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The United Nations and Indigenous rights

With the creation of the United Nations Organization at the San Francisco Conference in 1945, and the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the language of human rights began to permeate the peace movement and define the way Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) activists engaged in the postwar world. The declaration became an 'instrument, as well as the most prominent symbol, of changes that would amplify the voices of the weak in the corridors of power'.¹ At a meeting to discuss 'Justice for Aborigines', supported by WILPF and held at the Australian Church in Melbourne, the Western Australian feminist Ada Bromham explained that this language set a 'new world standard':

We feel heartened by the fact that the UNO in their Universal Declaration of Human Rights sets out this principle: 'All human beings are born equal'. These words include the conclusions of those people who have set a charter for the world. This new world standard should be something that we should be very thankful about. We should use this world standard to influence our own government because after all the Australian Government is one of the members of the United Nations.²

1 Mary Ann Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, (New York: Random House, 2001), xvi.

2 Ada Bromham, 'Justice for Aborigines', 21 February 1951, Papers of A. Vroland Box 4/28, National Library of Australia (NLA).

Following WILPF's engagement with the White Australia Policy (WAP) during the interwar years, members continued to explore racial discrimination as a root cause of conflict. In the 1950s WILPF prioritised understanding Aboriginal policy, encouraged Indigenous women's involvement, and tried to connect local community issues with international politics.

From Federation onwards, in an era of self-conscious nation building, the history of Indigenous Australia was usually written out of the national story. In the words of the historian Ernest Scott in 1916: Australia 'begins with a blank space of the map, and ends with the record of a new name on the map, that of Anzac'.³ Throughout the twentieth century, many Australians continued to overlook and even deny the violence wrought by colonisation, preferring the 'heroic' military story of the Anzacs as a foundational national myth. So widespread was the blindness to the country's darker colonial past that in 1968, in his watershed Boyer lectures, the historian WEH Stanner described a national 'cult of forgetfulness' and 'great Australian silence'.⁴ WILPF's serious engagement with Aboriginal rights in the 1950s, well before Stanner's lectures, illustrates their commitment to an issue not popular in the mainstream.⁵ Their engagement was shaped by their experiences as white middle-class women, and their rhetoric at times reflected an older paternalistic humanitarianism. Nevertheless, their commitment was uncommon. The WILPF were 'one of the most cogent non-communist critics of the colonial system'.⁶ They insisted on seeking information about Aboriginal disadvantage and countering discrimination, even when the exclusion of Aboriginal history from mainstream teaching was structural and deliberate.

At the same time, changes in technology revolutionised the practicality of international travel. In the interwar years WILPF in Australia was typically on the fringe of the wider progressive movement. They were resistant to change and remained 'absolute' in their pacifism. The revival of the section in

3 Ernest Scott, *A Short History of Australia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1916), quoted in Anna Clark, 'Friday Essay: The "Great Australian Silence" 50 Years On', *The Conversation*, published and accessed 3 August 2018, theconversation.com/friday-essay-the-great-australian-silence-50-years-on-100737.

4 WEH Stanner, 'The Great Australian Silence', in *After the Dreaming: The 1968 Boyer Lectures* (Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1969), 18–29.

5 Alison Holland, *Breaking the Silence: Aboriginal Defenders and the Settler State 1905–1939* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2019). She illustrated how there 'may not have been an official history that supported the defenders' claims at the time but there was a vociferous politics, undergirded by memory, which included a critique of the conspiracy of silence on the matter', 7.

6 Laura Beers, 'Advocating for a Feminist Internationalism Between the Wars', in *Women, Diplomacy and International Politics Since 1500*, ed. Carolyn James and Glenda Sluga (New York: Routledge, 2015), 202, doi.org/10.4324/9781315713113-13.

the 1950s, however, saw dramatic changes instituted relatively quickly. One reason the organisation was able to survive such difficult times was because its established international networks remained desirable to new members and it was malleable when driven by new and different personalities in the wake of Moore's death at the end of the previous decade.

Several scholars have considered the interests and activities of feminists advocating for the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the early twentieth century.⁷ Often invoking the language of sisterhood over racial difference, feminists' activism remained largely assimilationist.⁸ Nonetheless, the women's movement, strongly influenced by maternal ideas of care and welfare, was a prominent voice in advocating for Indigenous peoples after World War II. Indeed, activists from the women's movement helped found political organisations that worked for Aboriginal rights. Jessie Street co-founded the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement, which later became the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, while Shirley Andrews helped form the Council for Aboriginal Rights in Victoria.⁹ Women's leadership on this issue culminated in the 1967 referendum for Aboriginal rights. Jessie Street had in fact proposed the referendum to Faith Bandler a decade earlier, reflecting the women's movement's interest in constitutional law reform.¹⁰ Street, Bandler, Bromham and Joyce Clague were all members of WILPF branches and used the organisation in their activism. Yagel woman Joyce Clague (née Mercy) was even supported by WILPF to attend conference in New Delhi in 1966, making her the first Indigenous Australian woman to attend an international UN-sponsored event.¹¹

7 For example see: Fiona Paisley, *Loving Protection? Australian Feminism and Aboriginal Women's Rights 1919–1939* (Carlton South, Vic: Melbourne University Press, 2000); Alison Holland, 'Wives and Mothers Like Ourselves? Exploring White Women's Intervention in the Politics of Race, 1920s–1940s', *Australian Historical Studies* 32, no. 117 (1 October 2001): 292–310, doi.org/10.1080/10314610108596166.

8 Marilyn Lake, 'Between Old World "Barbarism" and Stone Age "Primitivism": The Double Difference of the White Australian Feminist', in *Australian Women: Contemporary Feminist Thought*, ed. Norma Grieve and Ailsa Burns (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994), 90.

9 Sue Taffe, 'The Council for Aboriginal Rights (Victoria)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (ADB), National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, adb.anu.edu.au/essay/8/text29426, originally published 11 April 2014, accessed 10 February 2022.

10 Kate Laing and Lucy Davies, 'The Leadership of Women in the 1967 Referendum', *Agora* 56, no. 1 (March 2021).

11 For more on Joyce Clague and her activism with WILPF and the World Council of Churches see Kate Laing and Lucy Davies, 'Intersecting Paths of the Local and the International: Joyce Clague's Activist Journeys', *Women's History Review* (11 June 2020): 1–20.

While WILPF women collaborated with others who worked for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights between the 1920s and 1950s—women such as Bessie Rischbieth and Ada Bromham—they did not make Indigenous rights activism part of their core campaign platform until the 1950s. It was only after Anna Vroland combined WILPF's agenda with Aboriginal rights campaigns upon taking over as the secretary that WILPF made a real attempt to interact with women from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. WILPF women connected the campaign with their internationalism, basing their theories of achieving racial equality on demanding the proper application of universal human rights. They saw the treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia as a prerequisite for peace and promoted the campaign internationally. With the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN allowed a new discourse that solved some of WILPF's philosophical ambiguities. The language of human rights associated with the UN system focused on individual rights rather than nation-states and allowed WILPF a new framework.

WILPF reformed

During the late 1940s, WILPF in Australia was limited in its activities because of a small and aging membership. A core group remained interested in world affairs but were unable to recruit younger or more active members. Annual reports show that their activities mainly consisted of meetings or conferences with other organisations, such as collaborations with the Australian Peace Campaign, and the Federal Pacifist Council of Australia.¹² Internationally, after World War II, WILPF mourned the loss of many members including some who had died in exile or concentration camps.¹³ The executive of the organisation was unable to meet throughout the war and was only able to reconvene in September 1945.¹⁴ At the 1946 conference in Luxembourg, though no Australian delegate was able to attend, WILPF seriously questioned whether it should continue or dissolve.

12 'WILPF Australian Section annual report', 7 February 1949, series III reel 54, WILPF International Papers 1915–1978, Sanford, NC: Microfilming Corp. of America, c 1983, accessed NLA. Hereafter referred to as WILPF Papers.

13 Rosa Manus of Holland died in a German concentration camp, Anita Augspurg and Lida Gustava Heymann both from Germany died in exile in Switzerland. More WILPF wartime losses were outlined in GC Bussey, and Margaret Tims, *Pioneers for Peace: Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 1915–1965*, 2nd ed. (London: Allen & Unwin, 1965), 180.

14 Bussey and Tims, *Pioneers for Peace*, 187.

Dutch member J Repelaer van Driel spoke to the dissolution of WILPF, questioning the gender essentialism of the organisation. Her experience of war showed that women were just as likely to be complicit in violence and oppression. She did not want WILPF to dissolve, but she felt a serious reappraisal of their aims should be undertaken. Continuing as a women's organisation after women had attained the right to vote in most countries showed 'women who separate themselves into groups for the advancement of universal goals, demonstrate clearly their own inferiority complex'.¹⁵ In response to van Driel, US member Mildred Scott Olmsted spoke about women's peaceful nature. This exchange is revealing of the internal contradictions of WILPF's gendered organising, which were constantly negotiated and questioned. As Catia Confortini has observed, it was also at this conference that 'they recognised the tension between their prewar liberal ideals and those ideals' inability to prevent the Holocaust'.¹⁶ Confortini argues that after this discussion WILPF refrained from interrogating the relationship between women and peace in the 1940s and 1950s beyond their activism on women's equal representation at the UN. In many ways it reflected the absence of 'an organised feminist movement that publicly resurfaced only later'.¹⁷

Despite the exhaustion and disillusionment of many after the war, the conference voted overwhelmingly for WILPF to continue. A new secretary general was appointed, Mrs Anne Bloch from the US, who actively tried to re-engage national sections of WILPF. She sent the Australian section letters urging that they focus on recruiting younger members: 'please try to give us a sign of life as often as you can'.¹⁸ WILPF International needed local involvement to bolster their legitimacy.

In 1949 the WILPF triennial congress was held in Copenhagen, and Victorian member Mrs Edith Abbott acted as the Australian delegate. Abbott was an early member of WILPF who fell out of communication with the group when she moved to the country and joined the Country Women's Association

15 Bussey and Tims, *Pioneers for Peace*, 188. See also '10th International Congress of the WILPF', Congress report at Luxembourg, 4–9 August 1946, database edited by Kathryn Kish Sklar and Thomas Dublin, *Women and Social Movements, International—1840 to Present*, 182. Translated from French to English by Julie Johnson 2015.

16 Catia Cecilia Confortini, *Intelligent Compassion: The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and Feminist Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4, doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199845231.001.0001.

17 Confortini, *Intelligent Compassion*, 43.

18 Bloch to Moore, 10 February 1949, series III reel 54, WILPF Papers.

(affiliated to the Associated Countrywomen of the World).¹⁹ She agreed to be the Australian representative as she was preparing for a trip to England. The prospect of having Australia represented at WILPF conferences once again gave momentum to the small and disconnected section, who sensed their activities had been hampered by a feeling of isolation. As Moore noted in a letter to Bloch in 1948: 'the threads of communication broken by the war have never been quite picked up.'²⁰ The recent introduction of airmail relieved some anxieties, but international travel was still difficult with 'little money and no official priority'.²¹ Air travel was prohibitively expensive. While Abbott's journey by ship was long and interrupted, she still made the August conference.

For Abbott, the experience of the conference was emotional and transformative. She wrote in a report to the Australian section how she felt attending the conference as a delegate was a 'privilege' that she deeply appreciated, believing 'there is no experience in life like that of attending an international conference.'²² It allowed her to realise how 'isolated' Australia was and how important the 'few seeking souls' were who thought on world affairs.²³ While Abbott was abroad, Moore passed away and the future of the Australian section was uncertain. Abbott returned and pleaded with the remaining members to make 'every effort to carry on'.²⁴ At this time WILPF Australia received a generous bequest of £100 from the deceased estate of Mrs Lucy Creeth, who had been a devoted member of the Western Australian branch.²⁵ The injection of funds, the excitement of reconnecting with the rejuvenated international section, and the addition of new members allowed WILPF Australia not just to reform, but to refocus. The most important new additions to the membership were Anna Vroland who joined and became the honorary secretary, and Doris Blackburn who became the president, having rejoined after a lapse in engagement.

19 Moore to Bloch, 29 March 1949, series III reel 54, WILPF Papers.

20 Moore to Bloch, 11 December 1948, series III reel 54, WILPF Papers.

21 Moore to Bloch, 12 May 1949, series III reel 54, WILPF Papers.

22 Edith M Abbott, report to the Australian Section of WILPF, 28 March 1950, Box 1728/3 Papers, WILPF, MS 9377, State Library of Victoria (SLV).

23 Edith M Abbott, report to the Australian Section of WILPF, 28 March 1950, Box 1728/3 Papers, WILPF, MS 9377, SLV.

24 Australian section report, '12th International Congress of WILPF report', 4–8 August 1953, Paris, in Sklar and Dublin, eds, *Women and Social Movements*, 143.

25 Australian section report, '12th International Congress of WILPF report', 4–8 August 1953, Paris, 143. See also letter from the deceased estate of Lucy Creeth, 25 August 1950 in Box 1724/2 Papers, WILPF, MS 9377, SLV.



‘(194-?) Portrait of Mrs. Doris Blackburn, M.H.R.’

Source: This photograph was taken by Jack Gallagher, who was a government photographer working for the Australia Department of Information. National Library of Australia. See Appendix for a short biography of Doris Blackburn.

The two world wars had radically changed Australian politics. The federal government was located in Melbourne until 1927, when it moved to Canberra and the city rapidly grew to accommodate the new administration. Women still faced many barriers to full political participation, most notably shown by the ban on married women in the public service which was not abolished until 1966.²⁶ World War II also had a profound effect on women’s employment opportunities and changed ideas about femininity and sexuality. Women gained ‘independence, self-reliance and autonomy’, which came with taking on male jobs with higher wages.²⁷ The government established the Women’s Employment Board to regulate the wages and conditions of women doing men’s work, and to allay fears of employers and trade unions about women taking men’s jobs.²⁸ The reality of women

26 Marian Sawer, *Removal of the Commonwealth Marriage Bar: A Documentary History* (Canberra: University of Canberra, Centre for Research in Public Sector Management, 1997).

27 Marilyn Lake, ‘Female Desires: The Meaning of World War II’, *Australian Historical Studies* 24, no. 95 (1 October 1990): 269, doi.org/10.1080/10314619008595846.

28 Lake, ‘Female Desires’, 269.

taking on roles traditionally considered masculine challenged traditional gender norms and provoked 'strenuous reaffirmations of sexual difference'.²⁹ As historian Jill Matthews has noted, the construction of femininity changed over the first half of the twentieth century and by the 1950s conceptions of women in society shifted from ideas about sacrifice and a role as 'mother of the race' to a culture of 'permissive consumerism'.³⁰ Women were increasingly 'purchasing managers' for the household rather than servants of private spaces.³¹ Femininity and sexuality were defined by youthfulness and consumerism, as evident in the traditional gender roles advertisers increasingly directed towards women.³²

The fear of Cold War politics after World War II and a backlash against new images of femininity 'fostered a deep suspicion of social change, sexual deviance and female autonomy'.³³ The image of the 'nuclear family' and the idealised housewife therefore took on a new significance, while families also became increasingly dependent on women's waged work to 'maintain a desired lifestyle based on the purchase of services and commodities'.³⁴ Coupled with this shift was the increasing importance placed on women's right to work by the women's movement. From the 1930s onwards the feminist agenda also shifted away from promoting sexual difference towards encouraging women to participate on equal terms in public life.³⁵ Maternalist feminism, popular when WILPF was first constituted, was beginning to be seen as 'anachronistic, prudish and divisive'.³⁶ By the late 1940s, WILPF had lost touch with these new expressions of feminism and understandings of sexuality. Maternal activists for women's rights had demonstrated little capacity in later years to adjust their position to take on this difference within the organisation. Many feminists of the interwar era were opposed to the new representations of femininity.³⁷

29 Lake, 'Female Desires', 269.

30 Jill Julius Matthews, *Good and Mad Women: The Historical Construction of Femininity in Twentieth Century Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1984), 90.

31 Matthews, *Good and Mad Women*, 90.

32 Matthews, *Good and Mad Women*, 90; Lake, 'Female Desires', 272.

33 Gail Reekie, 'Market Research and the Post-War Housewife', *Australian Feminist Studies* 6, no. 14 (1 December 1991): 15, doi.org/10.1080/08164649.1991.9994625.

34 Reekie, 'Market Research and the Post-War Housewife', 15.

35 Marilyn Lake, *Getting Equal: The History of Australian Feminism* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1999), 174.

36 Lake, 'Female Desires', 284.

37 Matthews, *Good and Mad Women*, 90.

The revival of WILPF internationally after the war and the vacuum left following Moore's death in Australia brought forth a new wave of women willing to engage with some of these complexities. WILPF was able to bring together a variety of points of view with different party allegiances because the women were 'united by the belief that warfare should be eliminated and that economic and social justice was part and parcel of a system of peace'.³⁸ WILPF adapted because of its basis in the tradition of liberal internationalism, and because (despite what Moore believed and hoped) the organisation had itself never identified with absolute pacifism or feminism, though many members individually did.³⁹ When asked to make definitive statements on complex issues, WILPF leaders often opted instead to refer people to the 'WILPF principles showing that women of different political viewpoints are welcomed'.⁴⁰ The new president of the Australian section, Blackburn, reasserted this position when the section reformed and delineated their new philosophical and theoretical understanding of the Australian section of WILPF. One member from Western Australia wrote referring to the new direction: 'I agree with Mrs Blackburn that the WILPF is not a Pacifist Organisation. Quite a number of our members may be, certainly not everyone.'⁴¹

In Australia white women had had the right to vote federally since 1902. The right to stand for election, however, was not granted to every woman in every state until 1923 when Victorian women were finally awarded the right to stand for state parliament.⁴² WILPF women were proud of Australia's international reputation as a pioneer in women's political rights. However, despite the right to stand for federal parliament being won so early, it took 41 years before women were elected to federal parliament.⁴³ The first, in 1943, were Dame Enid Lyons, widow of the former prime minister, elected for the United Australia Party to the House of Representatives, along with Dorothy Tangney, who would represent the Labor Party in the Senate.⁴⁴ Three years later, Doris Blackburn was elected to the House of Representatives in the seat of Bourke as independent Labor, meaning she

38 Confortini, *Intelligent Compassion*, 4.

39 Confortini, *Intelligent Compassion*, 12.

40 WILPF Executive record of discussion, 9 August 1952, series III reel 54, WILPF Papers.

41 Nancy Wilkinson, WILPF member from the WA branch, to Anna Vroland, 10 November 1953, Box 1722, Papers, WILPF, MS 9377, SLV.

42 Marian Sawyer, *A Woman's Place: Women and Politics in Australia*, 2nd ed. (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1993), 5.

43 Sawyer, *A Woman's Place*, 1.

44 Sawyer, *A Woman's Place*, 197.

was elected on Labor principles but not bound by the Australian Labor Party (ALP) Caucus. As a leader in WILPF before and after World War II, Blackburn's election to parliament represented a moment of mainstreaming for WILPF's agenda.

Blackburn had been an early member of WILPF, joining the Sisterhood of International Peace in 1915.⁴⁵ She was also a member of the Women's Political Association (WPA), where she met her husband Maurice Blackburn, a lawyer and member of the Victorian and later the federal parliament. Doris had been a campaign manager for Vida Goldstein's senate election bid in 1913.⁴⁶ She was president of WILPF from 1928 to 1930, though her involvement during this time was limited by her caring responsibilities for young children.⁴⁷ In 1937 Blackburn threw her energies into the International Peace Campaign (IPC), for which she was suspended from the Labor Party. She had a very pragmatic political style and was not interested in putting her energies into organisations that she felt were too insular and not advancing the cause for peace. She rejected absolute pacifism in the face of fascism and was thus aligned with the WILPF headquarters rather than the Australian section during the disagreements at the beginning of the war. She distanced herself from the Melbourne WILPF group because they publicly denounced the IPC.⁴⁸ After electoral defeat in 1949, when the seat of Bourke was redistributed into the seat of Wills, Blackburn returned to WILPF and once more became president in 1950. WILPF, in need of new leadership after Moore's death, provided a platform for her activism after her brief time in parliament ended. She was particularly interested in re-engaging with the international network and wanted to align the policies of the national section once more with the headquarters in Geneva.

45 Carolyn Rasmussen, 'Falling In and Out of Love: Doris Hordern, Maurice Blackburn and the Women's Political Association 1911–1915', in *Fighting Against War: Peace Activism in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Phillip Deery and Julie Kimber (Albert Park, Vic: Leftbank Press, 2015), 47.

46 Carolyn Rasmussen, 'Blackburn, Doris Amelia (1889–1970)', ADB, National Centre of Biography, ANU, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/blackburn-doris-amelia-9517/text16755, published first in hardcopy 1993, accessed online 2 December 2014.

47 Rasmussen, 'Blackburn, Doris Amelia (1889–1970)', ADB.

48 Rasmussen, 'Falling In and Out of Love', 50.



Anna Vroland speaking at the 50th Celebration of WILPF, Faith Bandler sitting in background. Celebration of 50th anniversary of Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 28 April 1965.

Source: Compiled by Margaret Holmes, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales and the Womens International League for Peace and Freedom (NSW Branch) [PXB 726]. See Appendix for a short biography of Anna Vroland.

Anna Vroland was, like Blackburn, involved in progressive causes in Melbourne, being an executive member of the Victorian Council Against War during the 1930s.⁴⁹ Vroland and her husband Anton, who married in 1947, were members of Charles Strong's Australian Church that founded the Sisterhood in 1915. Although no longer in its heyday, it still carried on in Melbourne organising and attracting nonconformist liberal intellectuals to progressive causes. Anton was secretary of the church from 1936 to 1955.⁵⁰ Well educated, Vroland was a teacher by profession, as was her husband. She had a great interest in internationalism and international relations and in 1938 acted as a commentator on international affairs for the radio station 3MA in Mildura. Her 12 broadcast talks were printed in a booklet called *Who Goes Where?*⁵¹ Active alongside WILPF in World War II, she did not join as she 'had little tolerance for people whose ideas differed from

49 Sitarani Kerin, *'An Attitude of Respect': Anna Vroland and Aboriginal Rights, 1947–1957* (Clayton, Vic: Monash University, 1999).

50 Sitarani Kerin and Andrew Spaul, 'Vroland, Anna Fellowes (1902–1978)', ADB, National Centre of Biography, ANU, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/vroland-anna-fellowes-12108/text21371, published first in hardcopy 2002, accessed online 12 March 2015.

51 Anna White, *Who Goes Where?* (Mildura, Vic: Sunraysia Daily Print, 1938).

her own, and frequently worked alone', disagreeing with the anomalous position of WILPF during the war.⁵² When she decided to join WILPF as it entered a new phase, she prioritised policy on Aboriginal affairs. She wrote in a letter to the headquarters of WILPF enclosing her policies about Aboriginal affairs that:

for years, some of us have been presenting it to various organisations, hoping to interest some of them. It is because the WILPF women here took it seriously that I joined the organisation.⁵³

WILPF had ratified her policy platform, but before Vroland's involvement with WILPF, their engagement with Aboriginal issues was limited to collaboration with sympathetic organisations.⁵⁴

The United Nations and human rights

The League of Nations broke down during the 1930s and 1940s as nations withdrew and the organisation struggled to deal with state aggression.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, after World War II there was an increased investment in international solutions to world affairs which led to the creation of the United Nations.⁵⁶ Based in New York after 1945, the UN distinguished itself from the failed League of Nations experiment, but the League's organisational legacy was absorbed into the new institution and lessons of its shortcomings were taken on board. While the General Assembly represented internationally recognised states, and the Security Council gave veto rights to the US, China, the UK, France and the Soviet Union, which enshrined national sovereignty, its charter focused on 'fundamental freedoms without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion.'⁵⁷ This provided a way for marginalised groups to agitate to have their voices heard and introduced a 'human rights orientation to the concept of social

52 Kerin and Spaull, 'Vroland, Anna Fellowes (1902–1978)', ADB.

53 Vroland to Baer, 16 November 1953, series III reel 54, WILPF Papers. For example, the National Council of Women Australia did not have much interest in pursuing Aboriginal issues, 'there was not significant further discussion' until the 1960s. Judith Smart and Marian Quartly, *Respectable Radicals: A History of the National Council of Women of Australia 1896–2006* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2015), 319.

54 Eleanor M Moore, *The Quest for Peace, As I Have Known It in Australia* (Melbourne, 1948), 142.

55 Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 78, doi.org/10.9783/9780812207781.

56 Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism*, 78.

57 Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism*, 94.

justice'.⁵⁸ Internationally, WILPF fully supported the creation of the UN, despite its compromises and imperfections, as they believed that one of the root causes of war was 'the lack of legal instruments to resolve disputes peacefully. International law would be the antidote to the use of violence in international disputes'.⁵⁹ WILPF women also believed that any revision of the charter might lead to the dissolution of the organisation, so were reserved in their criticism.⁶⁰

Historian Glenda Sluga defines this period as the 'apogee of internationalism' which, at the new UN, saw the creation of affiliated bodies such as the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), formed in 1946, and the Human Rights Commission, which held its opening session in 1947.⁶¹ After the horrors of two world wars, which increased sensitivity to race-based discrimination, the rights of the individual were put forward as a central issue. This shaped the new era's focus on human rights, reinforced in 1948 when the General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The concept of human rights was not familiar in the mid-twentieth century, but after its incorporation into the central platforms of the UN it infused the language used to discuss world issues. The commission was flooded by demands for international attention and intervention on issues now characterised as violations of human rights.⁶² Roland Burke has also shown how the human rights agenda helped the process of decolonisation as 'third world' delegates used the new discourse to push for the declaration to be truly universal.⁶³ This new international language gave WILPF in Australia a way to understand national and domestic issues in an international framework.

Australia was a conspicuous presence at the 1945 San Francisco Conference as Labor's Herbert Vere Evatt steered a delegation that included Jessie Street. Street was a well-travelled Australian woman with respected political skills and influence. Prominent in many progressive causes, she was part of a politically connected family as the 'daughter-in-law, wife, and mother of three Supreme Court Justices'.⁶⁴ Years earlier she had advocated for women's

58 Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism*, 94.

59 Confortini, *Intelligent Compassion*, 34.

60 Confortini, *Intelligent Compassion*, 36.

61 Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism*, 78.

62 Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism*, 100.

63 Roland Burke, *Decolonization and the Evolution of International Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), doi.org/10.9783/9780812205329.

64 Jessie MG Street and Lenore Coltheart, *Jessie Street: A Revised Autobiography* (Annandale, NSW: Federation Press, 2004), vii.

rights as an alternate delegate for Australia at the League of Nations. She was then chosen as the only Australian female delegate at the San Francisco Conference and became a key player in the establishment of the CSW, before being elected as its vice-chairman in 1947.⁶⁵

Street's appointment was not without criticism from other feminists. When she was appointed to the UN delegation by Evatt, Bessie Rischbieth and other activists protested to the prime minister, John Curtin, noting that there needed to be more transparency in the selection process.⁶⁶ In 1945, Street and Rischbieth, a prominent feminist from Western Australia, attended the founding conference in Paris of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), an organisation that became defined by its support for the Soviet Union. While there, Rischbieth became decidedly anti-communist. Later in a speech in Australia she defended democracy against 'the methods of the Soviet order (suppression of free speech, the imposition of uniformity and domination from the top).'⁶⁷ Street, however, showed sympathy towards the policies and practices of the Soviet Union. She wrote after her visit to the Soviet Russia in 1938 that she was 'very interested to find women had complete equality', and later became president of the Australian Soviet Friendship Society.⁶⁸ Rischbieth's and Street's philosophies on how to lead the women's movement in Australia became divided along Cold War lines.

When WILPF in Australia heard of Street's appointment to the UN meeting in 1945, they were pleased to have been part of the successful lobbying effort to have a female representative. Moore wrote to the international headquarters what she knew of Street, noting 'she was active in the IPC during its period of popularity and is to that extent peace-minded'.⁶⁹ Initially Australian WILPF had limited engagement with Street. Moore and her team were focused on Melbourne, and as Street was a well-known activist from Sydney she had not involved herself in the everyday working of the organisation. Yet, while the small Melbourne branch did not personally know Street in the 1940s, the headquarters in Geneva knew her well. In 1938 Street visited Geneva to attend the League of Nations and to work with women's organisations as president of the United Associations

65 Lake, *Getting Equal*, 204.

66 Lake, *Getting Equal*, 203.

67 Lake, *Getting Equal*, 203.

68 Street, 'Statement', New Delhi, 22 November 1954, Box 13/8, Jessie Street Papers, NLA.

69 Moore to Baer, 16 March 1945, series III reel 54, WILPF Papers.

of Women, which was affiliated to the International Alliance of Women (IAW). While there she attended WILPF International meetings to 'ensure the fullest understanding of women's issues around the world'.⁷⁰

Street wrote in her autobiography how some delegates to the League of Nations were very patronising to women activists lobbying in the international sphere, noting:

With few exceptions the male delegates were very backward in their attitude to women and in understanding the political, social and economic problems arising from sex discrimination. They listened to us with condescension and rather amused tolerance.⁷¹

Street was a member of WILPF internationally as well as many other international women's organisations, including the WIDF. In 1954 she addressed a WILPF forum to discuss the history of the disarmament campaign, drawing on her personal involvement with the international movement.⁷² Her engagement with WILPF however was not through any Australian branches, but from abroad, communicating directly with European branches. From 1950 to 1956 she was effectively exiled from Australia when the Menzies Government withdrew her passport. This was because of her sympathy for the Soviet Union and the allegations of her communist associations, freezing her out of Australian politics at the height of the Cold War.⁷³

Street maintained that she 'never was a communist' despite showing interest in the Soviet Union and its policies and attending Stalin's funeral as a guest in 1953.⁷⁴ She was very aware of the negative connotations evoked by any support for Soviet Russia and used her membership of various women's organisations strategically to counteract this. When necessary she promoted and organised within WIDF, helping to build the organisation into one of the largest international women's groups after World War II. Street had an interest in organising behind the 'Iron Curtain'. Yet, when she wanted to soften her image and distance herself from allegations of 'communist front'

⁷⁰ Street and Coltheart, *Jessie Street*, 125.

⁷¹ Street and Coltheart, *Jessie Street*, 125.

⁷² Street, 'Disarmament?' Paper presented to WILPF, 1954, Jessie Street Papers, Box 13/2, NLA.

⁷³ Street and Coltheart, *Jessie Street*, vii.

⁷⁴ Nina Lowe to Vroland, 25 July 1956, reporting back from the Birmingham conference, Box 1722/25, Papers, WILPF, MS 9377, SLV; Ros Pesman, *Duty Free: Australian Women Abroad* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1996), 138.

activities, she emphasised her membership to WILPF and downplayed her affiliation with WIDF by using the umbrella statement 'member of organisations working for equal rights for women'.⁷⁵

In 1956 Street tried to convince the international leadership of WILPF to host a World Disarmament Conference with other peace organisations, noting 'I believe that the WILPF has a special spur to do this'.⁷⁶ She later clarified that the 'special spur' was that 'if you go to a peace congress now, you are called a communist and are cut off from your organisations. But if you have a conference organised by a body which is not suspect you may get somewhere'.⁷⁷ WILPF membership was therefore a tactical advantage in trying to give her message legitimacy. She utilised the jealously guarded and vigorously defended 'non-communist' image of WILPF while also freely associating with WIDF's subversiveness. Tensions caused by Cold War politics divided the women's movement and exacerbated personality clashes, to which women's organisations were vulnerable because of their non-hierarchical and unofficial structures.

Street was also present at the 1956 WILPF triennial congress in Birmingham. However, by then the Melbourne branch of WILPF, led by Vroland, were not appreciative of Street claiming membership of the section without involvement in the local network. Doris Blackburn, too, was often frustrated by Street's disorganised working style.⁷⁸ The section made a special effort to have their own delegate present who could provide a different perspective of the branch and report back to them. Nina Lowe was the chosen delegate who was able to be in England at the time, though she felt unqualified, writing to Vroland: 'I too wish you were here instead of an old noodle like me'.⁷⁹ Nonetheless, the Melbourne branch encouraged her to participate and to send information so they could get a better picture of Australia's standing within WILPF. The tension between Street and the Melbourne branch was clear when Lowe was unsure if the Australian section report had been received. Asking the secretariat who she should contact, they assumed Street was the official Australian delegate. Lowe wrote to

75 Street, 'Statement', New Delhi, 22 November 1954, Box 13/8, Jessie Street Papers, NLA.

76 Street, 'Minutes of Meeting with Peace Organisations', 29 July 1956, Birmingham, series I folder 13, reel 23, WILPF Papers.

77 Street, 'Minutes of Meeting with Peace Organisations', 29 July 1956, Birmingham, series I folder 13, reel 23, WILPF Papers.

78 Carolyn Rassmussen, *The Blackburns: Private Lives, Public Ambition* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2019), 296.

79 Lowe to Vroland, 22 July 1956, Box 1722/25, Papers, WILPF, MS 9377, SLV.

Vroland: 'I did not feel she was the one or that you would approve.'⁸⁰ The misunderstanding was rectified when Vroland's report was found, yet this incident highlighted another rivalry within the women's movement. There was a difference between the way members of the section felt about WILPF and how Street utilised it; they personally identified with the organisation while Street tactically engaged. Lowe described Street's contribution to the conference as 'provocative', recalling one discussion group where a prominent member from the UK section Kathleen Lonsdale 'almost lost her temper' with Street.⁸¹ Nonetheless, WILPF International respected Street and her contribution to internationalism while the women's networks were in the process of re-engaging after the breakdown in communications during the war.

WILPF International connected with the UN and lobbied the national delegations just as they had done with the League of Nations. In 1948 they were eventually given consultative status B as a non-government organisation (NGO) to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).⁸² This was after much lobbying and a few rejected efforts on the grounds that the Liaison Committee of Women's International Organisations could represent them.⁸³ In 1949 they were also admitted to consultative status with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). Both statuses remain with the organisation today. Gertrud Baer was appointed to be the consultant to the UN on behalf of WILPF.

It was towards Baer that Vroland directed her energy, encouraging her to use WILPF's newfound status with the UN to place Aboriginal rights on the international agenda, just as Street and Mary Bennett had tried to do earlier at the UN.⁸⁴ WILPF in Australia felt the need to approach international policymakers outside of the Australian delegation since Evatt and the Department of External Affairs did not take comments by WILPF into account. The government had a 'tendency to simply file comments from NGOs without subjecting them to detailed consideration.'⁸⁵ But with a new human rights language to discuss oppression and disadvantage, the

80 Lowe to Vroland, 22 July 1956, Box 1722/25, Papers, WILPF, MS 9377, SLV.

81 Lowe to Vroland, 25 July 1956, Box 1722/25, Papers, WILPF, MS 9377, SLV.

82 'NGO Branch ECOSOC, UN Website, WILPF Profile Special Consultative status since 1948', accessed 28 March 2015, esango.un.org/civilsociety/showProfileDetail.do?method=showProfileDetails&tab=1&profileCode=500.

83 Bussey and Tims, *Pioneers for Peace*, 197.

84 Marilyn Lake, *Faith: Faith Bandler, Gentle Activist* (NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2002), 66.

85 Annemarie Devereux, *Australia and the Birth of the International Bill of Human Rights, 1946–1966* (Annandale: Federation Press, 2005), 138.

Australian section of WILPF took a new direction, notably in making the injustice experienced by Aboriginal Australians an issue of international consequence.

Aboriginal rights

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Social Darwinism heavily influenced policymakers who adopted a racialised vision of the world. Social Darwinists borrowed from Charles Darwin's theories on evolution in plants and animals and 'applied them, inappropriately, to change in human societies'.⁸⁶ The Australian Government or protection boards developed social policies that were motivated by the belief that Indigenous people were 'inferior races' who were 'doomed' to 'fade away'.⁸⁷ It eventually became clear, however, that Aboriginal people were not 'disappearing'. In fact, contrary to a belief that 'mixed race' people would become white and no longer identify with the Aboriginal community, many were instead 'identifying as Aboriginal, living with their Aboriginal relatives, and being identified by whites as Aboriginal'.⁸⁸ This led the protection boards in different states to develop new ways to categorise Indigenous people, which often had a significant impact on the way they were treated by state authorities as well as the status of their citizenship and the level of support they were entitled to. By 1900, 55 per cent of the Aboriginal population were of 'mixed' Aboriginal and European descent and were labelled as 'half-castes, quadroons, and octoroons'.⁸⁹ It was the anxiety about assimilating different 'categories' into the dominant 'white' culture that led to the removal of 'mixed' race children from families with the intention of separating them from their Aboriginal identity. These removals were, as is now widely recognised, a form of cultural genocide.

In a turn away from a paternalistic vision towards a more humanitarian approach, Vroland's focus was to understand Indigenous peoples' point of view rather than relying solely on 'expert' anthropologists who claimed to know what was in their interests. Historian Sitarani Kerin, in her work

86 Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in New South Wales, 1770–1972* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2008), 104.

87 Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, 104.

88 Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, 118.

89 Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, 118.

on Vroland, argues that this approach set her activism apart from others.⁹⁰ Vroland's thinking on Aboriginal affairs influenced WILPF, while the organisation's focus on internationalism in turn led her to seek solutions within the UN. Vroland read widely about 'traditional' Aboriginal culture from anthropologists such as Professor AP Elkin. An Anglican clergyman and anthropologist, Elkin claimed that experts like himself were better able to interpret and administer Indigenous communities than they were themselves.⁹¹ His work focused on the concept of how the traditional culture had 'shattered' under the impact of colonisation. Elkin believed that all that remained of the traditional culture were 'full-blooded Aborigines' and he therefore created an 'artificial division of Aboriginal society', delegitimising mixed-race and urban Indigenous communities.⁹² When Vroland wrote to him in 1948 to request information about Victorian Aboriginal people from Lake Tyers and how to best encourage their adjustment to white society, his response was to say such people 'should be classed as members of the general community'.⁹³

Vroland agreed with the consensus that Aboriginal peoples living in urban areas had 'lost' their culture. That said, she also recognised the inconsistency of treating them as part of the white community when they identified themselves as Aboriginal and were racially discriminated against by the rest of society. In a paper titled 'Towards Human Rights for Aborigines', Vroland noted that although these 'mixed descent' Aboriginal people were removed from their 'age old ancestors' they still 'speak of themselves as Aborigines though they are almost completely absorbed into the general community'.⁹⁴ She felt that much of the anthropological literature conflicted with the views of those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples whom she had met and corresponded with. Her interaction with Victorian activists such as Margaret Tucker helped her to critique the dominant school of thought.⁹⁵ She wrote about the need to bring Aboriginal voices into the conversation about improving the lives of the urban Aboriginal communities in a way that acknowledged the common history of white oppression:

90 Kerin, 'An Attitude of Respect', xi. A description of Vroland's distinctive views is also discussed in Bain Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2003), 146.

91 Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, 235.

92 Kerin, 'An Attitude of Respect', 3.

93 Kerin, 'An Attitude of Respect', 5.

94 Kerin, 'An Attitude of Respect', 5.

95 John Farquharson, 'Tucker, Margaret Elizabeth (Auntie Marge) (1904–1996)', *Obituaries Australia*, National Centre of Biography, ANU, ia.anu.edu.au/biography/tucker-margaret-elizabeth-auntie-marge-1556/text1618, accessed 30 March 2015.

Some time ago I met a very old man who had lived in Doncaster all his life. He remembered when red-coated soldiers used to ride out from Melbourne to shoot down aborigines, sometimes they took home a piccaninny for a pet. Such stories persist. And they are known abroad. Today, the public conscience is guilty about past treatment of aborigines ... Let us begin, as last, to try to understand these people. Let us hear what they have to say. Otherwise, what hypocrisy to talk about the rights of small nations!⁹⁶

Vroland sought to persuade Australians to take domestic action to improve the lives of Aboriginal people by exposing the country's poor national track record internationally, as well as by teaching white people about their thought, culture and hardships. To advance the latter cause, in 1951 she published a book called *Their Music Has Roots*, her own anthropological study of music and Victorian Indigenous communities.⁹⁷ It was an attempt to 'interpret to white people something of the thinking of dark Australians'. But Vroland believed that change would occur only when 'Aboriginal people were able to speak and struggle for themselves' and when white people were prepared to listen.⁹⁸ She sent her work around as an example of her advocacy and received many letters of recognition, including from Jessie Street who replied: 'I think it is a beautiful presentation of the aborigine outlook. Reading it has given me a clearer insight into their way of thinking'.⁹⁹

Their Music Has Roots showcased the relationship Vroland had with the Aboriginal community. It focused on the lyrics of 10 songs and told the story of how Vroland herself first heard the music and what it meant to the person who sang it to her. This also gave her a platform to discuss other social and political problems faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Margaret Tucker sang the first song, 'The Rough Road', and Vroland began the chapter with a simple instruction: 'Listen to Lulardia (Mrs Margaret Tucker)'. She then went on to explain her story: 'One of the first things I can remember is the singing of my dear old uncle. He used to sing me to sleep with songs in the old language'.¹⁰⁰ Tucker (Lulardia) was an Aboriginal activist born at Mooncullah in NSW before she was 'taken away

96 Vroland, 'The Aboriginal Questions—Aborigines I have Known', Undated, Vroland Papers MS 10301 Box 4336/4, SLV.

97 Anna F Vroland, *Their Music Has Roots* (Box Hill, Vic: Anna F. Vroland, 1951).

98 Kerin, 'An Attitude of Respect', 7.

99 Street to Vroland, 30 July 1957, Papers of A. Vroland Box 3/20 NLA.

100 Margaret Tucker quoted in Vroland, *Their Music Has Roots*, 2.

by the police' to be 'educated'.¹⁰¹ Hearing this personal history helped shape Vroland's understanding of Aboriginality as Tucker identified as Aboriginal despite being 'detribalised' or removed from the 'old' culture. Through her friendship with Tucker, Vroland recognised that Aboriginal women had an important role as spokespeople for their communities. She communicated by letter to many Aboriginal women and brought them into contact with the activities of WILPF.

In 1963 the anthropologist Diane Barwick submitted her doctoral thesis on the Victorian Aboriginal community, noting that many showed 'antipathy towards well-intentioned whites'.¹⁰² Indigenous Australians interviewed by Barwick described three types of white 'do-gooders': 'the social worker type, the church people, and the type of women who had no children of their own and were in search of a good cause to fill the emptiness in their lives'.¹⁰³ Vroland could have been described as all three, but she was unusual in first earning the trust of Aboriginal women by helping only where needed and only when requested. She avoided speaking on anyone's behalf without their consent or collaboration. She also combined her charitable efforts with a 'critique of the system which perpetuated their impoverishment'.¹⁰⁴ In *Their Music Has Roots*, and in the Anton Vroland papers at the National Library of Australia, stories of how Vroland helped Aboriginal peoples are abundant. For example, she advocated on behalf of Edna Harrison who needed help getting the maternity allowance as she had been 'rejected on the grounds that [she was] an Aboriginal Native residing on an Aboriginal reserve [at Lake Tyers]'.¹⁰⁵ She also sent a recommendation letter on behalf of Emma Bryant who, as a young Indigenous woman from East Gippsland, wanted special consideration to gain access to education to become a teacher.¹⁰⁶ In *Their Music Has Roots* Vroland explained how she had provided accommodation in her home to a woman named Mary Pepper, who was released from hospital in Melbourne but was gravely ill. She later died and Vroland helped her sister, Nellie Darby, by paying her fines and bail.¹⁰⁷

101 For more information on Margaret Tucker, see documentary directed by Alec Morgan and Gerry Bostock, *Lousy Little Sixpence* (Ronin Films, 1982).

102 Diane Barwick, 'A Little More than Kin: Regional Affiliation and Group Identity Among Aboriginal Migrants in Melbourne' (PhD thesis, ANU, 1963), quoted in Kerin, 'An Attitude of Respect', 30.

103 Kerin, 'An Attitude of Respect', 30.

104 Kerin, 'An Attitude of Respect', 33.

105 Director of Social Services to Edna Harrison, 'Maternity Allowance', 18 October 1950, Papers of A. Vroland, Box 3/20 NLA.

106 Vroland, to Mr Pederick on behalf of Emma Bryant, 19 September 1955, Papers of A. Vroland Box 3/20 NLA.

107 Vroland, *Their Music Has Roots*, 20.

According to Kerin, Vroland's ideas about the identity of 'part-Aboriginal' people were confused and complicated. She 'believed that Aboriginal culture no longer existed in Victoria' and yet her book was 'essentially an account of Aboriginal culture, a culture which, according to her own anthropologically-inspired understanding, did not exist.'¹⁰⁸ Similar to WILPF's early discussions on the WAP, Vroland had not quite arrived at a full paradigm shift, though she was aware of the flaws in the prevailing approach. This recognition, Kerin notes, predated the significant work by Barwick, who was the first scholar to recognise the so-called part-Aboriginal 'subculture'.¹⁰⁹ Vroland's divergence from official definitions of Aboriginality based on blood helped lay the groundwork for Barwick, as 'there needs to be a body of people thinking similar things before a new political discourse can truly emerge.'¹¹⁰

When Vroland became focused on WILPF, she encouraged the Australian section to accept a policy platform regarding Indigenous Australians that was based on the work of Donald Thomson from the University of Melbourne whom she greatly admired.¹¹¹ This set out a comprehensive 10-point agenda. It focused on seeking 'a recognition of the human rights of Aborigines, including land ownership and economic rights'. It also asked for a review into all Australian Native Policy, an anthropological and medical survey, and a royal commission to consider the facts revealed in the survey.¹¹² The agenda clearly identified the need to educate white Australians to increase 'awareness of their responsibility towards aborigines and descendants of aborigines [sic]', and a 'further fostering of essential elements of aboriginal culture', as well as the 'extension of full franchise but without compulsion'.¹¹³ By ratifying the policy, WILPF also condemned the removal of Aboriginal children. As the Australian section explained in their policy statement: 'we oppose and seek a reversal of the policy of breaking up social and family life wherever this is customary' and they insisted that support should be given to mother and child rather than forced

108 Kerin, *An Attitude of Respect*, 12.

109 Kerin, *An Attitude of Respect*, 12.

110 Kerin, *An Attitude of Respect*, 14.

111 Howard Morphy, 'Thomson, Donald Finlay Fergusson (1901–1970)', ADB, National Centre of Biography, ANU, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/thomson-donald-finlay-fergusson-11851/text21213, published first in hardcopy 2002, accessed online 1 September 2016.

112 'Policy recommended by the Australian Section with regard to Australian Aborigines', sent to Baer, 16 November 1953, series III reel 54, WILPF Papers.

113 'Policy recommended by the Australian Section with regard to Australian Aborigines', sent to Baer, 16 November 1953, series III reel 54, WILPF Papers.

separation.¹¹⁴ WILPF held that ‘people of mixed blood and those of full blood who are detribalised’ needed special consideration and support to help them adapt to the general community. The policy document showed how WILPF believed there were two distinct groups of Indigenous people with different needs, the ‘tribalised’ communities in rural Australia who remained outside the white community, and the ‘detribalised mixed-blood’ communities who were having difficulty ‘integrating’ into white society.

WILPF Australia sent their policy statement to the headquarters in Geneva, suggesting to Baer that UNESCO or the Human Rights Commission might be interested in carrying out the proposal for the anthropological survey. She also sent it on behalf of WILPF to Paul Hasluck, Minister for Territories in Australia and a key architect of assimilation policy, with a memo stating her reasoning for approaching international organisations with issues concerning Aboriginal Australia: ‘it is my failure to evoke any response within Australia that has made me think it necessary to raise the matter overseas.’¹¹⁵ From 1950 the Australian section began encouraging Baer to present their concerns about Australian Aboriginal human rights to the UN, mentioning the issue in most letters and all annual reports.¹¹⁶

Vroland kept Baer informed of the Indigenous women’s responses to WILPF and noted their interest and cooperation with the organisation, describing how practical engagement in WILPF work was occurring:

You may like to know that a half caste girl from an aboriginal reserve in Victoria helped me with the duplicating of your report, and that her dark aunt expressed great interest in a WILPF meeting they attended.¹¹⁷

Vroland’s language remained within the lexicon that prevailed at the time, and was not in line with more modern terms coming into use in the international sphere. Indeed, Baer reacted strongly to the racial language that Vroland used to describe the different ‘castes’ of Aboriginal people. Internationally, the progressive movement came to believe that emphasis on racial difference was discriminatory, especially after the race-based horrors

114 ‘Policy recommended by the Australian Section with regard to Australian Aborigines’, sent to Baer, 16 November 1953, series III reel 54, WILPF Papers.

115 Vroland, ‘Memo to Minister for Territories’, 21 November 1953, Anna F. Vroland (Mrs) re Welfare of Natives Northern Territory 1948–1954, National Archives of Australia (NAA): A431, 1950/730.

116 Vroland to Baer, 6 December 1950, series III reel 54, WILPF Papers.

117 Vroland to Baer, 6 December 1950, series III reel 54, WILPF Papers.

of the Holocaust, preferring the promotion of universalism over difference. This paralleled the change in the women's movement, where equality became more important than emphasising maternal difference.

Baer was a German of Jewish descent but was deprived of her German citizenship in 1933. She then became a permanent resident of Geneva, and later a US citizen, residing in New York.¹¹⁸ Her thoughts on racial problems were influenced by a desire to move away from any idea of segregating minorities. Baer had seen the disastrous consequences of discrimination and more recently as an American she had been inculcated with new ideas about 'colour-blind' approaches to racial equality. She wrote:

I never think of a person as being white or black or half-caste or pure race. There is no such thing as pure race any more. We have all mixed blood and for me there is only one thing which counts: integrity of character, warmth of heart and efficiency in work ... I am quite convinced that every little bit we do to forget about all these differences helps to make them disappear. The most recent research of UNESCO resulted, as you know, in the definite findings that there is no such thing as a difference of race. No superiority and no inferiority. There are biological differences, but even those are disappearing more and more with civilisation expanding as it does. I wish you would have the UNESCO papers come in great numbers to hand them around to friends yet unconverted.¹¹⁹

Vroland, on the other hand, considered that ignoring race was not the way to improve the living standards of Indigenous people as a group. It was not that she believed white society was superior but that the 'Aboriginal way of life [was] *different but not inferior*' and she emphasised the need for special rights on account of that difference.¹²⁰

This disagreement between Baer and Vroland highlighted a deeper philosophical tension in Australian society when discussing Aboriginality. Paul Hasluck, as Minister for the Territories, 'welcomed the United Nations' repudiation of racial distinctions' upon which he based his

118 Karl Holl, 'German Pacifist Women in Exile, 1933–1945', *Peace & Change* 20, no. 4 (1995): 491–500, doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0130.1995.tb00248.x.

119 Baer to Vroland, 8 January 1951, series III reel 54, WILPF Papers. See also: Jean Hiernaux and Michael Banton, *Four Statements on the Race Question*, published by UNESCO, Paris, 1969. This text reproduced the four UN statements on the race question from 1950, 1951, 1964 and 1967. The 1950 and 1951 statements show the new research that Baer was referring to in her letter, accessed 16 April 2017, unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001229/122962eo.pdf.

120 Vroland to Trades Hall Council, 18 February 1950, quoted in Kerin, 'An Attitude of Respect', 22.

policy of assimilation.¹²¹ He, too, saw ‘race consciousness’ as undermining national cohesion and hoped that ‘there would soon be no distinction’ as a result of assimilation policy, using the rhetoric of universal human rights that other progressives and feminists also adopted.¹²² But Hasluck’s focus on assimilation was based on the idea that Indigenous communities were ‘crumbling’ and ‘fading’. His promotion of the new international discussion of human rights through ‘non-discrimination’ raised ambiguities that some women activists, such as Vroland, Street, Bennett and Bromham, resisted.¹²³

Despite WILPF Australia’s language and choice of terminology regarding ‘castes’, they too believed that it was ‘incorrect biologically to speak of “Aboriginal blood”’ and thought that there should be no distinction between those of ‘full and mixed’ descent.¹²⁴ They implored the Victorian Government to ‘bring their ideas in line with the latest science and knowledge on the subject’.¹²⁵ The insistence that assimilation was a denial of difference led to terminology in the debate changing from ‘race’ to ‘culture’ which should be valued and protected, allowing ‘Aboriginal peoples’ the right to retain their identity.¹²⁶

Despite their ambivalence towards the language of international human rights, which was so integral to their emancipatory cause, both emboldening women’s international organising but disavowing sexual and cultural difference, the value of the international connection for the Australian activists in this debate was clear. Before joining WILPF, Vroland promoted her views in letters and communications with the government and other organisations with little response or acknowledgement. After demonstrating to the government that the policy ratified by WILPF had been sent to the Geneva headquarters, the potential international scrutiny pressured the government to respond seriously to their demands.

The Department of External Affairs in Canberra drafted a response to each of the 10 points raised in the WILPF paper for the minister. They noted the reason for the response was because the recommendations had been ‘sent to the League’s Headquarters at Geneva’ and as there was ‘a possibility that

121 Marilyn Lake, ‘Paul Hasluck’s Horror of the Two-Headed Calf’, in *Contesting Assimilation*, ed. Tim Rowse and Richard Nile (Perth, WA: API Network, 2005), 253.

122 Lake, ‘Paul Hasluck’s Horror of the Two-Headed Calf’, 253.

123 Lake, ‘Paul Hasluck’s Horror of the Two-Headed Calf’, 265.

124 Vroland, 25 April 1957, quoted in Kerin, ‘*An Attitude of Respect*’, 25.

125 Kerin, ‘*An Attitude of Respect*’, 25.

126 Lake, ‘Paul Hasluck’s Horror of the Two-Headed Calf’, 266.

these recommendations might be taken up with UNESCO the following departmental comments are made, if necessary, for your guidance.¹²⁷ WILPF used the power of potential embarrassment. This was one of their greatest strategic tools, as they publicly forced officials to rebut their statements or persevere in the face of public criticism. They could also demonstrate that their activism had a wide reach. A WILPF member in Italy acknowledged 'various letters and the material on Aborigines have found their way to Rome and I have forwarded all reports to the Human Rights Commission this week.'¹²⁸

The department's response included detailed reasons for the difficulties in dealing with this issue, including that the state governments bore responsibility for most of the problems. They cited a failed referendum in 1944 to give power to the Commonwealth parliament to legislate on behalf of Aboriginal Australians as being to blame for this and noted that Commonwealth–state conferences were not legally binding on the states thereby making cohesive national policy elusive. The government also rejected the recommendation of a royal commission, stating that there were 'inadequate reasons to support the appointment' and that setting aside land would mean 'either reverting to the old policy of protection or else it would mean segregation'.¹²⁹ Once again reiterating the policy of assimilation the government pursued the idea that Indigenous people should receive no special treatment or discrimination and wherever possible should be set up in 'economic undertakings with equal opportunities to Europeans'.¹³⁰ External Affairs argued that one point in the WILPF paper was 'misleading, as the welfare system does not involve a present practice of forcibly separating mother and child'. Separation, they claimed, was only used where the child was 'deemed to live under neglected conditions' and in need of care 'whether European or native'.¹³¹ Concluding the report, the department claimed that WILPF's recommendations were theoretically inconsistent:

127 C.R. Lambert, Secretary of Department of External Affairs, to Minister, 15 January 1954, 'Anna F. Vroland (Mrs) re Welfare of Natives Northern Territory 1948–1954' NAA: A431, 1950/730.

128 Cedelardi Baker to Vroland, c/o US Embassy, Rome, Italy, 26 April 1963, Box 1723/16, Papers, WILPF, MS 9377, SLV.

129 C.R. Lambert, Secretary of Department of External Affairs, to Minister, 15 January 1954, 'Anna F. Vroland (Mrs) re Welfare of Natives Northern Territory 1948–1954' NAA: A431, 1950/730.

130 C.R. Lambert, Secretary of Department of External Affairs, to Minister, 15 January 1954, 'Anna F. Vroland (Mrs) re Welfare of Natives Northern Territory 1948–1954' NAA: A431, 1950/730.

131 C.R. Lambert, Secretary of Department of External Affairs, to Minister, 15 January 1954, 'Anna F. Vroland (Mrs) re Welfare of Natives Northern Territory 1948–1954' NAA: A431, 1950/730.

Taking the recommendations as a whole they represent conflicting views, with no clear objective in mind. The League urges full social and economic recognition for aborigines, and on the other hand attempts to restrict advancement by preserving aboriginal life based on its ancient culture which has in fact largely disappeared from the Northern Territory. There exists an urgent need to fit these people into a new way of life through a constructive and vigorous policy which, however, the League has not presented.¹³²

Despite the defensive response by the government, WILPF continued to promote their policy. Their agitation on the issue and the official responses show that they, along with other activist groups, were successful in keeping the discussion on the political agenda. This in turn forced officials to defend government positions.

Apart from encouraging the UN and international bodies to take up the fight for equality for Indigenous Australians, WILPF Australia committed locally to intervene and help where they could. In 1951 the section reported on how they contributed to a vigorous letter writing campaign to the Victorian Government about the Framlingham Aboriginal Reserve, where families were being threatened with eviction. Two WILPF members visited the reserve, including the treasurer Helen Strong, and cooperated with journalists and the Reserve Welfare Committee to have the evictions stopped.¹³³ Mrs Mary Clarke, a 'part-Aboriginal' woman from the Framlingham community, requested WILPF hold a meeting about what could be done about the issue and she spoke to the public about the conditions at the reserve. The meeting was chaired by Ada Bromham.¹³⁴ Among the speeches of note was the address by Shadrach James, a member of the Aborigines Protection Board and secretary of the Mooroopna Aborigines' Progress Association.¹³⁵ James' father, who was of Indian descent, was a dedicated advocate for Indigenous rights and a teacher at the Cummeragunja reserve, educating William Cooper, Margaret Tucker and Douglas Nicholls who all

132 C.R. Lambert, Secretary of Department of External Affairs, to Minister, 15 January 1954, 'Anna F. Vroland (Mrs) re Welfare of Natives Northern Territory 1948–1954' NAA: A431, 1950/730.

133 Anna Vroland, 'Australian Section Annual Report', 7 April 1951, series III reel 54, WILPF Papers.

134 For more information about Ada Bromham, internationalist and Aboriginal advocate see: Lake, *Getting Equal*, 53. Wendy Birman, 'Bromham, Ada (1880–1965)', ADB, National Centre of Biography, ANU, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/bromham-ada-5368/text9081, published first in hardcopy 1979, accessed online 9 April 2015.

135 'Justice for Aborigines', Minutes of meeting held in Australian Church, Russell Street Melbourne, 21 February 1951, Papers of A. Vroland Box 4/28 NLA.

went on to become leaders in the movement.¹³⁶ James' mother was Yorta Yorta woman Ada Cooper, sister of William. James assured the gathering that 'the Board have adopted a new attitude towards the people there' and confirmed that no more houses would be sold. The commitment conveyed a tension between not wanting to betray the confidence of the board while also reassuring the room of his activism.¹³⁷ James went on to passionately describe disadvantages communities faced: 'the aborigines [sic] are asked to pay taxes—well let them have the same privileges.'¹³⁸

WILPF women kept close watch on any publicised instances of unjust imprisonment. On one occasion they attempted to correspond on behalf of a young girl from WA whose arrest was, they believed, 'due to the caprice of officials'.¹³⁹ Recognising that their interventions were showing no results, they decided to 'make a study of the legal position of aborigines' by collecting and surveying the various Acts relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in all parts of the Commonwealth.¹⁴⁰

WILPF-sponsored survey of East Gippsland

WILPF realised that without proper information about the situation of the Indigenous communities, not much could be done in way of campaigning strategically. Therefore, following the example of WILPF's international fact-finding trips such as the delegation sent to China in 1927, the section decided to send three WILPF members to East Gippsland in 1951 to make a report of the conditions of Aboriginal communities. This included Dr Hilda Heffernan (née Greenshields), a retired doctor, Sister L Miller, a former matron of an industrial school, and Miss Cora Gilsenan, a social worker and Aboriginal rights advocate. The three women planned to write the report so that WILPF could use the information to 'publicise with

136 George E. Nelson, 'James, Thomas Shadrach (1859–1946)', ADB, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/james-thomas-shadrach-10610/text18855, published first in hardcopy 1996, accessed online 12 April 2022.

137 'Justice for Aborigines', Minutes of meeting held in Australian Church, Russell Street Melbourne, 21 February 1951, Papers of A. Vroland Box 4/28 NLA.

138 'Justice for Aborigines', Minutes of meeting held in Australian Church, Russell Street Melbourne, 21 February 1951, Papers of A. Vroland Box 4/28 NLA. See also: 'Aborigines Give Black Views on White Australia', *The Age*, 22 February 1951, 4.

139 'Justice for Aborigines', Minutes of meeting held in Australian Church, Russell Street Melbourne, 21 February 1951, Papers of A. Vroland Box 4/28 NLA.

140 'Justice for Aborigines', Minutes of meeting held in Australian Church, Russell Street Melbourne, 21 February 1951, Papers of A. Vroland Box 4/28 NLA.

a view to having improvements made'.¹⁴¹ Gilsenan acted as a guide, as she lived in East Gippsland in a town called Metung that was close to the Lake Tyers Aboriginal community.¹⁴²

The three women stayed in East Gippsland for one weekend, acknowledging themselves that this was not enough time to complete an exhaustive study.¹⁴³ However, they observed 'the way people were living, and it was a shock, even to one, accustomed, as I have been to know about bad living conditions'.¹⁴⁴ Visiting six places where Aboriginal people were living, each woman wrote a small description of her experience. Child mortality, hygiene and maternal healthcare were a great concern for each of them. But they primarily discussed inadequate shelter and housing, noting that 'mothers are most prolific' and 'improved accommodation alone would save many children's lives.'¹⁴⁵

Despite the alarming descriptions, all three reiterated how much effort was made by the communities to overcome such hardships. Gilsenan focused on stories of men trying hard to support families but being unable to find suitable employment, and recounted how a family spent all their money on an ambulance for their child with meningitis causing them to lose nearly all their possessions.¹⁴⁶ There was a shift in the 'discursive terrain' in the 1950s campaigns by white activists on Aboriginal issues with 'the reconceptualising of Aborigines as workers rather than as feminine victims' enabling 'labour men to identify more easily with the struggle for Aboriginal rights'.¹⁴⁷ The focus in the report on maternal welfare, arguing for state care for mothers and leftist assimilationism, as well as the recasting of Aboriginal men as workers desperately seeking employment, shows WILPF's attempts

141 Vroland to Baer, 19 April 1951, series III reel 54, WILPF Papers. Vroland to Prime Minister J.B. Chifley, 14 February 1948, 'Anna F. Vroland (Mrs) re Welfare of Natives Northern Territory 1948–1954', NAA: A431, 1950/730.

142 Richard Broome, 'Tracing the Humanitarian Strain in Black-White Encounters', *Latrobe Journal* 43 (1989): 38.

143 'Conditions of Dark Children in East Gippsland', June 1951, WILPF Australian section, Box 4336/4, Vroland Papers, MS10301, SLV.

144 'Conditions of Dark Children in East Gippsland', June 1951, WILPF Australian section, Box 4336/4, Vroland Papers, MS10301, SLV.

145 'Conditions of Dark Children in East Gippsland', June 1951, WILPF Australian section, Box 4336/4, Vroland Papers, MS10301, SLV.

146 'Conditions of Dark Children in East Gippsland', June 1951, WILPF Australian section, Box 4336/4, Vroland Papers, MS10301, SLV.

147 Marilyn Lake, 'Feminism and the Gendered Politics of Antiracism, Australia 1927–1957: From Maternal Protectionism to Leftist Assimilationism', *Australian Historical Studies* 29, no. 110 (1 April 1998): 106, doi.org/10.1080/10314619808596062.

to broaden the appeal of the report for the widest support. These stories reinforced the idea that this was a failure of the state rather than of the individuals. As Sister Miller explained:

The parents have belonged to a community that has lost the old aboriginal knowledge concerning care of children, and their way of living is completely different from the old way. They have been thrust into an alien culture without being provided with the sort of training that would enable them to adapt themselves successfully to the difficult position in which they find themselves. Surely they are not to be blamed overmuch for their shortcomings. Love of offspring and kin is theirs to a marked degree. Only the means and the knowledge of what to do for them is lacking. The community should be responsible for supplying those needs.¹⁴⁸

Just as Vroland's politics were informed by the idea of 'mixed-race' living with no culture, so too were the politics of the women writing the report. The focus on how the children could be 'absorbed' into the community if given the 'proper environment' drew heavily on the language and policy of assimilation.¹⁴⁹ Still, WILPF also recognised that those 'mixed-race' were denied the opportunity to assimilate because of discriminatory community attitudes. WILPF gained publicity for this expedition and the public meeting they held after it. Their report was published in the *Argus*, where the paper focused on the issue of child mortality raised by the findings: 'children are dying of starvation and exposure in camps and shacks'.¹⁵⁰ Their discussion revealed an uneasiness with the policy of assimilation, and reaffirmed their belief that Aboriginal rights were a racial issue for UNESCO and for the world, not something to be hidden away or kept exclusively for the domestic agenda.

Various elements of the findings of this report influenced WILPF activities during the 1950s. The section continued to press for wider-ranging 'rights to petition' the UN, so that not only signatory states could approach the Human Rights Commission, but also 'minorities whose needs are the greatest'.¹⁵¹ Despite their efforts, they would have to wait until the late 1960s before any significant breakthrough was made.

148 'Conditions of Dark Children in East Gippsland', June 1951, WILPF Australian section, Box 4336/4, Vroland Papers, MS10301, SLV.

149 'Conditions of Dark Children in East Gippsland', June 1951, WILPF Australian section, Box 4336/4, Vroland Papers, MS10301, SLV.

150 'What Goes On? A Melbourne News Diary', *The Argus*, 4 September 1951.

151 Vroland to Hon P.C. Spender, Minister to External Affairs, 14 February 1951, series III reel 54, WILPF Papers.

Doris Blackburn travelled to Europe in 1952 to engage with the international WILPF network. There was supposed to be a triennial congress in August that year, but it had to be moved to 1953.¹⁵² Nonetheless, as her plans were in place, Blackburn travelled in August 1952 and attended the International Executive Committee in Geneva. It discussed various issues and adopted several resolutions presented by national sections for the policy platform. Blackburn and the Australian section proposed that WILPF ‘requests the United Nations General Assembly to include among the functions of the UN and its Specialized Agencies and organs HOUSING as one of the most crying needs of the peoples of the world.’¹⁵³ This resolution, named the ‘right to shelter’, showed Australians engaging with the discussion about economic, social and cultural rights put forward in the Universal Declaration. It was a direct result of the Australian section’s desire to place the issues of Aboriginal Australia in a global context, reflecting the main issue of inadequate housing for the disadvantaged brought up in the East Gippsland report. Blackburn continued as an advocate for the rights of Indigenous people, and in 1957 co-founded the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League to further this activism.¹⁵⁴

The decade of the 1950s was one in which decolonisation, racial equality and Indigenous peoples’ rights were given increased international attention. WILPF was inspired by other progressive activists working on Indigenous issues and quickly became committed to promoting the human rights of Indigenous communities in the international sphere. They worked alongside a community of activists that all utilised the new human rights framework to have the issue advanced in the Australian political sphere, eventually leading to the 1967 referendum on Aboriginal rights. Within the movement there was still a theoretical inconsistency as some argued for radical universalism (leading to approval of assimilation policies) while others wanted recognition of group rights and collective identity. WILPF Australia’s argument in favour of presenting Aboriginal rights to international organisations was illustrated

152 Baer to Vroland, 14 February 1952, series III reel 54, WILPF Papers.

153 Resolutions adopted at the meeting of the International Executive Committee of WILPF in Geneva 6–11 August 1952, series I reel 12, WILPF Papers.

154 Richard Broome, *Fighting Hard: The Victorian Aborigines Advancement League* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2015).

in the International Labour Organization's 'Indigenous Tribal Populations Convention 107', drafted in 1957, which advocated 'integration' rather than assimilation of Indigenous peoples.

WILPF members in Australia were willing to collaborate with mainstream political parties at this time. Blackburn had been a member of federal parliament, and the public profile she brought to WILPF, as well as her political experience, were invaluable to their activities. Nancy Wilkinson from Western Australia ran for parliament for the Australian Labor Party, and other prominent women including Vroland and Mary Broun were ALP members, willing to criticise from within. Political involvement in the domestic sphere began to bring the message of WILPF to a wider audience and the politically involved women focused energy on domestic electoral politics as well as international networking. The use of the international arena continued to legitimise their work and provided a space for them to present their concerns if they could not find a response in the domestic sphere. It was also a means of applying pressure locally as Australia's policies and behaviour received wider scrutiny.

For the WILPF women, peace was not merely the absence of war. It included a detailed social and political agenda that was aimed at achieving gender and racial equality in an effort to extend to all individuals appropriate human rights and standards of living. Dealing with these issues shows how they connected the idea of 'peace' to a wider platform of social justice. They argued that by improving understanding of oppression and inequality they could create a more just and peaceful world.

After the breakdown of networks following the war, WILPF in Australia redefined and rebuilt its membership. That said, their membership was never large, and activities were often limited to holding public meetings, publishing pamphlets and petitions, and organising conferences. Nonetheless, this activity strengthened their purpose and cemented their presence in the Australian peace movement. By the 1960s the movement had an established platform to begin engaging the wider public when the Vietnam War brought issues of peace once more to mainstream attention.

This text is taken from *Sisters in Peace: The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom in Australia, 1915–2015*, by Kate Laing, published 2023 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/SP.2023.05