

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Organisation

Entry ID: AWE0583

Housewives Association of Victoria

(1915 -)

Born 1 January, 1915, Melbourne Victoria Australia

Occupation Lobby group, Membership organisation, Women's Rights Organisation

Summary

The Housewives Co-operative Association (later the Housewives Association of Victoria) was formed in mid-1915 and soon became one of the largest women's organisations in the state. The movement, reacting to the spiralling cost of living during World War I, initially aimed mainly at 'bringing the producer and consumer into direct contact' and providing discounted goods to members. In 1921, however, it also adopted a clear political objective: 'To advocate the equal status of women and adequate representation on all boards and tribunals dealing with the home and the cost of living.' From the 1930s the Association focussed more on the provision of training and information relating to household management and also became more involved in broader activism to improve the civil and political status of women and with other social reform causes.

Details

Inspired by the English Women's Co-operative Guild (founded in 1883), the Association was led at first by broadly left-liberal women—President Ivy Brookes from the women's section of the Liberal Party, others from the Women's Political Association and Sisterhood of International Peace and some conservative women. The group struggled in its first few years, and by 1919 its executive was dominated by conservative women from organisations such as the Australian Women's National League and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, particularly Eleanor Glencross and Cecilia Downing. In the 1920s the organisation adopted a more overtly political agenda and they also campaigned for the Victorian Electoral Act to be amended to allow women to stand for parliament.

A serious split in the organisation in 1930, over the issue of prohibition (which was supported by most members of the executive but not by the then president Delia Russell) saw the movement decline substantially again, but it recovered by the later in the decade.

In the 1930s the Association opposed tariffs and bounties and there was a new emphasis on information and training – with demonstration of domestic aids, lobbying for domestic science in schools and colleges, the establishment of a Resident Aid Home Service for the training of young women in housework (designed at least in part to encourage girls into domestic service) and numerous advice lectures and articles in the *Housewife* to do with housework, nutrition, mothercraft and other topics. From this point, the association also became more involved in broader activism to improve the civil and political status of women.

During World War II the Associations functioned as a branch of the Australian Comforts Fund and formed war savings groups. In the immediate post-years, a breakaway organisation formed the nucleus of the New Housewives Association (founded in 1946 in New South Wales and 1928 in Victoria), a far more left-wing organisation which was later to become the Union of Australian Women.

Although its fortunes fluctuated, the Association was certainly a large and influential group with a membership of over 20,000 in the 1920s, rising to 77,000 in 1938 (of a national total of 115,000). National membership peaked at about 175,000 in the late 1960s before an irreversible decline set in in the 1970s as the roles of women and the meanings attached to housework were reinvented or reformulated.

Published resources

Conference Paper

Christian women and changing concepts of citizenship rights and responsibilities in interwar Australia, Smart, Judith, 1999

Journal Article

A Mission to the Home: The Housewives Association, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union and Protestant Christianity, 1920-1940, Smart, Judith, 1998

A sacred trust: Cecilia Downing, Baptist faith and feminist citizenship, Smart, Judith, 1995

'For the good that we can do': Cecilia Downing and feminist Christian citizenship, Smart, Judith, 1994

Homefires and Housewives: Women, war and the politics of consumption, Smart, Judith, 2004

Book

The Early years of the Housewives Association of Victoria, 1915-1930, Oldfield, Robert, 1989

Winning essays in thrifty meals competition : comprising full menus, recipes, and purchase lists carried out by the Housewives' Association, Temple Court, Collins Street, Melbourne, Housewives' Association Vic.

Report

Annual report (Housewives' Association Vic.), Housewives' Association Vic., 1915

Newsletter

The Housewife: Official organ of the Housewives' Association, Housewives' Association, 1929 -1948

Calling all housewives / Housewives Association, 1965-1978

Calling all Housewives, 1965-1978

Book Section

Modernity and mother-heartedness : spirituality and religious meaning in Australian women's suffrage and citizenship movements, 1890s-1920s, Smart, Judith, 2000

Thesis

The Women's Movement in the New South Wales and Victoria, 1918-1938, Foley, Meredith, 1986

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection

[Papers of Herbert and Ivy Brookes, 1869-1970 \[manuscript\]](#)

State Library of Victoria

[Records, 1939-1985. \[manuscript\].](#)

The University of Melbourne Archives

[Moore, Edith Eliza Harrison](#)

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