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Women's Rights and Human Rights

International Historical Perspectives

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2001



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Chapter 3 © Patricia Grimshaw 2001

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Chapters 1, 2, 4–16 and 18–19 © Palgrave Publishers Ltd 2001

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First published 2001 by

PALGRAVE

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010

Companies and representatives throughout the world

PALGRAVE is the new global academic imprint of St. Martin's Press LLC Scholarly and Reference Division and Palgrave Publishers Ltd (formerly Macmillan Press Ltd).

ISBN 0-333-80195-4

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Women's rights and human rights : international historical perspectives / edited by Patricia Grimshaw, Katie Holmes, and Marilyn Lake.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-333-80195-4

1. Women's rights. 2. Human rights. I. Grimshaw, Patricia.

II. Holmes, Katie. III. Lake, Marilyn.

HQ1236 .W6529 2000

305.42—dc21

00-053056

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
10 09 08 07 06 05 04 03 02 01

Printed in Great Britain by Antony Rowe Ltd, Chippenham, Wiltshire

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Women's Rights or Human Rights? International Feminism between the Wars

Karen Offen

Word games or power plays? The choice of one word over another can be fraught with political significance. Since its origins in late nineteenth-century France, the word 'feminism' (in French, *féminisme*) has been controversial. In the twentieth century, distinguished writers such as Virginia Woolf wanted to incinerate the word 'feminism'; Simone de Beauvoir disclaimed the term for decades. What can explain this phenomenon? Why did this word seem so explosive?

The answer to these questions seems to lie in debates that erupted during the 1920s, particularly in the post-suffrage climate of English-speaking activists. These debates took yet another turn during the 1930s, with the threat to democracy posed by fascist and Nazi states and the attempts by the Third Communist International to spearhead an antifascist resistance struggle. To this day, the long shadow of socialist and communist antagonism to 'feminism' as 'bourgeois' and 'separatist' still hangs over European discussions of feminist history and action – as if a campaign to end the subordination of well over half the population – women – would not enrich the lives of all its members, including men. A further twist would be added by developments in the United Nations, the successor to the League of Nations, where feminist activists had succeeded in putting 'the status of women', if not 'women's rights', on the international agenda. This chapter will briefly survey these developments.¹

Citizenship in the nation-state and workplace became a reality for women in most (though not all) European societies in the period that spanned the years from the end of the First World War to the end of the Second World War. During this period, the goals and aims of feminism were reformulated and new meanings elaborated in response to new challenges. No longer was women's legal and material subordination to

men the most obvious centrepiece of feminist activity; indeed, after 1918, in a mostly post-suffrage Europe (the glaring exceptions being France, Italy, Belgium and Switzerland), 'feminism' did not seem, in the view of some women's movement activists, nearly encompassing enough. Margery I. Corbett Ashby, the English President of the International Alliance of Women (IAW), had summed up this new view in 1928 when she argued:

It is a fact which cannot be ignored that women are not only feminists in a perpetual state of protest against restrictions and disabilities, they are also to an increasing extent, keen citizens, peace workers, reformers and educators. The greatest freedom won by women is surely precisely this equal right with men to effective interest in the whole of life.²

Such a view had been developing for some time, mainly among the post-suffrage English-speaking feminists, and despite the resurgent backlashes against women's emancipation, it blossomed in post-suffrage contexts. Already in 1913, Helena Swanwick had suggested, in her preface to *The Future of the Women's Movement*, that 'humanist' was a better term than 'feminist' for the emancipatory goals she and her associates envisioned.³ Conversely, the term 'feminist' might be extended to encompass all human rights. Such chords had been struck repeatedly during the English controversies over feminism in the 1920s, and as women were pulled increasingly into the political and economic life of their respective nations, it carried over into debates among supporters of the international women's organizations in the late 1920s and 1930s, when they considered the controversial issue of protective labour legislation for women.⁴

In France as well, feminism seemed to critics such as academician Henri Joly to be but a derivative of humanism. 'The idea of humanism had, among other advantages, that it did not postulate any separation between the interests of man and those of women.'⁵ This Frenchman viewed feminism as being all too exclusively about women's 'separate' interests, rather than about the joint interests of men and women (or class interests). Such a statement would have been familiar to anyone who has confronted socialist views on the subject since the founding of the Second International in 1889, but it takes on an even more intriguing meaning in a context in which women constituted more than half the population and were feared as a potential political majority. The questionable view it encapsulates – that feminism is

'separatist' – remains alive and well in France today, even impeding the growth of women's history and women's studies in French university settings. The fact that 'men's separate interests' had dominated European societies for so many centuries went unnoticed by the Henri Jolys of Europe; they were taken to represent everyone's interests. Only women's interests could be construed as exclusive, divisive and threatening.

In the late 1920s, following the schismatic developments of its 1926 Congress in Paris (over protective legislation for women workers) and an ensuing 1927 study conference in Amsterdam, adherents of the newly renamed International Alliance of Women heatedly debated the meaning and scope of the concept 'feminism'. Setting off a series of exchanges in their journal *Jus Suffragii* that continued through most of 1928, one disenchanted activist, C. Nina Boyle, voiced her alarm about the Alliance's embrace of pacifists and social reformers, whom she viewed as 'the two most dangerous rivals and foes of Feminism'.⁶ Rather than joining in the clamour for peace and endorsing protective legislation for women workers, Boyle thought the Alliance should remain focused specifically on abusive marriage customs and laws, and on violence against women – or what she subsequently underscored as 'desperate [sic] conditions, under which women suffer hideous personal and sexual coercion'.⁷

It was in this context that Corbett Ashby defended the Alliance's position of multiple interests in a world in which some women had arrived at full citizenship. She went on to insist that 'a feminist is no less a feminist because she has reached a point at which she dare develop every side of her human nature and natural interests... [A]ll our work must be done from a feminist angle and by feminist inspiration.'⁸ The following month, the ageing German activist Marie Stritt joined the debate, arguing for the intimate connection between feminism and pacifism, and for a broad understanding of feminism. 'Feminism... means nothing else than the struggle against violence in every form – means right and justice instead of violence and injustice.'⁹ This was a breathtakingly encompassing agenda, but it also threatened to neutralize or diffuse continuing campaigns on behalf of issues specific to women.

In the course of this 1920s debate, one point was clarified, and it was that at least for the IAW, working at the international or transnational level, issues concerning free love, birth control, and 'marriage slavery' were ruled out of bounds on grounds that they had religious, national and cultural implications, which the IAW leaders considered to lie beyond their association's internationalist mandate. 'It must advise and

aid very gently, but wait for the women themselves of each nation to move effectively', cautioned the former president of the Alliance, the American suffragist Carrie Chapman Catt. The 'great problems' of the world were within its mandate: 'peace is proper work for feminists', Catt argued. But another point was also clarified by Chapman Catt, and that was the exclusive identification (historically erroneous, but nonetheless solidly embedded in the popular mind) of feminism with the suffrage cause. 'I feel that I have personally moved on and become a humanist since the vote came to me ... I have not ceased to be a feminist nor to be less sympathetic with protests against women's wrongs.'¹⁰

In the June 1928 issue, the British egalitarian feminist Helen A. Archdale, who sympathized with Nina Boyle's concerns, criticized the 'admission' of both Corbett Ashby and Chapman Catt that they had moved on to 'humanism':

A humanist is...one who cares for the joys and sorrows of all humanity, and works directly on their cure. A feminist is one who works for the advancement of women's intellectual and social status...Peace, for which nearly all our hearts are full of longing, is the business of humanity, of men and women; co-operation, not separation, should be its strength. Equality, defined as we all know as feminism, is the special business of women; the burden of acquiring it must be mainly theirs. I share cordially the deep regret expressed by your correspondents that the I.W.S.A. has deserted feminism for humanism, knowing that each such extravert to humanism is rejecting feminism.¹¹

By December, Archdale (who, along with Lady Rhondda, founded the Open Door Council in 1926 and became a force in the new group, Equal Rights International) was arguing that there could only be one kind of feminist – 'feminists believe in equality [for women] and will accept nothing less...'.¹²

When the IAW met in Berlin in 1929, its members ratified a 'Restatement of Policy after 25 Years', which reaffirmed its commitment to suffrage work and peace work, and emphasized equal rights in economic, moral, and legal rights. Significantly, neither this 'Restatement' nor the *History* compiled and published by Regine Deutsch for the IAW anniversary celebration included the word 'feminism'.¹³

By the 1930s many whom we might view historically as feminists disagreed on what 'equality' meant and on whether 'women' should be considered distinct from 'men', on account of their physiology and

reproductive roles, or should such 'difference' be disavowed in pursuit of 'rights equal to those of men'? Particularly in the English-speaking world, older notions of 'equality-in-difference' faded from view before the polarization that would increasingly oppose absolute legal 'equality' for individuals to sex-specific needs perceived to rest on women's distinctive 'difference'.

In consequence of these disagreements, the term 'feminist' became identified more exclusively in the public mind with campaigners for an unqualified, all-encompassing understanding of 'equal rights' (this faction was led by the Americans, Alice Paul and Doris Stevens, and their British counterparts from the Six Point Group, in the new grouping known as Equal Rights International). They opposed protective legislation for women on principle, pressing instead throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s for endorsement of an international equal rights treaty. Despite the efforts of Eleanor Rathbone and others to delineate a 'new feminism' that took women's difference and their distinctive contributions and functions as mothers into account, the term 'feminist' migrated and stuck to the more adamantly egalitarian faction.

Debates in the IAW's *Jus Suffragii* and publications by other international women's groups continued to delineate varied understandings of 'feminism', broadly extending the meaning of feminism to encompass the struggle for all human rights and social justice. This line of thinking would be articulated more vigorously in the 1930s, as the menace of fascism to human rights became increasingly pronounced. With the roll-back in opportunities for women imposed by fascist regimes, and particularly in Nazi Germany, where assaults on the civil liberties of Jews and other 'undesirable' minorities, including Gypsies and the handicapped, were already well-known to the international feminist community, organizations such as the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom would broaden their mission to encompass 'the inauguration of a new system under which would be realized social, economic and political equality for all without distinction of sex, race or opinion'.¹⁴

Developments in world politics during the late 1930s brought the confusion and contentiousness over feminism – and the polarization of positions – to a head. These can be studied in the rhetoric of the IAW president, Margery Corbett Ashby. In late 1936, Corbett Ashby had insisted that feminism should not be set aside, as had been done in 1914, in the face of 'more than medieval savagery in Abyssinia, Palestine and Spain'. But she offered a broad definition of feminism, which she

but – and this is significant – ‘men and women’ are explicitly mentioned in the UN Charter; no mistake could be made about its intent.

In this new context, the prior work of feminists on women’s issues at the League of Nations in the 1930s found its reward. The women who were present continued to press the point. A subsequent declaration by women representatives, alternates and advisers to the first General Assembly, presented to the delegates by Eleanor Roosevelt early in 1946, emphasized ‘joint efforts’ of men and women, ‘common ideas of human freedom’, and called on women to take part in the ‘work of peace and reconstruction as they did in war and resistance’.²¹

In the spring of 1946, the Commission on Human Rights, a division of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), established a sub-commission, but soon bowed to feminist pressure to upgrade it to a fully-fledged Commission on the Status of Women, with an extensive mandate to inquire into ‘improvements in political, civil, educational, social and economic fields’. Influential in this development were the Danish feminist and social democrat, Bodil Begtrup, the Commission’s first Chair, Jessie Street from Australia, and Latin American feminists. In December 1946, feminist delegates pushed for adoption by the General Assembly of a resolution urging that member states who had not yet done so ‘fulfil the purposes and aims of the Charter... by granting to women the same political rights as to men’.²² They intended to revive the examination of the worldwide status of women begun by the now-defunct League of Nations and to carry the reforms proposed during the 1930s to fruition.

The UN Commission on the Status of Women took up its investigation in January 1947. Its work would eventually provide the model for many national commissions (and even regional and local commissions) on the status of women throughout the world. Many landmark UN measures – the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1952 Convention on Women’s Political Rights, the 1967 UN Covenants on civil and political rights and on economic, social and cultural rights – all have origins in the work of this Commission. Finally in 1975 a resurgent women’s rights movement would help bring to fruition what the Commission on the Status of Women had been recommending since 1946–47 – an International Women’s Year in 1975 and an International Decade of Women. All of these post-Second World War developments owe a large debt to the bold initiatives launched during the interwar period by feminist activists and organizations working on behalf of women’s issues at the League of Nations. The work of the UN Commission on the Status of Women continues to this day.

Although IAW president, Margery Corbett Ashby, thought in early 1946 that ‘at this stage it would be dangerous to set up a “women only” committee to deal with sex differentiation’,²³ it soon became clear to some (among them the Social Democratic women of the 1930s who had for so long insisted on prioritizing class differences rather than sex differences) that even in the United Nations, and despite every principled pronouncement, if feminists didn’t insist on specifying and making visible women’s rights and women’s representation, nobody else would. The new terminology adopted was that of ‘the status of women’ and ‘human rights’. But the discourse on ‘equal rights’ and ‘women’s rights’, and the language of ‘feminism’, were not forgotten and would soon be spoken anew.

Appendix

International Alliance of Women, ‘Declaration of Principles’, 1939:

In these serious times where the fundamental principles concerning the relations between individual and state, and between states themselves are being challenged, it is essential that women should be fully aware of the responsibilities which their feminist conviction entails.

The sacredness of human personality has always been the keystone of the woman’s movement, which rebelled against an imposed standard of faith, behaviour and economic status. Our great pioneers fought for freedom of conscience and personality, for the right to choose their own career, to participate in national and political life, and to help to shape the destiny of their nation.

Their fight was essentially a part of the great struggle against oppression of creed, race, class and sex. It was in favour of the right to education, and economic freedom as well as of preparation for the task of citizenship.

The woman’s movement therefore, although apart from party politics, was founded on a political conception. In consequence it stands for equality of sex, race and creed.

If women believe the State to be an organisation to secure peace, freedom, justice, and well-being for all, they must hold this conviction with passionate sincerity. Faith can only be met with faith. Women must keep alive the belief in democracy, which is obscured only because it has not been carried out in practice.

The barbarism of war, torture and famine threatens to engulf the world. It is for the woman’s movement to awaken and strengthen sanity, compassion, wisdom and foresight, which are the gifts of womanhood.

The woman's battle is that of all mankind. There can be no freedom for women when freedom is no longer a recognised right of every individual. There can be no justice nor economic freedom for women, when all justice is dependent on the will of an oligarchy.

Now we live through difficult times in which life based on our principles is at stake. Therefore, women, with men, true to their fundamental principles, must defend a system which will lead to greater justice, freedom, real peace, general prosperity, and more happiness for all.²⁴

Notes

1. This chapter has been adapted from Chapter 12 of my book, *European Feminisms, 1700–1950: A Political History* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2000). The material is used with the permission of the publishers, Stanford University Press. Copyright 2000 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University. An earlier version was presented at the 1998 conference of the International Federation for Research in Women's History in Melbourne, Australia. Questions of definition and of the French origins of the words *féminisme* and *féministe* are discussed at greater length in my articles, 'Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Analysis', *Signs*, 14, 1 (1988) pp. 119–57 and 'On the French Origin of the Words Feminism and Feminist', *Feminist Issues*, 8, 2 (Fall 1988) pp. 45–51.
2. M. I. Corbett Ashby, 'What Is the Alliance?', *Jus Suffragii*, 22, 5 (February 1928) p. 69.
3. H. Swanwick, *The Future of the Women's Movement* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1913) p. vii.
4. Discussed in K. Offen, *European Feminisms, 1700–1950: A Political History* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000) Chapter 10. For further attention to the international feminist organizations, see L. J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).
5. H. Joly, *Le Droit Féminin* (Paris: Flammarion, 1922) p. 7. More than 20 years earlier the male feminist Léopold Lacour discussed 'féminisme' in *Humanisme Intégral: Le Duel des Sexes, la Cité Future* (Paris: Stock, 1897).
6. C. N. Boyle, letter to the editor, 15 December 1927, *Jus Suffragii*, 22, 4 (January 1928) pp. 59–60.
7. C. N. Boyle, letter to the editor, 15 March 1928 *Jus Suffragii*, 22, 7 (April 1928) p. 106.
8. Corbett Ashby, 'What is the Alliance?', p. 69.
9. M. Stritt, in *Jus Suffragii*, 22, 6 (March 1928) p. 87.
10. C. Chapman Catt, 'What Is the Alliance?', *Jus Suffragii*, 22, 8 (May 1928) pp. 117–18.
11. H. A. Archdale in *Jus Suffragii*, 22, 9 (June 1928) p. 140.
12. H. A. Archdale, letter to the editor, 30 October 1928, *Jus Suffragii*, 23, 3 (December 1928) pp. 41–2.
13. See R. Deutsch, *The International Woman Suffrage Alliance: Its History from 1904 to 1929* (London: Board of the Alliance, 1929) [30 pages].
14. 'Statement of Aims of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, decided at the Zurich Congress', 1934, as reprinted in G. Bussey and M. Tims, *Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 1915–1965: A Record of Fifty Years' Work* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1965) p. 122.
15. M. Corbett Ashby, in *Jus Suffragii*, 31, 1 (October 1936) p. 1.
16. See P. Johnson, *Feminism as Radical Humanism* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin; Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1994) p. vii.
17. M. Corbett Ashby, 'The Woman Pilgrim's Progress', *Jus Suffragii*, 33, 9 (June 1939) p. 68.
18. G. Malaterre Sellier, 'Vers l'avenir' in *ibid.*, pp. 68–9.
19. IAW, 'Declaration of Principles', *The International Women's News (Jus Suffragii)*, 33, 10–11 (August–September 1939) p. 83. Also partially reprinted in A. Schreiber and M. Mathieson, *Journal Towards Freedom: Written for the Golden Jubilee of the International Alliance of Women* (Copenhagen: IAW, 1955) p. 52 and in A. Whittick, *Woman into Citizen* (London: Athenaeum, 1979), p. 139. See appendix to this chapter.
20. *The United Nations and the Advancement of Women, 1945–1996* (New York: United Nations, 1996) doc. 1, p. 103. My understanding of the UN issues has been greatly enhanced by the suggestions and work of D. H. Linder, particularly her unpublished paper, 'Scandinavian Women's Rights Leadership at the Early UN, 1946–1952' (1995).
21. *Yearbook of the United Nations, 1946–1947* (Lake Success, NY: United Nations. Department of Public Information, 1947) pp. 77–8.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 179.
23. M. Corbett Ashby, 'United Nations Assembly. Women outnumbered fifty to one by men', *The International Women's News (Jus Suffragii)*, 40, 5 (February 1946) p. 51.
24. International Alliance of Women, 'Declaration of Principles', *The International Women's News (Jus Suffragii)*, 33, 10–11 (August–September, 1939) p. 82.
25. *Ibid.*