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Anne Cova, Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon,

"Writing a Comparative and Transnational Women's History in Southern Europe (1901-1939)"

The majority of European women's movements were formed between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century and peaked on the eve of the First World War, a period that is considered the belle époque of feminisms[1].Indeed, both the National Council of French Women (*Conseil national des femmes françaises,* CNFF), founded in Paris in 1901, and the National Council of Italian Women (*Consiglio nazionale delle donne italiane*, CNDI), established in Rome in 1903, reached their zenith prior to the outbreak of the First World War, while the National Council of Portuguese Women (*Conselho nacional das mulheres portuguesas*, CNMP), established in Lisbon in 1914, peaked during the 1920s – before the military coup of 1926.Regarding the National Council of Greek Women (*Conseil nacional des femmes hellènes,* CNFH) founded in Athens in 1908, my research is still as an early stage and will benefit from the work of various colleagues.[2]

For the four councils, the Great War produced a rupture during which priority was given to supporting the sacred unions – a time when patriotism and nationalism were exacerbated and the feminists asked women to place their demands to one side and serve their countries. The interwar period was characterised by the rise of dictatorships, which make comparisons between Fascism in Italy (1922-1943), Salazarism in Portugal (1933-1974) and Metaxasism in Greece (1936-1941) particularly relevant. The National Council

[1] This paper is part of a larger current research project at the ICS-ULisboa on the National Councils of Women in Southern Europe and Latin America (1900-1945) and is based mainly on the following contribution: Anne Cova, "The national councils of women in France, Italy and Portugal. Comparisons and entanglements 1888–1939," in Oliver Janz and Daniel Schönpflug (eds.), *Gender History in a Transnational Perspective: Biographies, Networks, Gender Orders*, Oxford and New York 2014, 46-76.

[2] I would like to thank very much Efi Avdela and Angelika Psarra for the informations they have provided me. At the Forms of Public Sociality conference, the discussions with various colleagues and especially Pothiti Hantzaroula and Eleni Fournaraki were fruitful.

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of French Women was– during the period under study which ended with the outbreak of the Second World War– under the political regime of the Third Republic.

Studying women's associations is a way of making women's activities visible at a time when all women did not have the right to vote as it occurred late in Southern Europe: 1944 (France), 1945 (Italy), 1952 (Greece) and 1974 (Portugal). Furthermore, the councils could play the role of mediator between civil society and the state. The women's initiation into associative life is written in the history of democracy's apprenticeships. These women's councils were federations and their main aim was to federate the largest number of women's associations in each country, a policy that resulted in a wider range of groups adhering. While the councils declared themselves to be feminist, the affiliated groups were not necessarily so. The councils emerged under the impulse of the International Council of Women (ICW), which was founded in Washington in 1888 'to stimulate the sentiment of internationalism among women throughout the world', as an attempt to build a collective women's identity.[3] The growth of the ICW – a non-governmental association – was significant, but it took many years for it to spread to other countries: in fact, twenty-six years were to pass before the CNMP was formed, twenty years for the CNFH, it took fifteen years for the CNDI to be formed, while thirteen years went by before the CNFF was established. The earliest European ICW affiliates were all from the north, and it was not until the twentieth century that the southern European countries – with the exception of Spain where a council was established later– had formed their councils. Each council had an inclusive programme that was able to maximise their memberships. Their main objective was to unite all women's associations. Faithful to the ICW's protestant Anglo-Saxon tradition, philanthropic societies were welcome to affiliate themselves to the women's councils. As a consequence, at their beginning the majority of the associations affiliated to the councils had their roots in philanthropy.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the significance of studying the networks of personal relationships that led to the formation of the national councils of women. Having

[3] « Notice sur le Conseil International des femmes fondé à Washington (États-Unis d'Amérique) le 31 mai 1888 », *L'Action Féminine. Bulletin Officiel du Conseil national des femmes françaises* 6 (1909) : 90. On the ICW, see Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement*, Princeton 1997; Eliane Gubin and Leen Van Molle (eds), *Des femmes qui changent le monde. Histoire du Conseil International des Femmes, 1888-1988*, Brussels 2005.

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analysed the common points in the establishment and early growth of the four councils in a way that highlights the importance of adopting a comparative and transnational approach, emphasis will turn to an examination of the differences that make comparison more difficult. In doing so, the purpose is to contribute to comparative women's history as well as gender history in a transnational perspective, which in my opinion both 'move in a similar direction.'[4] The multidimensional political transfers that took place between various national councils of women offer new insights on their transnational history. The women that were at the head of the councils "can only be seen influential and significant when placed in the transnational context."[5]

Similarities

Among all women's associations, the national councils of women in France, Greece, Italy and Portugal had the longest lives; even today the French, the Greek and Italian councils as well as the ICW still exist, while the Portuguese council ended in 1947 more than three decades after its foundation. Joining the ICW meant belonging to a movement that crossed national boundaries and which gave strength and legitimacy to each council. The steps leading up to the establishment of the councils were many and it is not possible to mention all of them here.[6] It is important to refer that the foundation of the councils started as an urban phenomenon and there were all established in their capital city. The congresses of the ICW held every five years served as catalysts for the creation of the councils.[7]

The personal relationships existing between several of the leading women that explain the formation of networks that eventually led to the creation of the national

[4] Anne Cova, "The Promises of Comparative Women's History," in Anne Cova (ed.), *Comparative Women's History: New Approaches*, Boulder and New York 2006, 2. See also the updated version translated into French: *Histoire Comparée des femmes. Nouvelles approches*, Lyon 2009.

[5] Lucie Delap, *The Feminist Avant-Garde: Transatlantic Encounters of the Early Twentieth Century*, Cambridge 2007, 328.

[6] Anne Cova, "International Feminisms in Historical Comparative Perspective: France, Italy and Portugal, 1880s-1930s," *Women's History Review* 19/4 (2010): 595-612; Anne Cova, "Feminisms and Associativism: The National Councils of Women in France and Portugal, a Comparative Historical Approach, 1888-1939," *Women's History Review* 22/1 (2013): 19-30.

[7] More precisely the ICW congresses were held for the period under study in the following cities: Washington (1888), Chicago (1893), London (1899), Berlin (1904), Toronto (1909), Rome (1914), Oslo (1920), Washington (1925), Vienna (1930), Paris (1934), Dubrovnik (1936) and Edinburgh (1938).

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councils. In the case of the French council, the role played by May Wright Sewall (1844-1920), the American president of the ICW from 1899 to 1904, was crucial, while in Portugal, Ghénia Avril de Sainte-Croix (1855-1939)'s role, general secretary for the French council, was fundamental in the formation of the Portuguese council. The role of the Canadian, Sophia Sanford, was a determining factor in the genesis of the Italian council. In the Greek case, Callirhoe Parren (1859-1940) was present at the congress of the ICW held in Chicago in 1893.[8]

Another characteristic shared by the majority of the councils and the ICW was the long duration of each president's time in office. The Italian Gabriella Spalletti Rasponi (1853-1931) held the CNDI presidency for almost three decades, until her death in 1931. The same happened with the Portuguese Adelaide Cabete (1867-1935) who remained president of the CNMP for more than twenty years until she died in 1935. The French Ghénia Avril de Sainte-Croix (1855-1939) was president of the CNFF for more than ten years, from 1922 to 1932, and previously served as its general secretary. On the contrary, the Greek Eleni Griva was president only during four years: 1908-1912. These charismatic figures helped to identify the council with its leaders, in the same way that the ICW, whose president, the Scottish Marquess Ishbel of Aberdeen and Temair (1857-1939), known as Lady Aberdeen, remained its leader, almost without interruption, for more than forty years.

The ICW as well as its councils declared themselves apolitical and neutral, a principle which led to their break with those women's movements linked to the political parties and with those women's associations linked to the Catholic women's movement. While three of the four countries being examined are predominantly Catholic, comparing them with the group of councils that were affiliated to the ICW before the First World War shows that they represented less than one-third of all affiliated countries, with the majority of councils coming from Protestant countries.[9]

[8] Angelika Psarra and Eleni Fournaraki, "Parren Callirhoe (born Siganou) (1859-1940)," in Francisca de Haan, Krassimira Daskalova and Anna Loutfi (eds.), *A biographical Dictionary of women's movements and feminisms. Central, Eastern, and South Eastern Europe, 19th and 20th Centuries*, Budapest 2006, 402- 405.
[9] Gubin, Eliane and Leen Van Molle (eds), *Des femmes*.

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The councils followed a pragmatic and gradualist strategy, seeking support from politicians without concerning themselves with their political affiliation – with the goal of influencing legislation and in the knowledge that their margin for manoeuvre was limited since women did not have the right to vote. In order to achieve their claims, the councils functioned through several standing committees following the model of those that existed within the ICW. The date on which these standing committees were created tells us something about each council's priorities. The ICW's press and peace standing committees were both created in 1899, and were followed by the standing committees on white slavery (1904), education, public health and immigration (1909). The public health standing committee was led by Lady Aberdeen, who was very active in the struggle against tuberculosis. The immigration standing committee operated under the presidency of the Italian countess Maria Lisa Danieli Camozzi and concerned itself with the conditions in which future emigrants were transported. The Portuguese council's standing committee against white slavery followed the example set by the ICW's 1904 standing committee, which Ghénia Avril de Sainte-Croix led for its first thirty-two years until 1936.[10] The campaigns against prostitution and venereal disease culminated in the 1920s, when Sainte-Croix was a member of the French Committee of the Abolitionist Federation (*Comité Français de la Fédération Abolitionniste*) and its representative to the League of Nations. It is difficult to provide a brief account of the CNFF's demands, since they were concerned with a considerable number of topics. However, the constant claims were – in no particular order – the struggle against prostitution, pornography and 'depopulation,' all of which were perceived to be true 'social afflictions'. A brief review of the work carried out within the various standing committees shows that those dealing with assistance and hygiene concentrated on the struggle against tuberculosis and alcoholism, which was regarded a 'national threat,' and also looked into childcare facilities and the improvement of working-class housing.

In their ambitious programmes, the four councils demanded that, in return for fulfilling their duties, women be granted rights. The dialectic of rights and duties is

[10] Karen Offen, "Madame Ghénia Avril de Sainte-Croix, the Josephine Butler of France," *Women's History Review* 17/2 (2008): 239-55; Karen Offen, *European Feminisms, 1700-1950: A Political History*, Stanford 2000.

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apparent in almost all of their demands. The transnational component of many claims addressed by the councils should also be stressed. Without going into more detail about all of the demands in the various areas, it should be noted that the councils had a common agenda that was, according to historian Gisela Bock, based on the idea that "education, employment and civil code reform were issues everywhere at the time the organizations were being formed."[11] Indeed, education was the councils' great concern. Just to give one example the first two congresses organized in the 1920's by the CNMP (in 1924 and 1928) were labelled as feminist and education congresses.

Another matter that was considered of great importance by the councils was women's right to vote. This was the responsibility of the suffrage standing committee. The matter of female suffrage illustrates the differences of opinions between feminists, and there was a rupture within the ICW at its 1904 Berlin congress. The International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA), which was founded at this congress under the presidency of the American Carrie Chapman Catt (1859-1947 who led the National American Woman Suffrage Association), went on to develop separately from the ICW. As its name suggests, its goal was to achieve the vote for women in the many countries at that time, including the United States, in which women could neither vote nor stand for office. Although it remained a minority movement and never had as many members as the more moderate ICW, the IWSA was very active and managed to gain support from women's suffrage associations in several countries. The CNMP also assumed the representation of the IWSA, demonstrating both its desire for internationalisation and its wish to obtain the vote for women. French feminists were also represented in the IWSA through the affiliation of the French Union for Female Suffrage (*Union Française pour le Suffrage des Femmes*, UFSF), which itself was part of the CNFF.In Greece, as historian Angelika Psarra has shown the IWSA « did not initially find support (...) where demands for the franchise were still considered premature."[12] But after the Great War, some Greek

[11] Gisela Bock, *Women in European History*, Oxford 2002, 121.

[12] Angelika Psarra, "A Gift from the New World: Greek Feminists between East and West (1880-1930)," in Anna Frangoudaki and Caglar Keyder (eds), *Ways to Modernity in Greece and Turkey: Encounters with Europe, 1850*-1950, London 2007, 150-75.

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feminists get in touch with the IWSA and it contributed to the creation of the League for the Rights of Greek Women which was part of the IWSA.[13]

Relations between the ICW and the IWSA were tense, and ranged between cooperation and rivalry. Some unsuccessful attempts were made to merge the organisations, particularly during the interwar period when the extent of the collaboration between them within the League of Nations and the International Labour Organisation intensified.[14]

There were many debates within each council concerning labour, with opinions expressed both for and against legislation to protect working women. Generally speaking, the councils chose to defend a position grounded in the theory of equality in difference that favoured protection. They declared themselves in support of legislation to protect maternity and prohibit women and children from working at night.

The influence of the 1804 Napoleonic civil code, which was the source of many of the feminists' complaints, was not restricted to France as it also inspired the Italian civil code of 1865 and its Portuguese counterpart of 1867. Its reform was a constant demand of the feminists of the councils, who denounced especially the absence of civil rights for married women and succeeded in changing some articles.

Differences

The CNFF's entire existence under study occurred during the Third Republic, while the situation in Italy, Portugal and Greece where the interwar period saw radical political change, was completely different. In Italy, the council was confronted with the rise and implementation of Fascism. The changing political situation in Portugal meant that one-third of the Portuguese council's life was spent under a republic, the first twelve years of its existence, with the remaining almost two-thirds, twenty-one years exactly, under a military dictatorship (1926-33), followed by the New State that was founded in

[13]Efi Avdela and Angelika Psarra, *Feminism in Inter-war Greece. An Anthology* [*Ο φεμινισμός στην Ελλάδα του Μεσοπολέμου. Μια ανθολογία*], Athens 1985.

[14] « Projet élaboré en commun en vue d'une Fédération entre le Conseil International des Femmes et l'Alliance Internationale pour le Suffrage des Femmes », *Conseil International des femmes. Bulletin* 9 (1923), 2-4.

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1933bySalazar. During the thirties in Greece there was the dictatorship of Metaxas (1936-1941).

In 1922, after the March on Rome, the CNDI circulated to the federations presidents a copy of a telegram it had sent to Mussolini, congratulating him. The reception was favourable, with Mussolini and Gentile being invited to attend the CNDI's third congress, which took place in Rome in May 1923, and which was dedicated to education within the family. The foundation in the 1920s of the *fasci femminili* was a watershed for the CNDI, whose initial objectives had been rendered moot. Furthermore, the election of a new vice-president, Beduschi Todaro, to replace Sandeschi Scelba, who had adopted an anti-Fascist position, demonstrated the council's willingness to please the Fascist regime. The council's president, Gabriella Spalletti Rasponi, was always careful to remind the standing committees to emphasise cultural rather than social activities in order to maintain good relations with the *fasci femminili*. Following this same line of thought, an important change was made to the CNDI's statutes in 1927, according to which the council's objective was now to bring together women in order to promote a patriotic and religious spirit.

During the economic crisis of the 1930s women were accused of taking work from men and there was a campaign to force women back into the home. The CNFF, however, defended the right of women to work outside the home, whilst simultaneously calling for state subsidies that would enable those women who wished to stay at home to do so. The 1930s in Italy was marked for the CNDI by the death in 1931 of its president, Gabriella Spalletti Rasponi. The Fascist regime took the opportunity to nominate her successor, the countess Daisy de Robilant, and it was only with the defeat of Fascism after the end of the Second World War that the council was able to choose an anti-Fascist as its president. The fact that the Italian council believed that any government could undertake reforms in favour of women was one of the reason it collaborated with the Fascist regime. However, this does not mean that it supported all of the regime's policies, and it continued to present the government with petitions.

The CNMP also presented petitions and organised protests against, the Portuguese government and parliament during the interwar years and the 1940s.During the 1940s, the

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CNMP grew considerably. In July 1945, Maria Lamas (1893-1983) was elected president and a group of young anti-Salazarist university students joined the association. However, this recrudescence of activity was soon brought to a halt and without warning the CNMP's offices in Lisbon were closed by the police on 28 June 1947. The government justified the closure by saying that its objective was 'completely vague', and that state organisations already existed 'which had as their objective the protection of mothers and children'. The CNMP 'competed' with these state organisations and that was the pretext used for its closure. However, the real reason for the CNMP's abolition was the new political situation that existed after the war: the defeat of Fascism in Europe and the emergence of stronger legal and clandestine opposition to the New State.

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A comparative historical approach towards these four feminist federations highlights the American matrix in their origins, their cosmopolitan transnational component and their longevity, which secured the affiliation of the majority of women's groups in each country. The social backgrounds of this transnational women's elite secured their groups' contacts to the political sphere. In the beginning, the councils managed to bring together many philanthropic and women's associations. But not all women's associations wanted to affiliate with the councils, as some viewed the councils' reformist strategy as too reserved. The question of women's suffrage, for example, which was not only important for the councils as a goal in itself but also as a means of obtaining other reforms, led to a rupture within the ICW and the establishment of the IWSA, an organisation devoted exclusively to securing for women the right to vote. In so doing, the ICW and its councils refused to focus exclusively on female suffrage and insisted on a broader programme. The links that existed between many of the leaders explains the establishment of networks that were a prelude to the creation of the councils. The women who led the councils were charismatic and came from the upper-middle class and, at times, from the aristocracy (the Italian case is paradigmatic). With regard to the French council, the founding leaders were whether Protestants or Jews, and in Portugal they were republicans and Freemasons. They spoke several languages, travelled, and financed the councils. The leaders belonged to an

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elite that had the financial means and the time to dedicate to the councils. What the councils had in common was that the majority of their leaders came from the urban elite, and French was the language of communication between them. The federations employed all the measures at their disposal to pursue their goals: congresses, conferences, surveys, petitions, brochures, demonstrations and press campaigns – all of which highlight the doctrinaire nature of their programmes. They shared common objectives and acted in similar fashions, following the strategy of reformist feminism, which attests to their pragmatism and their desire to obtain reforms through a strategy designed to maintain their apolitical and neutral nature.ICW affiliation was important because the national councils were able to demonstrate their membership in an international movement, giving them strength and recognition. The councils worked through several standing committees, corresponding with those from the ICW. Education was one of the councils' fundamental demands. The legal position of women was also a central concern, and the councils actively engaged in debates on laws affecting women. In order to place this study in a larger perspective, it is worth to refer that the National Council of German Women, which affiliated to the ICW at the end of the nineteenth century, ceased its activities in 1933, shortly after Hitler's rise to power. This illustrates the importance of referring to the context of each country independently of the general lines that were common to the councils. Far from exhausting this theme, this contribution illustrates the richness of the issue and aims to open further research into the comparative history of women's associations during the twentieth century.