privilege, a fleeting moment in which she felt what it was to be on the inside looking out.”<sup>31</sup> Few British women tasted such power between the wars.

Those women who persevered were able to contribute a great deal to the League – not just in terms of dealing with social and humanitarian issues and increasing their level of importance, but also in terms of changing how the League went about its business. Their achievements include the ability to work amongst themselves as well as with senior male connections in the League and their national governments to bring about resolutions and actions of great benefit to women and their families and communities. For example, the League’s actions in support of deported Armenian women and children started off with a letter from Helena Swanwick to Lord Cecil bringing his attention to the enslavement and dishonouring of women and children all over the East as a result of war and suggesting a special Commission to investigate. Cecil passed this to Crowdy in the Secretariat who got it onto the League’s agenda and then coordinated inputs from a relay of women delegates and experts in consecutive Assembly meetings resulting in the rescue and rehabilitation of thousands of women and children.

American women were also able to play a role in the work of the League – even though the United States of America was not a member state – through their involvement as assessors or experts. For example, Grace Abbott had a massive impact on the way the League operated through pushing for surveys on trafficking in women to be undertaken through scientific studies at the field level – rather

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<sup>25</sup> Marie Curie was a member of the Committee on Intellectual Cooperation. Crowdy-Thornhill, R. E. op. cit. Part 3, Chapter 2.

<sup>26</sup> Grace Abbott was an American social worker, public administrator, educator and reformer who was important in the field of child-labour legislation. She was a friend of Jane Addams and a resident of Hull House during which time she was awarded her doctorate in political science from the University of Chicago. In 1917, she became Director of the child-labour division of the US Children’s Bureau and from 1922 to 1934 and was also an unofficial representative of the United States at the League of Nations Advisory Committee on Traffic in Women and Children. In 1934 she was appointed professor of public welfare at the University of Chicago and helped plan the social security system as a member of FDR’s Council on Economic Security. She was also US delegate to the ILO in 1935 and 1937. Sources: *Wikipedia*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grace\\_Abbott](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grace_Abbott). Retrieved July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020; *Britannica.com/biography/Grace-Abbott*.

<sup>27</sup> Eleanor Rathbone was born in 1872 into a political family, and after graduating from Somerville College in Oxford, she worked alongside her father – the social reformer William Rathbone VI – to investigate social and industrial conditions in their hometown of Liverpool. In 1919, when Millicent Fawcett retired, Rathbone took over the presidency of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies, and in 1929 she entered parliament as an independent MP for the Combined English Universities. She was an ardent supporter of the system of family allowances and fought for this both in Britain and at the League of Nations where she was an assessor on the Child Welfare Committee. Her involvement extended to being Vice-President of the Committee on the Recruitment of Women in the League of Nations (CRWLN). She was also active in issues concerning women in India and Kenya. Sources: Reeves, R., *Women of Westminster: the MPs who changed politics* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2019); Pedersen, S., “Rathbone, Eleanor Florence (1872–1946),” *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press: 2004); *Wikipedia*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eleanor\\_Rathbone](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eleanor_Rathbone). Retrieved July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Walters, F. P. (1952), *A History of the League of Nations*, p. 186.

<sup>29</sup> Helena Swanwick was born in Munich in 1864 to a German/Danish painter and the illegitimate daughter of an English astronomer. She was educated at Girton College, Cambridge. In 1906, she joined the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies where she edited the weekly journal. She remained on the Executive until 1915 when she resigned over the Union’s refusal to send delegates to the International Women’s Congress at The Hague. Shortly afterwards she joined WILPF, which was formed at The Hague, and she became its Chair. She was highly critical of the terms under which the League of Nations was set up in 1919, partly because the League was permitted the use of force and economic sanctions, and partly because it was committed to supporting the Versailles settlement, which she regarded from the start as an unjust and unstable peace. However, she went on to be active in the League’s activities and represented the British government as a substitute delegate. She was a member of and an advisor on international affairs to the Labour Party. Sources: *Wikipedia*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helena\\_Swanwick](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helena_Swanwick). Retrieved July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020; [wilpf.org](http://wilpf.org); Mitchell, D. (2018), *Against All Odds: The Life and Work of Helena Swanwick*, Amazon Kindle; *Spartacus Educational*. <https://spartacus-educational.com/Wswanwick.htm>.

<sup>30</sup> Miller, C. op. cit. p. 112.

<sup>31</sup> McCarthy, H. op. cit. p. 124.

than through written surveys to governments – a process which became a prerequisite for policy making at the League.

And Dorothy Kenyon<sup>32</sup> was a leading figure on the Committee on the Status of Women becoming a major link between the League's work on women with that of the United Nations through her subsequent participation on the UN Commission on the Status of Women.

### **Part III: Women in the Transition from the League of Nations to the United Nations: 1938 onwards**

*“Women from the great transnational organizations played a critical role in winning a place for women's equal rights in the UN Charter and in fighting for the establishment of the Commission on Women. Their activism links the pre-1945 international women's movement to what might otherwise seem the 'emergence' of such a movement ... the tale begins with the first wave of international organizing among women. It is a prehistory we should not ignore.”*

Leila Rupp

For many researchers interested in women and gender issues in the United Nations, the story begins with the World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 2015, or with the UN Decade for Women and the International Women's Conference held in Mexico City in 1975. At best, memories go back to the battles fought at the San Francisco Conference in 1945 to ensure equality for women and men in the UN Charter. But as we have seen in the first two parts of our story, the history of women's international organizations begins much earlier than this with the work of women before and during the existence of the League of Nations being the basis on which present day resolutions are built.

At the San Francisco Conference, women took part in discussions – unlike at Paris some twenty-six years earlier – and their input became part of the UN Charter completed on June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1945 ... with, to their delight, the inclusion of the principle of equality between women and men.

Then the question of a special women's commission arose and the long-standing debate over separating out women's issues from general human rights intensified. In the flush of victory of the Charter, the two main protagonists on women's equal rights at San Francisco (Bertha Lutz and Jessie Street<sup>33</sup>) pushed for the establishment of a Commission on the Status of Women under the jurisdiction of ECOSOC. The US-based World Women's Party took up the cause with gusto – sending delegates to lobby the First UN Assembly held in London in February 1946. But not all organized women agreed. Dorothy Kenyon, who had served on the League of Nations Committee on the Status of Women, reported that many women's organizations “hated to see women and women's interests segregated in a special commission.”<sup>34</sup> Her view was backed by Eleanor Roosevelt, a member of the Human Rights Commission, who believed that “women should work on an equal basis with men within the full UN

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<sup>32</sup> Dorothy Kenyon (1888-1972) was a New York lawyer, judge, feminist and political activist in support of civil liberties. After graduating in economics from Smith College, she spent a year in Mexico where she observed poverty and injustice at close range and decided to focus on social activism. After graduating from NYU School of Law in 1917, her first job was advising delegates to the Versailles Peace Conference. In the 1930s, she devoted a great deal of her energy to push for social justice and a variety of liberal and progressive causes such as the New Deal, Women's Rights, and the Labour Movement. From 1938 to 1943, she worked on the League of Nations Committee on the Status of Women and travelled regularly between New York and Europe. She continued this work with the United Nations from 1946 to 1950, fighting for a greater participation of women in the United Nations and its agencies, particularly the WHO, and leading a drive to establish by international treaty such rights for women as equal nationality, equal pay for equal work, equal property rights, and equal political privileges. Sources: *Wikipedia*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dorothy\\_Kenyon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dorothy_Kenyon). Retrieved July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020; “Judge Dorothy Kenyon is Dead: Champion of Social Reform, 83,” *New York Times*, February 14<sup>th</sup>, 1972.

<sup>33</sup> Bertha Lutz (1894-1976) was born in Sao Paolo to a pioneering physician of Swiss origin and a British nurse. She graduated in natural sciences at the Sorbonne before returning to Brazil where she became a leading figurehead of women's rights until the end of 1931, when Brazilian women finally gained the right to vote. After obtaining her law degree in 1933, she continued her campaign for gender equity and also became one of the few Brazilian congresswomen of her time. She was one of four women to sign the United Nations Charter and served as Vice-President of the Inter-American Commission of Women from 1953 to 1959. Sources: *Wikipedia*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bertha\\_Lutz](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bertha_Lutz). Retrieved July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020; Roth, C. and E. Dubois, (March 2020) “Feminism, Frogs and Fascism: The Transnational Activism of Brazil's Bertha Lutz,” [onlinelibrary.wiley.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com).

Jessie Street was born in 1889 at Ranchi in India and moved with her family to Australia when her mother inherited property there. She was an Australian suffragette, feminist and human rights campaigner. She was a key figure in Australian political life for over fifty years including the removal of Australia's constitutional discrimination against Aboriginal people in 1967. She was the only Australian woman delegate at the founding of the United Nations in 1945 and was a co-founder of the UN Commission on the Status of Women. Sources: *Wikipedia*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jessie\\_Street](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jessie_Street). Retrieved July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020; [nationalwomenslibrary.org.au/aboutus/who-was-jessie-street/](http://nationalwomenslibrary.org.au/aboutus/who-was-jessie-street/).

<sup>34</sup> Rupp, L. op. cit. pp. 223-24.

system.”<sup>35</sup> Meanwhile, members of the World Women’s Party successfully lobbied for a sub-commission on the status of women and later, led by Alice Paul, succeeded in having the sub-commission raised to a full commission (CSW).

The basis for the early activities of the CSW was the scheme outlined by the Committee of experts of the League of Nations and the materials collected in the course of its inquiry, and further continuity was built in with the appointment of Dorothy Kenyon to the Commission. Bodil Begtrup, Danish Economist, substitute delegate to the Assembly of the League of Nations and Vice-President of the Peace and Disarmament Committee of Women’s International Organizations, was appointed as the first Chair, and after almost two decades of disagreement on how best to improve the status of women in society, the IWOs met on the UN Commission in an uneasy alliance.<sup>36</sup>

While the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) was created within the UN Secretariat to service the CSW, a special women’s section or women’s unit was not to be created for another thirty years when, at the First International Women’s Conference held in Mexico City in 1975, proposals for a UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) were accepted. Starting life within the Secretariat, the founding Director of UNIFEM (Dr. Margaret Snyder), with the backing of a strong African women’s lobby, moved the Fund into autonomous association with UNDP where it was better able to respond to the needs of grassroots women for support for their economic activities.<sup>37</sup> Separate from the CSW/DAW, which concentrated on women’s rights, the Fund was able to focus on women’s needs as farmers, merchants and entrepreneurs. In doing so, it moved beyond those women’s issues, such as traffic in women and children and nationality of married women, given priority by the League of Nations (and which continued to be covered in the UN Secretariat as well as UNICEF, UNHCR and UNCHR), and introduced the concept of women as economic actors in their own right. This in its turn was part and parcel of the rise of independent states in Africa, the raising of the voices of African women in international fora, and the move away from the charity approach hitherto adopted by European States and International Women’s Organizations. Now, there was a third category of feminists – neither ‘social’ nor ‘equal rights’ – but – ‘economic empowerment feminists’ – those who believed in giving agricultural training and technology to women farmers not just to their husbands; credit and technology to women involved in rural industries; and support to the women who had always run the markets of many developing countries.

## Conclusion

Women’s international conferences and congresses no longer take place in the cities of the West and are no longer dominated by the European and American elite. Universal participation was more nearly achieved in the Women’s Conferences in Mexico City, Nairobi and Beijing – and the range of nationalities and classes of women at these gatherings – not to mention the issues discussed – would have taken earlier activists such as Lady Aberdeen by surprise. But the legacy of these early activists lives on in other ways – most importantly, the granting of NGO consultative status to the many international women’s organizations (and other NGOs interested in women’s issues) who attend NGO fora at the big international conferences, as well as participate in meetings of ECOSOC and its various committees.

As for the women of the League of Nations Secretariat – it is difficult to know what they would think of life and work in today’s United Nations. Life at the top is probably a little less lonely, with around 30% of Directors, ASGs and USGs in 2013 being women.<sup>38</sup> They would no doubt be amazed to find a woman being considered seriously for the top post of Secretary-General, perhaps less so to find that women had already headed up specialized agencies such as UNICEF, WHO, UNHCR and UNCHR dealing with social and humanitarian affairs. And what would they make of the separate entity dealing with gender equity? Some women feel today as the League staff did a hundred years ago that isolating women in a separate organization or unit is counterproductive. Others feel that it is essential to have such an entity if women’s concerns are not to be mainstreamed out of existence. And, no doubt they would feel completely at home in the battle between the ‘social’ and ‘equal rights’ feminists, which to

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<sup>35</sup> Miller, C. op. cit. pp. 230-31.

<sup>36</sup> Miller, C. op. cit. p. 232.

<sup>37</sup> See: Snyder, M. (2020), *They can stop us but they can’t move us: Surviving the early years of “Women in Development” in the United Nations*.

<sup>38</sup> United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, (2015), *The World’s Women 2015: Trends and Statistics*, p. 130, BOX 5.2.

some extent, continues unabated. Unchanged is the energy and enthusiasm of the international women's organizations, which continue to support and work through women in the international civil service and lobby for the fair and equal treatment of women in all of the UN's policies and activities.

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Note: Reference/cited material drawn from websites and other media is acknowledged in the footnotes (links indicated).

### About the Author



Marilyn Carr holds an MSc in Economics from the London School of Economics and a D.Phil in Development Economics from the University of Sussex. After graduating in 1975, she worked for three years at the nascent African Training and Research Centre for Women at UNECA as an Expert in Village Technology and Rural Industry. After several years as Senior Economist with the Intermediate Technology Development Group in the UK, she returned to the UN in the 1980s to establish UNIFEM's Regional Office for SADC based in Harare. Her final posting was in New York as UNIFEM's Chief of Economic Empowerment. After retiring, Dr. Carr was awarded a fellowship at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies at Harvard University and spent three years as a Research Associate at the Institute for Development Studies at the University of Sussex. During this time, she acted as Director of the Global Markets Programme of Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) – of which she was a founding member. Several consultancies on women in international trade and women in global value chains were undertaken for IFAD and the Commonwealth Secretariat. Resulting publications include *Chains of Fortune: Linking Women Producers and Workers with Global Markets* (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2004), *Gender and Non-Timber Forest Products: Promoting Food Security and Economic Empowerment*, (with Maria Hartl, IFAD, 2008) and *Trading Stories: Experiences in Gender and Trade* (with Mariama Williams, Commonwealth Secretariat, 2010). More recently, she has been active in the British Association of Former UN Civil Servants (BAFUNCS) as a member of the Executive Committee, and with three other members (David MacFadyen, Michael Davies and John Burley), as part of a major research project on the League of Nations leading to the 2019 publication *Eric Drummond and his Legacies: The League of Nations and the Beginnings of Global Governance* (Palgrave Macmillan).

Photo credit: WISAT (Women in Global Science and Technology)

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