

GLOBAL PASSAGES

A Worldwide Struggle for Woman Suffrage

The fight to grant women the right to vote was an international movement that circled the globe. Not until 1893, when New Zealand enfranchised women, could a single woman in the world vote for a national legislative body. Today, every nation but the tiny city-state, Vatican City, has enfranchised women. The fight for suffrage proved to be a long and arduous battle, a struggle kept alive through international women's organizations that shared leadership, strategies, and resources as well as the inspiration needed to endure the hostility and marginalization they faced.

Well before the Civil War, American suffragists cultivated transatlantic ties with their British sisters. With the transportation and communication revolutions of the Gilded Age, suffragists strengthened and greatly expanded their networks globally through international organizations that regularly held conventions, published journals, and sponsored leaders to travel abroad. The World Women's Christian Temperance Union (WWCTU), founded in 1884 as the international wing of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, demanded votes for women as a means to fight against the sale of alcohol. The largest women's organization in the world, the WWCTU organized its first international convention in 1891; by that time, the WWCTU had established outposts in over 40 countries and colonies in South America, Latin America, Asia, and the Pacific, including New Zealand and Australia. The WWCTU played a key role in the world's first national suffrage triumphs: New Zealand in 1893 and Australia in 1902. Suffrage leaders from those countries traveled to the United States and Britain, where they inspired their sisters there and helped to reinvigorate the movement.

Other international organizations joined the WWCTU in the fight for the vote. While advocating different goals, these women's groups all agreed that women had the right to a political voice. Women from around the world organized the International Council of Women (ICW) in 1888, followed by the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) founded in Berlin in 1904 with its stated goal "to secure enfranchisement of the women of all nations throughout the world in organized cooperation and fraternal helpfulness." By 1915, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) emphasized women's vote as a means to end war. Socialists also organized and inspired suffragists internationally. The Second Socialist International (1889–1916) organized working women predominately in the United States and Europe, and it proved to be a major force in Finland's suffrage victory in 1906, the first in Europe. Socialists also invigorated the suffrage movement in the United States, demanding the vote as a means to battle workplace oppression.

By the dawn of the 20th century, suffragists in Great Britain introduced more militant strategies to propel their cause forward. Taking their fight to the streets, they embraced civil disobedience, organized hunger strikes, heckled politicians, and coordinated mass arrests. Suffragists in other part of the world, including the United States, Ireland, and China, all drew upon the British example of dramatic public protests.

After decades of struggle, the First World War proved to be a watershed for woman suffrage. Between 1915 and 1922, a number of governments granted suffrage to women. These included Denmark and Iceland (1915); Russia (1917); Austria, Canada Germany, Poland, and Great Britain (all 1918); the Netherlands (1919); the United States and Czechoslovakia (1920); Sweden (1921); and Ireland (1922). Women in France and most of Latin America waited several more decades. The post–World War II era saw many more countries granting women the right to vote, including many Latin American and African nations as well as China and India (1949). More recently, the Middle Eastern countries of Kuwait (2005), the United Arab Emirates (2006), and Saudi Arabia (2011) enfranchised women.

- How did women around the world aid each other in advancing the cause of suffrage?
- Why do you think women were denied the right to vote for so many years?



IWSA PLATE THE International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) produced this emblemware plate with its symbol and motto, *Ius Suffragii* (Right to Vote).