

100 YEARS OF IFUW

Past and Future Sisterhood

Written and researched by

Louise McLeod

GWI VP Marketing 2016-2019

*For the 100th Anniversary of IFUW / GWI
Geneva 2019*



©GWI 2019 www.graduatwomen.org

Past and Future Sisterhood by Louise McLeod, VP Marketing 2016-2019



“In the right sort of patriotism lies the hope of the world... Let us teach them not to hate, not to wish harm or dominate other peoples, but to love their own land and to play her part as a good citizen of the world, ready, with head and hand to make Justice prevail.”

Virginia Gildersleeve, Many a Good Crusade.

As a global citizen and advocate for peace after the devastation of WW 1, Gildersleeve believed that peace depended on 2 things: first, the creation of international political machinery; and second, the development of a climate of public opinion in which the machinery could function. She also believed that it was necessary to educate people, young and old, to want international cooperation and understanding. Her friends and colleagues in her academic environment were all beginning to voice the same opinions and were already making plans for an international exchange of professors and opportunities for travel for students between countries -- both very new ideas at the time.

Gildersleeve’s primary interest was in the movement that was seeking international cooperation among the university women of the world. In 1918 in the USA, while the war was still raging, the Association of Collegiate Alumnae (later to combine with the Southern Association of College Women as the American Association of University Women) established a Committee on International Relations with Gildersleeve as the Chairman. Later that same year, the British Government appointed a British Universities Mission to visit Canada and the United States to develop closer relations with universities on both sides of the Atlantic. At the last minute, 2 women were added to the group of 5 men on this Mission -- Miss Rose Sidgwick, Lecturer in History at the University of Birmingham, and Dr. Caroline F.E.



Spurgeon, Professor of English Literature in the University of London. As Chairman of the Committee on International Relations of the Association of Collegiate Alumnae, Gildersleeve was assigned to welcome the distinguished Mission and automatically became one of its members. And the rest is history as we know it.

We all know only too well, the oft-told story of the 3 women sitting on steamer trunks in Miss Spurgeon's room at the old University Women's Club at East 52nd in New York while they discussed the terrible war that had just ended that led to Miss Spurgeon remarking "We should have an international association of university women, so that we at least shall have done all we can to prevent another such catastrophe." To which Virginia replied, "then I guess I must rally the Association of Collegiate Alumnae." Rose in turn responded with "And we must go back and talk with the British Federation of University Women."

Rose, however, was to succumb to the Spanish Influenza a few weeks later, a great personal loss to Virginia. The two remaining friends returned to Britain to take up the work the 3 of them had planned together. Virginia chaired a fundraising effort to create a fellowship in Rose's memory.

Dr Winnifred Cullis, of the London School of Medicine soon joined the group and an agreement was made to establish an international federation of university women, the signing taking place on July 11, 1919 with 2 Canadians also present.

Virginia herself wrote the first Constitution. The first meeting of the new federation was to be held in London in 1920 with 8 organized national federations voting: Britain, the USA, Canada, Czechoslovakia, France, the Netherlands, Italy and Spain and representatives from Australia, Belgium, Denmark, India, Norway, South Africa and Sweden.

The stated purpose in the new constitution was *"to promote understanding and friendship between the university women of the nations of the world and thereby to further the interests and develop between their countries sympathy and mutual helpfulness."*

It was immediately observed that there were some issues to overcome if IFUW was to be a truly international organization. You will recognize that these issues are still



relevant today ... 100 years later ... even as IFUW has become an international organization of some repute. Some things apparently don't change over time but speak to the constant reminders of the differences between us while at the same time adhering to a common cause and mission.

One problem was one of numbers with larger associations dominating over the others. AAUW already had 50,000+ members and quickly grew to more than 100,000. It was soon decided that the maximum number of votes for any association would be no more than 5 (the maximum number of votes for an organization of 1000 members). This decision was a forerunner of the General Assembly of the United Nations -- IFUW was already well ahead of its time.

The second problem, eternal and forever, was about the dues, but in this case, the solution was an inverse of the dues quota used today ... the per capita tax (the term they used then), would be HIGHER for large federations than for smaller ones. At the time, our founding mothers felt that the smaller, struggling federations could better use their funds to increase membership and should not be expected to support the international body as a whole. In her book, *Many a Good Crusade*, Virginia Gildersleeve expressed pride in the fact that the Americans didn't try to influence policy in spite of paying the bulk of the expenses.

This situation, however, didn't last much longer than into the early 1930s as the Americans struggled to pay dues after the US went off the Gold Standard in 1933 along with a declining currency and a deflationary spiral ending in the Great Depression. Debates about dues occupied almost the entire decade. Sound familiar? At some unknown date during this same period, dues currency switched from USD and British pounds to Swiss Francs.

The third problem was one of differences in parliamentary rules. How do you conduct business, even in the same language, when terminology has different meanings in different cultures? Gildersleeve quoted an example in her book. When the British 'table' something, they take it up for consideration. When an American 'tables' something, it is dropped for consideration and may be taken up later or lost all together. From the outset, IFUW worked out a highly simplified set of parliamentary rules on which all could agree. It is one of the reasons why we still



do not abide by proscribed parliamentary rules (such as Roberts Rules) valid in the country of origin, but not recognized universally.

The fourth problem was simply one of language. Originally, French and English, like all international organizations of the time, became the two official languages. Communication problems in all its forms was, and is, a continual theme .. how best to tighten the bonds between IFUW and its NFAs and with individual members taking into consideration the barriers of language and cost of publications.

From the very beginning, the original founders wanted to promote international understanding, broaden, and elevate educational standards and demonstrate the value of personal contacts. They had no desire to create an ultra-feminist movement but instead would form coalitions with and provide support for other like-minded organizations. Nor did they want the organization to be political and propagandist. They just wanted the different nationalities to work together. Within a few years, IFUW had grown to 30 NFAs and over 75,000 individual university women.

Early on, committees were formed to deal with educational standards, fellowships, the status of women, secondary education, intellectual cooperation and, after WW 2, refugees. Conferences initially were held every 2 years but changed to every 3 years with Council meetings in between.

During the 1930s, IFUW added disarmament and peace to its agenda and cooperated with the League of Nations in order to work for 'humanity'. NFAs started carrying out their own activist agendas such as the right for married women to work, lobbying for suffrage rights, prison visits, a Children's Bill, equal pay for equal work, improvements in civil service and the teaching profession for women, to name a few. This speaks to the relative freedom of NFAs to pursue issues of special importance to women in their respective countries. In other words, IFUW and its NFAs incorporated, as we still do today, a wide range of women who differed in their approach but united in the commitment to the mission.

In her book *The Rise and Fall of Women's Transnational Activism: Identity and Sisterhood* Marie Sandell devotes a chapter to the growth of IFUW as an international women's organization. In the 1930s, political, economic and social



instabilities, economic depression, the rise of fascism and political tensions in Europe badly affected the growth and functionality of women's organizations in the western world. Major groups were lost in Italy, Germany, Austria, Spain and Czechoslovakia. IFUW was no exception. However, while other international women's organizations could balance the gap with increased membership from non-Western countries where women were feeling more emancipated, IFUW had more difficulty. There was some price to be paid for the membership requirement as being a university or college graduate women. Participation in nationalist struggles in other parts of the world assisted the growth of the feminist movement and more and more women were gaining experience in doing so. They were no longer novices and displayed more confidence.

IFUW, established during the first bloom of the transnational women's movement, sought an identity of its own, one that we still value and adhere to 100 years later. IFUW had much in common with other women's international organizations with the same commitment to improving women's lives and the bond of the common struggle for emancipation, but little attention had been paid to date on higher education for women.

IFUW's commitment to education (and in particular improvement in the status of university women) to achieve women's rights made it more acceptable as an organization in many parts of the world when feminism was becoming unpopular and less acceptable. Privileges inherent in IFUW membership were many: fellowships for research were established in 1924; exchange posts for secondary school teachers were offered as was assistance for individual travelers along with the establishment of clubhouses. International scholarships and the establishment of residences promoted IFUW's central objective of developing understanding and friendship between university women of different countries.

During the 20s and 30s, affiliates were formed in Australia, New Zealand, South America, Asia and the Middle East. But despite its initial rapid growth, few members came from outside Europe and North America, even though there were a few members from non-Western countries. The membership of IFUW during the first 2 decades consisted mainly of women in Europe and the Americas due to



easier access to higher education for predominantly upper- and middle-class women -- a small number when compared to other international women's organizations and was unevenly distributed, as previously noted. In 1923, according to the Journal of the American Association of University Women, the number of graduate women in a single year in the USA was more than the other 17 countries put together. This was due to easier access to tertiary education in North America that was not necessarily tied to a profession. As one member from Norway expressed it, graduate women from the 'community' were predominant in North America, whereas women in Europe attended university to obtain a profession and European members were mainly academics.

This limited opportunities for expansion into countries where university education for women had not yet been developed and in many non-Western countries, the number of university-educated women was low, and the development of university women was even more uneven. A member could only belong through her national affiliate, not much different to our membership requirements today. This was amended in the constitution in 1929 when provision was made for 'corresponding' membership in countries where there was no affiliation.

Unique among the requirements for membership in many other international organizations, IFUW membership differentiated *between* women, but it was the special feeling of 'fraternity' or unity that persuaded many women to become involved. A university education led women to share traditions and ideals and to speak a common language. In the very early days, IFUW attendees showed their international differences at meetings by wearing academic dress, which differs across the world.

A second world war, one that the idealism of education for women was trying to prevent, raged across Europe and Asia again 20 years later. The hardships of the war in Europe saw many of our IFUW members engaged in activities of resistance and help against the ravages of persecution. The sisterhood, formed in the early years, held firm during this era of destruction even though many of the NFAs fell as a result Nazism and Fascism. Desperate to maintain contact, Councils were held during the war years until 1942 when it was no longer safe (or wise) to cross the



Atlantic. IFUW members re-united in London in 1946. The Report of the 1946 Council meeting contains an eloquent appeal by Dr. Hannevart “to university women to redouble their efforts at education children to think for themselves and to respect human personality,” to not act blindly and to exert self-discipline by “not playing the game” of obeying the majority. Is this not true in 2019? The first post-war triennial on the North American side of the Atlantic in Toronto in 1947.

Set firmly into place at the end of the war was a system of help for refugees. The Relief Committee of IFUW reported at the Toronto conference the chief needs of university women along with requests for assistance: replacement of lost books and scientific equipment; opportunities for refresher courses after 6 years of isolation along with awards and bursaries for Study Grants; rest and recuperation as a restorative to health; and gift parcels of food and clothing.

By 1950, true to its guiding principle of liaising with other international organizations, IFUW had become a consulting member of the newly formed Economic and Social Council of the United Nations in New York and Geneva, and the Paris headquarters of UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. In addition, it had representatives attached to the Temporary International Council for Educational Reconstruction under UNESCO and to the International Refugee Organization. Of longer standing was its membership in the Liaison Committee of Women’s International Organizations, a clearing house for matters of special interest to women at the United Nations.

While IFUW did not emerge from WW 2 unscathed, it did emerge united with a stronger mission and purpose than ever. The 1950 Conference in Switzerland had the Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948 as a thematic topic. In an article in *The IFUW News Letter* in 1952, the IFUW Consultant to ECOSOC, Janet Robb, stated that “it is the support and interest of the NFAs alone that will enable IFUW to function in the UN relationship and the briefing of delegates by their own constituencies which will bear fruit in international legislation. The acceptance or rejection of legislation is national in scope and therefor dependent on the NFAs to accomplish.”



By 1966, IFUW was represented at not only UNESCO and ECOSOC but also the Commissions on the Status of Women, Human Rights, the Population and Social Commissions as well as the Sub-Commissions on Prevention and Discrimination and Protection of Minorities and the International Labour Organization. IFUW viewed its relationship with the United Nations as not just acquiring knowledge about UN activities but also serving as an international research organization.

As we move forward through the 21st century, the solidarity and sisterhood inherent in IFUW has evolved from the original purpose of “ *promoting understanding and friendship between the university women of the nations of the world*” to the inclusion of all graduate women and the mission has expanded to the current vision of **100% of girls and women in the world achieving education beyond primary school.**

Today, GWI describes itself as a 21st Century Organization that distinguishes itself from other “women’s organisations” by combining its passion for women’s and girl’s education with a clear-eyed, familiar understanding of: integrated economics, global decision-makers, NFAs and their countries; Advocacy mechanisms; advocacy implementation; legislation; SDG 4; the UN and its agencies; Young Professionals and Students; Networking and Information.

In 2019, the world is a vastly different place that it was in 1919 but sadly, the issues of human rights, women’s rights and equality are not.

GWI President Geeta Desai delivered a speech in 2018 entitled “Where to Next? Future Directions for Graduate Women” where she states the following:

“Today, as violence escalates around the world and women’s rights are rolled back by governments, courts, patriarchal societies and acts of war, we acknowledge the prescient wisdom of the clarion call sounded by our Founding Mothers, all those many years ago. Now more than ever before, women, particularly graduate women must organize, create alliances across the world, become change agents to build a peaceful, just and equal society.”

The year 2020 celebrates many milestones for the women’s agenda as it pertains to Human Rights. At the Beijing Conference for Women in 1995, where IFUW



played a critical role, women's rights were finally recognized as human rights. Enthusiasm and assurances abounded with optimism about the future of those rights.

The UN and most of its member countries collaborated on the development and ratification of Conventions, Agreements and Instruments that upheld the rights of women and girls including CEDAW and the first ever Resolution to include women in the peace process. And for a while, progress seemed possible. Unfortunately, there has been a resurgence of violence against women and a growing violation of women's rights across the world, in developing and developed countries alike.

Graduate Women, now more than ever, need to embrace the responsibilities that come with education: the responsibility to think critically, the responsibility to counter ignorance with enlightenment, to lead societies in re-examining their values, attitudes and beliefs and to balance the scales of economic and social justice. Women must be willing and able to participate in **key decision-making positions locally, regionally, nationally and globally and in all sectors: government, academic and all levels of civil society including the private sector.**

Decision-making is not gender-neutral but based on the life experiences of the person making the decision. While men usually see negotiations and decision-making as a zero-sum game, women take into consideration what is good for their countries, communities and families.

If our challenges seem great, our faith in ourselves must be greater. We need to **commit to identifying and supporting all women who have the courage to serve in decision-making positions.**

Our found mothers felt the need for women to engage in international activities in order to create better benefits for themselves and their communities. This was true in 1919, it is even more necessary in 2019 with our ever-shrinking world. We need collaborative activities and projects that recognize both inclusivity and diversity, that we all have different cultures, backgrounds and needs. Inclusivity of women who are educated and those who are not, women from urban and rural areas, and diversity of women of all ages, religions, and ethnicities, women who understand technology as well as indigenous women who are the keepers of the old traditions



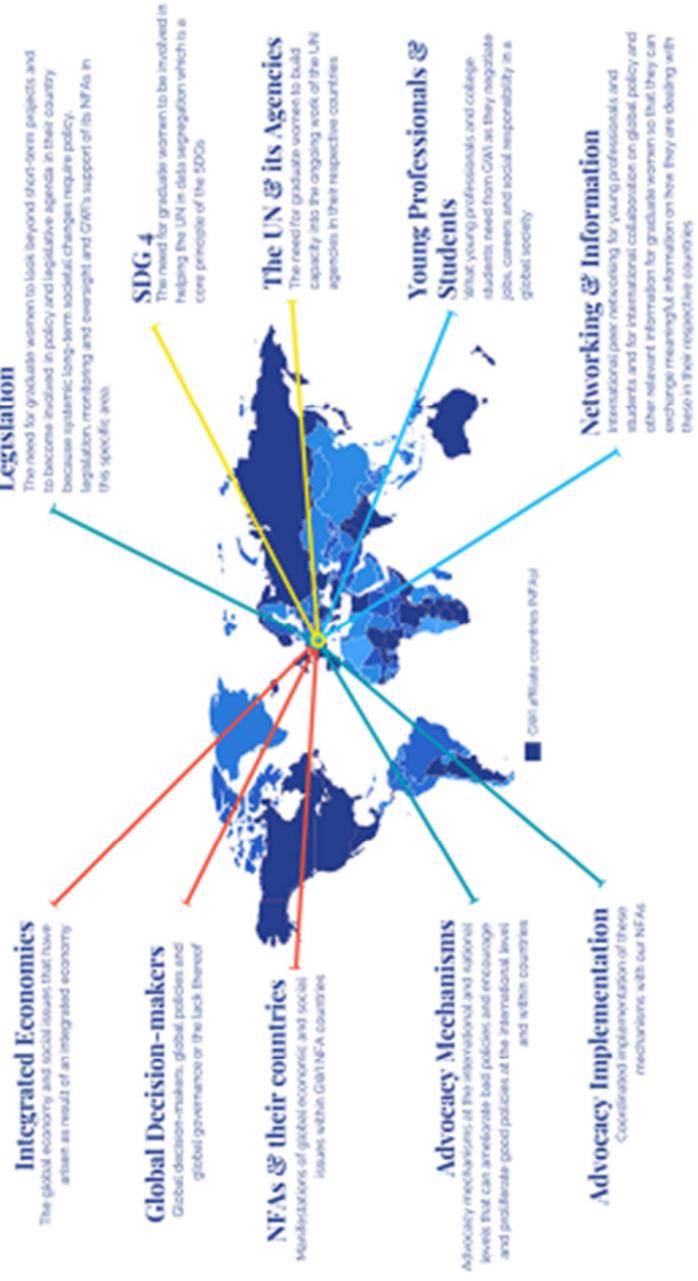
and knowledge of the land. Each of us is a valued partner and we must trust and respect each other. It takes all of us together to form an international collaborative to challenge the global decision-makers to develop thoughtful, far-sighted human development.





Graduate Women International

A 21st century organization that distinguishes itself from other "women's organizations" by combining its passion for women's and girls' education and SDG 4 with a clear-eyed, familiar understanding of:



 National & International
  Advocacy & Legislation
  United Nations
  Networking & Information

GWI 2018



Graduate Women International (GWI)

4 QUALITY EDUCATION



www.graduatwomen.org

