

Forging Bonds Across Borders: Mobilizing for Women's Rights and Social Justice in the Nineteenth-Century Transatlantic World

Conference at the German Historical Institute Washington, April 28-30, 2016. Conveners: Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson (GHI), Sonya Michel (University of Maryland, College Park), Anja Schüler (University of Heidelberg). Participants: Ann Taylor Allen (University of Louisville), Bonnie Anderson (City University of New York), Noaquia Callahan (GHI), Wendy E. Chmielewski (Swarthmore College Peace Collection), Mischa Honeck (GHI), Dane Kennedy (George Washington University), Sara Kimble (DePaul University), Marilyn Lake (University of Melbourne), Allison Lange (Wentworth Institute of Technology), Thomas Lappas (Nazareth College), Margaret McFadden (Appalachian State College), Christine Neejer (Michigan State University), Lori Osborne (Frances Willard Memorial Library and Archives), Eva Payne (Harvard University), Jessica R. Pliley (Texas State University), Stephanie Richmond (Norfolk State University), Marion Röwekamp (Free University of Berlin), Katharina Isabel Schmidt (Princeton and Yale), Carol Strauss Sotiropoulos (Northern Michigan University), and Margaret Vigil-Fowler (University of California, San Francisco).

Historians have by now produced a rather extensive literature on national feminist movements as well as a number of bi-national and multi-national comparative studies of female mobilizations. But so far, few scholars have focused on the transnational, especially transatlantic, collaborations of women's rights activists throughout the long nineteenth century. This conference explored how female activists inside and outside of institutions and organizations exchanged ideas in the Atlantic world and collaborated across national borders and bodies of water and sometimes also across borders of race, class, and gender. It explored how, even without formal political rights, women were able to develop effective strategies and bases of power, working both within their own countries and through the personal transnational connections, alliances, and organizations they created. Their efforts eventually provided the foundations for worldwide organizations around issues as diverse as women's rights, protective labor legislation, and temperance.

The conference opened with a panel on "Defining Women's Issues – Suffrage and Pacifism," chaired by Mischa Honeck. Bonnie Anderson portrayed the life of freethinker Ernestine Rose, a life that developed transnationally and led her from her homeland, Poland, to

Berlin, Paris, London, New York, and back to London. Rose's activism on both sides of the Atlantic ranged from advocating for women's property rights and a change in divorce laws to associating herself with freethinkers and pacifists. Marilyn Lake then introduced another woman reformer whose work transcended national boundaries: the Scottish-born Australian journalist, feminist reformer, and Unitarian preacher Catherine Helen Spence. Spence traveled as an official delegate to the Conference on Charities at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 and then across the country, lecturing on women's suffrage, children's courts, boarding-out, education, and proportional representation. Assuming that women needed political rights to secure the welfare of women and children, Spence was amazed to find that American women were socially and economically advanced but politically relatively powerless. The panel concluded with a look at women's transnational work for peace. Wendy Chmielewski analyzed the so-called "Friendly Addresses" that men and women in the U.S. and Britain signed in 1846 in relation to a boundary dispute between Canada and the U.S. The addresses exchanged between the women of Exeter and Philadelphia reflected the emerging but contested roles of women in the transatlantic antiwar movement. On the one hand, women left the domestic sphere by engaging in international politics, while on the other, they remained within their traditional gender role by addressing only their female counterparts.

That evening, Margaret McFadden presented the conference keynote, "Mothers of the Matrix – Anna, Frederika, and Ray: Forging Bonds of Feminist Activism." As McFadden explained, the "matrix" that laid the groundwork for women's transnational movements included opportunities for travel and education, participation in evangelical religion, missionary work and/or social reform, and improved means of communication. Anna Doyle Wheeler emphasized women's individualism and asserted that women's rights were human rights. Influenced by early nineteenth-century socialism, she criticized marriage for "reducing women to a state of helplessness" and emphasized their need for suffrage. For Frederika Bremer, the bonds among women grew out of the familial ties between mothers, daughters, and sisters. A "relational feminist," she sought signs of international commonality among women. Ray Strachey served as a bridge between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, taking first radical and then more moderate positions on suffrage. Strachey, a prolific author, also ran for office and served as an assistant to Lady Astor, the first female member of the British Parliament.

The second day of the conference continued with the second panel, entitled "Joining Other Struggles: Women's Transnational Work for Abolition and Racial Equality." Chaired by

Sonya Michel, the panel began with Stephanie Richmond's paper on British and American abolitionist women who traveled to America, England, and France in the 1840s and 1850s to spread their antislavery message and strengthen international relations. Americans like Maria Weston Chapman, Sarah Pugh, and Sarah Parker Remond traveled alone or spoke to "mixed audiences" of men and women, thus challenging the social norms of their respective cultures, opening paths for women political activists, and establishing women as authority figures. British Quaker Anne Knight promoted the cause of antislavery throughout France after male abolitionists refused to take the opportunity, again challenging the restrictive gender roles of the Atlantic world. Katharina Schmidt then looked at a German woman who joined the American abolitionist movement: Ottilie Assing. The Hamburg-born writer and activist is best known for her relationship with Frederick Douglass, but she also pursued independent political projects. Assing was influenced by other émigré intellectuals and her membership in German-American immigrant networks. Schmidt focused on Assing's involvement in these networks, rather than on her personal ties with Douglass, arguing that Assing's antislavery activism emerged primarily from her identity as a "freethinker" who favored feminism, atheism, and republicanism. In the final presentation of this panel, Noaquia Callahan explored the transnational career of African American feminist Mary Church Terrell. Callahan described the 1904 Berlin Congress of the International Council of Women as a moment in which black and white, American and European feminists came together to exchange ideas about issues of race, sexual violence, and woman suffrage. Published as part of the widely circulated proceedings of the Berlin congress, Terrell's address on the "Progress of Colored Women" in the United States since the end of the Civil War met with great interest.

The conference's third panel, chaired by Dane Kennedy, examined the topic "Creating Networks through Words and Images." Carol Strauss Sotiropolous looked at the connections between Margaret Fuller, one of the foremost American promoters of German literature, and author Bettina von Brentano-Arnim. While introducing her readers to Arnim's literary writings, Fuller remained silent about Arnim's social justice projects, creating the impression that Fuller was not interested in politics. Sotiropolous showed, however, that Fuller was very familiar with the political system and power structures on the other side of the Atlantic but highly selective about the rhetoric strategies she deemed useful for her own purposes. Allison Lange went on to examine how the visual tactics of labor activists and suffragists in Britain informed parallel campaigns in the United States. Before World War I, strategies like parades, open-air meetings

and lectures, picketing, and other publicity stunts imported from Britain generated popular support for woman suffrage and transformed women's relationship to politics; the imagery reveals much about the different tactics of the militant and moderate suffragists. The panel concluded with Christine Neejer's paper on women's international bicycling networks and the suffrage press women cyclists turned to in the 1890s to find advice about dress, riding styles, cycling-based travel, and international races. Neejer explored the transnational coverage of women's bicycling in British and American suffrage periodicals, which served as an international forum for collaboration and inspiration and shifted the boundaries between politics, sports, and leisure by positioning women's cycling within transatlantic networks.

The conference fourth panel, chaired by Anja Schöler, took a look at "Professions as a Base for Feminist Mobilization." Sara Kimble documented the transatlantic alliance of legally-oriented feminists in the *belle époque* that preceded women's right to practice law in France. Networks like the Women's International Bar Association developed along with the International Council of Women (ICW) and nurtured an international feminist lawyers' movement that worked simultaneously at the grass roots and the elite level. Marion Röwekamp then examined how the ideas and activism the *Bund Deutscher Frauenvereine* contributed to the campaign for transnational family law reform within the International Council of Women. She showed that the different ideas about legal reform in the national women's movements could translate into serious problems on the transnational level. At the same time, the legal debates in the ICW reveal the dynamics of trans- and international legislative work at the turn of the twentieth century. The final contribution, by Margaret Vigil-Fowler, looked at the role of transatlantic networks in the Anglo-American medical women's movement. It re-examined the canonical nineteenth-century physicians Elizabeth Blackwell, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, and Sophia Jex-Blake within a transnational framework. These women were well aware that their work was setting an international precedent, especially for their counterparts in Britain. They met in person, maintained a prolific correspondence, and were well-connected to feminists, abolitionists, and suffragists on both sides of the Atlantic.

The day ended with the fifth panel, "The Global Reach of the Women's Christian Temperance Union [WCTU]," chaired by Sonya Michel. In the opening paper, Thomas Lappas outlined the WCTU's contradictory policies toward American Indians. While on the one hand pursuing a goal of "kill the Indian, save the man" and attempting to destroy the reservations, on the other hand it recognized the existence of a Native American nation with a distinct

culture, one whose people had rights but also needed protection from the evils of drink. Lori Osborne followed with a paper on the WCTU in India, tracing the different paths three activists took there. Pandita Ramabai, concerned with the plight of child widows, established special schools for them. Frances Willard saw India as an opportunity to internationalize the WCTU and use temperance as a platform to strengthen women's position within the family and expand their rights. Mary Leavitt, who spent more time on the ground, formed numerous WCTU chapters and prevailed upon Indian men to create their own, facing opposition from British officials for speaking to mixed audiences. Concluding the panel, Jessica Pliley looked at the WCTU's role in the campaign against human trafficking, tracing the tensions between figures like Josephine Butler, who sought to repeal Britain's Contagious Diseases Act, which effectively legalized prostitution, and the WCTU's Kate Bushnell, who believed it was important to hear the voices of women in the sex trade and improve their conditions.

The last day of the conference featured the final panel, titled "Protecting Women and Children: Feminism by Other Means," which was followed by a brief discussion of the entire proceedings; Sonya Michel chaired both. Eva Payne began the panel with an intricate analysis of the three-way debate over age-of-consent laws in Britain, the United States, and India. She showed how the U.S. women physicians who were concerned with this issue played the three countries off against one another, using claims to "civilization" as a lever. Ann Taylor Allen then described how women reformers around the world, drawing on the ideas of German education pioneer Friedrich Froebel, promoted the establishment of kindergartens as a way of advancing themselves professionally. Finally, Michel read a paper by Mineke Bosch, who could not be present, which traced the international transfer of birth control knowledge by looking at how the "Dutch cap," an early contraceptive device, got its name. One of its chief advocates was the Dutch feminist Aletta Jacobs, who encountered opposition from colleagues who feared that birth control advocacy would taint the suffrage movement.

Bosch's point segued smoothly into the wrap-up discussion of themes that had emerged throughout the conference. The papers had shown that women's strategies changed over the course of the "long nineteenth century" as permanent organizations were formed, yet national political and legal contexts as well as cultures constrained efforts at reform. Participants emphasized the importance of considering philanthropy as well as government policies, comparing individual and organizational techniques, and noted the irony that international figures often drop out of national narratives. The papers had shown that women formed bonds

across borders in different ways, as individuals, through organizations, and with the help of publications. In addition, participants identified several themes that connected the panels, like the aspiration of "universal sisterhood," which could culminate in social movements and the transfer of knowledge. They also agreed that many papers were contributions to the historiographic trend of "new biography." Given the coherence of the papers and their many original findings, the participants concluded that an edited volume should be feasible.

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