

# The Inter-American Commission of Women and Women's Suffrage, 1920–1945\*

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*Abstract.* In studies of the international dimensions of women's suffrage, the role of international organisations has been overlooked. This article examines the suffrage activities of the Pan-American Union (PAU), and in particular those of the Inter-American Commission of Women (IACW), between 1920 and 1945. Attentive to historical context, the examination suggests that international organisations can be both bearers of state interests and platforms for social movement interests. The article also argues that while not independent bureaucracies, the PAU and IACW nevertheless had some importance for suffrage that cannot be attributed either to their state members or to the suffragist movements.

*Keywords:* women's suffrage, Inter-American Commission of Women, Pan-American Union, international organisations, transnational women's movements

## *Introduction*

There has been a surge of interest in the international dimension of women's suffrage in the past decade, focusing on the international activities of various women's movements.<sup>1</sup> While this is a welcome development, the role of

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<sup>1</sup> Caroline Daley and Melanie Nolan (eds.), *Suffrage and Beyond: International Feminist Perspectives* (New York, 1994); Francisco Ramirez, Yasemin Soysal and Suzanne Shanahan, 'The Changing Logic of Political Citizenship: Cross-National Acquisition of Women's Suffrage Rights, 1890–1990', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 62, no. 5 (1997), pp. 736–47; Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca NY, 1998); Corinne Pernet, 'Chilean Feminists, the International Women's Movement, and Suffrage, 1915–1950', *Pacific Historical Review*, vol. 69, no. 4 (2000),

international organisations (IOs) in the spread of women's suffrage remains almost entirely overlooked. It is presumed that neither states nor international organisations have functioned as proactive instruments for the proliferation of suffrage. As Keck and Sikkink note, 'Nowhere did women find powerful foreign organisations or governments willing to use leverage or devote resources to promote woman suffrage beyond their borders.'<sup>2</sup> While it may be true that no *powerful* IOs advocated for suffrage in the early twentieth century, it is simply inaccurate to say that no international organisation per se was attentive to women's suffrage. Indeed, this assumption has likely developed out of the Western European and North American bias of international relations suffrage scholarship.<sup>3</sup>

If we direct our vision to Latin America, the story of the role of international organisations in the emergence of women's suffrage looks quite different. In Latin America, women's suffrage was granted primarily after the outbreak of the Second World War.<sup>4</sup> By then, the Pan-American Union (PAU) had been supportive of women's suffrage for two decades. No less than four intergovernmental declarations and resolutions advocating the political enfranchisement of women had been generated by the International Conferences of American States, commonly known as the Pan-American Conferences, between 1933 and 1945; these conferences also produced the world's first treaty on women's political rights in 1948.<sup>5</sup> This article seeks to shed further light on the activities and function of the PAU, and particularly the Inter-American Commission of Women (IACW), with regard to the political enfranchisement of women in Latin America between 1920 and 1945, before the PAU was reorganised as the Organization of American States (OAS) in 1948.

Neither IO scholars nor those interested in the international dimensions of women's suffrage have looked at the activities of the PAU and IACW in support of women's political emancipation. In fact, there is very little scholarship centring on the IACW as such, and the few pieces that do so do

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pp. 663–88; Louise Edwards (ed.), *Women's Suffrage in Asia: Gender, Democracy and Nationalism* (London, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Keck and Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders*, p. 54.

<sup>3</sup> Daley and Nolan, *Suffrage and Beyond*; Keck and Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders*.

<sup>4</sup> Maxine Molyneux, 'Twentieth-Century State Formation in Latin America', in Elizabeth Dore and Maxine Molyneux (eds.), *Hidden Histories of Gender and the State in Latin America* (Durham NC, 2000), pp. 33–81; Asunción Lavrín, 'La génesis del sufragio femenino en América Latina', in Eugenia Rodríguez Sáenz (ed.), *Un siglo de luchas femeninas en América Latina* (San José, 2002), pp. 3–22.

<sup>5</sup> Ann Towns, *Women and States: Norms and Hierarchies in International Society* (Cambridge, 2010).

not address women's suffrage.<sup>6</sup> As Mary K Meyer argues, the IACW thus 'remains obscure'.<sup>7</sup> A few historians have touched on the IACW in their analyses of national suffrage struggles in Latin America,<sup>8</sup> and Francesca Miller's important scholarship on the transnational dimensions of Latin American women's movements also points to the IACW.<sup>9</sup> Miller draws attention to the breadth of women's concerns in Latin America, but does not specifically address the promotion of suffrage by the PAU/ IACW across the region. With an emphasis on the complexity of factors at the national and international intersection of the continent's women's movements, the treatment of the IACW is as intermittent and brief in her scholarship as it is in others. We thus still know relatively little about the IACW, particularly about its suffrage activities, and this is a gap that this article seeks to fill.

This article uses recent theoretical literature on international organisations to bring into focus and thus better understand the suffrage activities of the PAU and IACW. Much of this literature centres on one single dimension or another of IOs. As will be discussed further below, IOs are most often treated as the agents of states, controlled by state interests and policies. Other scholars focus on IOs either as responsive to civil society actors or as entities with their own institutional agendas. This article is more sceptical about one-dimensional and general claims regarding the nature and behaviour of IOs. Through an analysis sensitive to a variable historical context, I will show that the various treatments of IOs as agents of states, platforms for civil society actors and independent entities in fact all provide helpful frames for understanding the IACW and its suffrage activities. The examination of the IACW over two decades suggests that IOs can be both bearers of state interests *and* used as a platform for social movement interests. And whereas the IACW did not develop into a bureaucracy with interests of its own during its first few decades in existence, the organisation nevertheless

<sup>6</sup> Exceptions include Mary K. Meyer, 'Negotiating International Norms: The Inter-American Commission of Women and the Convention on Violence against Women', in Mary K. Meyer and Elisabeth Prügl (eds.), *Gender Politics in Global Governance* (Lanham MD, 1999), pp. 58–71; Lynn Stoner, 'In Four Languages, but with One Voice: Division and Solidarity within Pan American Feminism 1923–1933', in David Sheinin (ed.), *Beyond the Ideal: Pan Americanism in Inter-American Affairs* (Westport CT, 2000), pp. 79–94.

<sup>7</sup> Meyer, 'Negotiating International Norms', p. 59.

<sup>8</sup> Asunción Lavrín, *Women, Feminism and Social Change in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, 1890–1940* (Lincoln NE, 1995); Lynn Stoner, *From the House to the Streets: The Cuban Woman's Movement for Electoral Reform, 1898–1940* (Durham NC, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> Francesca Miller, 'The International Relations of Women of the Americas 1890–1928', *The Americas: A Quarterly Review of Inter-American Cultural History*, vol. 43, no. 2 (1986), pp. 171–82. See also Francesca Miller, 'Latin American Feminism and the Transnational Arena', in *Women, Culture, and Politics in Latin America: Seminar on Feminism and Culture in Latin America* (Berkeley CA, 1990), pp. 10–26; *Latin American Women and the Search for Social Justice* (Hanover NH, 1991); and 'Feminisms and Transnationalisms', *Gender and History*, vol. 10, no. 3 (1998), pp. 569–80.

also appears to have had some effects that cannot be attributed to states or women's movements. Moreover, the feedback between IOs and the activists and state actors that occupy them is often not easily separated out into causal effects one way or the other. The research draws in part on secondary sources, rethinking the insights from relevant existing scholarship. The analysis chiefly rests on primary documents produced by the PAU, the IACW and some of the women who participated in their gatherings.

The article proceeds in three parts. First, there is a brief discussion of the literature on international organisations to situate the present study in extant scholarship. The second section then provides an analysis of the suffrage activities of the PAU and IACW. For clarity, the discussion pivots on the four Pan-American Conferences held between 1923 and 1938 – in Santiago (1923), Havana (1928), Montevideo (1933) and Lima (1938) – as well as on activities during the Second World War period. The article concludes with a discussion of what we can learn about IOs from looking at these Latin American organisations.

### *The Study of International Organisations: Three Approaches*

A prolific body of scholarship on international organisations has developed within the field of international relations during the past couple of decades. Much of this literature presents a vision of IOs simply as reflections of the fundamentals of international life. There are three alternative views of what those fundamentals are. To most scholars, international politics is in essence politics among states. The nature and activities of IOs are thus best explained with reference to the interests of states (which, for some, are in turn attributable to domestic politics) and/or the distribution of power among them.<sup>10</sup> IOs are, above all, an arena for intergovernmentalism in this view, and the main foci of scholarly debate have centred on which state interests – relative power or absolute economic gains – are at stake in the creation

<sup>10</sup> John Mearsheimer, 'The False Promise of International Institutions', *International Security*, vol. 19, no. 3 (1994–5), pp. 5–49; Robert O. Keohane and Lisa L. Martin, 'The Promise of Institutionalist Theory', *International Security*, vol. 20, no. 1 (1995), pp. 39–51; Randall Schweller and David Priess, 'A Tale of Two Realisms: Expanding the Institutions Debate', *Mershon International Studies Review*, vol. 41, no. 1 (1997), pp. 1–32; Barbara Koremenos, Charles Lipson and Duncan Snidal, 'The Rational Design of International Institutions', *International Organization*, vol. 55, no. 4 (2003), pp. 761–99; Barry S. Levitt, 'A Desultory Defense of Democracy: OAS Resolution 1080 and the Inter-American Democratic Charter', *Latin American Politics and Society*, vol. 48, no. 3 (2006), pp. 93–124; Craig Arceneaux and David Pion-Berlin, 'Issues, Threats and Institutions: Explaining OAS Responses to Democratic Dilemmas in Latin America', *Latin American Politics and Society*, vol. 49, no. 2 (2007), pp. 1–31.

of IOs and IO policy, and on whether state behaviour in IOs is best explained with reference to systemic factors or domestic politics.

This intergovernmental approach has been well suited to accounting for US hemispheric hegemony and manipulation of the PAU during the first half of the twentieth century, and the strategic responses of Latin American states to this manipulation.<sup>11</sup> However, the inclusion of women's issues and gender equality concerns in the agendas of IOs has not been effectively explained with reference to state interests. Feminist scholars, among others, have thus objected that IOs are not simply reflections of given state interests, or intergovernmentalism.<sup>12</sup> These authors have shown the responsiveness of IOs to the aims and activities of a different constituency, namely non-governmental actors such as transnational women's movements. Transnationalism – that is, interactions across state boundaries that include *non-state* actors<sup>13</sup> – is thereby presented as a second face of international organisations, one that responds to forces within transnational civil society.<sup>14</sup>

Like most scholarship on IO involvement in issues of gender equality, the small existing literature that touches on the PAU/IACW has treated women's rights as a transnational dimension of these organisations, an effect of women's movements placing feminist issues within IOs. For instance, Miller shows the value Latin American women's movements have placed on 'the idea of effecting change through international treaty and the belief in the efficacy of moral suasion at the international level', and she looks at their strategies in the international arena.<sup>15</sup> If the intergovernmental approach to

<sup>11</sup> John C. Dreier, 'The Organization of American States and United States Policy', *International Organization*, vol. 17, no. 1 (1963), p. 41; George Meek, 'U.S. Influence in the Organization of American States', *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, vol. 17, no. 3 (1975), pp. 311–25.

<sup>12</sup> Carol Miller, 'Women in International Relations? The Debate in Inter-War Britain', in Rebecca Grant and Kathleen Newland (eds.), *Gender and International Relations* (Buckingham, 1991), pp. 64–82; Carol Miller, "'Geneva – the Key to Equality": Inter-War Feminists and the League of Nations', *Women's History Review*, vol. 3, no. 2 (1994), pp. 219–45; Deborah Stienstra, *Women's Movements and International Organizations* (New York, 1994); Sandra Whitworth, *Feminism and International Relations: Towards a Political Economy of Gender in Interstate and Non-Governmental Institutions* (New York, 1997); Nitza Berkovitch, *From Motherhood to Citizenship: Women's Rights and International Organizations* (Baltimore MD, 1999); Pernet, 'Chilean Feminists'; Bob Reinalda, 'The International Women's Movement as a Private Political Actor between Accommodation and Change', in Karsten Roint and Volker Schneider (eds.), *Private Organisations in Global Politics* (London, 2000), pp. 165–86; Stoner, 'In Four Languages'.

<sup>13</sup> Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye (eds.), *Transnational Relations and World Politics* (Cambridge, 1981), p. xi.

<sup>14</sup> Bruce Cronin, 'The Two Faces of the United Nations: The Tension between Intergovernmentalism and Transnationalism', *Global Governance*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2002), pp. 53–71.

<sup>15</sup> F. Miller, 'The International Relations of Women of the Americas', p. 171.

IOs has involved a focus on the interests and activities of states, feminist scholars with a transnational view of IOs have primarily analysed the strategies and agenda-setting tactics of women's movements.

A third approach is to view IOs partially as entities independent of state or transnational interests and actions. International organisations, contend scholars such as Barnett and Finnemore, affect and structure international and domestic life in their own right and do not function only as a forum for state or non-governmental action.<sup>16</sup> To make this claim, they begin with the basic constructivist assumption that IOs, like all other actors, are produced by social knowledge and are carriers of meaning. Many contemporary IOs are the effect of a particular *kind* of discourse, that of the *bureaucracy*. They have developed into semi-closed organisations with their own organisational culture, including rules, beliefs and interpretive frames that help make sense of the world. As bureaucracies, IOs can also develop goals of their own. IOs help shape outcomes by structuring knowledge (classifying the world into coherent categories and relations, and fixing meaning) and by spreading such knowledge. A number of feminist scholars with similar constructivist assumptions have looked at the gender culture of IOs.<sup>17</sup>

While clearly productive, these three main views have unfortunately often been treated as alternative and competing theoretical explanations of IO behaviour. Many analyses of IOs thus become one-dimensional and rather static in highlighting one aspect of IOs at the expense of the others. In the examination of the PAU/IACW that follows below, this article seeks to show that what are generally presented as alternative theoretical approaches could instead fruitfully be seen as analytical dimensions of international organisations that can be present empirically at the same time. An organisation can simultaneously be characterised by intergovernmentalism, transnationalism and bureaucratisation, and as we will see, there can be a shift in emphasis between these dimensions over time. Finally, this article is cautious of making strong and clear causal arguments about the determinants of IO behaviour. In the interplay between states, non-governmental actors and the IO bureaucracy, general claims about causal directions are often very difficult to make.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore, 'The Politics, Power and Pathologies of International Organizations', *International Organization*, vol. 53, no. 4 (1999), pp. 699–732; Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore, *Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics* (Ithaca NY, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> Anne Sisson Runyan, 'Women in the Neoliberal "Frame"', in Meyer and Prügl (eds.), *Gender Politics in Global Governance*, pp. 210–20; Elisabeth Prügl, 'What is a Worker? Gender, Global Restructuring, and the ILO Convention on Homework', in Meyer and Prügl (eds.), *Gender Politics in Global Governance*, pp. 197–209.

*Women's Suffrage and the PAU/LACW*

*The emergence of national suffrage laws in Latin America*

Although the first parliamentary suffrage debates took place in 1890 in Costa Rica<sup>18</sup> and in 1891 in Brazil, the great surge in suffrage campaigning in Latin America came in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In 1929, Ecuador became the first state of the southern continent to grant women suffrage, nine years after the United States did so. Soon thereafter, many governments collapsed or were overthrown during the turbulence of the Great Depression, creating windows of opportunity for suffrage initiatives across the continent as new electoral codes were debated in constituent congresses. The grand suffrage debates took place in Brazil in 1931, Argentina, Peru and Uruguay in 1932, Colombia in 1933 and Chile in 1934. Although not for lack of mobilisation, these debates resulted in the approval of national female suffrage in only three cases: Uruguay (1932), Brazil (1932) and Cuba (1934).

By the end of the Second World War there was another wave of regime change across Latin America, in many cases through mass upheavals, that once again generated the prospect of electoral reform.<sup>19</sup> A number of the ensuing new constitutions granted women suffrage in the 1940s, in Panama (1941), Guatemala (1945), Argentina (1947), Venezuela (1947), Chile (1949) and Costa Rica (1949). The ruling left-wing administrations of Mexico – Alemán of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI) – and Peru – Bustamante of the Frente Democrático Nacional (National Democratic Front, FDN) – still would not risk granting the vote to what they presumed to be a conservative and religiously minded constituency that would undoubtedly favour rightist parties. Indeed, later in Peru (1955) and in Paraguay (1961) – as had been the case in Ecuador in 1929 – the right-wing dictatorships of Manuel Odría and Alfredo Stroessner hoped women would prove a useful source of votes to shore up their rule.<sup>20</sup> By 1961, 32 years after Ecuador became the first to do so, all the states of Latin America had instituted women's suffrage. International factors were part of the suffrage struggle in Latin America from the very beginning. As Francesca Miller and others have already shown, women's suffrage legislation was the result of a complex interaction of

<sup>18</sup> Eugenia Rodríguez Sáenz, 'La lucha por el sufragio femenino en Costa Rica (1890–1949)', in Eugenia Rodríguez Sáenz (ed.), *Un siglo de luchas femininas en América Latina* (San José, 2002), pp. 87–110.

<sup>19</sup> Dictatorial regimes fell in Guatemala (1944, Ubico), Cuba (1944, Batista), Venezuela (1945, Betancourt), Peru (1945, Prado), Brazil (1946, Vargas), Argentina (1946) and Costa Rica (1948).

<sup>20</sup> Odría explicitly situated women's suffrage in the fight against communism and as a response to the social revolution in Bolivia.

factors at the domestic and international levels, making general claims about causal directions fruitless. The analysis below highlights the suffrage activities of the understudied PAU and IACW in the complicated interface of the international and the domestic, focusing on the multiple dimensions of these organisations.

*Suffrage in a Context of US Hegemonic Aspirations and Transnational Women's Mobilisation*

The question of women's suffrage emerged as a topic within the PAU at the fifth Pan-American Conference in Chile in 1923. In 1928 the PAU created the world's first formally intergovernmental organisation to advocate the advancement of women, the IACW, which subsequently generated at least five PAU recommendations, resolutions and treaties to the same end by 1948.<sup>21</sup> These activities overlap temporally with the adoption of suffrage laws across the continent.

From the turn of the century until Paraguay acknowledged women's right to vote in 1961, suffrage activism in Latin America took place in a context of US imperial or hegemonic aspirations in the hemisphere. Countless economic, military and political interventions generated fear and apprehension among Latin Americans concerned with national sovereignty, and this apprehension was reflected in the PAU.<sup>22</sup> The pan-American movement had developed partially out of a wish to prevent further European intervention in the Americas, particularly to counter the threat of Spain reclaiming its empire and Great Britain's designs upon South America. By the turn of the nineteenth century, Latin American statesmen had become more concerned with US interventions than with European ones. The United States indeed supported and fostered the pan-American idea as a means to further its security and economic predominance in the western hemisphere.

The PAU came into being in 1910, having developed intermittently out of a small Pan-American Commercial Bureau established in 1890. It was created as the permanent administrative agency to assist the association between the American republics, with headquarters in Washington DC. Since the PAU was easily subject to US control, Latin American states refused to endow the organisation with any effective formal political authority; the new organisation was thus not founded on treaty. Instead, the 21 member states assented to the PAU by annually disbursing funds to support it, by authorising the appointment of delegates to the periodic Pan-American Conferences (the delegates generally met every five years in a capital of the Americas) and by

<sup>21</sup> Towns, *Women and States*.

<sup>22</sup> Dreier, 'The Organization of American States'; Meek, 'U.S. Influence'.



Table 1. *Women's Suffrage in the Americas*

Country	Year	Country	Year
United States	1920	Venezuela	1947
Ecuador	1929	Chile	1949
Brazil	1932	Costa Rica	1949
Uruguay	1932	Bolivia	1952
Cuba	1934	Mexico	1953
El Salvador (limited)	1939	Honduras	1955
Dominican Republic	1942	Nicaragua	1955
Guatemala (limited)	1945	Peru	1955
Panama	1945	Colombia	1957
Argentina	1947	Paraguay	1961

*Source:* Inter-Parliamentary Union, 'Women's Suffrage: A World Chronology of the Recognition of Women's Right to Vote and to Stand for Elections', available at [www.ipu.org/wmn-e/suffrage.htm](http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/suffrage.htm).

Table 2. *Landmark Suffrage Events within the Pan American Organisation*

Year	Landmark events
1923	Motion to study the issue of women's rights adopted at the fifth Pan-American Conference in Santiago.
1928	Inter-American Commission of Women created at the sixth Pan-American Conference in Havana, partly with the aim of advocating for women's political rights.
1933	Resolution XIX, 'Civil and Political Rights of Women', the world's first suffrage resolution, adopted at the seventh Pan-American Conference in Montevideo.
1936	Recommendation to politically enfranchise women at the extraordinary Pan-American Conference for the Maintenance of Peace, Buenos Aires.
1938	Lima Declaration in Favour of Women's Rights adopted at the eighth Pan-American Conference in Lima.
1945	Resolution XXVIII, 'On the Rights of Women in America'.
1948	Inter-American Convention on the Granting of Political Rights of Women adopted at the ninth Pan-American Conference in Bogotá.

financing the delegates' participation.<sup>23</sup> The PAU therefore remained an association of agreements between the executive departments of the member state governments.<sup>24</sup> The Governing Board consisted entirely of state officials – the US secretary of state and the Latin American foreign ministers or diplomatic representatives accredited to the US government – and the PAU did not develop a bureaucracy bestowed with decision-making powers of its own.

<sup>23</sup> Walter Scott Penfield, 'The Legal Status of the Pan American Union', *The American Journal of International Law*, vol. 20, no. 2 (1926), p. 259.

<sup>24</sup> Penfield, 'The Legal Status of the Pan American Union', p. 260.

The functions of the PAU were limited to (1) compiling and distributing information and reports on commercial, industrial, agricultural and educational developments of concern to the American republics; (2) the compilation and classification of information on the legislation, conventions and treaties of American states; and (3) serving as the Permanent Commission of the Pan-American Conferences, keeping records and assisting in the ratification of treaties and conventions.<sup>25</sup> Until the 1948 creation of the OAS, the PAU remained, in the words of a US OAS representative of the 1950s, ‘essentially a debating society on the one hand and a clearinghouse for safely technical, non-political subject matter on the other. Unanimous consent remained the standard whereby agreements or decisions, such as they were, might be reached.’<sup>26</sup> The question of women’s suffrage was not one of these safely non-political subject matters, as we will see.

Women’s suffrage became an issue of serious and sustained political concern in the PAU in a context also characterised by the intense transnational work of activists with roots in national women’s mobilisation across the American continents. Beginning in the 1910s, the transnational mobilisation around suffrage continued well into the 1950s, often uniting women across the liberal–socialist divide. Most of the continent’s suffrage organisations were launched in the 1920s and 1930s, many after their founders had travelled or studied in Europe or the United States.

Suffragism in Latin America initially received some assistance from the newly enfranchised women of the United States. The US League of Women Voters – with internationalist Carrie Chapman Catt as president – organised the momentous Pan-American Conference of Women in Baltimore in 1922. The meeting brought together almost 2,000 women for a week from all but two countries of the hemisphere.<sup>27</sup> This made the conclave the largest gathering of women in the Americas up until that date, and it caught the attention of a dozen foreign journalists.<sup>28</sup> At the meeting, the Pan-American Association for the Advancement of Women (PAAW) was created, whose platform included the aim of ‘educat[ing] public opinion in favour of granting the vote of women, to secure political rights’.<sup>29</sup> Within a year, a more cohesive transnational pan-American women’s movement was developing. As PAAW’s honorary chairperson, Catt toured South America in 1923 to spur suffrage work. The Mexican branch of the PAAW hosted the First Feminist Congress in Mexico City that year, drawing the participation

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 258.

<sup>26</sup> Dreier, ‘The Organization of American States’, p. 41.

<sup>27</sup> F. Miller, ‘The International Relations of Women of the Americas’, p. 178.

<sup>28</sup> League of Women Voters, ‘Immediate Release’ (press release, 15 April 1922).

<sup>29</sup> F. Miller, ‘The International Relations of Women of the Americas’.

of over 100 women from the Americas.<sup>30</sup> The issue of women's suffrage thus entered the PAU arena in a context characterised by two distinctive developments: an intense transnational women's mobilisation (transnationalism), on the one hand, and inter-state affairs (intergovernmentalism) marked by US hemispheric predominance, on the other. Although US women at times attempted to dominate the transnational women's movement (attempts which Latin American activists often resented and resisted), this should not be equated with US *governmental* supremacy in the hemisphere. The transnational and intergovernmental dynamics were quite distinctive in the PAU, and, as we will see below, US women activists often counteracted the US government.

### *The PAU and suffrage*

#### *Santiago, 1923*

Even though the Fifth International Conference of American States was held in Santiago a mere year after the Women's Conference and the creation of the PAAW, it is not quite clear whether (women) activists or a (male) state representative should be credited with ensuring that the question of women's political rights be placed in the official, pan-American intergovernmental context. The question of women's rights had not been included in the programme, although the US NWP had submitted a petition in favour of women's equal political rights.<sup>31</sup> The Guatemalan delegate Máximo Soto Hall, a self-described supporter of equality between the sexes, had also prepared a women's rights proposal for the conference. Presented to the delegation heads during a private session, the proposal took the participants by surprise, as Soto Hall describes:

Had a bomb exploded in the meeting room, it would likely have caused less sensation than this simple document. A spectacular silence followed its reading. The person who presided over the meeting announced, with nervous curtness, that this question would be handled in due course. The session ended and we withdrew without a single person present saying a word about my proposal.<sup>32</sup>

Soto Hall feared that the proposal would remain unaddressed, but the conference was held in a Santiago bustling with feminist suffrage activities.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Shirlene Soto, *Emergence of the Modern Mexican Woman: Her Participation in Revolution and Struggle for Equality, 1910–1940* (Denver CO, 1990), p. 104.

<sup>31</sup> Zoila Aurora Cáceres, *Labor de armonía interamericana en los Estados Unidos de Norte América 1940–1945* (Lima, 1946).

<sup>32</sup> Máximo Soto Hall, 'Genesis de la Comisión Interamericana de Mujeres', *Boletín de la Comisión Interamericana de Mujeres*, vol. 1, no. 4 (1943), p. 17.

<sup>33</sup> Edda Gaviola Artigas, Ximena Jiles Moreno, Lorella Lopresti Martínez and Claudia Rojas Mira, '*Queremos votar en las próximas elecciones*': *historia del movimiento femenino chileno 1913–1952* (Santiago, 1986), pp. 27–30.

A group of Chilean women got word of the proposal and initiated an intense period of lobbying individual delegates to secure their support. Soto Hall declines to name the women 'for fear of making an involuntary omission that I will regret', and it is difficult to find more specific information about the nature and extent of the campaign.<sup>34</sup> What is clear is that a combination of state representative initiative and subsequent action by the women's movement generated the PAU's first resolution on the status of women. Its five components were unanimously adopted, including (1) that the PAU study the question of equal civil and political rights between the sexes and (2) that female delegates be included in the following Pan-American Conference in Havana.<sup>35</sup>

### *Havana, 1928*

If the origin of the 1923 resolution on women's rights can partly be attributed to a state representative, the women's movement was solely responsible for generating an organisation devoted to women's rights and suffrage at the following conference. Whereas the Santiago resolution to study equal political rights was included on the programme,<sup>36</sup> the call to include female delegates in the Havana conference had been unheeded by the state members, and no women were scheduled to attend. The Cuban women's movement had been gathering strength in the 1920s, however, and it eagerly embraced the international conference as an opportunity for suffrage activism.<sup>37</sup> So did a number of women's organisations from across the Americas, such as the Consejo Feminista Mexicana (Mexican Feminist Council) and the Club de Madres (Mothers' Club) of Argentina, which were hosted by the Alianza Femenina Cubana (Cuban Women's Alliance) and the Club Femenino de Cuba (Cuban Women's Club).<sup>38</sup>

Having heard of Soto Hall's resolution in Santiago, Cuban lawyer Dr. Flora Parrado saw an opening for placing women's rights in the arena of international law.<sup>39</sup> She contacted Alice Paul of the US National Woman's Party (NWP) and requested that a US representative be sent to Havana. Paul in turn contacted Doris Stevens, chairman of the NWP Committee on

<sup>34</sup> Soto Hall, 'Genesis', p. 17.

<sup>35</sup> James Brown Scott, 'Inter-American Commission of Women', *The American Journal of International Law*, vol. 24, no. 4 (1930), p. 759; Cáceres, *Labor de armonía*, pp. 1–2.

<sup>36</sup> Scott, 'Inter-American Commission of Women', p. 759.

<sup>37</sup> Stoner, *From the House to the Streets*; Lynn Stoner, 'El movimiento sufragista cubano (1917–1940)', in Eugenia Rodríguez Sáenz (ed.), *Un siglo de luchas femeninas en América Latina* (San José, 2002), pp. 23–37.

<sup>38</sup> F. Miller, *Latin American Women and the Search for Social Justice*, p. 95.

<sup>39</sup> Doris Stevens Papers, Subseries H, *Stevens' Manuscript about the LACW* (Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, 1945–62), Box 126, #5, p. 2.

International Action.<sup>40</sup> A small, more radical and expressly 'feminist' wing of the US women's movement, led by Stevens and the NWP, thus simultaneously directed its attention to the pan-American context. Although suffrage had been placed on the agenda in Santiago, the US League of Women Voters and Carrie Chapman Catt had not shown any interest in continuing their international work for the political emancipation of women, instead turning to peace work by 1925.<sup>41</sup> Stepping into the role that its US rivals had left, the NWP saw the Havana conference as a chance to take over leadership and direct women's initiatives within the PAU to further its own domestic aims. Its international endeavours had intensified a couple of years previously, as the League of Women Voters successfully kept the NWP from becoming members in the International Woman Suffrage Alliance and as the domestic US environment proved hostile to the NWP's equal rights initiatives. The pan-American arena and international law thereby appeared as appealing alternatives for the NWP's main objective, a US Equal Rights Amendment.<sup>42</sup> As Stevens herself writes of the creation of the IACW (which will be further discussed below):

the Inter-American Commission of Women was a round-about device for enabling the National Woman's Party to have a new Amendment enacted. It was, to begin with, an obvious way of stirring up interest, and getting newspaper discussion, on the subject. Then, too, it formed a way of raising the subject each time a Conference would be held. The United States would have to formulate an official position on Women's Rights. And if by any chance, I were to succeed in getting a fair number of the twenty-one Republics to adhere to the Equal Rights Treaty, it would put strong pressure on the United States Government to enact similar legislation, first by adhering to the Treaty and then by making its Domestic Laws conform.<sup>43</sup>

Clearly, then, Stevens and the NWP were using the international arena primarily to confront the US government with an Equal Rights Treaty. While the quest for such a treaty never bore fruit, it contributed to the creation of the IACW.

It is also important to note that the NWP was an organisation that noted historian Nancy Cott describes as having an 'authoritarian character'.<sup>44</sup> The building of a *movement* was not among its concerns, nor was the League of Women Voters' focus on democratic process. Democratic organisational procedure was not foremost in Stevens' mind as she spearheaded attempts to use the pan-American arena to push for an Equal Rights Treaty drafted by

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Pernet, 'Chilean Feminists', p. 676.

<sup>42</sup> Susan Becker, *The Origins of the Equal Rights Amendment: American Feminism between the Wars* (Westport CT, 1981), pp. 161–86.

<sup>43</sup> Doris Stevens Papers, *Stevens' Manuscript about the IACW*, Box 162, #5, p. 52.

<sup>44</sup> Nancy F. Cott, 'Feminist Politics in the 1920s: The National Woman's Party', *The Journal of American History*, vol. 71, no. 1 (1984), p. 64.

the NWP's Alice Paul and which had undergone no deliberation among the women it would affect.<sup>45</sup> From Stevens' unpublished manuscript about the IACW, it is clear that she knew (and cared) little about the political context of Latin America and that she was unfamiliar even with the existence of women's organisations in the hemisphere.<sup>46</sup>

US activists were not alone in turning to the formal intergovernmental arena to agitate for women's rights. It was the coming together of Cuban, US and other activists of the Americas that assured that suffrage remained on the inter-American agenda. Cuban women's organisations used the international conference as an occasion for mobilisation, for their own cause of suffrage and for furthering women's rights within the pan-American arena. A series of actions were initiated: a petition was signed by 5,000 Cuban women demanding that women be allowed to make their case to the PAU, hundreds of women demonstrated outside the conference premises, and an event was held at the University of Havana to address delegates from the IACW, attended by almost 1,000 Cuban women and some of the women visiting Cuba for the Pan-American Conference.<sup>47</sup>

The demand to be heard at the conference was met through a special plenary and extraordinary session on 7 February. Eight representatives of women's organisations spoke at the plenary before the galleries of the Aula Magna, which were packed with Cuban women. Nearly all the conference delegates were present.<sup>48</sup> The plenary was convinced not only to discuss the Equal Rights Treaty at the following conference but also, at the initiative of Stevens, to create the IACW.<sup>49</sup> On 18 February, the decision was taken to create the world's first formally intergovernmental organisation expressly concerned with women's rights. The IACW was created 'to take up the consideration of the civil and political equality of women in the continent' and was immediately charged with 'the preparation of juridical information and data of any other kind that may be deemed advisable to enable the Seventh International Conference of American States to take up the consideration of the civil and political equality of women'.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Cáceres, *Labor de armonía*, p. 3; Diane Elizabeth Hill, *International Law for Women's Rights: The Equality Treaties Campaign of the National Woman's Party and Reactions of the U.S. State Department and the National League of Women Voters*, unpubl. PhD diss., University of California, 1999; Doris Stevens Papers, *Stevens' Manuscript about the IACW*, Box 126.

<sup>46</sup> Doris Stevens Papers, *Stevens' Manuscript about the IACW*.

<sup>47</sup> Stoner, 'In Four Languages'.

<sup>48</sup> Doris Stevens Papers, *Stevens' Manuscript about the IACW*, Box 129, # 5, p. 27.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31. In her unpublished manuscript on the IACW, Stevens could not recollect how she came to ask for the establishment of the IACW, and she guesses that the idea came from Alice Paul.

<sup>50</sup> James Brown Scott, *The International Conferences of American States, 1889–1928: A Collection of the Conventions, Recommendations, Resolutions, Reports, and Motions Adopted by the First Six*

It is important to note that the IACW had an *official* mandate, making suffrage part of the formal diplomacy of inter-state relations. Like the other pan-American commissions, the IACW was to be composed of one (female) delegate from each of the then 21 American member states. The small headquarters were to be located at the PAU in Washington DC. This was not a bureaucratised organisation, however, and it had virtually no permanent staff. Indeed, like the rest of the PAU at this time, the commission could hardly be said to be anything more than the sum of its composite parts.

Nonetheless, despite its official status, it is far from clear that the organisation primarily responded to state concerns. Between 1928 and 1938, with Doris Stevens as chair, the IACW functioned as an autonomous, non-permanent subsidiary body within the PAU. Many of the delegates were culled from domestic women's organisations and were responsive to their aims and interests. Whereas a few of the delegates enjoyed the backing of their governments, others, like Stevens, never had strong support from their state officials.<sup>51</sup> With little state support, the IACW's first decade was characterised by financial difficulties and struggles to be heard.

To ensure some organisational continuity and cohesion, the female state delegates decided to hold assemblies every two years in addition to the natural points of congregation at the Pan-American Conferences. The first such meeting of the IACW was held at the University of Havana in 1930, and was far from successful. The delegates did not receive any financial assistance from the states they represented, resulting in only six members being able to attend, representing the Dominican Republic, the United States, Nicaragua, Panama and Cuba.<sup>52</sup> A group of psychiatrists had asked to be present at the assembly, to study this presumably 'rare species of abnormal women'.<sup>53</sup> The Cuban delegate, Elena Mederos de González, later recalled that their presence 'made us too uneasy. We lost all our spontaneity and we rarely dared to speak what was on our minds. As a consequence, we were not satisfied with the results of the meeting. We left without having expressed our ideas frankly.'<sup>54</sup> Moreover, the mutual tolerance that had developed among the Latin American and US activists in 1928 was now showing considerably more strain. While open criticism against Stevens and the direction of the IACW was rare, some Cuban women's rights activists criticised Stevens' 'imperious gesture' in her interactions with the Cuban movement.<sup>55</sup>

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*International Conferences of the American States, and Documents Relating to the Organization of the Conferences* (New York, 1931), p. 521.

<sup>51</sup> Doris Stevens Papers, *Stevens' Manuscript about the LACW*, Box 126, #7, p. 12.

<sup>52</sup> Elena Mederos de González, 'Reseña histórica', *Boletín de Información*, no. 6 (Dec. 1942), p. 16, my translation. <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Hill, *International Law*, p. 128.

For Cuban suffragists, the 1928 Pan-American Conference in Havana had nonetheless been a blessing. Their mobilisation in 1928, on the occasion of the conference, resulted in a snowball effect, as the membership in the main suffrage organisations grew exponentially.<sup>56</sup> It is also noteworthy that Cuban suffragists were able to make common cause with the US women, given the Cuban context of fierce opposition to ‘*yanqui*’ intervention.<sup>57</sup> The following five years saw intensified suffragism in the midst of popular unrest, democratic activism and protests against the Platt Amendment and US interventionism in Central America and the Caribbean. In the commotion following the Great Depression, the consistent pressure exerted by the suffragists was rewarded in 1934, when suffrage was constitutionalised by presidential decree.<sup>58</sup>

### *Montevideo, 1933*

The seventh Pan-American Conference took place in a context of intense mobilisation and campaigning for suffrage across the continent. Not only had the IACW been established and suffrage placed on the pan-American agenda, but Ecuador had spearheaded the granting of voting rights to women in 1929. The political turbulence of the Great Depression generated windows of opportunity in the early 1930s for those that advocated electoral reform. While two decades old, the Uruguayan suffrage movement had gathered more force in the late 1920s and worked intensely between 1929 and 1932, when Uruguayan women finally achieved enfranchisement. Meeting a year after suffrage was granted, the 1933 Pan-American Conference thus provided no opportunity for Uruguayan women to advocate for the vote. They nonetheless petitioned the conference delegates for the recognition of women’s rights and suffrage elsewhere.<sup>59</sup>

The now five-year-old IACW remained in the hands of women’s rights advocates, whose work in the organisation continued to be relatively autonomous from the states they represented. The conference in Montevideo presented the first opportunity for the IACW to make its case for the equality of women to the main state delegates. A comparative report on the legal statutes of the states of the Americas had been prepared, discussing women’s civil and political rights and nationality status.<sup>60</sup> The IACW also

<sup>56</sup> Stoner, *From the House to the Streets*.

<sup>57</sup> Stoner, ‘El movimiento sufragista cubano’, p. 28.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Lavrin, *Women, Feminism and Social Change*, p. 346.

<sup>60</sup> IACW, *Informe de la Comisión Interamericana de Mujeres a la Séptima Conferencia Americana sobre los derechos civiles y políticos de la mujer* (Montevideo, 1933).



recommended the adoption of the Equal Rights Treaty, whose enacting article was just two lines long:

The contracting states agree that, upon the ratification of this treaty, men and women shall have equal rights throughout the territory subject to their respective jurisdictions.<sup>61</sup>

By asking for full legal equality between men and women in all spheres of life, the treaty had little if any chance of being approved. Putting forth such a treaty was a bold strategy, a gamble derived from the risk-taking nature of the NWP and Stevens themselves.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, the general interest in and support for such wide-reaching and explicit change among the main state delegates was slim. While formally composed of female delegates of states, the IACW was thus in practice pitted against the main delegates. The reaction to the treaty is illustrative. 'Upon entering the debate, after the initial flash of admiration prompted by the women's efficiency, a general frostiness spread in the assembly. Only four delegates sat through the entire presentation', reported Peruvian suffragist Zoila Aurora Cáceres from the conference.<sup>63</sup> Virtually no efforts were made by the main state delegates to find compromise solutions that may have at least partially satisfied the IAWC. Instead, the delegates 'chose an easy and conciliatory solution, one that skirted the responsibility of the conferences and congresses'.<sup>64</sup> This solution consisted of the unanimous adoption of Resolution XIX, 'Civil and Political Rights of Women', on 16 December 1933. Four states did sign the treaty at the conference – Ecuador, Cuba, Uruguay and Paraguay – but without subsequent ratification. Three of these had already enfranchised women.

Despite the disappointment expressed by the IACW, Resolution XIX was nonetheless the world's first diplomatic resolution to recommend suffrage.<sup>65</sup> As the preamble stated, the resolution was adopted 'to respond to the urgent and well-grounded petitions of the Inter-American Commission of Women, which seek this equality of rights'.<sup>66</sup> The resolution recommended

To the governments of the republics of America that they endeavour, so far as the peculiar circumstances of each country will conveniently permit, to establish the maximum of equality between men and women in all matters pertaining to the possession, enjoyment and exercise of civil and political rights.<sup>67</sup>

The IACW had thereby succeeded in the feat of formally placing suffrage on the intergovernmental agenda.

<sup>61</sup> James Brown Scott, 'The Seventh International Conference of American States', *The American Journal of International Law*, vol. 28, no. 2 (1934), p. 221.

<sup>62</sup> Cott, 'Feminist Politics in the 1920s', p. 44.

<sup>63</sup> Cáceres, *Labor de armonía*, p. 8, my translation.

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

<sup>65</sup> Towns, *Women and States*. <sup>66</sup> Scott, 'The Seventh International Conference', p. 222.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

Strains and cleavages among the women's rights activists surfaced once again, however. Comparable to the situation in Cuba in 1930, in a general context of mobilisation against US imperial aspirations in Latin America, Stevens did not escape resentment over the perceived hijacking of the IACW and, thereby, the pan-American arena. Under the leadership of Stevens, the IACW had obviously followed the line of action of certain US activists, favouring the daring pursuit of an international Equal Rights Treaty. 'It's not farfetched to think that the Inter-American Commission for Women would have had greater success if it had stayed within the *modus operandi* [of the PAU], hiding its intentions and focusing on pressuring the smaller countries, instead of presenting a treaty that directly affected the domestic politics of the United States of North America', argued Cáceres.<sup>68</sup> Not without sarcasm, she added that such a scenario 'would have been exceptionally altruistic, since the women of the United States would have had nothing to gain'. In becoming a pawn of the US women's movement, Cáceres eloquently points out, the IACW entailed a paradox: 'The Inter-American Commission of Women asked for equal rights for the whole continent, while it placed itself within the historical inequality that divides the Nations of the Americas.' The cause of women's suffrage, which was one of the main objectives of Cáceres' organisation *Feminismo Peruano ZAC* (Peruvian Feminism ZAC), as it was of many others across Latin America, could possibly have been better served had the IACW used different strategies.

Stevens' equal rights agenda also prompted the US government to take a more active interest in the IACW, subjecting the organisation to more intense manipulation by states. The IACW had been established during the Hoover administration and, although Stevens claimed to be neither Republican nor Democrat, the general sentiment was that she was in fact a Republican. Domestic animosity towards Stevens, the NWP and the IACW thus intensified with the election of Democratic president Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933–45), particularly among women activists who favoured protective labour legislation. In an apparent attempt to undermine Stevens' agenda, the Roosevelt administration sought to shut down the IACW at the Montevideo conference in 1933, arguing that the tasks of the commission had been completed.<sup>69</sup> The other state members were not convinced, however; with the sole exception of Argentina, the Latin American delegations voted *en bloc* against the US proposal, instead favouring a continuation of the IACW. According to Stevens, this was the first time in the history of the

<sup>68</sup> Cáceres, *Labor de armonía*, p. 8, my translation.

<sup>69</sup> Doris Stevens Papers, *Stevens' Manuscript about the IACW*, Box 126, #7, p. 12.

Pan-American Conferences that Latin American states had voted as a group against the United States.<sup>70</sup>

*Lima, 1938*

The eighth Pan-American Conference took place in a context still characterised both by US hemispheric dominance and by transnational suffrage activism. At this point, however, the transnational face of the IACW ceded more ground to US state interests. The activities of the organisation nevertheless helped stimulate the domestic, Peruvian suffrage movement, as had been the case in Cuba a decade earlier.

Peruvian suffragism, concordant with the hemispheric trend, had peaked with the grand congressional suffrage debate in 1932. Whereas the mobilisation had resulted in municipal suffrage for literate Peruvian women, it fell short of the coveted national vote. The movement subsequently lost steam, but the Pan-American Conference scheduled for December 1938 provided an opportunity for reorganisation. Cáceres, the Peruvian delegate to the IACW, was also the founder of Peru's main suffrage organisation, *Feminismo Peruano ZAC*, which was thus well tuned in to pan-American trends and understood the opportunity presented by the conference. On 27 and 29 August, *Feminismo Peruano ZAC* thus published a statement in two major daily papers that it was reinitiating its activities in anticipation of the eighth Pan-American Conference.<sup>71</sup> The statement called on women to join forces in the struggle for political suffrage. A mobilising campaign was initiated during the months leading up to the conference.

The conference was met with lobbying efforts as well as demonstrations. Chilean suffragists and other Latin American women struggling for the vote travelled to Lima to put pressure on the main state delegations. A number of the IACW members, such as Ana Rosa S. de Martínez Guerrero of Argentina, refused to be hosted by a Peruvian government that they considered to be a 'fascist dictatorship' and thus found their own accommodations among Peruvian feminists.<sup>72</sup> Stevens, in contrast, greatly enjoyed the lavish reception and opulent living arrangements.<sup>73</sup>

In an unprecedented move in the Peruvian context, *Feminismo Peruano ZAC* collected nearly 5,000 signatures in support of suffrage. A letter with 3,470 signatures was likewise presented to the Peruvian delegate, Dr. Victor Andrés Belaúnde, pleading for political suffrage.<sup>74</sup> These signatures were

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> 'Feminismo Peruano ZAC', *La Prensa*, 27 Aug. 1938, and *La Crónica*, 29 Aug. 1938.

<sup>72</sup> Doris Stevens Papers, *Stevens' Manuscript about the IACW*, Box 127, #3, p. 8. <sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> *Feminismo Peruano ZAC*, 'Carta al Dr Victor Andrés Belaúnde, Ministro Plenipotenciario en el Servicio Diplomático. Delegado del Perú en la VIII Conferencia Internacional

presented along with a petition to the PAU. The language of the petition, drafted by a relatively liberal organisation, is indicative of the conservative domestic climate that faced Peruvian suffragists:

To the Delegates of the Panamerican Conference in Lima.

In the name of the Peruvian women who have signed below, Peruvian mothers, daughters, teachers, professionals, business employees, nurses and workers of all classes and positions, we ask that you grant us political suffrage. Not because we want active involvement in political life, but because whenever the occasion emerges, we wish to use the vote to support the institutions that undergird our national life: the Holy Catholic Church; a stable, progressive and patriotic government that maintains peace with honour among peoples; and a strong family following the Catholic Christian belief, which is the fundamental unit of the Nation; and also to support or help create generous protective legislation for women and children, to provide security for the woman worker in offices, factories, stores and other institutions outside the home, in order to protect the family and the home, and in the name of Christian justice for the less fortunate, in the broadest sense of the term. We trust that this petition, which we believe will support our sisters of the other republics of the continent, will be favourably received at this important occasion of meeting to make decisions for the well-being of America.

Lima, December of 1938.<sup>75</sup>

In expressly voicing their support for protective legislation, *Feminismo Peruano ZAC* publicly departed from the official position of the IACW and the goals of its Equal Rights Treaty.<sup>76</sup> Although *Feminismo Peruano ZAC* and many other Latin American women's organisations did indeed favour protective legislation, this might also have been a conscious strategy to align the cause of suffrage with the position of the Roosevelt administration and a US delegation that was hostile to the IACW as run by Stevens. Cáceres, as noted, was deeply sceptical of Stevens' tactics and uses of the commission.

Whereas the Pan-American Conference spurred a revival of activism for the vote, subsequent developments did not favour Peruvian suffragists as they had their Cuban counterparts a decade earlier. The conservative political environment proved overwhelming and quenched the efforts at a sustained suffrage campaign. What is more, the Peruvian National Council of Women had used the occasion to advocate *against* the vote for women, arguing that Peruvian women were not sufficiently prepared for such public

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Americana', Aurora Cáceres Collection (not yet catalogued), Biblioteca Nacional del Perú (Lima, 1938), my translation. I have unfortunately been unable to locate any other information about the proposed convention.

<sup>75</sup> *Feminismo Peruano ZAC*, 'Solicitud' (petition for suffrage in national elections, presented to the delegates of the eighth Pan-American Conference, Lima, 1938). Aurora Cáceres Collection, my translation.

<sup>76</sup> See Inter-American Commission of Women, *Report of the Inter-American Commission of Women to the Eighth International Conference of American States on the Political and Civil Rights of Women* (Lima, 1938).

responsibilities. It would be another 17 years until the right-wing dictator Odría came to see the allegedly traditionalist and deeply religious female population as congenially conservative voters that would likely support his regime.

Domestic Peruvian and transnational suffrage activists were nonetheless highly mobilised and involved in the Lima conference and the IACW's activities there. The US government also saw the conference as a crucial opportunity to further its goal and to reign in the IACW, however. In 1937, behind-the-scenes activities had been initiated by the League of Women Voters, the Women's Trade Union League and members of the Roosevelt administration to oust Stevens from the IACW.<sup>77</sup> Since Stevens had been appointed chair of the IACW by the PAU and served as the head while the IACW was an autonomous body within it, the Roosevelt administration was able to question whether Stevens was an official representative of the US government at all. At the initiative of the US delegation, the IACW was reshaped as a subsidiary commission of the PAU, promising more sustained and better financed activities but also less autonomy. Subsequently, during 1938–40, the IACW was fully reorganised. Three months after the meeting, the State Department furthermore announced the appointment of a new IACW chair, Mary Winslow of the Women's Trade Union League; Winslow would retain the position for a year before being replaced by the Argentine Ana Rosa de Martínez Guerrero.

The IACW now took on more of the character of a conventional inter-governmental organisation, becoming the bearer of state interests and aims. The fact that the suffrage issue then became entangled in the hemispheric contention between market democracy and socialism added to this development. US policy had become increasingly concerned with the rise of communism and fascism in the 1930s. In 1936, an extraordinary Pan-American Conference for the Maintenance of Peace was called by President Roosevelt. Here, the PAU issued a recommendation to its member states that they speedily enfranchise women to strengthen hemispheric as well as world peace.<sup>78</sup> A few years later, the reconstituted IACW was charged with organising the women of the Americas 'in defence of democracy', and it encouraged the formation of *acción femenina* (women's action) groups to this end; these were subsequently formed in a number of countries in the 1940s.<sup>79</sup> The IACW thus shifted in character, ceasing to respond primarily to

<sup>77</sup> Mary Trigg, "'To Work Together for Ends Larger than Self': The Feminist Struggles of Mary Beard and Doris Stevens in the 1930s", *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1995), p. 64.

<sup>78</sup> Pernet, 'Chilean Feminists'.

<sup>79</sup> Mary Cannon, 'Women's Organizations in Ecuador, Paraguay and Peru', *Bulletin of the Pan American Union* (1943), pp. 601–7; F. Miller, *Latin American Women and the Search for Social Justice*, p. 115.

transnational activists and moving towards also being the subject of state concerns.

### *The war years*

The IACW continued to be the bearer of both state and transnational interests for some years to come. During the 1938 Lima conference, the ninth conference was scheduled for Bogotá in 1943.<sup>80</sup> The study of women's civil and political rights was the only substantive aim listed in the new statutes of 1940, a fact that is indicative of the projected course of the IACW until the next conference – civil and political rights were considered primary.<sup>81</sup> The outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 instead led to emergency measures being called in the Pan-American Union. Three consultative meetings of foreign ministers were held between 1939 and 1942, and a special conference – the Chapultepec Conference on the Problems of War and Peace – took place in Mexico City in 1945. The IACW's suffrage advocacy was largely placed on the back burner during the war, particularly after the attack on Pearl Harbor in December of 1941, as the organisation was reoriented towards mobilising women across the Americas for civil defence.<sup>82</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, national defence and the well-being of women were thought to coincide by an IACW which was now largely in the service of state aims.

While certainly diminished by the war effort, the IACW's suffrage activities did not cease entirely during the period. The commission regularly sent telegrams to public officials and national parliaments in support of suffrage legislation, such as the Chilean suffrage bill of 1945.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, the United States temporarily abandoned its policy of direct military involvement in Central America, and its previously strong political ties to the dictatorships of Trujillo of the Dominican Republic, Hernández of El Salvador, Somoza of Nicaragua and Ubico of Guatemala grew more tenuous. As the war ended, the US occupation force wrote suffrage into the new Japanese constitution of 1947 and that of South Korea in 1948. General MacArthur argued that the vote of Japanese women would bring into the state polity 'the noble influence of womanhood and the home, which has done so much to further American stability and progress'.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Charles Fenwick, 'The Ninth International Conference of American States', *The American Journal of International Law*, vol. 42, no. 3 (1948), pp. 553–67.

<sup>81</sup> See IACW, *Boletín de Información* (Jan. 1941), p. 2.

<sup>82</sup> See IACW, *Boletín de Información* (1940–5). <sup>83</sup> Pernet, 'Chilean Feminists', p. 686.

<sup>84</sup> Cited in Mire Koikari, 'Exporting Democracy? American Women, "Feminist Reforms", and Politics of Imperialism in the U.S. Occupation of Japan, 1945–1952', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1 (2002), p. 29.

With the US officially dedicated to democracy (and a conception of it that included a female electorate), its strong ties with dictatorships became an embarrassment – and the IACW made sure that public US statements in favour of women's suffrage did not pass Latin American statesmen by. Trying to characterise the IACW as 'intergovernmental' or 'transnational' during this period is not easy, however, nor is teasing out the exchanges between the various actors involved in the commission in terms of who was influencing whom. The IACW's interactions with the Dominican Republic, where women gained suffrage in 1942 under the gruesome Trujillo regime, are an interesting case in point. Trujillo supporter Minerva Bernardino had secured the position of IACW delegate between 1933 and 1944 through Trujillo's patronage and appears to have had little anchorage in the women's movement. During her stays in Washington DC, Bernardino became close to Stevens and learned the workings of the organisation through her.<sup>85</sup> Through Bernardino, Stevens in turn also developed strong ties with Trujillo, even arranging with him to have a Russian deserter relocated to the Dominican Republic.<sup>86</sup> (It is interesting to note that in her manuscript about the IACW, Stevens neither criticises Trujillo's reign nor expresses any qualms about collaborating with him.)

In the summer of 1938, Stevens and Bernardino travelled to the Dominican Republic as IACW representatives to advise Trujillo on creating greater rights for Dominican women.<sup>87</sup> Bernardino states that the Trujillo government 'collaborated enthusiastically with the work of the Commission and thoroughly complied with its objectives', which had resulted in women's suffrage becoming law in 1942.<sup>88</sup> Both women claim to have influenced the direction of the Trujillo regime with respect to women's rights and suffrage. A different interpretation is just as feasible, however – namely, that Trujillo was using the IACW to advance the status of his regime. Hosting its representatives, complying with its aims and granting voting rights to a group (women) presumed to be conservative were seemingly inconsequential ways for him to show dedication to democratic reform in a quest to appease the United States.<sup>89</sup> The story appears to be one of mutual exploitation, complex paths of influence and an IACW whose intergovernmental or transnational character was unclear at this time.

<sup>85</sup> Robin Derby and Ellen Dubois, 'The Strange Case of Minerva Bernardino: Pan American and United Nations Women's Rights Activist' (paper presented at 'Transnational Feminism in History, 1920–1975', UCLA, 26–7 May 2006).

<sup>86</sup> Doris Stevens Papers, *Stevens' Manuscript about the IACW*, Box 127, #2, pp. 1–4.

<sup>87</sup> Doris Stevens Papers, *Stevens' Manuscript about the IACW*, Box 127, #2, p. 1. See also 'Doris Stevens to Meet President Trujillo on Plans to Enfranchise Dominican Women', *New York Times*, 10 August 1938, p. 17. <sup>88</sup> IACW, *Boletín de Información* (July 1944), p. 5.

<sup>89</sup> See NACLA, 'Feminismo Balaguerista: A Strategy of the Right', *NACLA Latin America and Empire Report*, vol. 8, no. 4 (1974), pp. 28–31.

What does appear clear is that the United States' official embrace of women's political emancipation lent support to the suffrage activities of the IACW. By the early 1940s, the IACW expressly called for a more proactive suffrage role for the delegates themselves. Resolutions calling on the governments of the Americas to grant women suffrage, if they had not been so already, were adopted.<sup>90</sup> The annual program for 1943 required the delegates to work actively for the recognition of political and civil rights in their home countries, rather than simply study and report on the status of women.<sup>91</sup> Many if not most of the delegates had of course already been involved in suffrage promotion, but the directive is nevertheless an important indication of the direction of the IACW during the war period. Information bulletins now came to include reports of what the delegates themselves had done to advance women's voting rights.<sup>92</sup>

At the 1944 assembly, there was a sense that the tide had possibly turned in favour of women's suffrage. Nineteen of the 21 member countries were represented at the IACW assembly, a record number enabled by the fact that more states were now willing to fund the travel costs of their delegate.<sup>93</sup> The political turbulence which accompanied the Second World War and its aftermath then provided yet another hemisphere-wide window of opportunity for suffragism. Six states – El Salvador (1939), the Dominican Republic (1942), Guatemala (1945), Panama (1945), Argentina (1947) and Venezuela (1947) – enfranchised women during the war and its immediate aftermath.

*Conclusion: The Multiple and Shifting Character of International Organisations*

The creation of the IACW and its subsequent suffrage activities is a story of a formally intergovernmental organisation that has shifted in character from being responsive primarily to the transnational women's movement to also becoming the carrier of state interests and aims. The fact that the IACW was initially so strongly characterised by transnational activists is particularly interesting given that the PAU was a truly intergovernmental organisation based on executive agreements and state aims. The PAU had been utilised since the 1920s as an arena for Latin American suffragists, however, who agitated transnationally for the vote. The creation and activities of the IACW were initially largely a reflection of the efforts of these non-governmental actors.

<sup>90</sup> See IACW, *Boletín de Información* (Dec. 1941), p. 3.

<sup>91</sup> IACW, *Boletín de Información* (Dec. 1942), p. 13.

<sup>92</sup> IACW, *Boletín* (July 1943), pp. 17 and 20. <sup>93</sup> IACW, *Boletín* (July 1944), p. 1.



Previous scholarship has highlighted the way in which women of different nationalities and from diverse backgrounds were able to make common cause in the pan-American setting.<sup>94</sup> It would be a mistake, however, to treat the transnational face of the IACW as a united front for suffrage. As we have seen, the pan-American arena was also characterised by struggles between US and Latin American women's activists, with different aims and preferred strategies of action. The feud between Stevens' NWP and the League of Women Voters (among others) in fact seems to have given rise to the IACW, as the NWP looked for new venues to advance the equal rights cause.

The strategy of the NWP, of using international law and organisations to bring about domestic change, has been dubbed the 'boomerang effect' by Keck and Sikkink.<sup>95</sup> Miller has also shown that Latin American women's activists used the international arena to further domestic goals.<sup>96</sup> It is indeed instructive to consider the suffrage activities of the IACW in these terms, since transnational activists consistently used the organisation to put pressure on governments to change domestic law. A boomerang does not always come back, however, as the IACW's failed attempt at generating an Equal Rights Treaty illustrates. The treaty can be seen as a boomerang thrown by an IACW dominated by one faction of the US women's movement. Instead of returning, the boomerang seems to have hit Latin American feminists in the head, undermining advances that would otherwise have been possible according to activists such as Cáceres. To understand the transnational character of international organisations and the processes of change involving this dimension, it is thus important also to take seriously the divisions and inequalities that existed among activists.

In contrast with the IACW, the PAU remained primarily an intergovernmental assembly. The PAU was characterised by a division between a Bolivarian ideal of a congregation of equal and sovereign states and the unilateralism of the United States – a conflict sometimes referred to as one between 'Bolivarianismo and Monroeismo'.<sup>97</sup> Neither the introduction of suffrage into the pan-American arena nor the creation of the IACW can be attributed, however, to the hemispheric dominance of the US as a state. Initially, US state representatives did little or nothing to support and encourage women's suffrage on the continent. If anything, Latin American delegates proved more amenable to placing suffrage on the pan-American agenda and to being persuaded to introduce the declarations and resolutions

<sup>94</sup> Stoner, 'In Four Languages'; also see Note 9.

<sup>95</sup> Keck and Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders*.

<sup>96</sup> See Note 9.

<sup>97</sup> Dreier, 'The Organization of American States', citing Antonio Gómez Robledo, *Idea y experiencia de América* (Mexico City, 1958).

on women's rights in the pan-American context.<sup>98</sup> As mentioned above, it was the Guatemalan delegate Máximo Soto Hall who introduced the resolution to study the status of women in the Americas in Santiago in 1923. Similarly, the Lima Declaration in Favour of Women's Rights of 1938 was proposed by the Mexican delegation, and Latin American state representatives were almost unanimous in blocking a US proposal to shut down the IACW in 1933. We can thus detect a faint division between the US and the Latin Americans on the question of women's rights during the IACW's first decade of existence, although no state can be said to have taken the lead in advancing women's political rights.

After a decade as an organisation primarily shaped by transnational forces, the IACW and its suffrage activities became subject to more intense and sustained state interest. When the United States shifted to supporting market democracy and women's suffrage in the late 1930s, and with the election of Roosevelt, the IACW was reined in and more clearly subordinated to the PAU and US state interests. The IACW thus shifted a bit in character, also becoming the carrier of state aims such as civil defence and the fight against socialism. It is interesting, though perhaps not surprising, that the United States was not alone in utilising the IACW to advance its interests. As we saw above, small states such as the Dominican Republic under Trujillo appear to have made use of the organisation to further their goals.

The IACW's shift from being responsive almost exclusively to the transnational women's movement to then also becoming more intergovernmental underscores the notion that international organisations can be dynamic entities of changing nature, subject to multiple social forces at once. During the time period of concern to this article, however, the IACW did not develop an effective bureaucracy, nor was it endowed with any formal independent authority that would enable us to conceive of the organisation as an entity in its own right. If we agree that the pan-American organisations and their suffrage activities were largely derivative of the efforts of transnational activists and states, the question remains of whether the organisations in any way functioned as forces on their own. Can we attribute *any* independent effects to the organisations as such? I suggest four separate effects of the PAU and IACW that cannot solely be assigned to transnational activists or state representatives.

### *1. Generation of transnational activism*

It is well established that IOs can be reflective of transnational activism and that civil society actors may affect and shape IO agendas. As we have

<sup>98</sup> This observation is shared by Doris Stevens. Doris Stevens Papers, *Stevens' Manuscript about the IACW*, Box 126, #7, p. 2.

seen in this article, the relationship can also be the reverse. While certainly influenced by women activists, the Pan-American Conferences simultaneously helped spur transnational activism. There had been a fair number of women present at the first few conferences, primarily from Argentina, Chile, Brazil and Uruguay. The subsequent conferences in Cuba, Chile, Uruguay and Lima gave additional women exposure to the world of international law and organisations. They provided Latin American women with experience in international activism and cross-border interactions, fostering a shared identity as American women with a common, hemispheric fate. The PAU thus served as a space in which a policy community could form, one which would be followed by others in later decades.<sup>99</sup> As a forum and a congregation point, the IACW *enabled* and *spurred* transnational activism – activism which was crucial for the enfranchisement of women.

## 2. *Intensification of domestic mobilisation*

In addition to impelling transnational activism, the Pan American Conferences gave rise to intensified domestic suffragism. Cuban and Peruvian women in particular appear to have taken advantage of the meetings in their capitals to agitate for the vote. In both cases, the conferences helped suffrage organisation membership soar and activities intensify. In the Cuban case, this can in turn be linked fairly directly to the subsequent constitutionalisation of women's suffrage.

## 3. *Standardisation and classification of knowledge*

The IACW clearly played a crucial role in generating comparative data that standardised the knowledge on the legal and political status of women among the states of Latin America. This compilation of data was unprecedented and generated a great deal of interest across the hemisphere. It is unfortunately beyond the scope of this article to theoretically discuss the discursive power entailed in such standardisation and classification, or to empirically analyse the ways in which women's suffrage was framed and interpreted by the IACW. Indeed, Barnett and Finnemore point out that such knowledge generation by IOs may have a crucial influence on state policy.<sup>100</sup> What is more, comparative data is often central to the mobilising of shame by transnational activists, as it enables them to point to certain states as more 'advanced' and others as more 'backwards' or unjust when it comes to the treatment of women.

<sup>99</sup> I am grateful to one of the editors for pointing this out.

<sup>100</sup> Barnett and Finnemore, *Rules for the World*.

4. *Legitimacy of suffrage*

Finally, the principle that states should maximise equality between women and men was legitimated via the declarations, resolutions and, finally, treaty on the political rights of women which the IACW initiated. As the embodiment of international law – something which has enjoyed a high level of esteem in Latin America since the nineteenth century – the IACW and PAU helped establish the legitimacy of suffrage as a concern of American republics. The IACW also ensured that all state delegates at least considered the matter of suffrage at the Pan-American Conferences and forced those delegates who stood against political rights for women to develop a set of arguments and justifications to the other delegates for doing so, something that became increasingly difficult as more and more states enfranchised women. The IACW became one of several instruments for articulating and promoting a new set of values, helping move an order based on exclusively male political authority towards new relations that recognised political power for women.

*Spanish and Portuguese abstracts*

*Spanish abstract.* En estudios de la dimensión internacional del voto femenino, el papel de las organizaciones internacionales ha sido pasado por alto. Este artículo examina las actividades alrededor del sufragio de la Unión Pan-Americana (PAU por sus siglas en inglés) y en particular de la Comisión Interamericana de Mujeres (CIM) entre 1920 y 1945. Fijándose en el contexto histórico, el análisis sugiere que las organizaciones internacionales pueden ser tanto portadoras de los intereses del Estado como plataformas de los intereses de los movimientos sociales. El artículo también señala que aunque no son burocracias independientes, el PAU y la CIM sin embargo tuvieron cierta relevancia para el sufragio que no puede ser atribuida ni al Estado ni a los movimientos por el voto.

*Spanish keywords:* voto femenino, Comisión Interamericana de Mujeres, Unión Panamericana, organizaciones internacionales, movimientos transnacionales de mujeres

*Portuguese abstract.* Em estudos sobre as dimensões internacionais do sufrágio feminino, o papel de organizações internacionais tem sido ignorado. Este artigo examina as atividades em prol do sufrágio da União Pan-Americana (UPA) e especialmente da Comissão Inter-Americana de Mulheres (CIAM), entre 1920 e 1945. Atenciosa ao contexto histórico, a análise do tema sugere que organizações internacionais podem ser tanto veículos para os interesses dos estados como podem ainda ser utilizadas como plataformas para os interesses de movimentos sociais. O artigo também argumenta que embora essas organizações não representem burocracias independentes, a UPA e a CIAM contribuíram para o sufrágio, fato esse que não pode

somente ser atribuído aos estados-membros e tampouco aos movimentos pelo sufrágio.

*Portuguese keywords:* sufrágio feminino, Comissão Inter-Americana de Mulheres, União Pan-Americana, organizações internacionais, movimentos de mulheres transnacionais