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Between National and International: Women’s Transnational Activism in Twentieth-Century Chile

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the transnational dimension of women’s mobilization in twentieth-century Chile and the connections they established with women’s international non-governmental organizations, particularly the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) and the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF). It sheds light on the political choices women made when forging transnational alliances to expand and make their activism more effective, together with the material and ideological dynamics that shaped their collaboration. The article analyses this topic by focusing on key but little-explored figures of women’s activism in Chile – especially, but not solely, feminist academic Olga Poblete – and their personal communications with the leadership of women’s organizations in the US and Europe. The article contends that, although both the WILPF and WIDF shared strengths and weaknesses in promoting their ideas and establishing links with activists in Chile, the alliances that Chilean women chose to pursue were mostly defined by their own political priorities and local contexts.

INTRODUCTION

This article explores the transnational dimension of women’s mobilization in Chile and the connections they established with women’s international non-governmental organizations (WINGOs), particularly, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) and the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF).¹ The study sheds light on the political choices women made when forging transnational alliances to expand and make their activism more effective, together with the material and ideological dynamics that shaped their collaboration. The article analyses this

1. I am most grateful to Celia Donert and participants in the workshop “Women’s Rights and Global Socialism”, as well as to Lawrence Black, Henrice Altink, and Tanya Harmer, and to the reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions. An early version of this manuscript was part of my thesis: “Women’s Activism and Feminism in the Chile Solidarity Movement” (Ph.D., University of York, 2020), which was funded by CONICYT.

topic by focusing on key, but little-explored, figures of women's activism in Chile – especially, but not solely, the feminist academic Olga Poblete – and their personal communications with the leadership of WINGOs in the United States and Europe. The focus on the personal and political relations of women and local women's groups in Chile provides first-hand accounts of their choices of transnational alliances, and what impact such connections had on women's activism locally and internationally.

Although historical research in the field of women's transnational activism has expanded our knowledge about the ways in which Latin American women advanced feminist goals during the first half of the twentieth century and the early stages of the Cold War,² the relations between activists themselves and WINGOs remain under-researched. The most well-known WINGOs, all founded between the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, are the International Council of Women, the International Women's Suffrage Alliance (later the International Alliance of Women), and the WILPF. More recently, the WIDF has also drawn scholarly attention, after Francisca de Haan observed how lingering Cold War narratives had prevented historians from exploring the WIDF's pivotal role in international feminism after World War II.³

This is not to discount the valuable insights historians have provided in the role played by WINGOs in the region and the influence of Latin American women within them, or their stress on the importance of personal connections and friendships in the development of international feminism. Such research has given due weight to local contexts in explaining the foundation of national branches, and explores the tensions and disagreements between Latin American women and their European and North American counterparts.⁴

2. Francesca Miller, "The International Relations of Women of the Americas 1890–1928", *The Americas*, 43 (1986), pp. 171–182; Katherine Marino, *Feminism for the Americas. The Making of an International Human Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2019); Ellen DuBois and Lauren Derby, "The Strange Case of Minerva Bernardino: Pan American and United Nations Women's Right Activist", *Women's Studies International Forum*, 32 (2009), pp. 43–50; Ann Towns, "The Inter-American Commission of Women and Women's Suffrage, 1920–1945", *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 42 (2010), pp. 779–807; Cassia Roth and Ellen DuBois, "Feminism, Frogs and Fascism: The Transnational Activism of Brazil's Bertha Lutz", *Gender & History*, 32 (2020), pp. 208–226.

3. Francisca de Haan, "Continuing Cold War Paradigms in Western Historiography of Transnational Women's Organisations: The Case of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF)", *Women's History Review*, 19 (2010), pp. 547–573.

4. Christine Ehrick, "Madrinas and Missionaries: Uruguay and the Pan-American Women's Movement", *Gender & History*, 10 (1998), pp. 406–424; Jadwiga E. Pieper Mooney, "El anti-fascismo como fuerza movilizadora. Fanny Edelman y la Federación Democrática Internacional de Mujeres (FDIM)", *Anuario IEHS*, 28 (2013), pp. 207–226; Katherine Marino, "Transnational Pan-American Feminism: The Friendship of Bertha Lutz and Mary Wilhelmine Williams, 1926–1944", *Journal of Women's History*, 26:2 (2014), pp. 63–87; Adriana Valobra and Mercedes Yusta (eds), *Queridas camaradas. Historias iberoamericanas de mujeres comunistas* (Buenos Aires, 2017).

Indeed, these studies have brought new awareness about the effects of WINGOs' networks and politics for feminism in the region, especially in comparison to the more extensively researched historical realities of the Global North.⁵ However, even with this regional research, the historiography is unbalanced: some national cases are explored more than others.⁶ Beyond the passing mentions of the National Women's Council,⁷ or of the role played by WINGOs in the activism against the Pinochet dictatorship in the 1970s,⁸ the transnational dimension of women's activism in Chile has not received sufficient attention in the literature.

To this end, the article explores personal correspondence between Chilean women and activists abroad, the official documentation of women's organizations, and audiovisual sources to elucidate the structural, political, and ideological factors that shaped the relationship between Chilean women's activism and WINGOs in the 1940s and 1950s. It takes particular advantage of the Chilean National Archive's new collection *Archivo Mujeres y Géneros*, which made available the papers of feminist activists that had been kept private with limited access for researchers. From these, it examines Chilean women's shifting alliances with WINGOs after World War II, which laid the foundations for women's activism beyond the 1940s. The study contends that, although both the WILPF and WIDF shared strengths and weaknesses in promoting their ideas and establishing links with activists in Chile, the alliances that Chilean women chose to pursue were mostly defined by their own priorities and local contexts. Ultimately, the way in which Chilean women aligned themselves vis-à-vis the Cold War ideological projects and leftist women organizational forces defined the level of success WINGOs enjoyed inside the country. This focus on the transnational angle also illuminates the rich political activities of women's groups beyond the

5. The literature is too extensive to be cited here, but a pioneering and influential work on the topic may be found in Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton, NJ, 1997).

6. Mexico, for example, has received more attention. See Megan Threlkeld, *Pan American Women: US Internationalists and Revolutionary Mexico* (Philadelphia, PA, 2014); Sara Sanders, "The National Union of Mexican Women and Maternalist Alternatives in Global Women's Politics", in Sara Sanders and Yulia Gradszkova (eds), *Institutionalizing Gender Equality: Historical and Global Perspective* (Lanham, MD, 2015), pp. 61–81.

7. Corinne A. Pernet, "Chilean Feminists, the International Women's Movement, and Suffrage, 1915–1950", *Pacific Historical Review*, 69 (2000), pp. 663–688, 669; Ericka Kim Verba, "The Círculo de Lectura de Señoras [Ladies' Reading Circle] and the Club de Señoras [Ladies' Club] of Santiago, Chile: Middle- and Upper-Class Feminist Conversations (1915–1920)", *Journal of Women's History*, 7:3 (1995), pp. 6–33, 10.

8. Jadwiga Pieper Mooney, "Women's Rights as Human Rights: Exile, International Feminist Encounters, and Women's Empowerment under Military Rule in Chile, 1973–1990", in Niels Bjerre-Poulsen, Helene Balslev Clausen, and Juan Gustafsson (eds), *Projection of Power in the Americas* (New York, 2012), pp. 154–179; María Fernanda Lanfranco González, "Women's Activism and Feminism in the Chile Solidarity Movement" (Ph.D., University of York, 2020).

late 1940s, challenging the common narrative that women's activism in Chile withered away in the 1950s.⁹ As we will discuss later, the establishment of the Comité Nacional Femenino de Unidad (later Unión de Mujeres de Chile) – linked to the WIDF and more firmly aligned with a socialist vision – shows that the women's movement kept active in the face of political fragmentation and ideological polarization. Women remained organized as women, foregrounding gender as a political identity while intersecting it with other ideological identifications.

THE MOVIMIENTO PRO-EMANCIPACIÓN DE LA MUJER CHILENA

Chilean women were active players in pan-American feminism and international women's activism. While campaigning for women's full suffrage in Chile (only achieved in 1949), they participated in international politics, endorsed initiatives that supported international women's rights, and joined international women's conferences and organizations.¹⁰ In the 1930s, the mobilization of women reached new levels of activity. Latin American feminists believed that American republics had a duty to stand against both fascism and the global curtailment of the advancement of women.¹¹ Transnational connections among women in these countries were vital to creating – and prioritizing the goals of – a Latin American feminist project both nationally and internationally. Indeed, Katherine Marino explained how *feminismo americano* peaked with the development of what she calls “Popular-Front Pan-American feminism, defined as an internationalist feminism that combined social democratic labour concerns with international ‘equal rights’ demands, in the context of an anti-fascist inter-American solidarity”.¹² This international project would not only be significant for the Inter-American Commission of Women (IACW) during World War II, but also served to further Latin American feminist efforts in advancing the idea of women's rights as human rights at the United Nations' foundational meeting in 1945.¹³

The Movimiento pro-Emancipación de la Mujer Chilena (MEMCH) was the most significant local manifestation of Popular Front feminism in Chile. Founded in 1935, it became a multi-class nationwide organization during

9. This interpretation follows the idea of “feminist waves”, and was initially proposed by the Chilean sociologist Julieta Kirkwood in *Ser política en Chile. Las feministas y los partidos* (Santiago, 1986).

10. Pernet, “Chilean Feminist”, p. 664.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 679–680.

12. Marino, *Feminism for the Americas*, p. 122; Katherine Marino, “Marta Vergara, Popular-Front Pan American Feminism and the Transnational Struggle for Working Women's Rights in the 1930s”, *Gender & History*, 26 (2014), pp. 642–643.

13. Francesca Miller, *Latin American Women and the Search for Social Justice* (Hanover, NH [etc.], 1991), p. 116; Marino, *Feminism for the Americas*; Marino, “Marta Vergara”, p. 655.

the late 1930s and early 1940s. Although it was led by an executive committee located in Santiago, MEMCH established dozens of local committees throughout the capital and provinces. At its highest point in the mid-1940s, it had around fifty local committees spread across Chile. While *memchistas* were of diverse social origin, most held progressive views involving women's political, civil, labour, and reproductive rights. Naturally, not all MEMCH members shared the same priorities or even held the same vision of feminism; yet, rather than a hindrance, this diversity fostered campaigns over a wide range of issues: full suffrage; married women's rights over their children and property; women's access to more and better-paid jobs (including equal pay and paid maternity leave); the regulation of consumer prices; sex education; contraception; and abortion rights. In the provinces, where committees were mainly composed of working-class women, campaigning also focused on improving the material, cultural, and social conditions of their families and the wider communities.¹⁴

Transnational ideas and connections were significant in the creation and subsequent evolutions of MEMCH. While the movement originated from Chilean domestic political developments, MEMCH took inspiration from the involvement of women in anti-fascist struggles in Europe embodied in, for example, the 1934 World Congress of Women against War and Fascism.¹⁵ Composed of communists, socialist reformers, and women's rights activists, the World Congress was one of the earliest signs of women's international opposition to fascism, predating the official creation of the Popular Front in 1935.¹⁶ The Chilean feminist Marta Vergara was instrumental in establishing MEMCH following inspiration from leftist ideas and women's mobilization in Europe. Having already served as the Chilean delegate to the League of Nations' Commission on Women's Rights and the IACW, Vergara witnessed the curtailment of women's rights by Hitler and Mussolini and – supported by Communist Party (CP) members – persuaded the feminist lawyer Elena Caffarena to join her in the creation of MEMCH to promote women's rights and anti-fascist and working-class activism.¹⁷

In Chile, the political milieu was fertile for this kind of initiative. Socialist and communist ideas had been gaining force during the challenging social and economic conditions experienced during the 1929 crash and following economic recession.¹⁸ Progressive organizations such as MEMCH gained

14. This description of MEMCH follows Pernet's work. Corinne A. Antezana-Pernet, "Mobilizing Women in the Popular Front Era: Feminism, Class, and Politics in the Movimiento Pro-Emancipación de la Mujer Chilena (MEMCh), 1935–1950" (Ph.D., University of California, Irvine, 1996).

15. Pernet, "Mobilizing Women", p. 67.

16. Marino, "Marta Vergara", pp. 647–648.

17. Pernet, "Mobilizing Women", pp. 77–82.

18. Brian Loveman, *Chile: The Legacy of Hispanic Capitalism* (New York, [1979] 2001), pp. 197–201.

traction just as the Popular Front project was uniting centrist and leftist political forces in the late 1930s and 1940s. The Communist, Socialist, and Radical Parties established a set of political alliances of significant popular support. This resulted in control of the executive branch of the state, shaped state policies, and influenced social – and feminist – movements.¹⁹ In this context, relationships between MEMCH and political parties were multifaceted and complex. MEMCH supported the Popular Front coalition because they believed it was their best chance of influencing politics and improving the status of women, even if this involved exerting a fair amount of pressure on politicians. A significant number of *memchistas* were also active members of the Popular Front parties, especially the CP. Women linked to the CP (although not necessarily party members) dominated local committees in the provinces, accounting for more than half of all MEMCH members by 1940.²⁰ Never a party member herself, the MEMCH leader, Elena Caffarena, believed that women's double militancy – struggling for both specific reforms benefiting women and general party goals – was possible, and even desirable.²¹ However, this also meant that changing political alliances and inter-party conflicts were poised to negatively affect MEMCH: the parties' goals to bolster their women's sections and their desires to influence the women's movement through the participation of their female members were often at odds.²²

Beyond local dynamics, access to overseas political organizations, transnational activism, and first-hand experiences of the achievements (and difficulties) of the women's movement in other countries gave Chilean women insight into or even inspiration to pursue political activism in their home country. International pioneers, such as Marta Vergara, were somewhat representative of MEMCH leadership. Most of its leaders were middle-class professionals who enjoyed the opportunity of participating in women's international organizing.²³ The government functionary Graciela Mandujano and teacher Aída Parada, for example, lived in the US and became involved in pan-American women's activities before becoming part of MEMCH leadership in Santiago.²⁴ This meant that MEMCH consistently showed an awareness of the importance of the transnational arena for women's activism, the struggle against fascism, and the protection of peace. MEMCH, for example,

19. Karin Alejandra Roseblat, *Gendered Compromises: Political Cultures and the State in Chile, 1920–1950* (Chapel Hill, NC [etc.], 2000), p. 4.

20. Pernet, "Mobilizing Women", pp. 326–327.

21. Anna M. Travis, "Consolidating Power: Chilean Women in the Political Party System, 1950–1970" (Ph.D., Ohio State University, 2007), pp. 1, 91.

22. On the relationship between political parties and the women's movements, see Travis, "Consolidating Power".

23. Pernet, "Mobilizing Women", p. 106.

24. Marino, *Feminism for the Americas*, pp. 80–87; Pernet, "Mobilizing Women", pp. 96–99.

collaborated with “the movement of Spanish Women” against “Franco’s terror” and “Spanish Fascism”. In 1938, MEMCH organized a public protest against the persecution of Jews outside the German Embassy in Santiago,²⁵ and widely and actively participated in transnational networks, sending delegates to international gatherings and maintaining contact with several women’s organizations abroad.²⁶

In the mid-1940s, WINGOs became part of MEMCH’s transnational networks. Both WILPF and WIDF displayed global ambitions, trying to expand their activism to Latin America. Of the former, established in 1915 after 1,200 women met in The Hague to discuss putting an end to World War I, WILPF has since advocated for peace and women’s rights, including goals such as women’s suffrage, equal nationality rights for married women, permanent peace, the rule of international law, and humanitarian relief. In the interwar period, although WILPF had reached nearly 50,000 members in forty countries, there were almost no national sections in Latin America.²⁷ Of the latter, WIDF was founded in Paris at the end of World War II to promote an “alternative feminist internationalist political identity” aligned with socialist principles.²⁸ It became a “counter-point to the Western led” WINGOs, in which the Soviet Union wielded the most state influence on the organization. Notwithstanding, this dominant role should not be exaggerated to the point of disregarding women’s own agency and diversity.²⁹ Indeed, WIDF women from across the world effectively organized to promote peace, anti-colonialism, and women’s and children’s rights.³⁰ As for Latin America,

25. Olga Poblete to Marie Claude Vaillant-Couturier, October 1948, Archivo Nacional de Chile, Fondo Elena Caffarena [hereafter ANCFEC], 5, 2; “Enérgica protesta de las mujeres de Chile”, November 1938, ANCFEC, 5, 1. All translations are the author’s.

26. Edda Gaviola Artigas et al., “Queremos votar en las próximas elecciones”. *Historia del movimiento femenino chileno 1913–1952* (Santiago, 1984), p. 44.

27. Sarah Hellawell, “Feminism, Pacifism and Internationalism: The Women’s International League, 1915–1935” (Ph.D., Northumbria University, 2017); Rupp, *Worlds of Women*; Laura Beers, “Advocating for a Feminist Internationalism between the Wars”, in Glenda Sluga and Carolyn James (eds), *Women, Diplomacy and International Politics since 1500* (New York, 2016), pp. 202–221; Threlkeld, *Pan American Women*, pp. 39–42.

28. Karen Garner, *Shaping a Global Women’s Agenda: Women’s NGOs and Global Governance, 1925–85* (Manchester [etc.], 2010), p. 3.

29. Quote from Garner, *Shaping a Global Women’s Agenda*, p. 168. About the role of the Soviet Union and the communist world in WIDF, see Francisca de Haan, “Continuing Cold War”; Eugénie Cotton, Pak Chong-ae, and Claudia Jones: Rethinking Transnational Feminism and International Politics”, *Journal of Women’s History*, 25:4 (2013), pp. 174–189.

30. Francisca de Haan, “The Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF): History, Main Agenda, and Contributions, 1945–1991”, in Thomas Dublin and Kathryn Kish Sklar (eds), *Women and Social Movements (WAS) Online Archive* (2012), pp. 1–25, 11. Available at: <http://alexanderstreet.com/products/women-and-social-movements-international/>; last accessed 2 April 2018.



Figure 1. Olga Poblete at a ceremony of the MEMCH (front row, fifth from the left), date unknown.

Archivo Nacional de Chile, Archivo Mujeres y Género. Available at: https://www.archivonacional.gob.cl/616/articles-86872_recurso_1.jpg; last accessed 15 September 2021.

De Haan has described how the organization showed an interest in reaching out to the region from its inception.³¹

Both WINGOs found their key contact in Chile to be the MEMCH leader Olga Poblete (Figure 1). Especially during her period as Secretary General between 1946 and MEMCH's dissolution in 1953, Poblete was willing to foster collaboration with WILPF and WIDF to strengthen peace activism and gather support for MEMCH's campaigns in Chile. To some extent, Poblete's life story was not dissimilar from that of other MEMCH leaders. As a member of the emergent professional middle class – which benefited from the development of public institutions and the expansion of the state – and born to a modest background in Tacna in 1908 as the daughter of a single mother, Poblete took advantage of the educational opportunities that allowed her to become a history teacher in 1929.³² In 1952, after developing a prominent career as educator in secondary education, Poblete began to work at the University of Chile, specializing in the history of “the far East and Africa”.³³ In 1939, she became involved in MEMCH through a colleague, who asked her

31. Francisca de Haan, “La Federación Democrática Internacional de Mujeres (FDIM) y América Latina, de 1945 a los años sesenta”, in Valobra and Yusta, *Queridas camaradas*, pp. 17–44.

32. Pernet, “Mobilizing Women”, pp. 103–104.

33. María Teresa Larrain, “Olga Poblete. La mujer aún no levanta la mano”. Available at: https://www.genero.patrimoniocultural.gob.cl/651/articles-28923_archivo_02.pdf; last accessed 21 April 2021.

to help with an exhibition on women's activities. This collaboration introduced Poblete to feminist politics and MEMCH circles.³⁴

WILPF AND CHILE

The collaboration between MEMCH and WILPF began in 1946. While Poblete was studying new pedagogical schools of thought at Columbia University in New York, she was introduced to WILPF's work and became involved with the organization.³⁵ In the US, Poblete met Heloise Brainerd, who had vast experience working on the inter-American sphere and was a long-time member of WILPF. At the time she met Olga Poblete, Brainerd had been the chair of the WILPF Committee on the Americas (CA) for eleven years. Before taking the challenge of leading WILPF's inter-American project, she had worked at the Pan-American Union between 1909 and 1935, becoming Chief of the Division of Intellectual Cooperation in 1929. Her professional career and the experience of living and working in Mexico for four years meant that she had good knowledge of the Latin American region and was fluent in Spanish.³⁶ While there is not much information available about their encounter in the US, this initial contact between Poblete and Brainerd led to sustained communication between WILPF and MEMCH over the next few years.

Upon her return to Chile, Poblete became one of only a few associate members of WILPF in Latin America – thirteen in 1948 – and, as such, worked to disseminate “the concepts of peace, democracy, international relations, and organisation of the United Nations, in several women's groups and academic organisations”.³⁷ Poblete considered both her work in MEMCH and her role as teacher as her “contribution to the work of the League”. Through these activities, Poblete believed it achievable to “form an opinion and create favourable attitudes of peace and the strengthening of an organization of world government”, showing the significance of internationalism for her. Thus, despite not organizing “a group or committee of the League as such, [she] acted in these areas as a member and pointed out that this work is part of the movement's inspiration and its purposes”.³⁸

Since at least the 1920s, WILPF members were actively promoting the organization's principles in hemispheric politics.³⁹ In the late 1930s, Brainerd

34. Pernet, “Mobilizing Women”, pp. 92–104.

35. Poblete to Baer, 10 June 1950, ANCFEC, 7, 8; Pernet, “Mobilizing Women”, p. 104.

36. Threlkeld, *Pan American Women*, pp. 176–177.

37. Poblete to Brainerd, 17 March 1948, ANCFEC, 5, 1; WILPF, “Interim Report to International Executive Committee of WILPF by Chairman of the Americas (Heloise Brainerd, USA)”, 1948. Available at: <https://archive.org/details/xcollection807b>; last accessed 26 October 2020.

38. Poblete to Brainerd, 10 February 1949, ANCFEC, 7, 8.

39. Miller, *Latin American Women*, pp. 84, 260 (n. 65).

visited Chile as part of a Latin American tour where she “[established], with the help of the *Círculo Pro-Paz de Valparaíso* [Peace Circle of Valparaíso], other Circles in Santiago and Concepción”. WILPF had worked with the peace circles in the 1930s before associating with MEMCH, yet little is known about the nature, scope, and connection of the circles to WILPF.⁴⁰ However, despite WILPF’s early interest in Latin America, Megan Threlkeld has noted that the organization not only struggled to include new members from the region, but also persisted in considering it as part of the periphery of international politics.⁴¹ Given her prior knowledge of the region, her language skills, and experience living in Latin America, Brainerd’s appointment was undoubtedly beneficial in helping to overcome some of these difficulties. Nevertheless, structural barriers to incorporating Latin America women remained firmly in place. Indeed, the broader relationship between WILPF and Latin America was still troubled by persistent elements of an “orientalist ethos”,⁴² which permeated Poblete’s relation with the WILPF.

These structural barriers – membership practices, the locations of international meetings, and language differences – hampered Latin American women’s involvement in WINGOs. For instance, Poblete struggled to keep up with WILPF membership payments (set in US dollars), which may have been quite high for a female teacher in Chile. In a letter to Brainerd, she explained that:

due to the dollar shortage and the high price on the market [...], it has not been possible for me to pay the League fee. I do not know if I will be in a position to do it soon, but I wish not to be removed from the League. Believe me that I will do everything I can to continue contributing and secure all valuable information that I have been receiving so far.⁴³

Similarly, while replying to an invitation extended by WILPF to the eleventh International Congress in Copenhagen, Poblete asserted that “it would certainly be impossible to attend from Chile”.⁴⁴ Indeed, WINGOs’ meetings were normally held in Europe and North America, and so travelling from the southern continent was fraught with difficulties. Additionally, if members wished to send written reports or statements in advance as an alternative, long-distance means of participating in international gatherings, language arose as another barrier. In considering her willingness to participate in WILPF’s eleventh congress despite the myriad challenges, Poblete explained that she “would enthusiastically contribute with any report or work [...] of interest

40. Brainerd to Mistral, 29 January 1939, Biblioteca Nacional Digital de Chile, Archivo del Escritor [hereafter BNDAC]. Available at: <http://www.bibliotecanacionaldigital.gob.cl/bnd/623/w3-article-151184.html>; last accessed 26 January 2020.

41. Threlkeld, *Pan American Women*, p. 9; for a wider explanation about the “exclusiveness” of WINGOs, see Rupp, *Worlds of Women*.

42. Threlkeld, *Pan American Women*, p. 9.

43. Poblete to Brainerd, 1950, ANCFEC, 6, 4.

44. Poblete to Brainerd, 10 February 1949.

for the Congress".⁴⁵ Brainerd helpfully explained that while she could translate the document if written in Spanish, additional time constraints would need to be put in place, and lamented that "the tongues of our League do not include Castilian, and to get the attention it needs, the report has to be in English".⁴⁶

Although not always successful, partial solutions were put forward to advance the participation of Latin American women, most notably under the leadership of Brainerd. As previously mentioned, she was the first chair of WILPF's CA who was fluent in Spanish, meaning that newsletters and correspondence in WILPF's regionally organized body for the Americas could be composed in that language. This strongly facilitated contact, although the Committee remained small, with only nine members in 1946 (six from Latin America and three from the US).⁴⁷ Additionally, Brainerd herself translated documents to facilitate communication with other League members, as suggested by her offer to translate Poblete's report.

Another important inclusion mechanism was the organization of meetings for WILPF members and local women's groups. Indeed, regional conferences – and the personal encounters, exchanges of information, and informal socializing therein – were undoubtedly considered the most optimal means for encouraging cooperation and finding common ground.⁴⁸ In February 1946, for example, a "Meeting of Inter-American Women" was held in Washington DC to discuss the organization of the First Inter-American Congress of Women sponsored by WILPF. Representatives from several countries, including Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Venezuela, Chile, and the US, met to discuss future congress guidelines, programmes, timing, location, invitations, and funding (including participant travel expenses). Marta Vergara, at the time living in Washington, chaired one of the sessions and was elected as the organizing committee's South American delegate.⁴⁹ Brainerd also invited Gabriela Mistral, the influential Nobel Prize-winning Chilean poet (awarded in 1945), to be a congress sponsor.⁵⁰ She explained to Mistral that Vergara was part of the organizing committee so "you may take it that it deserves your trust".⁵¹ Vergara and Mistral's support helped Brainerd to navigate the

45. *Ibid.*

46. Brainerd to Poblete, 21 February 1949, ANCFEC, 7, 9.

47. WILPF, "Interim Report".

48. Threlkeld, *Pan American Women*, pp. 35–36.

49. "Reunión de mujeres interamericanas para discutir la posibilidad de un Congreso Interamericano. Acta de las sesiones efectuadas", 1946, ANCFEC, 7, 8. According to Patricia Harms, Poblete was part of the initial steering committee established by Brainerd in the US to organize the congress. It seems that Vergara took her seat at some point. Patricia Harms, *Ladina Social Activism in Guatemala City 1871–1954* (Albuquerque, NM, 2020), p. 190.

50. On Mistral's international influence, see Nicola Miller, "Recasting the Role of the Intellectual: Chilean Poet Gabriela Mistral", *Feminist Review*, 79 (2005), pp. 134–149.

51. Brainerd to Mistral, 14 March 1946, BNDAE. Available at: <http://www.bibliotecanacionaldigital.gob.cl/bnd/623/w3-article-151187.html>; last accessed 26 January 2020.

lack of awareness regarding WILPF's activities in Latin America, and to advertise the importance of organizing a successful international meeting. While Brainerd recognized that the organizing committee "is relatively unknown in Latin America", she expected that "if your name [Mistral's] is on the letterhead, the association will know that is a serious movement".⁵²

In August 1947, the congress was finally held in Guatemala. Against the background of the aftermath of World War II and the escalation of Cold War tensions, the congress posed a direct challenge to US foreign policy and rising militarization promoted by the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance signed the same month in Rio de Janeiro.⁵³ Organized into six committees, the delegates – representing organizations from nineteen countries – discussed a wide range of topics: the consequences of the atomic bomb; democratization; the struggle of human rights; the problems in inter-American politics; European immigration; refugees and victims of war; and the civil and political rights of women.⁵⁴ The Chilean doctor María Rivera, one of MEMCH's founders, attended the congress as a representative of the *Círculo Pro-Paz de Valparaíso* and other Chilean women's organizations, and chaired the Committee on Nuclear Weapons and Peace.⁵⁵ Poblete herself could not travel to the meeting, but professed her staunch support of the congress resolutions, especially after living the experience of arriving in the US while "Hiroshima and Nagasaki were still burning".⁵⁶

WILPF's CA and the organizing committee put a considerable amount of effort into coordinating and funding an accessible international congress. As shown by the participation of Chilean women such as Vergara, Mistral, and Rivera, Latin American women had an active role in both the planning and the conference itself. Furthermore, initiatives in the same spirit followed in the years to come. The second Inter-American Congress of Women took place in Mexico in 1951; and, two decades later, a similar initiative in Colombia saw the organization of the third Congress of American Women, in 1970.⁵⁷ However, none of WILPF's sponsored congresses in Latin America succeeded in greatly advancing the League's primary interest in the region, namely, to create national sections. At times, they may even have been detrimental: the organization of the 1970 congress in Colombia has been discussed as possibly having debilitated the WILPF section in that

52. *Ibid.*

53. Harms, *Ladina Social Activism*, p. 186.

54. Miller, *Latin American Women*, p. 125.

55. Brainerd to Poblete, 22 October 1947, ANCFEC, 7, 8; Brainerd to Poblete, 17 July 1947, ANCFEC, 7, 8.

56. Luis Alberto Mansilla, "Autorretrato de Olga Poblete", *Punto Final* (1986). Available at: https://www.genero.patrimoniocultural.gob.cl/651/articulos-28923_archivo_03.pdf; last accessed 13 May 2021.

57. MEMCH. *Antología para una historia del movimiento femenino*, 1983; Liga Internacional de Mujeres Pro Paz y Libertad, "III Congreso de mujeres de América", n.d., ANCFEC, 7, 8.

country.⁵⁸ Ultimately, by the end of the 1940s, and despite the CA's decade-long effort to create national organizations, solely Brazilian women – and only just – had a WILPF national section in the region.⁵⁹

Indeed, improving membership figures through the creation of national sections proved an extremely challenging task. In February 1949, when Brainerd asked Poblete her thoughts on creating a national organization in Chile, she replied: "I would not know if National Sections are convenient. I think they can be constituted upon reaching a greater stage of growth. I believe in unified movements and actions, not divided into blocks."⁶⁰ Certainly, Poblete's opinion was grounded in her local reality. By the end of the 1940s, the women's movement in Chile was riddled with political squabbles and divisions influenced by the recent realignments of the Cold War.⁶¹ Furthermore, in January 1949, President González Videla had signed the law that granted women the vote in national elections, one of the main goals of the women's movement. However, achieving female enfranchisement also removed one of the main incentives to organize, triggering the further fragmentation of the women's movement.⁶² The previous year, in 1948, Brainerd had reported that "a section is in the process of formation in Chile"; however, its official creation came twenty-four years later.⁶³ And Poblete herself was too overburdened to undertake more activities. While explaining the situation of the women's movement to a friend, she claimed: "I am the national leader of a women's institution of great activity, the MEMCH, and because of that I have a lot of extra work additional to, of course, my professional activities."⁶⁴ Despite this, Poblete remained enthusiastic about improving international connections despite political and personal constraints, and was open to Brainerd's suggestion "of creating a Latin American branch [...] which would have a lot to learn from the Sections in US and Canada".⁶⁵

After this, the failed aspirations for WILPF's national sections in Latin America led to the design and implementation of alternate membership methods. Specifically, participation outside of nation-based organizing appeared to

58. Catherine Foster, *Women for All Seasons: The Story of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom* (Athens, 1989), p. 59.

59. Heloise Brainerd, "Report to International Executive Committee by Chairman of Committee on the Americas", June 1950, ANCFEC, 7, 8.

60. Poblete to Brainerd, 10 February 1949.

61. Corinne A. Pernet, "Peace in the World and Democracy at Home. The Chilean Women's Movement in the 1940s", in David Rock (ed.), *Latin America in the 1940s: War and Postwar Transitions* (Berkeley, CA, 1994), pp. 166–183, 178–182.

62. *Ibid.*, pp. 181–182.

63. WILPF, "Interim Report".

64. Poblete to Annemarie L. Robinow, 15 February 1950, ANCFEC, 7, 8.

65. Poblete to Brainerd, 10 February 1949. Her exact words are: "una rama Latino Americana, que debe estar en formación y que tendría mucho que aprender a la de los Estados Unidos y el Canadá".

be a productive way of attracting more members and to better foster integration. Given these conditions, Brainerd suggested forming a regional WILPF branch in 1949. Women belonging to any country lacking a national section could join the League's Latin American branch by paying a reduced fee (two dollars, instead of the five usually asked of associate members). Optimistically, she stated that, "it is our idea that many Latin American women feel deep sympathy for the League's work and they will be pleased to accept the opportunity of affiliating if the dues are modest, and in due course national committees will be formed, and maybe Sections".⁶⁶ The plan began to be implemented in 1949, and Brainerd hoped that, "eventually this would lead to the formation of more National Sections of the League".⁶⁷

In spite of such concessions, instead of creating – or transforming MEMCH into – a national section, Poblete opted for an alternative path of transnational collaboration. In her capacity as both MEMCH's secretary and member of the League, Poblete used her position to closely affiliate both organizations without sacrificing MEMCH's autonomy as an independent group. This cooperation was underpinned by Poblete's belief that WILPF's ideals coincided with MEMCH's principles of democracy, peace, and women's rights.⁶⁸ An essential part of this exchange consisted of sharing information about the organizations' experiences, goals, and, above all, common interests.⁶⁹ Materials pertaining to WILPF were sent to Poblete by the CA, the International Headquarters, and WILPF's sections. These were then studied and summarized by MEMCH's secretariat with a view to be disseminated among local committees. WILPF's international events were also publicized by the MEMCH in its own activities; for example, in International Women's Day celebrations, and through radio and printed media.⁷⁰ Thereby Poblete believed that MEMCH could effectively implement the activities carried out by WILPF's sections without actually becoming one. In her own words: "As you see, we have a lot of activities even though there is not a WILPF section constituted as such."⁷¹

These initiatives were positive steps in furthering collaboration between WILPF and Latin American women. In Poblete's case, she considered the connection to WILPF not only profoundly stimulating, but also valuable for MEMCH's local agenda. Especially after World War II, when political polarization and anti-communist sentiment grew, Poblete turned to her

66. Heloise Brainerd, "Circular al comité de las Américas", 10 October 1949, ANCFEC, 7, 8.

67. Brainerd, "Report to International Executive Committee".

68. Poblete to Baer, 10 June 1950.

69. Threlkeld makes the same point regarding contact between US and Mexican women's groups. Threlkeld, *Pan American Women*, p. 34.

70. Poblete to Robinow, 15 February 1950; Poblete to Baer, 10 June 1950; Olga Poblete to Heloise Brainerd, 25 August 1950, ANCFEC, 7, 8.

71. Poblete to Robinow, 15 February 1950.

transnational networks for support. MEMCH appealed to their contacts in WILPF to denounce political repression affecting its affiliates, members of the CP, and leftist sympathizers. The Popular Front strategy of seeking broader alliances had meant that, by the late 1930s, there were consolidated communist organizations in most Latin American countries. Growing industrialization, urbanization, and support for the allies during the war – including the prominent role gained by the Soviet Union – also helped to strengthen class mobilization and communist parties.⁷² Nonetheless, the political scenario changed rapidly with the beginning of the Cold War. In 1947, President González Videla, who had been elected with support from the CP, changed his policy and began to support US foreign policy after the Truman administration made economic aid and credits dependent on anti-communist loyalty.⁷³ As a result, Poblete and her fellow *memchistas* were being marginalized from the political mainstream owing to their opposition to the government's restriction of civil liberties and the repression of labour, communist, and leftist leaders.⁷⁴ This affected not only the communist activists among MEMCH members, but also those *memchistas* without party affiliation, especially in the provinces.⁷⁵

Facing this adverse political climate, this kind of international support became increasingly important for women's activism. In September 1948, Poblete wrote to Brainerd explaining that MEMCH's actions had been stifled through fear: all MEMCH activities were deemed by authorities to be “at the service of the [CP]”, and so “people are terrified, and nobody wants to risk detention or exile”.⁷⁶ Two months later, Poblete explicitly asked WILPF members to “intervene with their prestige and moral strength before the government of Chile [...] [so that] rational, and not brutal, means are employed against the political opposition”.⁷⁷ WILPF, and Brainerd in particular, responded positively, addressing the Chilean Ministry of Labour to inquire about the internment camps. She also wrote to the chair of the United Nations Human Rights Commission, Eleanor Roosevelt, to inform her of the “cruel treatment of women communists, communist sympathizers, and even humanitarians”, and requesting “that the situation be investigated and the proper steps taken to correct these abuses” and that “preferential attention” should be given “to the plight of Chile's working women”.⁷⁸

72. Victor Figueroa Clark, “Latin American Communism”, in Norman Naimark, Silvio Pons, and Sophie Quinn-Judge (eds), *The Cambridge History of Communism*, 3 vols (Cambridge, 2017), II, pp. 388–413, 397–399; David Priestland, *Bandera roja. Historia política y cultural del comunismo* (Barcelona, 2017), p. 339.

73. Andrew Barnard, “Chile”, in Leslie Bethell and Ian Roxborough (eds), *Latin America Between the Second World War and the Cold War, 1944–1948* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 66–91.

74. Pernet, “Mobilizing Women”, pp. 361–365.

75. *Ibid.*, p. 366.

76. Poblete to Brainerd, 18 September 1948, ANCFEC, 2, 5.

77. Poblete to Brainerd, November 1948, ANCFEC, 2, 5.

78. Brainerd to Roosevelt, 20 October 1948, ANCFEC, 8, 7.

Here, Poblete leveraged her women's international networks to advance MEMCH's goals, or at least to attempt some protection for its members. She appreciated Brainerd's support in such difficult times, explaining that, "contact with you [...] is very valuable for me as a woman, [a woman] determined to defend the same ideals that you uphold, and as the leader of [...] MEMCH, which, in these trying times for democratic convictions, is proud to stand by persecuted and abused people".⁷⁹

SHIFTING ALLIANCES: WILPF'S INROADS IN CHILE

WILPF supported Poblete and MEMCH during a high point of women's activism in Chile and a pivotal moment of political transformation after World War II. Nonetheless, Poblete's search for international support and the expansion of her transnational network, together with her desire to preserve MEMCH's autonomy (not seeking to transform MEMCH into a WILPF branch), also set boundaries to the endorsement that WILPF was willing to give. This is clear when we highlight Poblete's connection with other international groups. Poblete established diverse contacts within international organizations, particularly among those initiatives linked to the communist movement. In contrast, during the 1940s, WILPF was extremely cautious about not being linked to international communism. The practice of associating WILPF's goals with radicalism and socialism as a way of discrediting its members began with WILPF's opposition to World War I.⁸⁰ However, this issue became more pressing after the end of World War II. As Patricia Harms notes, WILPF's advocacy of peace and Brainerd's opposition to US military policies in the Americas made the organization particularly vulnerable to allegations of being on the "wrong side" of the Cold War.⁸¹ Brainerd, however, repeatedly denied such claims. Corresponding with Mistral in 1946, she explained that, "we [WILPF] are liberals, but not communists".⁸² The next year, when a delegate to the Guatemala congress walked out on the grounds of it having been tainted by communism, she again clarified that accusations suggesting "communist influence" were "unfounded" since "the point of view [...] against any totalitarianism is precisely that which the League espouses".⁸³

Such accusations were also present in Chile. The newspaper *El Mercurio* published the declarations of the Costa Rican delegate, who protested the

79. Poblete to Brainerd, 17 March 1948.

80. Threlkeld, *Pan American Women*, p. 22.

81. Harms, *Ladina Social Activism*, p. 196.

82. Brainerd to Mistral, 14 March 1946.

83. Brainerd to Mistral, 20 September 1947, BNDAE. Available at: <http://www.bibliotecanacionaldigital.gob.cl/visor/BNDAE:151238>; last accessed 26 March 2020.

alleged “pro-Soviet” loyalties of the meeting.⁸⁴ The Federación Chilena de Instituciones Femeninas (Chilean Federation of Women’s Institutions, FECHIF) – a national umbrella organization for more than 200 hundred different women’s groups established in 1944 – also echoed such claims, and accused WILPF of being a communist group.⁸⁵ Owing to the political tensions stemming from the onset of the Cold War, FECHIF had moved to the right and expelled all the communists from its ranks. In a forceful response, MEMCH renounced the federation in 1947.⁸⁶ Thus, amid growing polarization, Brainerd tried to persuade Poblete and MEMCH to avoid Soviet-linked initiatives advocating peace. Indeed, she lamented that “the Soviet Union has sponsored so many initiatives in the name of peace that the world suspects those who use the word” and advised that, “we need to be careful not to identify with Soviet initiatives, however good they seem, because their methods do not agree with their declarations. This means, we only support *true* democracy”. She concluded her message by saying: “I am sure the MEMCH is aware of this particular danger of our times.”⁸⁷

However, Poblete had her own convictions. In her years as a *memchista*, she had worked closely with communist women and, although never a party member herself, was considered an ally. In Poblete’s words, “they [the CP] had a lot of trust in me, I was not an infiltrator”.⁸⁸ As MEMCH entered a period of decline, Poblete threw herself into the organization of the Movimiento Chileno de Partidarios por la Paz (Chilean Movement of Partisans for Peace), a local section of the World Peace Council (WPC). The WPC was an international organization that endorsed an idea of peace linked to Soviet interests against the militarism and imperialism displayed by the West, especially the US, and had a significant presence in Latin America.⁸⁹ The Chilean section held its first national congress in 1950 and Poblete was appointed vice-president – a decision not without controversy within WILPF.⁹⁰ Her fellow League members were apprehensive about her appointment and relationships became strained. For example, replying to Poblete’s calls for aid in pressuring the Chilean government after authorities had declined to issue her passport to attend the Second World Congress of Partisans of Peace in Sheffield, Brainerd warned her that, “this group falls

84. Pernet, “Peace in the World”, p. 179.

85. Poblete to Brainerd, 1950. On FECHIF, see Pernet, “Peace in the World”, p. 176.

86. Pernet, “Peace in the World”, p. 180.

87. Brainerd to Poblete, 3 November 1950, ANCFEC, 7, 8; original emphasis.

88. Mat de Cámara. Sra. Elena. 3era Olguita (Lotty). Entrevista 7/92. [Video]. Archivo Eltit-Rosenfeld [hereafter Mat de Cámara]. Available at: <https://archivospatrimoniales.uc.cl/handle/123456789/31573>; last accessed 14 June 2021.

89. Patrick Iber, *Neither Peace nor Freedom: The Cultural Cold War in Latin America* (Cambridge [etc.] 2015), p. 2.

90. On the Chilean congress, see *Primer Congreso Nacional de los Partidarios de la Paz. 29 y 30 de Septiembre y 1º de Octubre de 1950* (Santiago de Chile, 1950).

under” those “dominated by the Soviet Union; not tending sincerely towards peace, but to the USSR’s purposes, which sometimes are imperialistic”. Thus, instead of accepting Poblete’s request for help, she suggested that, “if it was not possible for you to go to the Congress, maybe it is for the better”.⁹¹ Thus, WILPF’s members – along with other non-aligned pacifists – distanced themselves from the communist-led peace campaign and refused to support it. Although WILPF leaders explained that, “it was difficult, and sometimes painful, to cast doubts on expressions of solidarity in the cause of peace” through the WPC, it was “impossible not to do so when these movements were so at variance of life behind the Iron Curtain and so lacking in criticism of provocative actions by communist governments”.⁹²

Despite WILPF’s attempts at persuasion, Poblete aligned herself with the WPC after attending the 1950 Warsaw Congress (which had moved from Sheffield because of intervention from Attlee’s government) and visiting socialist Czechoslovakia. Not just asserting her own position, she further attempted to influence Brainerd to shift hers towards the inclusion of communists in the peace movement. In an emotional letter expressing her “love, respect and memories full of admiration”, Poblete recognized the “true esteem” she had for Brainerd’s “noble spirit” and work for the ideals of peace and freedom. However, she also believed that her “mistrust” of working with communists and her “well-intentioned and honest” compatriots were blinding her to the fact that the peace movement, with or without communists, was composed of people “holding different convictions”. As one of those people with independent ideas, she claimed to “not be afraid of the company of communists”. While travelling in Eastern Europe, she “clarified her position toward the problem of peace” and championed “the enormous responsibility [...] of fighting against the curtains of silence and evil misrepresentations”. From her writings, it is clear that Poblete sincerely believed in the possibility of political independence and collaboration within the WPC. She urged Brainerd to question the ostensibly “objective information” given by Western magazines, such as *Time* or *Life*. Faced with Cold War polarization, Poblete “did not wish for either a Soviet or North American peace imposed by war”. Nevertheless, she was completely convinced of the negative consequences of North American economic imperialism, President’s Truman newly launched technical assistance programme that benefited “a handful of usufructuaries”, and the shift towards a hemispheric defensive policy based on anti-communism. Poblete made clear to WILPF that her support of the WPC was honest and not politically motivated, but the vision of peace promoted by the USSR – in her eyes – was “more linked to reality” and carried

91. Brainerd to Poblete, 25 November 1950, ANCFEC, 7, 8.

92. Quoted in Lawrence Wittner, *Confronting the Bomb: A Short History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement* (Stanford, CA, 2009), p. 27.

“more meaning for the people than the peace put forward by US foreign policy”.⁹³ While Brainerd and Poblete kept in touch in the years that followed, the end of MEMCH and different Cold War standpoints held by their leaders limited WILPF's influence in Chile.

While detrimental to her alliance with WILPF, Poblete's gravitation towards the communist-backed peace movement further encouraged her relationship with WIDF. As Celia Donert has remarked, the onset of the Cold War marked the association between WIDF and the Soviet-supported peace campaign. Not only did they share a common socialist definition of peace (linked to social justice and self-determination), but also many members of the WIDF held positions in the WPC.⁹⁴ Indeed, when Poblete took a leading role in the Chilean section of the WPC, she had been directly in touch with WIDF's leadership for at least two years (see below). Thus, this shift in Poblete's position shows the limits of collaboration across opposite ideological lines. As De Haan illustrated with the experiences of the feminist leaders Cécile Brunschvicg and Ceza Nabaraouy, Poblete's personal trajectory also reflects the intimately connected but increasingly antagonistic positions of WINGOs during the Cold War.⁹⁵

The interest WIDF founders showed towards Latin America developed early, reflecting the organization's global reach. In Chile, FECHIF was the first institution officially in contact with them, while MEMCH and communist women were still part of it. In 1945, FECHIF received “repeated invitations” to the 1945 International Congress of Women in Paris.⁹⁶ The organization appointed two delegates who were in Europe at the time: Irma Salas, a prominent Chilean educator and member of the Asociación de Mujeres Universitarias (Association of University Women); and Margot Duhalde, the first Chilean female military pilot, who had served in World War II. On returning to Chile, Salas reported on WIDF's foundational congress, stressing the importance of the experience of war in developing women's consciousness and role in maintaining peace.⁹⁷ Emphatically, she explained how “women had learned to join forces [...] to convert the principles of democracy into a reality for women [...] and to overcome their subordinate position in society”.⁹⁸ In 1946, WIDF also sponsored a visit from Marie Claude Vaillant-Couturier – a member of the French Resistance and a communist member of parliament after the end of the war – in her tour of Chile,

93. Poblete to Brainerd, 16 June 1951, ANCFEC, 7, 8.

94. Celia Donert, “From Communist Internationalism to Human Rights: Gender, Violence and International Law in the Women's International Democratic Federation Mission to North Korea, 1951”, *Contemporary European History*, 25 (2016), pp. 313–333, 316.

95. De Haan, “Continuing Cold War”, p. 554.

96. FECHIF, *Boletín*, 4 (September 1947), p. 10, ANCFEC, 6, 4.

97. *Ibid.*

98. Pernet, “Peace in the World and Democracy at Home”, p. 176.

Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil.⁹⁹ Vaillant-Couturier became the organization's secretary general in the same year, a fact suggestive of the attention paid to the region. Her talks made a strong impression on the Chilean audience, who "enthusiastically paid homage" and observed her "bravery", "spirit of sacrifice", and "elevated doctrine". Indeed, according to FECHIF's *Boletín*, Vaillant-Couturier's words "touched the hearts of all women".¹⁰⁰

It is unclear whether Poblete met Vaillant-Couturier during her visit to Chile, but their correspondence began, at least, in 1948, and covered several topics: the women's movement in Chile and Europe, the situation in Spain under Franco's rule, and the international peace movement, among other things. Communication with WIDF opened another window for MEMCH's participation in international affairs and constituted not only "the possibility to connect with another sector of the global women's movement", but also "a valuable source of news and suggestions".¹⁰¹ MEMCH's members were keen to know more about women's activism in other parts of the developing world, possibly because their communication with international women's organizations had so far only focused on activities in the Americas and Europe. Poblete, for instance, described the great interest awakened by the WIDF-sponsored 1949 Congress of the Women of Asia held in Beijing: "For many of our associates, the knowledge about this Congress of Women in Asia establishes a true revelation, since it means an extraordinary development of the women's movement in the East and a positive contribution to the world women's movement." Poblete added, "we are highly interested in receiving all information that you could send about such Congresses, as well as the one in Budapest, because MEMCH sustains an active educational campaign for our women about all salient problems both nationally and internationally".¹⁰²

Early contacts and mutual interest in communicating were fruitful, although collaboration remained problematic. As mentioned, for instance, FECHIF could not send delegates to the 1945 Paris Congress directly from Chile, despite asking the government for monetary support, and instead had to rely on women already in Europe for representation. However, geographical distance was not an insurmountable obstacle. WIDF women developed alternative methods of communication to advance connections with the region and create bonds across the continents, similar to the strategies developed by WILPF, such as organizing congresses in the region and exchanging materials and letters in Spanish. Indeed, one year after WIDF's foundation, women's

99. WIDF, *Second Women's International Congress* (Paris, 1949), p. 54.

100. FECHIF, *Boletín*, 4, p. 11.

101. Poblete to Vaillant-Couturier, October 1948.

102. *Ibid.* On the 1949 Conference of the Women of Asia, see Elisabeth Armstrong, "Before Bandung: The Anti-Imperialist Women's Movement in Asia and the Women's International Democratic Federation", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 41:2 (2016), pp. 305–331.

groups in Chile were receiving their *Boletín de Información* (Informational Bulletin) and, later, *Mujeres del Mundo Entero* (Women of the Whole World), WIDF's monthly (and from 1966, quarterly) review, in their own language. As noted by De Haan, these publications, "served to create bonds and an imagined community of progressive women worldwide, in addition to providing information about WIDF and its activities, its congresses, national affiliates, and specific events and political causes".¹⁰³

These efforts quickly bore fruit, and the Comité Nacional Femenino de Unidad (CNFU) was established in 1947. There is little information about its initial years, but Poblete explained during an interview that the organization emerged after the "rupture of the women's movement due to repression and the Cold War". It seems that the committee, established to counteract the marginalization of leftist women, had direct support from the CP.¹⁰⁴ Its supporters were also probably encouraged by results of the 1947 council election in which the CP performed well, becoming the third most voted-for party (16.5 per cent of the ballots) and securing up to 11.8 per cent of the women's vote.¹⁰⁵ This convergence of domestic conditions likely encouraged communist support for the newly formed committee, which increased the chance of influencing women while the CP was illegal.¹⁰⁶ However, as shown by WIDF's global actions, women organizing CNFU were not only responding to local events but were also stimulated by communist internationalism. Mercedes Yusta highlighted this process of transnational mobilization when explaining the connection between Spanish communist women's organizing and the creation of WIDF.¹⁰⁷ Thus, it was a combination of both internal and external factors that galvanized Chilean communist women; those who, in turn, became instrumental to CNFU's success.

CNFU became a national organization, with local chapters in La Serena, Valparaíso, Talca, and Concepción.¹⁰⁸ The committee grouped "women's institutions across Chile" and strove to "improve childhood living standards, to support modest women, working women, middle-class women, in whom anguish is felt in excess, to provide them a better life, less filled with misery, with more dignity, and more humanity".¹⁰⁹ Over the years, the organization

103. De Haan, "The Women's International Democratic Federation", p. 12.

104. Mat de Cámara.

105. Erika Maza Valenzuela, "Catolicismo, anticlericalismo y la extensión del sufragio a la mujer en Chile", *Estudios Públicos*, 58 (1995), pp. 137–195, 194.

106. McGee Deutsch notes a similar dynamic regarding the Argentinian CP and the women's organization la Junta de la Victoria. Sandra McGee Deutsch, "Mujeres, antifascismo y democracia. La Junta de la Victoria, 1941–1947", *Anuario IEHS*, 28 (2013), pp. 157–175, 166.

107. Mercedes Yusta, "Las mujeres en el Partido Comunista de España (1921–1950). La estrategia internacional", in Valobra and Yusta, *Queridas camaradas*, pp. 45–69.

108. Mat de Cámara.

109. Mercedes Fuentealba and Luisa Vicentini to Gabriela Mistral, 23 May 1951, BND AE. Available at <http://www.bibliotecanacionaldigital.cl/bnd/623/w3-article-137702.html>; last accessed 27 July 2018.

developed a complex structure that included an executive committee, a governing body, fee-paying provincial and local committees, and affiliated organizations.¹¹⁰ They also periodically organized national, provincial, and local assemblies, together with national congresses every three or four years.¹¹¹

Poblete collaborated with CNFU while she was leading MEMCH, bringing the two organizations together and emphasizing their “anti-war discourse”.¹¹² In the late 1940s and early 1950s, part of this joint work consisted of supporting WIDF’s petitions and campaigns, such as activism against the use of nuclear energy, international campaigns for the protection of children, and work on behalf of women’s rights.¹¹³ The prominence of WIDF was highlighted in these activities. In 1951, for example, in celebrating International Women’s Day, Poblete gave a talk entitled “The Women’s Movement in Europe”, in which she underlined the role of WIDF’s international leaders, Cotton, Vaillant-Couturier, and Maddalena Rossi (the president of the Union of Women of Italy and later WIDF’s vice-president), and the “notable” role of women in Poland and Czechoslovakia.¹¹⁴ Their high esteem for women’s activism related to the communist movement and socialist regimes built from their past loyalties to the anti-fascist struggle (an important feature of organizations such as MEMCH), but also showed how WIDF stoked new life into leftist women’s activism, even in spite (or perhaps because) of a hostile political environment. As Poblete recalled, CNFU’s purpose was to “struggle for the defence of human rights [in] a time of very intense political persecution”.¹¹⁵

While MEMCH entered a period of decline until its dissolution in 1953, CNFU remained active in strengthening its international ties. It is not clear when CNFU officially became affiliated with WIDF, but in 1948, it sent a report to the WIDF International Congress hoping for “its official admittance, as soon as possible”.¹¹⁶ At the same meeting, Fanny Edelman, the Argentine member of the WIDF executive committee, explained that Chilean women had not been able to attend owing to heavy repression in Chile.¹¹⁷ A couple of months earlier, the Law of Permanent Defence of Democracy (also known as the Damned Law) had been promulgated, resulting in harsher

110. WIDF, *Second Women’s International Congress*, p. 12.

111. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

112. Mat de Cámara.

113. Marie-Claude Vaillant-Couturier to Olga Poblete, 2 October 1948, ANCFEC, 7, 8; Olga Poblete, “Apoyo a la realización de la Jornada internacional de defensa de la infancia”, 11 May 1950, ANCFEC, 6, 5; Olga Poblete, “Carta enviada por Olga Poblete de Espinosa. Presidente comando pro Jornada internacional de defensa de la infancia”, n.d., ANCFEC, 6, 5; Poblete to Elisa Uriz, 26 May 1950, ANCFEC, 6, 5.

114. Poblete to Arcelina M. Goto, 12 March 1951, ANCFEC, 7, 11.

115. Mat de Cámara.

116. WIDF, *Second Women’s International Congress*, p. 83.

117. *Ibid.*, p. 210.

persecution against communists. The CP was outlawed and excluded from the political system and from trade unions, which disenfranchised around 23,000 members.¹¹⁸ Ultimately, however, the CNFU remained active and, following the style of other WIDF national sections, changed its name to the Unión de Mujeres de Chile (UMC) in 1956. This also coincided with the easing of the repression against communists and leftists in the early 1950s, although the “Damned Law” was not abolished until 1958.¹¹⁹ Thus, in less than a decade, WIDF established a national section in Chile as it had already done in Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Peru, and Cuba.¹²⁰

The development of this national structure allowed for sustained involvement in WIDF's international activities. While influence from women in the Global South on the organization's leadership remained limited,¹²¹ regional conferences were nonetheless crucial to attracting local leaders and enhancing local organization. Lia Laffaye, for instance, became president of the UMC in 1956 after being introduced to WIDF's work in a conference in Brazil. Representing the Partido Femenino (Women's Party), Laffaye had been elected to parliament in 1953, becoming the second woman to hold a congress seat in Chile's history. In 1954, she attended the first WIDF-sponsored conference of Latin American women held at Rio de Janeiro, where she developed ties to the organization.¹²² The next year, she crossed the Atlantic to participate in WIDF's council meeting in Vienna. After having attended these meetings, she explained how she realized that, “the WIDF was a great force” and noted that, before participating in the Brazil Conference, she had “always worked alone and in an independent way”.¹²³ In the Vienna council meeting, Laffaye was captivated by the international gathering, where “the problems which have been discussed [...] closely [follow] the concerns of all women. The speeches have been extremely interesting and are a revelation to me. I am particularly interested in this unity of women all across the world, and I think that is a very important step forward”.¹²⁴ Inspired by these international assemblies, she not only became UMC's president, but went on to sustain

118. Barnard, “Chile”, pp. 88–89.

119. Rolando Álvarez, *Forjando la vía chilena al socialismo. El Partido Comunista de Chile en la disputa por la democracia y los movimientos sociales (1931–1970)* (Valparaíso, 2020), p. 71.

120. WIDF, *Second Women's International Congress*, p. 21.

121. Yulia Gradskova, “Women's International Democratic Federation, the ‘Third World’ and the Global Cold War from the late-1950s to the mid-1960s”, *Women's History Review*, 29:2 (2019), pp. 270–288.

122. The Women's Party was dissolved in 1953 and Laffaye became an independent member of congress. Felicitas Klimpel, *La Mujer Chilena* (Santiago de Chile, 1962), p. 109. On the Rio de Janeiro Congress, see Branca Fialho, “From the Conference of Latin American Women to the World Congress of Mothers”, *Women of the Whole World* [hereafter WWW], 2 (February 1955), p. 7.

123. “Their Impressions of Our Council Meeting”, WWW, 4 (April 1955), p. 9.

124. *Ibid.*

active participation in international conferences throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

Following MEMCH's tradition, the UMC advanced its programme of peace, women's emancipation, and children's rights, by establishing connections with international organizations, presenting their views about international issues to the United Nations, and maintaining an active presence at international events. In 1960, for instance, Laffaye explained that, despite facing great difficulties, the organization had been "present in almost all international meetings convened by the WIDF"¹²⁵ Indeed, the UMC was able to send delegates to the International Congress of Women in Vienna (1958), the International Assembly of Women to commemorate fifty years of International Women's Year in Copenhagen (1960), the International Congress of Women in Moscow (1963), and the World Conference for Children (1966). Its members also regularly attended council meetings (China, 1956; Helsinki, 1957; Sofia, 1965; Salzburg, 1955; Budapest, 1970) and held a seat on the WIDF's bureau.¹²⁶

Once WIDF's national section in Chile was firmly established, and its leaders had gained a fair amount of international experience, the UMC began to sponsor regional Latin American women's conferences. Santiago was designated the host city of the First Conference of Latin American Women in November 1959.¹²⁷ This aimed to convene a wide and diverse group of participants and supporters and was organized by the UMC together with women of the CP, fellow travellers, and other public figures. According to the UMC's report, the congress was a success, with representatives from every country in the region and "all members assuming the task as their own".¹²⁸ The UMC came to the fore again during the winter of 1968, when it organized a WIDF South American Seminar and presented the report "The Growing Participation in Economic, Social, Cultural and Political Life".¹²⁹ The five-day seminar gathered more than a hundred participants from nine countries, with the aim of showcasing "the increasing activity of the women of these countries studying and solving their problems". The participants also considered the activity a contribution to the 1969 WIDF World Congress of Women in Helsinki and the International Year for Human Rights (1968).¹³⁰ These high-profile seminars sought to garner women's support for

125. 2° Congreso Nacional Unión de Mujeres de Chile, p. 11. ANCFEC, 6, 4.

126. WWW, 6 (1956); WWW, 8–9 (1957); WWW, 8 (1963); WWW, 1 (1966); WWW, 4 (1966).

127. Strictly speaking, the First Conference of Latin American Women was held in Brazil in 1954; however, it was organized under a different name (Conferência Nacional sobre o Trabalho entre as Mulheres). This conference had links with WILPF but was organized by the Communist Party of Brazil. Adriana María Valobra, "Mujeres-sombra' y 'Barbudas'. Género y política en el Primer Congreso Latinoamericano de Mujeres, Chile-1959", *Anuario del Instituto de Historia Argentina*, 14 (2014), pp. 1–17, 2.

128. See: 2° Congreso Nacional Unión de Mujeres de Chile, p. 6. ANCFEC, 7, 11.

129. "Regional Seminars in Latin America", WWW, 1 (1968), p. 49.

130. Cecile Hugel, "Two Notable Events in Latin America", WWW, 1 (1969), pp. 3–4.

social change projects and, more specifically, WIDF. Indeed, such conferences were an effective way of connecting and involving Latin American women with communist-inspired women's transnational activism.

CONCLUSION

The personal and political relationships developed by the leaders of the Chilean women's movement and WINGOs shed light on the increasing (yet incomplete) participation of women from outside the "centres" of international politics in a particular space of women's transnational activism. Even though WILPF and WIDF shared strengths and weaknesses in promoting their ideas and establishing links with women in Latin America, they fundamentally differed in their level of success in creating national sections. Even in the fruitful collaboration developed between MEMCH and WILPF from 1946 to 1951, Poblete, as Chilean leader, articulated it from a position of autonomy. When MEMCH was dissolved in 1953 – theoretically providing a space for the establishment of a WILPF national section – Cold War realignments and impacts on the Chilean women's movement limited the organization's national influence. Conversely, WIDF's success in Chile – first, rapidly establishing a local committee in 1947, and then a national section – was due to several aspects. WIDF began as a more global organization, with one of its main aims to extend their influence worldwide. In Chile and elsewhere, WIDF's success was partly achieved by dovetailing with previous traditions in women's mobilization, particularly anti-fascism and pacifism. Those elements were vital to the initial configuration of the Chilean women's movement, and so there was a degree of continuity between MEMCH and WIDF's Chilean section. The fact that many communist women had double militancy was a tendency that also strengthened WIDF. Indeed, as Poblete explained in the 1980s, many *memchistas* became active members of the CNFU (including herself). The growing support for the CP in Chile – becoming one of the biggest political forces despite severe repression in the late 1940s and 1950s – naturally reinforced this trend.

Ultimately, the political and ideological trajectories of activists such as Poblete show that both the relationships and friendships they sought to prioritize, and their participation in women's transnational activism, were shaped by their local reality and their own political alignments and goals. Poblete appealed to her personal connections with the leadership of WINGOs to denounce the curtailment of civil and political liberties and protect leftist women affected by government repression. As political polarization grew with the onset of the Cold War, and WILPF consciously avoided associations with communism, Poblete and other activists further cultivated their relationships with communist internationalist organizations, including WIDF, to foster leftist women's activism for peace and women's rights. These relationships

were not only crucial for the projection of WIDF's activities within Chile in the following decades but would also shape the fundamental role of WINGOs in the anti-dictatorial international solidarity developed in the 1970s and 1980s. In January 1974, for example, WIDF was one of the first organizations to send a fact-finding mission to Chile to investigate human rights violations, only four months after Pinochet's coup d'état. Throughout the dictatorship years, transnational connections also gave a platform to Chilean exiles to speak against the regime, including Salvador Allende's widow Hortensia Bussi, who became WIDF's honorary president.¹³¹ Thus, such networks of women's solidarity and activism, which became prominent during the dictatorship years, had a longer history, which this article has aimed to unveil.

131. Lanfranco González, "Women's Activism and Feminism".