

# The transnational factor: The beginnings of South Africa's women's movement

Monica Gameiro Fernandes  
*Brunel University London*  
monica.fernandes@brunel.ac.uk

## *Abstract*

The South African women's movement had its origins in the Cape, but it also had a strong transnational relationship with countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States. The earliest formally created women's organisation in the country, the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), established in 1889, focused on forging a pure society that was liberated from the so-called constraints and perils of liquor. By 1892, the WCTU had formed a franchise department in response to the absence of female enfranchisement in the Cape, therefore promoting women's national and international suffrage. The WCTU encouraged the establishment of other women's organisations such as the Women's Enfranchisement League (WEL) in 1907, which was solely dedicated to the promotion and creation of women's suffrage. This article aims to understand the international links of the WCTU and WEL as the first two women's organisations in the Cape Colony. It does so through the framework of transnationalism and also considers the transnational influence on further developments in South Africa's women's movement during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

**Keywords:** Transnationalism; Women's Movement; Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU); Women's Enfranchisement League (WEL); Women's Enfranchisement Association of the Union (WEAU); Olive Schreiner; Julia Solly; Enfranchisement.

## **Introduction**

The history of the early South African women's movement has received limited attention. Gender has not been explored extensively in South African history between the 1880s and the 1930s; other themes such as race and class have been analysed in more depth. However, this does not imply that there was not a women's movement at the time, or that the women's movement existed in isolation. The Cape Colony in particular has a history of being a "port" through which international influences flowed, with the first Europeans

settling there in 1652. Since the seventeenth century, the Cape Colony has been associated with and linked to a wider international community, which by the late nineteenth century played a pivotal role in the establishment and emergence of the South African women's movement.

Naturally, these international links were an opportunity for new concepts, ideas and approaches to defy boundaries and enter new spaces. The South African women's movement initially materialised as a result of reformist approaches which linked women's rights to societal matters such as religion, abolition and education.<sup>1</sup> The rationale of this approach was that women's rights and other socio-political issues would have a greater probability of being addressed by society if they were related to broader issues that affected the wider community.

This article adopts a transnational perspective as a theoretical framework for its method of analysis. The transnational here refers to an international component that goes beyond borders. While historians such as Ian Fletcher make a distinction between the international and the transnational, these terms will be used interchangeably in this paper, with a specific focus on defying physical borders. The significance of this approach is that it helps to place the South African women's movement in the wider international context of women's organisations and the international suffrage movement. Additionally, the transnational perspective is paramount for demonstrating the planning and networking of South African women in the pursuit of their organisational aims. It is through this networking that women's organisations created a collaborative approach and ultimately influenced each other structurally and ideologically.

However, it was not just the international element of the Cape that was important for the emergence of the South African women's movement. The Cape's politico-legal status was fundamental in initiating and motivating the establishment of a women's organisation focused on enfranchisement. The Cape was the only region of South Africa that legally allowed qualified black<sup>2</sup> men to vote, depending on the value of the property they owned and their level of education, emphasising a class system beyond simple racial division. This forms part of the "rhetoric of women's suffrage in South Africa" in which class and race played a fundamental role in creating the South African suffrage

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1 C Walker, *The women's suffrage movement in South Africa* (South Africa, University of Cape Town, 1979), p. 4.

2 During the nineteenth century, the term "black" was used to refer to African and Coloured individuals.

movement.<sup>3</sup> Because qualified black men had the right to vote, white women in the Cape were therefore being discriminated against due to their gender, not their race. This was an important contextual influence that shaped the Cape's women's movement, its approach to South African politics and the overall aims of its individual organisations.

There are several historians who have written about the WCTU and WEL, but Gaitskell's work, "The imperial tie: Obstacle to asset for South Africa's women suffragists before 1930?" in particular has been an invaluable source for understanding the early women's movement. Gaitskell argues that the South African women's suffrage movement had a strong link to the UK due to imperialism, and that the WEAU was active in attracting a diverse audience of women (including Afrikaans and black women) in South Africa. My paper will specifically discuss the WCTU and WEL, the two earliest women's organisations in the Cape, their international connections and the importance of these international links in establishing the women's movement in South Africa. Specific individuals within the WCTU and WEL who further encouraged the transnational nature of these organisations, including Olive Schreiner, Julia Solly, Emily Mackintosh and Georgianna and Emily Solomon, will be discussed. The article argues that the transnational element of the earlier South African women's movement was crucial in setting the foundations and momentum for the emergence of a women's movement that would continue into the twentieth century.

### **The international suffrage women's movement**

The transnational perspective of global history has not been written about widely, but there are several historians who have used this approach as a method for understanding the impact of transnationalism on historical events, social movements and political developments. Historians such as Fletcher argue that there is a distinction between internationalism and transnationalism. Fletcher argues that internationalism relates to the formal relations between sovereign states, whereas transnationalism is related to the self-determination of "nation states" within an imperial setting.<sup>4</sup> Gaitskell's work fits within Fletcher's

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3 P Scully, "White maternity and black infancy: The rhetoric of race on the South African women's suffrage movement 1895-1930", I Fletcher, L Mayhall et al., *Women's suffrage in the British empire* (London, Routledge, 2000), pp. 68-83.

4 I Fletcher, L Mayhall et al., *Women's suffrage in the British empire* (London, Routledge, 2000), p. xvii.

definition of transnationalism, which analyses South Africa's link to the UK. Like Fletcher and Gaitskell, my work challenges the suffrage discourse by using transnationalism as a tool for going beyond a social understanding of gender, and linking it to a wider political identity related to race, enfranchisement, nationalism and, later on, apartheid.

In the nineteenth century, the USA and UK played a prominent role in and were at the forefront of the suffrage movement.<sup>5</sup> These countries also responded to specific international events such as the Anglo-Boer War, which divided them: the USA supported the Afrikaans population, while the UK supported their troops.<sup>6</sup> International perspectives on events such as the Anglo-Boer War encouraged networking around reforms, and as a result, close ties between organisations such as the International Women's Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) and specific individuals such as Olive Schreiner and Julia Solly were formed.<sup>7</sup>

These close ties resulted in increased interaction between international organisations, creating a collective identity that was further embodied in the first wave of international feminism.<sup>8</sup> It was this networking that encouraged South African women to consider the different approaches of both the UK and the USA towards reforms related to race and class.<sup>9</sup>

The transnational element of the Cape Colony's women's movement emerged in the context of women internationally starting to question their role in society and creating their own organisations for analysing and responding to these questions. International connections emerged in 1840 with the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London, where female delegates were forced to sit separately from their male counterparts. This gender segregation led to the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, the first recorded women's right's convention and the start of the American women's movement.<sup>10</sup> In 1883, approximately 40 years after the Seneca Falls Convention in the USA, Olive Schreiner, a South African author based in the Eastern Cape, wrote her first novel, *The*

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5 S Shaver Hughes & B Hughes, *Women in world history: Volume 2 – Readings from 1500 to the present* (New York, Routledge, 1997), p. 3.

6 C Bolt, *Sisterhood questioned: Race, class and internationalism in the American and British women's movement c. 1880s-1970s* (London, Routledge, 2004), p. 21.

7 C Bolt, *Sisterhood questioned...*, p. 7.

8 L Rupp, *Worlds of women: The making of an international women's movement* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 14.

9 D Gaitskell, "The imperial tie: Obstacle or asset for South Africa's women suffragists before 1930?", *South African Historical Journal*, 47(1), October 2002, p. 3.

10 L Rupp, *Worlds of women...*, p. 14.

*Story of an African Farm*. This novel questioned women's rights in a diverse environment where gender, race and class were socially divisive. *The Story of an African Farm* was the first publication in South Africa that openly questioned women's roles in the country and, as a result, Schreiner has been described as the "protagonist for the Women's Movement" in South Africa in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>11</sup>

Within five years of publishing *The Story of an African Farm*, the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) was created in the Cape. The WCTU was reformist in nature: female suffrage and other rights linked to religion and education were not ignored, but rather would be part of the wider, shared issues addressed by society. This approach was common in the USA, where the WCTU originated. In order to understand the message of Schreiner's novel and the motivation for the establishment of the women's organisation, the South African context needs to be further analysed. By the 1880s, there were political and economic tensions in South Africa. The country was divided into two Boer republics (the Transvaal and the Orange Free State) and two British colonies (the Cape and Natal). Economically, there was extensive migration to the Transvaal following the gold rush from 1886 onwards, which encouraged an open dialogue between the Cape and the Transvaal. Politically, there were heightened tensions between the British and the Boer republics, which was further epitomised by the Jameson Raid of 1895. While the black community were caught up within these tensions, qualified black men had the right to vote in the Cape Colony from 1853. By 1892, however, the Franchise and Ballot Act further restricted suffrage for qualified black men by increasing the property qualifications for from £25 to £75.<sup>12</sup> It is estimated that by 1910, 15% of the black population could vote, while white women were still fighting for their right for enfranchisement. This signifies that, while there was racial division in the Cape Colony, enfranchisement was based on gender and class rather than on race.<sup>13</sup>

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11 H Joseph, "South Africa's greatest daughter", *Liberation: A Journal of Democratic Discussion*, 11, 1955, p. 14.

12 R Davenport & C Saunders, *South Africa: A modern history* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 1991), p. 112.

13 D Gaitskell, "The imperial tie...", *South African Historical Journal*, 47(1), October 2002, p. 3.

## **The Women's Christian Temperance Union**

It was in this complex setting that South Africa's first women's organisation, the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), was established in 1889.<sup>14</sup> It was the "first organised Women's Society" in the Cape Colony and the rest of what would become the Union of South Africa, and was the result of the international tour of an American WCTU member, Mary Leavitt.<sup>15</sup> These suffrage world tours were common in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and were used to raise awareness of the international women's suffrage movement in Commonwealth and developing countries, and as a way to raise funds and network with other women leaders.<sup>16</sup>

Initially created in New York in 1874, the aim of the WCTU was to create a pure society, in particular through its advocacy against liquor.<sup>17</sup> Liquor was not the only concern of the WCTU, which developed its own perspective of women's enfranchisement and responded by creating the WCTU's franchise department in the Cape in 1892. Nationally, the WCTU's protests were mainly based on writing petitions and handing them to senior members of society in the hope that their concerns would be addressed. The WCTU's first petition was submitted in 1892.<sup>18</sup> It challenged the consent drinking age and resulted in the age being raised from 10 years in 1892 to 16 years in 1916.<sup>19</sup> This was an unsurprising topic for the WCTU's first petition as the organisation was concerned with preserving the purity of society and advocated against alcohol, calling for its limited use.<sup>20</sup> This form of protest seemed to be an organisational characteristic and would continue to be used by women's organisations into the mid-twentieth century.

While race was a dominant theme in South African society in 1889, the WCTU was progressive in its attitude towards race: the organisation supported all South African women having the right to vote, regardless of their race.

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14 UCT Manuscripts and Archives, Cape Town, Reference: BAP 178.06; Pamphlet, "Women's Christian Temperance Union, Cape Province: Golden Jubilee 1889-1939", 1939, p. 1.

15 UCT Manuscripts and Archives, Cape Town, Reference: BC 597, Article, "South African Outlook", 1 May 1939, p. 116.

16 E van Heyningen and P Merrett, "'The healing touch': The guild of loyal women of South Africa 1900-1912", *South African Historical Journal*, 47(1), October 2002, p. 33.

17 UCT Manuscripts and Archives, Cape Town, Reference: BAP 178.06 WOM; Pamphlet, "Women's Christian Temperance Union, Cape Province: Golden Jubilee 1889-1939", 1939, p. 2.

18 UCT Manuscripts and Archives, Cape Town, Reference: BAP 178.06 WOM; Pamphlet, "Women's Christian Temperance Union, Cape Province: Golden Jubilee 1889-1939", 1939, p. 1.

19 UCT Manuscripts and Archives, Cape Town, Reference: BA 178.SOL; Speech, Emilie Solomon (WCTU leader) Opening Address: 46<sup>th</sup> Convention of the Cape Province of the WCTU, Port Elizabeth. October 1935.

20 J Carson, *Emilie Solomon, 1858-1939* (Juta and Co, Johannesburg, 1941), p. 54.

One of its prominent leaders, Emilie Solomon, stated after white women were granted the vote in 1930:<sup>21</sup>

We had always worked for this reform in the hope it would be granted to women without the distinction of race or colour, and a great deal of the joy of victory was taken away by the way in which the vote was given.

In noting the “way in which the vote was given”, Solomon was referring to the 1930 Women’s Enfranchisement Bill, which enfranchised only white women. This Bill racialised women’s rights: women’s enfranchisement was determined by colour rather than gender. By 1930, Solomon refused to use her vote as she felt it was being “compromised”<sup>22</sup> since the vote was not representative of all South African women and did not achieve universal suffrage. Racial politics dictated the development of suffrage in South Africa.

It is unclear whether the WCTU was multiracial in its representation, but there is evidence that the organisation was working with coloured and African women in the Cape who “were interested in their Union”.<sup>23</sup> By 1911 the WCTU had helped to establish the Coloured and Native Union in the Cape,<sup>24</sup> increasing its audience from the “exclusively white, upper class women in towns”<sup>25</sup> to a more inclusive cohort. This signifies that the WCTU was interested in a collaborative approach based on educating coloured and African women and possibly advising them on how best to organise and represent themselves regarding the specific issues they experience. In this sense, the WCTU was guiding and encouraging a collective movement, empowering black and coloured women to confront and address social and political matters. Similarly the WCTU itself was used as a model on which the new union could base its own structure.

The relationship with the Coloured and Native Union was documented in detail in the WCTU’s periodical, *The White Ribbon*,<sup>26</sup> in which the WCTU described itself as extending “the right hand of fellowship”,<sup>27</sup> indicating its

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21 UCT Manuscripts and Archives, Cape Town, Reference: BA 178.SOL; Speech, Emilie Solomon (WCTU leader) Opening Address: 46<sup>th</sup> Convention of the Cape Province of the WCTU, Port Elizabeth, October 1935.

22 C Walker, *Women and gender in Southern Africa to 1945* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1990), p. 335.

23 UCT Manuscripts and Archives, Cape Town, Reference: BAP 178.06 WOM; Pamphlet, “Women’s Christian Temperance Union, Cape Province: Golden Jubilee 1889-1939”, 1939, p. 3

24 UCT Manuscripts and Archives, Cape Town, Reference: BAP 178 WHIT; Pamphlet, *The White Ribbon*, December 1989, 72.

25 C Walker, *Women and Resistance in South Africa* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1992), p.10.

26 UCT Manuscripts and Archives, Cape Town, Reference: BAP 178 WHIT; Pamphlet, *The White Ribbon*, December 1989, p. 70.

27 UCT Manuscripts and Archives, Cape Town, Reference: BAP 178 WHIT; Pamphlet, *The White Ribbon*, December 1989, p. 72.

willingness to help with the establishment and development of other women's organisations. The WCTU extended networking opportunities to the Coloured and Native Union by inviting it to the WCTU's world convention in London in 1920. These networking opportunities established a dialogue with the wider international community and the Cape. By collaborating with other women's organisations such as the Coloured and Native Union, the WCTU created a multiracial community of women fighting for social purity and suffrage.

Through *The White Ribbon*, local unions' details, such as where they originated, were recorded. Specific areas and towns that had set up unions included Stellenbosch, Cape Town, Paarl and Wynberg,<sup>28</sup> indicating that the movement was widespread in Cape Colony and, more importantly, that there was demand from these communities for the establishment of such unions.

The WCTU was an important organisation in South Africa because it was a model for future women's organisations and educated and encouraged a new generation of women who would later politically and socially define women's roles in the country. The WCTU was aware of its influence, describing itself as "the pioneer society in starting to work for Women's Suffrage"<sup>29</sup> through the creation of its franchise department. As a result of "our work", the Women's Enfranchisement League (WEL) in the Cape was formed in 1907.<sup>30</sup> The WCTU took responsibility for the creation of the political women's movement in South Africa, and as a result helped to create the Cape branch of the WEL. This influence was also recognised by WEL, which affirmed in its periodical, *Flashlight*, that "suffrage had been affiliated to the Cape province WEL through WCTU".<sup>31</sup> This indicates the extent to which the WEL based its structure and other organisational details on the example of the WCTU in order to learn strategies for approaching and protesting such issues as suffrage and women's rights.

The WCTU was fundamental in influencing and creating the female leaders who would shape the women's movement in South Africa. Emily Macintosh, a former WCTU member, became the first president of the

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28 UCT Manuscripts and Archives, Cape Town, Reference: BAP 178 WHIT; Pamphlet, *The White Ribbon*, December 1989, p. 73.

29 UCT Manuscripts and Archives, Cape Town, Reference: BAP 178.06 WOM; Pamphlet, "Women's Christian Temperance Union, Cape Province: Golden Jubilee 1889-1939", 1939, p. 2.

30 UCT Manuscripts and Archives, Cape Town, Reference: BAP 178.06 WOM; Pamphlet, "Women's Christian Temperance Union, Cape Province: Golden Jubilee 1889-1939", 1939, p. 3.

31 Wits Historical Papers, Johannesburg, Reference: A133; Pamphlet: *Flashlight*-Victory Number, 1930, p. 28.



Women's Enfranchisement Association of the Union (WEAU), an umbrella organisation that represented several suffrage societies.<sup>32</sup> Julia Solly formed and was the superintendent of the WCTU's franchise department in 1892<sup>33</sup> and held this position until the 1930s.<sup>34</sup> Due to her experience, Solly had extensive knowledge of the suffrage movement and the functioning of other women's organisations. She would later become one of the founding members of the WEL in the Cape, and of the National Women's Council of South Africa (NCWSA), which aimed to help women with their economic, social, intellectual and political development.<sup>35</sup>

Solly worked closely with WCTU leaders such as Solomon, who came from a politically liberal family and progressed through the ranks of the WCTU: she was the Cape President of the WCTU from 1911-1919, the South African national president of the WCTU from 1919-1925 and the World Vice President of the WCTU from 1925-1931.<sup>36</sup>

### **The WCTU and its transnational connections**

Solomon, Macintosh and Solly had strong ties with foreign countries. The Solomons had a strong link with the UK, the birthplace of Emilie's aunt, Georgiana Soloman. Emilie and Georgiana travelled to London often, taking part in the activities of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). Macintosh also had strong ties with the UK,<sup>37</sup> while Solly was born and raised in Liverpool. These women were English speaking, well-educated and literate, and they had the fortunate opportunity to travel and be exposed first hand to the political setting of the UK. Their travels and the individuals with whom they networked impacted their activities and attitude towards suffrage.

Having said this, the transnational influence was two fold in South Africa. On one hand, the international influence affected South African women's political roles by inspiring them to question enfranchisement, while concurrently

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32 I Tyrrell, *Woman's world, woman's empire: The woman's Christian temperance union in international perspective, 1880-1930* (USA, University of North Carolina Press, 1991), p. 223.

33 P Scully, "White maternity and black infancy...", I Fletcher, L Mayhall et al., *Women's suffrage in the British empire...*, pp. 68-83.

34 Human Sciences Research Council, *Women marching into the 21<sup>st</sup> century: Wathint' Abafazi Wathint' Imbokodo* (South Africa, HSRC Press, 2000), p. 74.

35 UCT Manuscripts and Archives, Cape Town, Reference: BC 775; Annual Report, National Council of Women in South Africa 1947-1948, p. 19.

36 I Tyrrell, *Woman's world, woman's empire...*, p. 224.

37 D Gaitskell, "The imperial tie...", *South African Historical Journal*, 47(1), October 2002, p. 8.

South African women were influencing the international context by becoming increasingly involved in international organisations. The exposure of issues in the WCTU gave members the unique opportunity to contribute to the international suffrage movement. May Sewell, a South African WCTU member and founder of the NCWSA, worked alongside Frances Willard (a founder of the World WCTU) to establish the International Council of Women's (ICW) regulations.<sup>38</sup> The ICW was the first international organisation that was concerned with women's human rights. This demonstrates that South African women were able to place the South African suffrage movement internationally and that they had an understanding of universal suffrage. It was also through these networks that South African women had the opportunity to contribute to the overall international network, which was in and of itself an important factor: South African women were empowering themselves nationally and internationally.

The WCTU encouraged members to take part in international networks. Not only was the WCTU an international organisation by nature, but also it commonly planned international tours. As the WCTU President of the Cape Colony, Emilie Solomon travelled to the UK, Canada, Italy and Switzerland.<sup>39</sup> These international tours planned by white women's groups such as the WCTU during the early twentieth century demonstrated the intricacy of the organisation, networking and mobility of the women's movement and its transnational nature. These tours also reveal that the fight for women's suffrage was a global issue that brought women from different countries together.

To further expand its international network, the World WCTU (WWCTU) was created in 1883<sup>40</sup> and established in Cape Colony in 1903.<sup>41</sup> The WWCTU was concerned with creating a stronger international network and in doing so it became a founding member of the ICW in 1893.<sup>42</sup> Having South African representation in the WWCTU further increased the exposure of South African women to the international women's movement, giving individuals such as Emilie Solomon influential and important contacts for the

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38 UCT Manuscripts and Archives, Cape Town, Reference: BAP 178.06 WOM; Pamphlet, "Women's Christian Temperance Union, Cape Province: Golden Jubilee 1889-1939", 1939, p. 3.

39 J Carson, *Emilie Solomon...*, p. 82.

40 World Women's Christian Temperance Union, "WWCTU beginnings", October 2014 (available at <http://www.wwctu.com/pages/history.html>, as accessed on 10 April 2015).

41 UCT Manuscripts and Archives, Cape Town, Reference: BAP 178 WHIT; Pamphlet, *The White Ribbon*, December 1989, p. 64.

42 World Women's Christian Temperance Union, "WWCTU beginnings", October 2014 (available at <http://www.wwctu.com/pages/history.html>, as accessed on 10 April 2015). The WWCTU was also made a charter member of the United Nations Non-Governmental Organisations in 1945.

further development of the South African women's movement. News from the international networks and tours was published in *The White Ribbon* as a way of informing its members to the national and international situation regarding the organisation's aims and women's suffrage overall.

### **The Women's Enfranchisement League (WEL)**

While the WCTU was the first women's organisation established in South Africa, it was not solely focused on enfranchisement. The Women's Enfranchisement League (WEL), established in 1902 in Natal Colony, spread throughout the country; its most popular branch was created in Cape Colony in 1907 by 40 WCTU members in Cape Town<sup>43</sup> "to promote an intelligent interest in the question of Political Enfranchisement of Women in Cape Colony and to advocate the granting of the Vote of Women on the same terms of men".<sup>44</sup> This was the first organisation that was primarily focused on women's enfranchisement in South Africa and it wanted to create an open dialogue in which the challenges and issues related to enfranchisement were discussed and acted upon.

The organisation was largely comprised of white, middle to upper class women, who were well read and aware of the international suffrage movement. This knowledge was demonstrated in *Women's Enfranchisement League: Our Claim for Enfranchisement*, WEL's 1912 publication, which made detailed reference to women's plight in Australia and New Zealand.<sup>45</sup> These countries were important to WEL because they were the first two countries in the world to enfranchise women nationally, but also because they had a similar relationship with the United Kingdom to South Africa. The publication of this information contributed to the understanding of the international status of women's enfranchisement and allowed it to be used as leverage to promote the further development of suffrage in South Africa.<sup>46</sup>

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43 UCT Manuscripts and Archives, Cape Town, Reference: BC 597, Article: *South African Outlook*, 1 May 1939, p. 117.

44 LSE Women's Library, Reference: PC/06/396-11/35; Pamphlet, *Women's Enfranchisement League: Our Claim for Enfranchisement – Cape Colony*, 1912, p. 1.

45 LSE Women's Library, Reference: PC/06/396-11/35; Pamphlet, *Women's Enfranchisement League: Our Claim for Enfranchisement – Cape Colony*, 1912, p. 3.

46 Wits Historical Papers, Johannesburg, Reference: A133; Pamphlet: *Flashlight*, April 1930, pp. 15, 28.

There is evidence that WEL members in the Cape were well versed in the literature related to the women's movement: reference was made to Mary Wollstonecraft, Elizabeth Fry and John Stuart Mill.<sup>47</sup> Mill's concepts were discussed in detail in WEL's periodical, where the belief in equal rights between men and women, including the equal right to vote,<sup>48</sup> was extensively discussed. These kinds of theories and literature further justified the need for women's votes in the UK and South Africa. They also demonstrated how organisations such as WEL used literature and academic debates about women's suffrage to justify their aims and actions.

This intellectual development was closely related to the social and intellectual context of the WCTU and WEL. Solly, one of the founders of the WEL in the Cape, discussed how the women's movement in South Africa stemmed from the growth of an idea.<sup>49</sup> Her thesis stated the idea of women's enfranchisement and equality originated in the USA and the UK and, like a seed, had grown and spread to other countries such as South Africa. In this essay Solly and WEL formally recognised other women's organisations, events and countries that had helped to shape South Africa's own women's movement, including Seneca Falls in the USA and women's enfranchisement in New Zealand (1893) and Australia (1902). Significantly, this essay demonstrates the strong interconnectedness and influence between women's organisations in different countries. British suffrage organisations identified with and were inspired by the suffrage movement in New Zealand and Australia, where women already had the vote.<sup>50</sup>

Like Solly, Olive Schreiner, the vice president of WEL's Cape branch<sup>51</sup> in 1907, was also well travelled, which exposed her to the literature of the women's movement in the UK and allowed her to develop valuable networks with suffragists Constance Lytton and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence and socialist activist Eleanor Marx. These interactions with progressive thinkers abroad shaped how Schreiner interpreted the "women question" in South Africa, which was reflected in her novels. These friends and acquaintances exposed Schreiner to new perspectives of what the "new woman" was, and

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47 LSE Women's Library, Reference: PC/06/396-11/35; Article, Julia Solly (WEL leader), "Growth of an Idea", *Women's Enfranchisement League: Our Claim for Enfranchisement* – Cape Colony, 1912, p. 41.

48 LSE Women's Library, Reference: PC/06/396-11/35; Pamphlet, *Women's Enfranchisement League: Our Claim for Enfranchisement* – Cape Colony, 1912, p. 31.

49 LSE Women's Library, Reference: PC/06/396-11/35; Article, Julia Solly (WEL leader), "Growth of an idea", *Women's Enfranchisement League: Our Claim for Enfranchisement* – Cape Colony, 1912, p. 40.

50 C Bolt, *Sisterhood questioned: Race, class and internationalism...*, p. 21.

51 L Haysom, "Olive Schreiner and the women's vote", *Search Light South Africa*, 3(3), October 1993, p. 31.

this kind of dialogue influenced how Schreiner observed women developing internationally.<sup>52</sup> Her eclectic group of acquaintances and friends allowed Schreiner to exchange and share ideas about women's rights that would transcend boundaries. Schreiner was also involved in and contributed to the international women's movement by serving as a committee member of the Women's International Congress at The Hague in 1915.<sup>53</sup> This committee was created in the hope of establishing peace during the First World War. The committee consisted of women from all around the world, and it was a "truly international and representative federation of nations in the future".<sup>54</sup>

Under Solly and Schreiner's leadership, the WEL Cape branch was incredibly popular, with approximately 2000 members in 1913, making it the largest in South Africa.<sup>55</sup> Under their guidance, the WEL Cape branch advocated for the right for all women to have the vote, regardless of race. This perspective created an internal conflict between the Cape and Johannesburg branches in 1909: the Cape WEL branch advocated for multiracial enfranchisement for women and therefore sought to be an organisation that represented all races, whereas the Johannesburg WEL branch believed that female enfranchisement should only have been extended to white women.

By 1911, this tension was formally addressed through the formation of South Africa's first national suffrage society, the Women's Enfranchisement Association of the Union (WEAU). The WEAU was created in March 1911<sup>56</sup> and was committed to obtaining votes for white women.<sup>57</sup> This union was an umbrella organisation that represented several suffrage societies,<sup>58</sup> including the WEL, and was affiliated with international organisations such as the British Dominion Women's Suffrage and the IWSA. Despite its widespread representation, the Cape WEL refused to join the WEAU because of its political stance on race implicit in its advocacy only of votes for white women.

The relationship between race and the transnational element of women's suffrage in South Africa was further challenged in 1911 when the IWSA toured South Africa. The IWSA's President, Carrie Chapman Catt from the

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52 R First & A Scott, *Olive Schreiner* (USA, University of Michigan, 1980), p. 268.

53 J Raiskin, *Snow on the cane fields: Women's writings and creole subjectivity* (USA, University of Minnesota, 1996), p. 19.

54 J Raiskin, *Snow on the cane fields...*, p. 21.

55 D Gaitskell, "The imperial tie...", *South African Historical Journal*, 47(1), October 2002, p. 10.

56 C Walker, *Women and resistance in South Africa...*, p. 20.

57 L Haysom, "Olive Schreiner...", *Search Light South Africa*, 3(3), October 1993, p. 32.

58 P Scully, "White maternity and black...", I Fletcher, L Mayhall et al. *Women's suffrage in the...*, pp. 68-83.

USA, and vice President, Dr Aletta Jacobs from the Netherlands, started their tour in Cape Town in December 1911. Jacobs detailed the tour in a memoir, describing the unexpectedly large number of women's organisations she met while in the Cape,<sup>59</sup> including individuals such as Macintosh from the WCTU and Schreiner from the WEL.<sup>60</sup> These tours created a small circle of elite women who worked together on a national and international level, but had different opinions about the racial issue and women's suffrage in South Africa. President Chapman Catt recommended that the WEAU should not get involved in racial politics in South Africa, but instead focus only on suffrage for white women, because this would help to get the vote quicker.<sup>61</sup>

This approach divided the WEAU members. Lady Rose-Innes, a WEL and WEAU suffragist, stated in 1926 that "we know in our hearts we shall not get all that we ask, but we are very anxious for that half loaf. The other may come."<sup>62</sup> This demonstrates that South African women were eager to get the vote, and were willing to conform to South Africa's segregation policies to do so. Innes' comments were supported by fellow WEAU members, who stated that the organisation wanted some form of enfranchisement as soon as possible, and the easiest way for this to happen would be if white women got the vote.<sup>63</sup> Due to the racial division in the country during the 1920s, it seemed like a plausible demand.

However, this stance was contested by some WEAU members, who supported votes for white women as a means of reinforcing wider racial segregation in South Africa. By attaining white women's votes, the overall white vote in the country would increase, while the black vote in the Cape would be disempowered.<sup>64</sup> This demonstrates how some of the members of the WEAU adapted their approach to accommodate contemporaneous segregation policies and thereby support the racial division that was occurring politically in South Africa. As a result, the limited white narrative of the women's suffrage in South Africa<sup>65</sup> forms part of a wider racial debate.

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59 A Jacobs, *Travel letters from Africa to Asia* (Holland, W. Hilarius Wzn, 1915), p. 86.

60 A Jacobs, *Travel letters from Africa...*, p. 88.

61 L Haysom, "Olive Schreiner...", *Search Light South Africa*, 3(3), October 1993, p. 31.

62 C Walker, *Women and resistance...*, p. 23.

63 LSE Women's Library, Reference: PC/06/396-11/35; Occasional Paper, "Women's Enfranchisement Association of the Union 1926", p. 1.

64 LSE Women's Library, Reference: PC/06/396-11/35; Occasional Paper, "Women's Enfranchisement Association of the Union 1926", p. 2.

65 P Scully, "White maternity and black...", I Fletcher, L Mayhall et al. *Women's suffrage in the...*, pp. 68-83.

This white narrative was clear in the WEAU's occasional papers,<sup>66</sup> which were available in English and Afrikaans: it comprised an appeal to a wider white audience beyond the English community. While information about the suffrage organisations affiliated with the WEAU were published, it is unclear what the relationship between the WEAU and WEL Cape branch was between 1912 and 1920. However, by 1923 and 1926 the WEL Cape branch had been published in the WEAU's periodicals, suggesting that the Cape WEL joined the WEAU in 1923.

It was through publications such as these occasional papers that WEL in the Cape was described by the WEAU as a proactive organisation. In 1923, the Cape WEL was labelled a "tax resisting league"<sup>67</sup> that argued that, if women did not have the vote and were therefore not seen as citizens of the state by the government, then they should not be obligated to pay taxes like their male, enfranchised counterparts.<sup>68</sup> By 1926, the Cape WEL was still active and organised several talks around the Cape Province. Solly, in particular, was pivotal in spreading the word about women's suffrage by speaking at student meetings and organising academics to give talks about the power and influence of women in society.<sup>69</sup> These meetings and discussions were important because they reached a diverse audience who had the opportunity to explore and understand ideas related to women's rights.

The WEL Cape branch used its international connections to further develop its knowledge and understanding of women's roles internationally. They organised women from the UK to speak at some of their meetings in the Cape,<sup>70</sup> exposing their members to foreign women whose experiences and contexts differed from their own. These guest speakers provided first hand insights that allowed women to learn more about their experiences. The WEAU also published articles from foreigners visiting the country. One visitor in particular, Marguerite Fedden from Saint Joan's Social and Political Alliance, a Catholic women's society in London, criticised the South African women's movement for being confined to a "few intellectuals and

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66 Occasional papers were published by the WEAU in the 1920s as the organisation was changing the name and format of its publication from *Women's Outlook* to the newer *Flashlight*.

67 LSE Women's Library, Reference: PC/06/396-11/35; Occasional Paper, "Women's Enfranchisement Association of the Union 1923", p. 4.

68 LSE Women's Library, Reference: PC/06/396-11/35; Occasional Paper, "Women's Enfranchisement Association of the Union 1923", p. 3.

69 LSE Women's Library, Reference: PC/06/396-11/35; Occasional Paper, "Women's Enfranchisement Association of the Union 1926", p. 6.

70 LSE Women's Library, Reference: PC/06/396-11/35; Occasional Paper, "Women's Enfranchisement Association of the Union 1926", p. 4.

progressives”,<sup>71</sup> indicating its infancy compared to the movement in the UK. What was most striking about Fedden’s observation was her response to South Africa’s political system. Fedden had the same stance as the IWSA’s President Catt: women should stay clear of other political issues and should focus solely on getting the vote.<sup>72</sup> She therefore advocated that only white women should have the vote.

The WEAU were conscious of what was happening overseas and published several pamphlets about the international women’s movement. One such document, the “Combined Suffrage Bodies in the Union of South Africa”, presented a detailed Suffrage calendar and highlighted countries where women had the vote by 1920, as well as the kinds of votes women had (i.e., whether they were municipal or national).<sup>73</sup> International conferences such as the International Women’s Suffrage Alliance congress in Rome in 1923, were also reported on, as was South Africa’s involvement in these events.

Implicit in the reporting on these events was the assumption that South African women should have the same ambitions as their English counterparts. Indeed, particular attention was paid to details such as the 20 Bills that were passed in the UK since 1918, which focused solely on women’s and children’s rights.<sup>74</sup> The South African women’s movement was labelled “passive”<sup>75</sup> due to its lack of aggressive actions, such as hunger strikes, which were common practises in the UK suffrage movement.

The WEAU also published information related to the legal status of South African women. A booklet made available to the WEAU that stated important facts about the legal status of women in the Cape Province: due to the Roman-Dutch law of the Union of South Africa, there was not a distinction between men and women, but rather between public and political law.<sup>76</sup> It was with this kind of knowledge that the WEAU could use to their advantage as part of their advocacy for women’s enfranchisement.

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71 LSE Women’s Library, Reference: PC/06/396-11/35; Occasional Paper, “Women’s Enfranchisement Association of the Union 1926”, p. 5.

72 LSE Women’s Library, Reference: PC/06/396-11/35; Occasional Paper, “Women’s Enfranchisement Association of the Union 1926”, p. 6.

73 UCT Manuscripts and Archives, Cape Town, Reference: BC1129; Pamphlet, Combined Suffrage Bodies in the Union of South Africa, 1920, p. 4.

74 LSE Women’s Library, Reference PC/06/396-11/35; Occasional Paper, “Women’s Enfranchisement Association of the Union 1926”, p. 6.

75 LSE Women’s Library, Reference PC/06/396-11/35; Occasional Paper, “Women’s Enfranchisement Association of the Union 1926”, p. 7.

76 UCT Manuscripts and Archives, Cape Town, Reference BC1129; Pamphlet, M De Villiers, “Some Points Concerning the Legal Status of Women in the Province of the Cape of Good Hope”, March 1911, p. 1.



Despite the ambition of these organisations, the South African media did not respond seriously to the WEL and the WEAU. According to the League's periodical *Flashlight*, "WEL was treated as a joke"<sup>77</sup> while newspapers were patronising: the *Natal Mercury* called one WEL meeting a "picnic", implying its equivalence to a friendly, social gathering. There was an overall consensus that women did not have any business in politics, as their endeavours would ultimately fail.<sup>78</sup> Regardless of these reports, the WEAU and WEL continued to promote white women's votes and succeeded when in 1930 the Women's Enfranchisement Bill was passed by Hertzog and the National Party government.

## **Conclusion**

The earlier women's movement in South Africa was closely linked to and influenced by its transnational links. It was through these links that the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and the Women's Enfranchisement League (WEL) were created and were able to prosper in the Cape, which brought various opportunities for South African women. One of these opportunities included increased exposure to the international suffrage movement, which by the late nineteenth century was advocating female enfranchisement. The unique legal setting in the Cape also contributed to the demand for women's suffrage in South Africa. The Cape was the only area where qualified black men had the right to vote, depending on the property they owned and their education, whereas white women in the Cape did not have the right to vote at all. This specific context signified that race was not the only issue that decided enfranchisement, but rather that enfranchisement was also determined by gender.

While gender was one of the deciding factors determining who could vote in the Cape, this did not prevent women representing different races from working together to support women's suffrage. If anything, it seemed to do the opposite, encouraging further cooperation between the Coloured and Native Union and the WCTU, while the WEL's aims included acquiring the vote for all women in South Africa, regardless of race. In this sense, these two organisations were ahead of their time: they fought inadvertently for racial equality and were progressive in their thinking, as was demonstrated by their alliances with multiracial organisations.

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<sup>77</sup> Wits Historical Papers, Johannesburg, Reference A133 Pamphlet: *Flashlight*- Victory Number, 1930, p. 28.

<sup>78</sup> C Walker, *Women and gender...*, p. 335.

While both organisations were used as examples for future women's organisations, the WCTU in particular was interested in helping African and coloured women in the Cape set up organisations. In doing so, the WCTU fought for women's rights for different racial groups. Unfortunately, by 1911 the fight for women's votes became a racial issue when the Women's Enfranchisement Association of the Union (WEAU) was established and advocated for votes for white women only. This approach was further reinforced when the President of the International Women's Suffrage Alliance (IWSA), Carrie Chapman Catt, visited South Africa as part of an international suffrage tour and advised the WEAU to distance itself from racial politics in order to achieve the vote sooner. This perspective was highly contested by WCTU and WEL leaders such as Emilie Solomon, Julia Solly and Olive Schreiner. Solomon in particular refused to use her vote as they felt it was not representative of all South African women, while Solly was the superintendent of the franchise department of the WCTU and an advocate for the enfranchisement for all women.

The transnational link was fundamental to the establishment and development of the South African women's movement, not only by providing models for the structure of international women's organisations, but also by creating opportunities for the creation of a network that allowed open dialogue and increased exposure to women's issues globally. In this sense the transnational element had dual roles: there was a clear international influence on South African women's organisations, but there were also important contributions made by South African women to the international suffrage movement.