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Susan Zimmermann. "Equality of Women's Economic Status? A Major Bone of Contention in the International Gender Politics Emerging During the Interwar Period."
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Review by **Ingrid Sharp**, University of Leeds

International and transnational gender politics have been a major focus of historical scholarship over the last few decades, with studies on international women's organisations and the international spirit by authors such as Leila Rupp, Glenda Sluga, Annika Wilmers, Catia Confortini and many others.¹ The League of Nations has been less prominent, with only a few scholars focussing on the gender dimensions of the organisation and the new opportunities it offered for women's intervention in international politics. Susan Zimmermann's work stands out within the current scholarly landscape for her ability and willingness to look at the question of women's rights within both socialist and non-socialist organisations rather than observing the strict division of their struggle with 'bourgeois' feminism that was claimed by the socialist women from the nineteenth century onwards. The First World War did much to blur these distinctions, especially between the radical anti-war groups that emerged from both the Socialist Women's international led by Clara Zetkin, German theorist and editor of the international socialist women's journal, *Die Gleichheit*, and the liberal International Women's Suffrage Alliance (IWSA). International groups of women from belligerent and neutral countries met during the war without the sanction or approval of their organisations and rallied around their opposition to war based on a shared analysis that women as mothers and builders of home and community were uniquely affected by war, and a shared appeal to women across enemy lines as mothers and homemakers as well as socialists and nationalists.

There were five international meetings across enemy lines between 1914 and 1919. Liberal antiwar feminists met in 1915 at The Hague and again in Zurich in May 1919, and internationalist socialist women at Bern in

¹ Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women. The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Annika Wilmers, *Pazifismus in der internationalen Frauenbewegung (1914–1920): Handlungsspielräume, politische Konzeptionen und gesellschaftliche Auseinandersetzungen* (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2008); Catia Cecilia Confortini, *Intelligent Compassion Feminist Critical Methodology in the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

1915, Stockholm in 1917 and in Bern again in February 1919. In particular, middle class women from defeated nations such as Germany and Austria-Hungary who had suffered from the allied food blockade during the war as well as experiencing at first hand the industrial strikes and street protests that presaged the revolutionary uprising at the end of the war had often worked closely with socialist women and had as a result moved closer to the socialist analysis. This was notably the case with the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), which had been formed at The Hague in 1915 and consolidated in Zurich in 1919 as an organisation committed to feminist opposition to war. There was overlap of membership, too, with some women attending both socialist and WILPF meetings in 1919, and their experience of working together made them more aware of socialist thinking on equality, private property, and class consciousness as well as the issues facing working class women. This was reflected in WILPF's Zurich resolutions, which recognised that sustainable peace was only possible in a transparent democracy based on principles of social and economic justice as well as equality between men and women. Sympathy for the revolutionary workers was clearly expressed in a resolution recognising "that there is a fundamentally just demand underlying most of these revolutionary movements. We declare our sympathy with the purpose of the workers who are rising up everywhere to make an end of exploitation and to change their world." However, a proposed addition to this amendment, exhorting "the possessing classes voluntarily to give up their special privileges and to consent to the reorganisation of industry on a democratic basis" was firmly rejected.² This interaction illustrates the split between the more revolutionary members from Eastern and Central Europe and the women from neutral and allied nations, who tended to adhere to principles of liberal feminism and seek equality with men within the existing economic and political systems. It also underlines Zetkin's position that cooperation with liberal feminists could only work up to a certain point, after which class interests would always prevail. It is also important to note that this overlap was only possible between outliers within both movements and that it did not characterise the position of either the International Council of Women (ICW) or the IWSA, although the latter did adopt a broader approach to democracy and a greater commitment to international solidarity in the post-war world. There remained a fundamental tension between socialist women's class-based interests and the gender-based interests of the liberal feminist internationalists that was difficult to reconcile.

Zimmermann's article concerns the legacies of this tension as they played out within the League of Nations and the International Labour Organization (ILO) from the late 1920s through the 1930s and in successor organisations after 1945. She seeks to show that the question of women's rights cannot be fully understood without a consideration of both the League of Nations and the ILO; that the unresolved issues on women as workers that dominated discussions in the nineteenth century labour movement remained unresolved in the twentieth century, and the split between the ILO and the League simply masked ongoing and fundamental tensions between liberal and socialist feminisms; and that the principles of liberal feminist internationalism gained ascendancy during this period within the League to the ongoing detriment of progressive class policies within dominant international organisations (the League from 1920 and the United Nations (UN) and European Union (EU) post 1945) through to the late twentieth century. Importantly, the article brings together scholarship from areas that are often considered in isolation, in order to show the interconnections between the ILO and the League within the context of women's international activism between the wars, and to make clear how these developments fed into gender and class politics after 1945.

² Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, *Report of the International Congress of Women, Zurich May 12-17, 1919* (Geneva: Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 1919), 259.

The article looks at three time periods, the late 1920s to 1932, 1933 to 1935, and 1935 to 1938 and beyond. During the first period, the author identifies the fundamentally different policy visions that determined strategies on protection for women workers and labour laws. One position prioritised class over gender exploitation, identifying the specific gender exploitation of working class women and accepting protections for women workers. This position could entail a pragmatic recognition of the need to protect women workers as mothers and wives within the current existing conditions, while campaigning to make these special regulations unnecessary through the abolition of class exploitation. Another position identified protection for women workers as incompatible with gender equality and as tending to weaken women's employment while doing nothing to improve workers' conditions as whole. Zimmermann identifies the strategies employed by key organisations such as the Open Door International, which sought unconditional legal equality for male and female workers, even at the cost of lowering standards across the board, and a second group, including the International Labour Office, which sought to achieve higher standards of labour protection by preserving the current protection of women workers, but extending these to men. She is keen to contest the idea that there were just two starkly opposing positions that ranged class against gender justice and to show the interconnections and interactions between gender and class concerns that responded to the shifts in the international context as the 1930s progressed.

In 1919, various forms of 'women's charters' were being formulated and put forward in an attempt to articulate universal standards for women's rights and to enshrine these in the new international organisations as a condition of membership. None of these proposals were adopted at that time, but the prospect of an overarching convention on women's rights was not abandoned and remained a feature of women's lobbying throughout the 1920s and 1930s. During the second period under consideration in the article, the attempt to articulate universal standards for women's rights and establish a League of Nations convention on the status of women was revived as an international feminist goal, which threatened the status of labour laws protecting women workers. It was this initiative that led to a clear separation of jurisdiction between the League and the ILO in 1935: the former would be responsible for articulating international standards of gender equality in political and civic matters while allowing the ILO to determine the approach in the economic sphere. In 1937, the ILO also articulated a set of principles concerning women's economic status that took account of broader developments in the political and civic spheres.

The uneasy separation of economic from political and civic spheres failed to resolve the underlying tension between gender equality and the protection for women workers, while it also showed clearly that gender equality was compatible with the most egregious forms of class exploitation. The effect of the split was to enshrine different and conflicting international models of gender justice in the League of Nations and the ILO based broadly on the long-standing divisions between liberal feminists and socialist women's groups. This paved the way for differential treatment between these areas after 1945, with a liberal-feminist paradigm dominating international gender politics within the UN, challenging the legitimacy of the ILO's defence of women-only labour protections within a context of developing conceptions of human rights.

This densely argued and scrupulously-evidenced article makes a major contribution to our understanding of a complex period. Aimed at the specialist reader, it is generally both accessible and convincing, although clearer signposting would be welcome in places. It makes a significant contribution to scholarship and fills an important gap in our knowledge, not least because it shows clearly how tensions between the concerns of socialist and liberal feminist women's groups carried through from the nineteenth century right through to the late twentieth century. It also demonstrates that these tensions were masked by the apparent split between the League of Nations' responsibility for women's political and civic rights and the ILO's economic remit,

which prevented the issue of female workers' protection from becoming a major sticking point in the renegotiation of women's rights within the international organisations. Zimmermann also demonstrates that the equal rights agenda furthered by liberal feminists did not address the structural, class-based inequalities that were central to socialist thinking on the woman question, and that the effective relegation of class politics to the economic sphere allowed them to be cast as an increasingly marginalised exception to mainstream gender politics within the League and its successor organisations.

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