

## **“These forces are in our midst”: YWCA “Girls” and Challenges of Transnationalism Between the Wars**

**Ellen Warne**

“Do you know that the YWCA has gone further in Australia and N.Z. than any other country in giving girls the power to make their own movement?” wrote Leila Bridgman in 1924. “This means that the YWCA believes in you. I believe they are showing how girls can be counted on to be responsible and loyal and work for the best they know” (7). Living in a “new country where things are really only beginning” she explained, would allow Girl Citizens to make a difference, “in ten or fifty years’ time” the world would be “not quite the same as they would have been if there had been no Girl Citizens” (Bridgman 7). Even as they asked their “girls” to imagine a new future, the organisation itself was responding to the internationalism of the post-war period, in which there was not only the need for “Girl Citizens” but also “world citizens.” The headquarters and focus of the YWCA moved to Geneva rather than London and the challenge to be more international and less colonial led to a broadening of membership and an official weakening of ties to the British colonial centre. As Daniel Gorman has recently argued, internationalism in this period was shaped by factors that were both imperial and anti-imperial: presenting opportunities for “increased interconnectivity across the globe” while at the same time developing a language and series of demands that were corrosive to European empires (2-3). One key challenge for the YWCA in the period between the wars, then, was to “safely” transform “colonial girls” into “world citizens” by emphasising the cooperative foundations of transnational association.

As foundational work by Angela Woollacott, Leila Rupp and Fiona Paisley has shown, the ability of women’s organisations to develop “worlds of women” was striking in this period. The YWCA extended its work internationally, developing ties with “colonial girls” in many parts of the British Empire (Paddle; Allen “Friends Alongside”, “That’s the Modern Girl”). Australian feminists were eager to participate in women’s international forums and developed a type of “commonwealth feminism” through regional organisations that both emphasised the bonds they shared with “British” women in different countries, while successfully asserting their place beside European and North American delegates (Woollacott, “Inventing” 81-104). This ability to simultaneously present themselves as British, Australian and more loosely transnational, allowed commonwealth feminists to position themselves as leaders in women’s affairs rather than just outliers (Woollacott “Inventing”; Paisley). By connecting with the League of Nations, women’s organisations further “amplified their voices” (Rupp 217), simultaneously taking women’s issues to an international platform and bringing international issues back to local settings (Warne, “Learning from the League”).

As Karen Offen has shown, however, the public atmosphere in which these women worked between the world wars was far from blandly accepting of feminism: “One cannot adequately assess the feminist organization initiatives of the interwar period (with reference to democratic initiatives) without recognizing the increased hostility of the national political environments in which they attempted to achieve their goals” (280). Women in Australia and New Zealand were held up as standard bearers for women’s suffrage but, as this paper will explore, within the Association itself, transnational activism on girls’ and women’s issues became increasingly difficult in the 1920s and 1930s. Even with their established international networks, YWCA members were defined partly by their local political

situations (some Fascist, some Nazi, some democratic, some still colonial) and lived in cultures with conflicting views on the legitimacy of women speaking out.

The language of internationalism or transnationalism encouraged a view that downplayed the tension YWCA members might feel between their loyalty to the world as a whole and to their nation in particular (Sandell 608). As Marie Sandell suggests, however, women's organisations such as the YWCA were not unique in advocating the importance of working beyond national borders. Socialist internationalism placed great emphasis on the need to promote solidarity among working people all over the world (Sandell 608), and, by the 1930s, youth groups in Nazi Germany also caught the attention of some YWCA members. In this increasingly politicised period, the YWCA was aware that shaping the way world citizenship could be presented to girls required careful thought. Should world citizenship be simply an organised international friendship network, or should the association campaign for a better future for girls? How far could they promote activist campaigns around girls' working conditions, and still remain politically acceptable?<sup>1</sup> Offen argues that, in the years following the Russian Revolution, some women activists believed that Bolshevism had proposed a solution for the woman question and that it was, for a while, "more stylish to be communist than feminist;" while others, horrified by Bolshevik attitudes to women and the family, saw communist influence as "distinctly inappropriate if not downright repugnant" (279). The need to reject alternative views on different possibilities for marriage, gender roles and the family, in case they were communist, permeated public discussion, becoming a "determining theme of anti-feminist backlash that characterized much of the 1920s and 1930s" (Offen 272). All of these issues were relevant to the "colonial girls" who were rapidly becoming "industrial girls," "business girls" or "modern girls" who were working by day, and living away from home and outside the family with what the YWCA leadership saw as minimal education to be citizens. The question of how to guide these girls preoccupied the YWCA leadership throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

Marjorie Black, National Girls' Work Secretary, explained in 1920 that "the teen age is the period for the battle for an honest, pure, righteous type of womanhood must be waged and won" ("The Adolescent Girl and the YWCA" 4). She called on young women with the "necessary qualifications and leisure" to take up "the challenge to leadership" as the "need of the 'the other girl' should impel them to service." After studying the psychology of adolescent girls, Black advocated a process that would build girls' self control: "she must go for one month without sweets and must be absolutely punctual for one month. For three months she must do deep-breathing exercises morning and evening. [...] We in the YWCA have been experimenting during the last three years and we mean... to bend all our energies and summon all our skill to help solve the problem of the adolescent girl in this day of opportunity" ("The Adolescent Girl and the YWCA" 4).

Later she clarified that it was only when people stopped trying "to make girls good that moment they would do something to help them" ("For the Girls" 9). *The Daily News* described Black as "a young woman whose sympathetic broad mindedness and magnetic personality stamp her as the right woman for the job" ("For the Girls" 9). She urged people to understand that "the need for nerve stimulus was more acute in the adolescent girl than in the boy" and that providing working girls with attractive challenges that developed their brains "was the only way to prevent degeneration" ("For the Girls" 9).

Black also noted that there was "an urgent need for a book on adolescent psychology. Everybody knew something of child study but so far no one had issued a work on the

adolescent child” (“For the Girls” 9). It may have been Black who included the writing of Margaret Read, originally titled, “Modern Psychology and the Adolescent Girl”, in the *Association Woman* in June 1924 (the extracts were reprinted as “Club-Girl and Leader” for Australian readers). Read was a social anthropologist working in India, whose article showed an interest not only in the psychology of adolescent “colonial” girls, but the women who ran clubs for them:

We all fall headlong down the cliff of wanting to do something for girls, to make them something, to influence them, and when we do it in the name of religion we do it with a double emphasis. How dare we? How has anyone of us the right to interfere in the growth of a human personality, and push our clumsy ideas of what is good for them into the delicate fabric of their mental and spiritual unfolding? I know this is putting it very strongly, but I want us to be awake to this at the beginning and then maybe we shall learn how to walk straight. (2-3)

She argued that the desire to work with girls had a didactic edge that needed to be acknowledged:

Whether we are club leaders or teachers or Guiders, all alike we fall into the snare which really has its origin in the savage’s lust for power—we want to mould that which is plastic, to lead that which will follow, to imprint maxims on the unwritten roll of life. How many of us in our heart of hearts are entirely innocent of such motives? And though we may be consciously innocent, what about that unconscious motive which lies beneath? (3)

She concluded that the role of a woman leader, conscious of the psychological dynamics of working with girls, should steer away from telling girls what to think but should instead act like a trusted doorkeeper: “We who serve humanity are only there to help the gate of each human life to stand open and unencumbered... and help them grow up to flourishing independence” (3-5).

For five years before this piece was published, Association members had participated in a lively and at times fraught debate about the best way to frame their role in the local and international contexts. They firmly believed that girls and women would help improve the world they lived in and that engaging in this challenge would also help develop their girl members as world citizens, something much more exciting than their jobs in factories or household service might indicate. Through discussion groups, travelling speakers, conferences and publications, the Association encouraged girls to envisage themselves as part of an active organisation, both in public spheres of influence and in paid work. The YWCA strongly believed that transnational, organised girlhood could provide both a stabilising and energetic role in the post-war world. They argued that if women could make a difference in war, they should be able to maintain this in the period of reconstruction that followed. The question of what the world, or at least the Association, should provide for girls was more difficult to determine.

To some extent, the war had both disrupted and increased YWCA engagement with the issues of women’s work. Before the war, the organisation had conducted a review of the “industrial issue” and had particularly highlighted concern over conditions affecting girls around the world: alongside concerns about child labour, night work, exposure to poisons and the repetitive nature of machine work, they were also concerned about the low wages that girls

received. A girl who worked hard should receive a “living wage” that would provide sufficient funds for “a room to herself, food to provide healthful living and efficient work, simple clothing, a chance for rest and recreation after the day’s work and on Sunday, time and opportunity for friendships, a two weeks’ vacation and a possibility to save for emergencies by putting aside a sum each week” (YWCA, *Report of the Fourth Conference* 113). It was less clear how such a goal could be achieved, although members provided other forms of support: they visited factories, established working girls’ clubs (in Sydney) and a working girls’ bank in Adelaide, and held business girls’ lunches and hostels (YWCA, *Report of the Fourth Conference* 239-240). A new “Girl Citizen” movement was formed in 1915, specifically designed to cater for the quarter of their membership who were under twenty and were (largely) domestic or industrial workers. This movement aimed to combine “Christian industrialism” and internationalism to broaden the outlook and prospects of their girl members (YWCA, “Australia” 59-60). The press applauded the provision of services that might support and protect “bachelor girls” from the “very real danger to a young unprotected woman who is ‘on her own’” (“Business Girls’ Club” 5).

While the war disrupted the study of the “industrial issue” in relation to girls, it nevertheless, served at some level to valorise women’s work. Amy Snelson, National General Secretary of the Australasian YWCA, made this point when she returned to Australia in 1918 after spending the war years in England. She encouraged Australian girls to see women’s war service in Britain as a turning point that would significantly change the way the public viewed women’s personal and public capacity. The war, she explained, had led to the “rebirth” of the YWCA (“British Women” 8) which rapidly came to be known, in her circles, as the “Progressive” YWCA. This was a coded reference to the schism that occurred at the end of the war when a small group of more evangelical British YWCA members formed a break-away group called the Christian Alliance of Women and Girls (Woollacott, *On Her Their Lives Depend* 156). Woollacott has argued that tension over the best way of “coaxing working women further into the fold of Christianity” was based on a “split between the pragmatism of its active leaders and the unswerving convictions of its ideologues” who believed evangelisation was key (*On Her Their Lives Depend* 155, 157).

In Snelson’s account, it was the Association’s practical work that was most important. She explained that the organisation had been able to solve the “problems of grave import” that followed the rapid influx of women into the labour force in England during World War I: “What the Y.M.C.A. has been to the soldiers, the Y.W.C.A. has been to the women—or rather, I should say ‘women soldiers,’ for they are considered such in England” (“British Women” 8). She described her memory of women, like soldiers, all contributing, regardless of rank, and working outside established gender roles:

Down at the docks when I came away there were women, dressed in men’s trousers, and seated on scaffolds, painting the sides of the ships. There were others wheeling barrows and doing various other jobs on the wharf. I have seen girls driving trams, and seated on the tops of large luggage vans, guiding their horses through the crowded thoroughfares of London. I have known the highest aristocrats in England society, stand for hours washing up dishes, and wiping sloppy floors. (“British Women” 8)

Two years later, this valorisation of women in war and work was still relevant to validate claims of citizenship (Woollacott, “Women Munition Makers” 378). Snelson emphasised the bonds between girls: the YWCA was “non-sectarian in every sense,” and had been

established “sixty-five years ago during a war” (“British Women” 8). While their aim to “help the girls of the world” was still in place, their role was more forceful because of girls and women’s participation in the war effort.

During the last five years womanhood had taken a tremendous leap forward. Womankind in every part of the world should feel grateful to the women and girls of France and Great Britain for the wonderful work they performed for the Empire. It was the woman behind the man and the gun that won the war. (“Helping Young Womanhood” 41)

This cooperative spirit and the channelling of girls’ work into a greater cause were part of the claims of the YWCA. As an international organisation of girls and young women, the Association believed that it had at its disposal a “complex machinery” that provided connections between girls and young women around the world (Warne “The Mother’s Anxious Future”). Snelson pointed out that, even during the war itself, when “numbers of German and Austrian girls were turned onto the streets of London at the beginning of the war” and public sentiment turned against them, the YWCA assisted them to get home to their own countries (“Helping Young Womanhood” 41). Snelson emphasised how YWCA women in England used actions to both support the war effort, and at times, to work outside of it.

While Australian women voters experienced the bitter political tension that revolved around the conscription referenda of 1915 and 1917, British women’s later enfranchisement between 1918 and 1928 also coincided with the period of post-war turmoil, unease (and excitement) about socialist influence following the Bolshevik rise to power in 1917, peace movements, and intense transnational activism rippling out from the newly established League of Nations and the International Labour Organization (ILO). The YWCA, closely followed ideas being discussed in Geneva and saw a critical role for their members in disseminating information to the local branches and community. Helen McCarthy has shown that “public opinion” would be vital to the League’s success and that voluntary societies provided a route through which that opinion could be “educated, mobilised and expressed” (187).

The YWCA took up the challenge to shape female public opinion and to encourage girls and women to follow and understand the issues being debated at the League of Nations (Warne “The Mother’s Anxious Future”). Amy Snelson urged Australian women to see themselves at a crucial point of history, when she wrote in the *Association Woman* in 1920:

[W]hy should we should ignore these tremendous issues? These forces are in our midst, and will increasingly make themselves felt; and do we want to be out of the world’s running? Has not the war taught us that the cause of womanhood everywhere is our obligation? ( 2)

Jean Stevenson, the National Industrial Secretary, called on Australian YWCA women to see themselves as part of a vital progressive network, with the important role of shaping female citizens for the future. Women’s civic role, she argued, was limited only by their own ambitions.

Every woman today is a citizen. Her reach is every day becoming wider and more direct. It is not too much to say that the future of this country, and indeed the world, depends more largely upon the conception the woman of today has of citizenship than upon any other factor. (“The Place of the YWCA” 3)

It was necessary, she continued, to recognise that each Young Women's Christian Association could "reach out to many hundreds" to be a real factor in the making of women citizens, "if it sees its vision big enough." It was important, she explained, that women needed to learn to say, "We are the government" and that women, as well as men, had to take on the "citizens' responsibility" for municipal, social and industrial conditions (Stevenson, "The Place of the YWCA" 3).

YWCA leaders stressed that citizenship was expansive: it allowed girls and young women to attend to the most minor of local issues as well as to empathise and campaign on issues which affected women around the globe. It was possible, the YWCA believed, to aspire to the goal of turning a "world neighbourhood into a world brotherhood" ("Christian World-Citizenship" 2) through Christian means. In part, such Christian spirit would manifest in a strong sense of empathy for the different experiences and suffering of people in other countries and other situations ("Christian World-Citizenship" 2). The sense of excitement felt by the YWCA delegates at international women's conferences further bolstered such ideas. It was not only inter-cultural dialogue that appeared to have real opportunities for progressive alliances but also dialogue with working girls and women. Mary Dingman, the World Industrial Secretary of the YWCA, wrote that at the Second International Congress of Working Women in 1922, there had been a "wonderful spirit of friendliness . . . between the intellectuals or workers with the brain and those classed as workers with their hands" ("The Second International Congress" 8-9).

The YWCA published an account of the exploitation of women in the workforce written by a "working woman" who had, after many years of personal campaigning for better conditions, finally taken a formal position as a union representative for women ("Every Woman's Business" 28-29). There was a need, the unnamed woman wrote, for the Board of Trade to include women when it was deciding appropriate wages for female workers. But there was also a need for forewomen to associate more closely with the needs and political aspirations of the young women working under their care (28). This latter point had obvious ramifications for the YWCA who prided themselves on guiding and assisting young working women.

When Jean Stevenson considered "The Place of the YWCA in the World To-day" in 1922, she included some stinging criticisms of the organisation and some radical demands for change. Stevenson was one of the few Association women in Australia who had attended the YWCA training school in New York. There she had become convinced that "religion must be expressed in public health and industrial conditions, in social organisations and labour laws, in local government and international relations" (Stevenson, "Studying in America" 11). Most importantly, she argued, "one learns the inevitable weakness of democracy that tolerates poverty and the conditions which make it" (Stevenson, "Studying in America" 11). She argued that the YWCA needed to become more truly democratic and less patronising. It was no longer acceptable, she argued, to say: "our girls do such and such things" because "no one set of girls in the city is 'ours'" (Stevenson, "The Place of the YWCA" 2). In the same vein, she challenged the premise that working girls "needed" the YWCA to protect them. In the nineteenth century, she said, the YWCA was established to provide protection "for the timid girl leaving the shelter of home for the first time" but such "protection" was no longer necessary as, "[i]t is rather the exception to find a young woman timid about going to stay in a hotel or boarding-house" (Stevenson, "The Place of the YWCA" 2). As a rule, she believed, young women were no longer timid:

The woman of today has quite frequently a vision of a career and a definite purpose towards it. Her physical health is better than that of her grandmother and she knows more about the rules which govern it. Moreover she has a range of opportunities for recreation, and an appetite for the use of them that leaves her elders gasping. She despises anything that savours of charity, and as a rule is sufficiently well paid to be independent of it. (Stevenson, "The Place of the YWCA" 2)

What was more, Jean Stevenson continued, the YWCA had changed its role from "shoring up" an inequitable system to being agents who should agitate for change: "we no longer condone bad conditions by providing what is practically charity" ("The Place of the YWCA" 2).

Stevenson had intended that educational discussion groups, which she had established, would activate YWCA campaigns around Australia for further social change, but such reformist energy was slow to appear at an organisational level. Working with other groups in the community concerned about industrial issues, Stevenson successfully helped to organise lectures and conferences on "industrial psychology" and the "human factor in Industry." At the same time, Mary Dingman spoke to prominent business groups and noted that, "in many instances this has been the first time a women [sic] has addressed these meetings" (Report of Her Visit n.p.). But as one YWCA woman pointed out, "it is no use to get 'stirred up' unless one expresses emotion in action" ("Christian World-Citizenship" 2).

To Stevenson's disgust however, the State and National Executive Boards were reluctant to back any action that would translate new ideas about industrial issues into practice. After three years of energetic effort, Stevenson bitterly wrote in her final report to the National Board, that, "For the most part we stand in our appeal and outreach to Industrial girls pretty much where we stood four years ago. As a movement I do not know if we have got very much further even in our point of view on the Industrial Problem" ("Final Report"). The failure, she wrote, was as much practical as educational. On the practical level, the Executive had done almost nothing to implement policies or to appoint industrial workers:

Christchurch is the only City that has attempted a piece of definitely de-centralised work during this past year into which it has put some financial backing. Only two Industrial secretaries on the field have had a course of training, and of these one is not working in definite industrial extension. None have any background or experience in this work. (Stevenson "Final Report")

Had the Executive really wanted to expand YWCA influence in industrial areas, she continued, they would have made the time and money available to train workers. She herself, "had twice raised the money for a new industrial centre in one City and it has been claimed for other purposes," a betrayal she felt which, "simply goes to show that we have not yet, in our Association, become so seized with the challenge of our responsibilities to the Industrial Problem that they [the National Board] say some definite work must be done" (Stevenson "Final Report").

Despite all her educational efforts, and the tour of Mary Dingman, Stevenson felt that the YWCA executive retained a strong "industrial prejudice" and were deeply unwilling to change the way they saw the world:

In many Boards we find an unwillingness to study impartially the real industrial problem—people are bounded by the traditions and opinions in which they have grown up and are not willing to launch out into the scientific study which may not only change all their ideas but which may even result in cutting themselves off in the opinion and thought from those whose friendship they value. (“Final Report”)

She recognised that self-examination on troubling issues was difficult for individuals because they “cannot all get far enough away from our usual orbit to examine it in any detached way.” To Stevenson, the appropriate method for breaking out of the “usual orbit” was to “learn by bringing into our fellowship of service women of quite different points of view and lovingly try to understand them” (“Final Report”). Without such organisational and personal willingness to change, Stevenson believed, the YWCA had failed to lead public opinion by showing a real understanding or a change of heart regarding industrial issues for working girls. She tendered her resignation in protest, ending her industrial work for the YWCA in February 1924, a result which one member called a “calamity” for the organisation, and left to work in Auckland (*Minute Book of the YWCA National Board*, 1923). Mary Dingman declared that “in all the countries she had visited she had found one or two people with a prophet’s outlook on Industrial problems and their solution, and Miss Stevenson was one of these” (“Impressions of Australia” 10). She argued that it would probably take ten years for others to appreciate and understand Stevenson’s contribution. Another article in the *Association Woman* acknowledged that those who knew her were “only now beginning to realise the value of this young citizen of the world” and hoped she might soon return to a leadership role (“Miss Stevenson’s Resignation” 7). Stevenson returned to Melbourne in 1927 (“Near and Far” 8).

Over the next year, the Australian YWCA did show some willingness to engage with industrial issues and sent resolutions to the World’s Association based on a “growing feeling of responsibility of the Association to help in the solution of the industrial problems ... [and] that each member as well as local, national and world groupings ... take an intelligent part in the efforts to bring about a more Christian industrial order” (“Christian World-Citizenship” 7). Marion Cripps (Lady Parmoor), a politically active, progressive figure, became world president the same year (YWCA, front cover). In Melbourne, girl members were encouraged to be part of the “biggest bit of student-industrial cooperation that has been attempted in Australia,” when “many different types of girls and women” lived together in a YWCA hostel in Kyabram and worked together at a fruit canning factory over the summer (“Making a Home” 14). A winter study and discussion group would bring the girls back together to reflect on the possibilities of their cooperative work as “those who labour together cannot fail to grow in that understanding without which the great problems of the world are not going to be solved” (“Making a Home” 14).

Recent scholarship by Dorothea Browder has shown the impact of connections between “working-class politics, women’s activism, and religious faith, language and institutions” (86). Browder argues that in the American YWCA, the impact of such debates meant that the association adopted “new directions” and new campaigns in the 1920s, establishing a “Public Affairs” office that undertook significant lobbying efforts. They “increasingly cooperated with liberal and sometimes radical political groups, and frequently took unpopular stands in support of labor, civil rights, and peace” (Browder 86). She argues that it was a period of transformational political engagement so that although YWCA leaders initially sought to convert working women to Protestantism, they instead “found themselves converted...to political activism as an expression of faith” (Browder 86). In the YWCA more generally



however, members seemed ambivalent about taking on a politically active role to advocate for women and girls.

Edith Picton-Turberville, vice-president of the British YWCA (and later Labour MP) urged YWCA members around the world to think politically, and to do so as Christians:

The world of politics has always been considered more or less as something alien to the ordinary person. The fact that the suffrage has been widely extended has by no means destroyed this idea . . . every young woman should be a student of politics, and . . . every organisation should give politics a place in its programme. The question then arises, should an organisation with a definitely religious purpose concern itself with political affairs?... [I]t will be said by some, distinctly *party* politics should be excluded from the discussion of religious bodies. But behind many so-called party-politics are great and eternal principles . . . To-day in the great world issues there is a side on which God stands. Think of the Treaty of Versailles, of the struggle of Labour to-day for a fundamentally new system. Much can be said to defend the treaty, to expose the unwisdom [sic] of certain Labour methods, yet does not something in our hearts tell us that in these issues there is a side on which stands mercy, righteousness and truth[?] (“Miss Picton Turberville” 3-4.)

Although Picton-Turberville urged her readers to be politically active Christians, it became increasingly difficult to claim a universalist strategy. When Mary Dingman left Melbourne in 1924 to work in Shanghai as a part of the (largely unsuccessful) anti-child labour campaigns in Shanghai, she found that the presence of politicised Western women campaigning for “colonial girls” seemed to exacerbate gender, class and imperial tensions (Little-Lamb 135-136). YWCA leaders who took part in these campaigns were not only shaped by intercultural connections but were changed by the resistance, hostility and challenges they faced, and this in turn meant that “feminist internationalism changed over time, and their activism served as catalyst for that change” (Little-Lamb 135)

By the mid 1920s, the YWCA mounted further campaigns to promote protective schemes and opportunities for girl workers. Esther L Anderson, argued that “the time had arrived for every state to institute a good system of vocational training . . . and some assistance should be given to schemes of apprenticeships and trade training for girls” (“Problems of Girlhood” 2). Under her guidance, the national conference that year debated a string of similar proposals and questions on girl workers:

What trades, if any, have apprenticeships for girls? What laws govern employment of adolescent girls? Is there any specific training for girls who may enter trade or commercial life? How far is there any organised effort at vocational guidance, and have any societies interested themselves in the problem? What is the cause of early age employment? Is it an economic urge, or is it ignorance or poor judgement of the parents? Is it the restlessness of the girls? How far is it due to the demand from the market for young, cheap labour, especially girls? (“A Woman to Women” 3)

The YWCA generally tried to ameliorate the problems experienced by individual girls through their hostels, employment agencies or clubs but advocated government regulation to tackle more generalised problems that needed broader protections.

While the YWCA advocated for Christian industrialism, a product of nineteenth-century liberalism, that sought progressive change through class cooperation and government regulation rather than political upheaval, the possibilities and fears of communist influence were clearly capturing public imagination at this time. Edith Picton-Turberville mused later that the psychological impact of conservative propaganda that “Labour was disguised communism was very effective” and exacerbated public tendencies to look for, and expose, “hidden communists” in their midst (162-164). Conversely, although geographically far away from fascist Italy, YWCA members in Queensland were exposed to public media discourse that sought to find political equivalence in the local setting. In November 1925, the details of the next YWCA meeting in the *Townsville Daily Bulletin* were next to a description of rural strike breakers: “the Fascisti of North Queensland” who had combined “in order to avert ruin, assemble in force, to do the work that other people refuse to do” (“The Bulletin” 4).

At the crucial World YWCA conference in Budapest in 1928, G Thélín from the ILO reminded YWCA listeners that the world was in a “critical state” facing “obstacles to peace, uncertainties, injustices, race conflicts, questions of ethnic and religious minorities, national and nationalist tensions, religious disputes and suspicion” (YWCA, “Fellowship and Responsibility” 7). On the other side, however, he pointed to the foreshadowing of peace and a wider understanding between countries. He entreated the YWCA to stop “passively acquiescing in the exploitation of human merchandise” and to take up greater activism and advocacy.

The Christian must replace ignorance with knowledge, contention with cooperation, the habit of intervention for the attitude of passivity, and be ready to pass judgement instead of remaining in aloof silence. (YWCA, “Fellowship and Responsibility” 7)

The difficulty for the organisation at the local level, however, lay in finding a voice for such “Christian” activism without encouraging more radical socialist identification or anti-colonial sentiment. The Australian press followed stories that showed how young people in Europe were being marshalled in state-sanctioned youth organisations, and the potential for influencing and motivating youth was seen to be both inspiring and threatening. Could “world citizens” fearlessly take on advocacy roles (and therefore be in control of their situation), or were they at risk of being covertly influenced (and therefore of being controlled by the political “forces in our midst”)?

This question was highlighted for the Australian YWCA when the organisation was publically named in parliament, and in the newspapers, as being at risk of infiltration. News reports indicated that Australian socialist organisations such as the communist-inspired Workers’ Educational League specifically wished to target the YWCA because they were critical of their program of sport, activities for working girls, and celebration of Empire. Press reports indicated that they aimed to “win from capitalism the youth of our class, and carry on a bitter and relentless struggle against all kinds of boss class [elite] commercialised sport” (“Class Hatred” 11). The supposed attack was not only on sport but on several aspects of colonialism. The League sought to abolish Empire Day, withdraw Scripture and Religious Education from the curricula, and eliminate all imperialist teaching from school books, replacing it instead with material on the struggles and aspirations of the working class and colonial masses (“Class Hatred” 11; “School Teachers” 1).

Over the next three years, the Workers' Educational League also accused the League of Nations of existing specifically to protect Empires and capitalism in general. In their eyes, the internationalism of both the League of Nations and the YWCA was ultimately colonial and imperialist (Stanley 5; Barkly 8). This was evident in a second attack on the YWCA reported, this time, in parliament. Sir Guy Pearce (leader of the opposition) warned that he had heard that communists wanted to subvert the YWCA because "[i]t must penetrate into the factories among the working youth, and must be directed towards the conversion of imperialistic war into civil war, which was the workers' revolution" ("Communist Cancer" 13). The *Brisbane Courier* reported on Pearce's speech:

He read portions of a [communist] poem on the British Empire, which, he said, was a scurrilous outburst, and referred to the Empire as 'a foul blot with the hangman strangling freedom at its birth,' and to a 'puppet king.' It also stated that the Empire was tottering to its doom upon the red tide of revolution... It was sapping the foundation of the nation. Were they to say, 'Peace, peace, all is peace,' when there was no peace? It was endeavouring to inculcate its damnable doctrines into the minds of our innocent children and poison them. Was the country to stand still and do nothing? ("Communist Cancer" 13)

That year, perhaps not surprisingly, the YWCA national convention picked up on all these themes, focussing on the issue of "Religion in the Heart of the Race," "Nationalism and World Unity, and the Challenge of Communism." An interesting feature of the discussion, contemporaries noted, "is the presence of many girl delegates, who are voicing their own ideas" ("YWCA Triennial Convention" 3). But it may also be imagined that in Australia, as in other countries where the YWCA was active, this focus on communist subterfuge discouraged the women's organisations from pursuing left wing debate as vigorously as they had done in the early 1920s (Mackie 159).

The World YWCA was also struggling with the increasingly politicised atmosphere in Europe. Hilda Rømer Christensen has argued that the international wing of the YWCA devoted itself primarily to bridge-building between "antagonised angles" (161) in this period, hoping to smooth over the rifts caused by overt internationalisation of the organisation in 1928 that allowed Roman Catholics and Orthodox women into its membership. Some national YWCA branches left the world organisation, and others voiced their opposition to this move. Even among the bulk that remained, debate continued over which of the two aims of the organisation needed to be prioritised: the need to evangelise – favoured by Nordic and Northern European YWCA groups, and the need to translate Christianity into social action – favoured by Anglo-American YWCA groups (Christensen 161).

With the move of YWCA headquarters from London to Geneva, some of the "comfort" of British colonialism, and perhaps "colonial feminism" seemed to be diminished for the Australian contingent ("Woman's Interest" 12). Miss Griffin told Australian members that they would need to work harder at trying to understand cultures that were becoming increasingly nationalistic and politicised, not through an engagement with the politics of these countries but rather an understanding of what might be shared.

We are confident that the citizens of tomorrow have got to be people who think not only nationally, but internationally, and who realize that all the countries of the world are interdependent one on the other. We must make our young people realize the things that make for a friendly world and for co-operation between the

nations, giving them an understanding of the real difficulties facing the world. (“Woman’s Interest”12)

The best way to do that, Miss Griffin believed, was through friendship and study. It was possible to take study programmes in Geneva, to do study tours of other countries, and to maintain links through pen-pals. She urged Australian girl members to find out what was best in youth movements in both Communism and “Hitlerism” (“Woman’s Interest” 12). Helen Jones has recently shown, however, that YWCA groups in England were active, in the 1930s, in supporting refugees from Nazi Germany (123, 129). The possibility of transnational friendship was growing increasingly complicated. While Griffin sought to keep YWCA rhetoric neutral in its approach to political matters, the press also reported that the YWCA also had several visiting delegates who appeared to see opportunities in “Hitlerism.” These included Cornelia van Asch van Wijck, the (Dutch) World President of the YWCA, who toured Australia in 1933 (van Asch van Wijck 9), as well as the National General Secretary of the YWCA in Germany who explained to Australian readers in 1933 that Hitlerism provided, at the very least, a possible solution to communism: “in that direction lies hope, opportunity, discipline, high ideals, sacrifice—much also which appeals to the best in youth, and of which it is in great need if it is not to perish utterly. In time of moral confusion it is this desire of youth for moral purity which one cannot value highly enough” (“Youth in Germany” 5).

Appealing to the best in youth was a challenge the YWCA felt their organisation could meet without recourse to overt political ideology. Dorothy Arland, the secretary of the Girls’ Department, argued that critics of “modern girls” focused on “the wrong things, things that were really only tendencies rather than definite characteristics. There may be as many reasons for using lipstick as there are lips on which it is being used” (“Youth’s Need” 10). What was critical, she believed was that “modern girls” appeared to be restless because they were seeking something:

[t]he seeking after something may seem indefinite but the seeking was very definite. In the older countries such movements as Fascism and Communism were making a strong appeal to young people who were reacting passionately against a system that had no place for them, that was making them spend their best years in anxiety for the future. We as a youth movement, not a big political youth movement, but a movement built on the right foundations, should be answering the needs of the girls who come to us seeking opportunity and guidance. (“Youth’s Need”10)

In particular, Arland pointed to the “drab monotony” experienced by girls working in factories. These girls enjoyed making something for themselves in YWCA craft groups but beside that there was a more serious purpose of giving the girls a collective identity: “People often ask what we are doing for these girls? What we are doing is not something you can put on a record sheet, something that cannot be tabulated or put into print. We are trying to give them a standard” (“Youth’s Need”10).

While the organisation was trying to remain neutral about competing ideologies in Europe, a letter to the *Melbourne Girl* in 1934 indicated that Australian members were following developments internationally, and were keen to follow more definite American models of advocacy for girl workers. The Australian YWCA, the writer complained, was falling behind

in its advocacy role for young women workers where they remained poorly paid and their conditions more poorly regulated:

the YWCA in USA is tackling the question of unpleasant conditions and long hours of work for household employees. They have drawn up a model 'code' of conditions for domestic workers, and the effects [of] hours of duty, sickness, regular pay, accident insurance, etc. It seems to me that we in Melbourne are lagging behind in social affairs. We lead the way on such questions as sport and play, dances and parties; but in the vital problems that affect girls and women of Melbourne, we remain discreetly silent! ("In Domestic Service" 10)

The Australian community was clearly divided on the topic of girls' work: at one "non-party dinner discussion" in Adelaide, the YWCA speaker pointed out that while a significant number of girls now worked, industrial work was "stultifying." Another (non-YWCA) speaker quipped that most girls were simply working to "mark time between their school days and their marriage [which] lessened her concern with the question of wage earning" ("Women's Rights" 11). It was the older, unmarried women, over the age of twenty-six, she said, "who had to fight out with men the right to work and earn a living" ("Women's Rights" 11) Ada Bromham, also at the table, suggested that more radical socialist-inspired change would soon fix problems in industry:

women in industry made up one-third of the world's population, and the future of such women was brightening. Women in industry in Russia today were working in perfect equality with men ... A change was imminent in the economic system, which would prevent the exploitation of human labor. ("Women's Rights" 11)

The YWCA continued to follow the debates about prejudice against women in the workplace in the late 1930s, as the International Labour Office in Geneva debated the logistics of recommending maternity leave, as well as protective legislation banning night work and industries that exposed young women to heavy metals such as lead or zinc. ("Better Status" 4) The hope that the ILO might regulate girls' and women's working conditions at an international level, and then be ratified and implemented by state and federal governments in Australia, allowed labour issues to be pitched more as progressive "women's issues" rather than class issues ("Women Past the Stage" 20).

In the ideological wars of the 1930s, this continuing focus on improving working conditions for girls and women allowed the YWCA to articulate a relatively common vision even as it became increasingly difficult to claim transnational solidarity. By focusing on girls, the Association also focused on a group that was not yet politically enfranchised: girls could "work" for the "world" but could not yet vote in their own countries. The Association tried to negotiate a neutral role that was less political than some of the other state-sponsored youth movements of the era and tried to avoid shaping girl members by presenting a particular ideological view of the world. Critics both inside and outside the Association, in the interwar years, claimed that that the Association therefore increasingly encouraged girls to become "world citizens" while deferring the uneasy question about whether they should aim to be activist or remain outside politics.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See the pamphlet by Joseph P Kamp for post-WWII attempts to cast the YWCA in America as communist.

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