

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Organisation

Entry ID: AWE1023

The United Associations of Women

(1929 -)

Born 18 December, 1929, Sydney New South Wales Australia

Occupation Feminist organisation

Summary

The United Associations of Women (U.A.) was one of the most radical feminist groups of the mid twentieth century. It was formed in Sydney, New South Wales, in 1929 by women who perceived a need for a more politically forceful alternative to the range of Australian women's organisations already in existence. Concerned that groups like the National Council of Women and the Feminist Club had become, by the late 1920s, social clubs rather than political lobby groups, Jessie Street, who had been an office-bearer of both the aforementioned organisations, but had become increasingly frustrated by their conservatism, took action. A series of meetings late in 1929 involving Street and other like-minded women such as Linda Littlejohn, Ruby Rich and Adela Pankhurst Walsh culminated in the establishment of the United Associations on 18 December 1929. The UA was extremely active throughout the 1930s and 40s, and played a major role in organising the Australian Women's Charter Conference in 1943.

Details

The interwar period saw Australian women establishing clubs and joining organisations at an extraordinary rate. The battle for woman suffrage had been won, but there was still much to be achieved by and on the behalf of women. By the late 1920s, however, many committed feminists felt that the existing women's organisations were too conservative and not forceful enough in their attempts to achieve gender equality. Inspired by the activities of a group of similarly dissatisfied English feminists (The Open Door Council), whose singular aim was to focus on women's economic needs and their rights to equal work for equal pay, regardless of marital status, a number of prominent Australian feminists joined forces to form the United Associations of Women Workers (UA). Jessie Street resigned from the Feminist Club in 1929 to become the UA's first president. She was joined by the presidents of three other important New South Wales women's organisations: Mrs. A Roberts of the Women's League; Mrs Dougall-Laing of the Women's Service Club and Mrs. Linda Littlejohn of the Women Voters' Association. Jessie Street was elected president, with the leaders of the other organisations becoming vice presidents. In quick time, the membership of the organisation grew to well over 200. Mary Bennett, Ada Bronham, Dymphna Cusack and Ruby Rich were all members at one time or another.

The new association operated under the motto 'For freedom and equality of status and opportunity' and had a wide range of objectives. They aimed to:

1. Achieve by legislation, administration, organisation or any other means considered advisable, a real equality of status, opportunity and liberties for men and women.
2. Secure equal pay for men and women and equality in all laws, rules and regulations.
3. Secure economic independence for married women.
4. Improve the legal status of mothers.
5. Promote an equal moral standard for men and women.
6. Support the candidature of qualified women for public office, who shall have pledged themselves to support constitutional methods and who shall be endorsed by the Council.
7. To promote the welfare of children.
8. To promote the study of social, political and economic questions.
9. To promote international peace and understanding.
10. To secure an amendment to the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Australia to provide that men and women shall have equal rights in Australia and all territories under the jurisdiction of the Commonwealth Government.

The women of the UA campaigned vigorously to achieve these aims in the 1930s and 40s. The highpoint of this political activism, arguably, was seen when representatives of over ninety women's organisations met in Sydney, Australia, in November 1943, at the Australian Women's Conference for Victory in War and Victory in Peace. Organised at a time when planning for peace was a politically bi-partisan priority, the conference focused on one over-riding question: how would women's interests be advanced in the planning of post war reconstruction? An important outcome of the conference was the development of a charter of rights for women in the post-war world. The Australian Women's Charter, regarded as a land-mark feminist manifesto, was endorsed by the conference and represents a moment in time when Australian women prioritised the single category of gender over other political categories.

Once the war was over, however, this fragile unity was shattered as the politics of the cold war came to impact upon the politics of postwar feminism. Many of the more conservative women's groups were confronted by Jessie Street's communist sympathies and chose to break ties with the U.A. For instance, the U.A.'s relationship with the Australian Federation of Women voters was harmed to breaking point by Cold War tensions. Furthermore, as time progressed, some of the U.A.'s causes were taken up by other political groups: the trade union movement, for instance, took up the struggle for equal pay. In the 1960s many of its objectives were met, as married women entered the workforce and some women achieved equal pay. A victim of its own success, the organization continued to assist with the major campaigns of the 1970s, however, its membership and financial base had by the late 1970s could no longer support it as an independent entity.

Published resources

Book

Getting Equal: the History of Australian Feminism, Lake, Marilyn, 1999

50 years of feminist achievement : a history of the United Associations of Women, Mitchell, Winifred, 1979

Book Section

Girdled for War: Women's Mobilisations in World War Two, Saunders, Kay and Bolton, Geoffrey, c1992

Edited Book

Jessie Street : documents and essays, Radi, Heather, c1990

Resource Section

Information from Special Branch, New South Wales Police, 19 March 1957., National Archives of Australia, <http://www.uncommonlives.naa.gov.au/record.asp?iID=279#>

Jessie Street to Prime Minister John Curtin, 6 April 1942 Jessie Street's complaint about staff of the Department of Air's response to a delegation, originally filed by the Prime Minister's Department., National Archives of Australia, <http://www.uncommonlives.naa.gov.au/detail.asp?iID=351&iID=3&cID=29>

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Archival resources

Mitchell and Dixson Libraries Manuscripts Collection

[United Association of Women - Records, ca.1930-1970](#)

[Kathleen M. M. Sherrard papers, ca. 1918-1975](#)

[United Association of Women - Further Records, 1930-1978](#)

State Library of Western Australia

[Records, 1960-1991 \[manuscript\]](#)

National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection

[Papers of Jessie Street, circa 1914-1968 \[manuscript\]](#)

State Library of New South Wales

[Photographs relating to the United Associations of Women including portrait of Jessie Street, 1936-1949](#)

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