Ada Norris (1901–1989):
Champion of the Impossible

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Abstract: This chapter discusses the leadership of Ada Norris in the context of her impact on respectable mainstream Australian feminism before 1980. It refers to the many areas of activism in which she engaged but focuses on her roles in immigration and status of women issues. As president of the Victorian and Australian National Councils of Women in the early 1950s and late 1960s respectively, she led the major umbrella organisation for women. Her special expertise in migration issues was recognised by appointment to the Commonwealth Immigration Advisory Council and as convener of the International Council of Women’s standing committee on migration, while her wider commitment to improving the status of women saw her selected as Australia’s delegate to the UN Status of Women Commission from 1961 to 1963, and as chair of the United Nations Association of Australia’s national committee for International Women’s Year and, subsequently, its committee for the Status of Women and Decade.

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Ada Norris titled her 1978 history of the National Council of Women of Victoria (NCWV), Champions of the Impossible, a term taken from the final paragraph of Barbara Wootton’s ‘autobiographical reflections’, In a World I Never Made. A fuller version of the quotation reads: ‘The limits of the possible constantly shift, and those who ignore them are apt to win in the end. Again and again’, she wrote, ‘I have had the satisfaction of seeing the laughable idealism of one generation evolve into the accepted commonplace of the next’. Hence, she concluded, ‘it is from the champions of the impossible rather than the slaves of the possible that creative evolution draws its force’. This summary of leadership is one that Norris clearly believed described those who led the National Council of Women (NCW) and their achievements. Interestingly, Wootton, an English contemporary of Norris, was a socialist and a humanist; Norris, a key figure in the history of the mid-century mainstream women’s movement in Australia, would not have defined...
herself in either of these ways but her views about what leadership entailed were nevertheless similar, if somewhat moderated by contemporary middle-class codes. Ada Norris applied this understanding to her work not only with regard to the status of women but also in relation to migrants, the elderly and the disabled. Though some of the ideals she articulated do indeed seem ‘commonplace’ from the vantage point of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, they were not so when she began her public activism, and the changes in which she played a significant role over the three post-war decades demonstrate that she did indeed gradually extend the limits of what many of her contemporaries then believed was possible. This must be seen in the particular context of the women she represented and led, who were of the mainstream majority rather than the radical minority. Embedded in what Judith Brett has called ‘the moral middle class’ herself, Norris tempered her ideals with pragmatism and adopted a measured approach to reform that helped mitigate fears of change. As a leader, she understood that patience and an understanding of her constituents was necessary to shift the boundaries. Thus, while the world may not have been ‘transformed utterly’ by what she did, significant advances had nevertheless been made in all her major spheres of work by the mid-1970s.

Ada Norris was born Ada May Bickford in Greenbushes, Western Australia, 28 July 1901, but the family moved to her father’s home state of Victoria when Ada was a child. A clue to her sense of social justice may lie in the example of her grandfather, the Reverend E.S. Bickford, a leading Methodist minister who had been president of the Victoria and Tasmania Methodist Conference as well as of the Methodist Home Mission Society. Ada’s education, however, was in the secular state system, first at Birchip State School and then at Melbourne High School before it was divided into separate boys and girls schools. An early propensity to test the limits of the possible was evident there in her (unsuccessful) attempt to persuade the principal to allow a debate on the rule that forbade fraternisation between the sexes. She later confessed that she had always been something of an ‘extrovert’: ‘When I was a student, the theatre was my hobby, not social work at all … I spent my time in plays, organising them’, and she was on the executive committee of the university Dramatic Society. It was good training for a teacher and also for honing the skills of public address she would later employ in her organisational work. After graduating BA, Dip. Ed. from the Teachers College and University of Melbourne in 1924 and MA in 1926, Ada taught at Leongatha and Melbourne High Schools, resigning in 1929 to marry lawyer John Gerald Norris, later a judge of the Supreme Court of Victoria. But, as her son-in-law noted in his eulogy on her death: ‘a trained and restless mind, and a degree of ambition, was not to be satisfied by the cares of managing a
house, children and a husband … she wanted to play a part in the wider community also’. He might have added that she would never have been satisfied with anything but a leading part. Ada herself explained her initial involvement as finding ‘some work to do’, when it became clear that her barrister husband was not going to spend his evenings entertaining her:

in fact every night of the week he sat down and retired to his work … I spoke to him the first time and he said “I’m busy, dear”. The second time I spoke to him he said “Shush!”’. So “dear” went and found something to do.9

In an era when middle-class married women did not engage in paid work, many in comfortable material circumstances made a career of voluntary work and public activism. She summed up the reasons she finally chose social service in an interview in 1980:

in those days a middle-class married woman had all the help in the house that she needed, so, apart from the children, she had time. I wasn’t good at sport at all, and I can’t stand playing cards, and I welcomed the opportunity that prompted me to do something that was really worthwhile but more or less approximated the work I had done teaching when I was single.10

Ada Norris initially turned her energies to the Children’s Hospital Auxiliary but was persuaded by the chair of the hospital’s committee of management, Ella Latham,11 that her organisational skills were needed as secretary of the new Victorian Society for Crippled Children, for which she soon became a delegate to NCWV. With her two daughters (Rosemary and Jane) still at primary school, she also took on secretarial responsibilities for NCWV in 1941, becoming a vice president in 1944.12 In addition, owing to a shortage of men in schools during the war years, she returned briefly to paid work teaching. NCWV representation most likely fostered an appreciation of the usefulness of coalitions for lobbying purposes, for she became foundation secretary (1944–51), then later president (1955–57) and vice-president (1957–62), of the Advisory Council for the Physically Handicapped, the forerunner of the Australian Council for Rehabilitation of the Disabled (ACROD, now National Disability Services or NDS).13 The Victorian Society for Crippled Children and Adults (as it became) remained her base, and she served as its delegate throughout her career in the NCWV, and as its patron and historian (The Society, 1974) when it merged with the Yooralla Society. In this sense, her avenue into the public sphere was a conventional philanthropic one, though her character, qualifications and pre-marital professional career
marked her out for wider arenas and broadened her conception of social service beyond good works and noblesse oblige to include recognition of the importance of equality and empowerment. Indeed, she denied the society had ever been a ‘charitable foundation’ and saw it, rather, as a ‘modern enterprise’, ‘an instrument of progress in a field hitherto largely neglected’, and one that recognised the practical importance of the integration of the disabled into society as a resource for its prosperity.\textsuperscript{14} While the language tended to be that of scientific social work and progressivist efficiency rather than self determination, it was nevertheless significant in eschewing demeaning paternalism and charity.

In the following decades, Norris developed expertise and demonstrated significant leadership qualities in three other key areas—ageing, immigration, and status of women issues—the last two at national and international levels. Her capacities were also recognised in the mainstream women’s movement by her election as president of NCWV from 1951–54, and of NCW of Australia (NCWA\textsuperscript{15}) from 1967–70. In these positions as well as in other leadership roles in the NCWs, it may be said that she more than anyone else was responsible for raising the consciousness of large numbers of Australian women, making change in each of these areas seem less threatening for those who did not identify as radical or feminist. As we shall see, Norris found the term ‘feminist’ restricting, but she did see herself as heir to a tradition and legacy of women’s activism and leadership for, in 1951, she suggested that NCWV should celebrate its jubilee in 1952 by acknowledging the ‘achievements or all outstanding women in the community’ and ‘honour[ing] the eminent women of the past as well as the present’, thus establishing ‘the nucleus of a Victorian Women’s Dictionary of Biography’.

Eminent women with whom she worked and who set examples of leadership included, apart from Ella Latham, her Victorian predecessors as NCWA president, May Moss and Ivy Brookes, and she was acutely aware of the importance of mentoring her own successors, as Jessie Scotford later attested.

As part of NCWV’s contribution to the centenary of Victoria’s separation from NSW in 1951 and the Commonwealth jubilee celebrations, Ada Norris suggested that an ‘Old People’s Welfare Council’ be established, and, in conjunction with other voluntary welfare organisations, interested individuals and municipal councils, the Victorian NCW brought it into being. Modelled on the National Old People’s Welfare Committee in Britain, and later renamed the Victorian Council on the Ageing, it would provide for home visiting, extension of the government’s home help scheme to the elderly, hot meals in clubs and at home, and recreational facilities and centres to encourage hobbies and socialising.\textsuperscript{18} Having shown there was a demand for
the local clubs and a willingness to get them up and running, the NCWV then successfully lobbied ‘the government of Victoria to provide money for establishment costs and for maintenance costs’. Norris also promoted the idea to the NCWA with a view to spreading the organisation to other states and creating a federal body. As she later observed, the Councils on the Ageing soon became autonomous and ‘very big organisations with highly qualified staff’. But she continued her involvement in the Victorian branch as its vice-chair from its inception till 1980, her own 80th year. Equally concerned about the health of children—their minds as much as their physical capabilities—she also instigated the Victorian Children’s Book Council and was elected its first president in 1954, serving until 1960, when she became national president. But impressive as was her pioneering role in the fields of disability, the welfare of children and the aged, it was in immigration and status of women issues that her major leadership skills and expertise were developed and exercised. The remainder of this chapter is dedicated to these fields of work.

Immigration

The National Councils of Women, at both state and national levels, mirrored the structure of the International Council of Women (ICW) in setting up standing committees on matters judged to be of importance to women in all countries. Among the earliest (1899) were Peace and Arbitration, and Laws Affecting Domestic Relations (soon renamed Laws Affecting the Legal Position of Women). 1909 saw a second wave of standing committees established by ICW that included Health, Education, and Emigration and Immigration (renamed Migration in 1930). From the outset, the primary focus of migration policy and activism was to be ‘to safeguard emigrants, especially women and children’, and, from the late 1920s, this increasingly included refugees, displaced persons and the stateless. In 1950, Ada Norris was appointed convener of the NCWV’s Migration Standing Committee, and, late in the same year, she became the national convener and ICW vice-convener, holding all three positions until 1966, when she was obliged to relinquish her Victorian and Australian Council migration duties on becoming the ICW convener. Arguably, she had more expertise on the subject at local, national and international level than any other Australian of her generation. Over the three decades of her involvement, her work spanned the period of Australia’s transition from paternalist policies of assimilation, through integration to the beginnings of multiculturalism. As Victorian convener, she acted for her council on the executive of the Good Neighbour Council, a community assimilationist body, and as national convener she represented the NCWA on
the government’s Commonwealth Immigration Advisory Council (CIAC) for more than twenty years (from late 1950), and was its deputy chair from 1968–71.24

The CIAC was established in 1947 by then immigration minister Arthur Calwell ‘in order to have a channel through which the opinions of different important sections of the community could be expressed’ and advice given to the ministry on ‘the sociological, legislative and day-to-day administrative matters relating to immigration’. It was responsible for organising the annual government-sponsored Citizenship Convention held between 1950 and 1968, another assimilationist body Norris attended as a delegate from both the NCWA and the Advisory Council.25 Norris’s main interests, as might be expected, lay in conditions for migrant women, and, at a time when the White Australia Policy was rarely challenged, she was instrumental in developing policy recommendations through the Advisory Council on admission and rights to citizenship of Japanese wives of Australian servicemen.26 By 1980, she was seeing this as a watershed moment that ‘opened the way for change of policy and gradually the barriers to Asian migration went down’:

I must say I did quite a lot of work on this in the National Council of Women but the Immigration Advisory Council then told the Minister that they should be allowed in and subsequently that they should be, if they wished, they could be naturalised and any of those Japanese women who were naturalised were the first Asians in Australia to be naturalised since Federation.27

Reflecting ICW and NCWA views as well as her own concerns, she also pressed for acceptance of a certain proportion of old, disabled and sick refugees, not just the able bodied who could contribute to the workforce.28 Insights gained from these local and national perspectives in the light of Australia’s extensive post-war immigration program were in turn fed back into the ICW’s deliberations. A Victorian resolution endorsed by NCWA was, for example, adopted at the international movement’s triennial conference in Helsinki in 1954. It advocated assumption of responsibility by both countries of origin and receiver countries to ‘provide the best possible information of the countries to which [women migrants] may intend going’.29 Adding to her expertise, Norris served on a number of the CIAC’s subcommittees too, notably the Committee on Social Patterns (which conducted enquiries that debunked the popular belief that incidence of crime was higher among migrants than the rest of the population), the Committee on Migrant Women (concerned primarily with ‘pre-embarkation training’, especially among Greek women), the Committee on Migrant Centres and Hostels, the
Committee Established to Consider the Drafting of a Charter or Statement of Australian Citizenship, and a subcommittee to consider the redrafting of the Immigration Act 1901–49. The resulting new Act, passed in 1958, abandoned the infamous dictation test in favour of a permit system. While the Advisory Council, in representing a wide cross-section of the community (business, unions, youth, social services, voluntary organisations), rarely expressed radical views, it enabled the government to introduce changes, for CIAC’s engagement in extensive research and report writing served to expand the knowledge base and points of views of its members and, eventually, of their constituencies. Among the most significant of these were the hundreds of organisations of women Ada Norris represented and influenced through the NCWA.

By the 1970s, Ada Norris was using the language of integration rather than assimilation, both in Australia and at the ICW. Retiring from the CIAC when it was on the cusp of transition to the new discourse of multiculturalism, she demonstrated some of the common community misgivings about changing the mix of the migrant intake too rapidly and was largely supportive of the ‘aim to maintain a substantially homogeneous society and to avoid building up racial minorities unlikely to be readily integrated’. Nevertheless, she also supported the view that policy should be based not on prejudice but on ‘national needs and objectives’, as well as capacity for ‘integration’. This would require acceptance of change, and she expressed herself in favour of a gradual modification of the ‘former tight restrictions’ on permanent residential eligibility of Asians. There were already ‘over 100,000 Asians … living in Australia’ (albeit mostly temporarily) and this did not in her view threaten stability. Indeed, she anticipated a time (too optimistically it would seem) when ‘immigration may lose much of its drama and many of its problems’. These were views she was central to bringing into the mainstream women’s movement from 1960 when, on behalf of the CIAC, she explicitly asked all state councils to study the matter of entry of non-Europeans. Such processes facilitated acquiescence in the demise of the White Australia Policy in the measured and gradual way typical of NCW leaders’ approaches to reform. She noted, for example, in arranging an information meeting that included a representative of the Immigration Reform Group (IRG) in Victoria in 1961, that although ‘public opinion was changing’, the IRG was impatient with the pace at which relaxation of conditions of permanent residency was proceeding. Her view was that widespread acceptance was necessary and should not be forced or ‘clouded with emotion’. The same patient and rational approach was evident in her response just over a decade later to a suggestion from Central Gippsland NCWV branch that the
intake of migrants should be slowed. Norris organised a one-day conference, ‘Migration in the Balance’, with a panel of experts on the links between migration and economic growth, conservation, education, housing and social welfare. Change, this former schoolteacher believed, would only come with tolerance born of increased knowledge. The conference was an impressive affair, featuring the Commonwealth minister for immigration, A.J. Forbes, as well as Alan Matheson, representing the European-Australian Christian Fellowship, on ‘The Paternalism of our Immigration Policy’; Ainsley Jolley, University of Melbourne School of Economics, on ‘The Role of Immigration in Australia’s Economic Growth’; R.D. Piesse, Australian Conservation Foundation director, on ‘Conservation Aspects of Immigration’; David McCutchan, tenancy officer, Housing Commission of Victoria, on ‘Migrant Housing’, and A.S. Humphries, co-ordinator and consultant, Child Migrant Education, on ‘Migrant Education’. Norris herself summed up the papers and responses to questions from the audience, and, in the process, revealed her own commitment not only to ‘the continuance of the current programme’, but also to maintaining the flow of ‘migrants from the same source countries’, ‘which would mean that the Australian population would be paralleled in the United Europe of the future and Australia would retain the characteristics of Western Civilization’. For all her recognition of the need to abandon the remnants of White Australia and take in more non-Europeans, she was concerned to ensure that their rates of admission were controlled. But to cut down the immigration program overall and limit population would only increase pressure from ‘crowded countries with lesser living standards in our geographical region’. It would also, she understood, bolster local prejudice and resistance to the continued gradual change she believed necessary to ‘integration’ and community acceptance.  

Status of Women Issues

On status of women issues, Ada Norris was less tentative or wary of moving too quickly. From the 1920s, and in some instances earlier, the Australian NCWs had accepted and followed up on ICW resolutions on all matters to do with the status and rights of women, lobbying state and federal governments for their implementation, and engaging in education of their own affiliates. Ada Norris’s Victorian presidential addresses in the early 1950s and her activism through the ensuing decades indicate that matters such as equal pay, political representation and rights before the law, representation on all public boards and bodies (including international ones to which Australia belonged), laws with regard to marriage, divorce, custody and maintenance, and access to all forms of education and work for women (married or not) were, if not
completely uncontroversial, less likely to raise significant dissent in council circles than issues related to immigration. Though, in 1953, Norris wrote that: ‘Feminism is an outmoded doctrine which served its purpose at a particular stage in the political emancipation of women’, it is important to understand this in context. Her other remarks make clear that the definition of feminism with which she was working was one narrowly confined to institutional political rights, and that, in reality, she was actively engaged in forwarding most, if not all, issues on the broader contemporary feminist agenda—and more. Her 1953 address also pointed out:

The legal status of women in our country is high, but the mere legal formula does not bestow those intangible attributes which are needed if women are to have that true equality which is theoretically theirs … actual achievement still requires great effort … the struggle for recognition of women’s capabilities in many fields of work still goes on.\(^{38}\)

The various national councils had supported equal pay almost from their foundation, and, as president of NCWV in 1952 and 1953, Norris was the key instigator of the Australian council’s decision to intervene in the Arbitration Court to oppose the Victorian Chamber of Manufactures’ application to reduce women’s wages from 75 per cent of the male rate to 60 per cent. On being approached by an affiliate, the Legal Women’s Association of Victoria, Norris moved quickly to get the Victorian council executive to urge rapid action on the NCWA, which then joined the Australian Federation of Business and Professional Women in seeking leave to intervene. Legal Women’s Association president Molly Kingston was then briefed as counsel and NCWV partially funded the intervention.\(^{39}\) Norris stressed that their action should be viewed not as an end in itself but as part of ‘their progress towards equal pay for equal work’.\(^{40}\) While acknowledging that the ACTU ‘carried the burden of the case’ and most of the credit for its successful outcome, Norris judged the action of ‘representatives of women’s voluntary organisations’ as influential and an ‘important precedent for similar interventions’ in 1969, 1972 and 1974.\(^{41}\) As she later wrote, the Equal Pay Committee the NCWV set up, together with the pamphlet it published, served to provoke public debate and thus educate opinion—for ‘[i]n the long run the decisions of the court reflect the changes in society, and these changes have their origins in the thinking of individual people.’\(^{42}\)

In 1969, as NCWA president, Norris herself was again a key figure in putting together and presenting the council’s case before the Arbitration Court for equal pay in the meat industries and in the Commonwealth public service. The
court’s favourable decision, to be phased in by 1 January 1972, would have variable repercussions for other women workers, flowing to some but not others, with actual numbers ‘hard to estimate’, as Norris reported to the United Nations Association of Australia (UNAA) Victorian Division. This clear and concise document, which included a list of Commonwealth and Victorian awards and determinations attracting equal pay, was later used in preparation for the case the NCWA presented to the Arbitration Court in November 1972, and was influential in the court’s decision. By 1972, the council pointed out, ‘it was estimated that only 18.24 per cent of the women in the work force now receive equal pay’, and the 1969 limited decision was ‘out of phase with the principles enunciated by the United Nations and its associated organisation, the International Labour Organisation’ (ILO). The NCWA case, prepared by the Victorians, also pointed to the recent legislation in New Zealand and to the fact that community attitudes to women’s work, including that of married women, had changed. All these arguments were used by Mr Justice Moore to justify the court’s decision to support the new—for Australia—principle enunciated more than two decades earlier by the ILO of ‘equal pay for work of equal value’. But the decision explicitly rejected the request of the NCWA and others to apply the male minimum wage to women workers. As Norris had commented of the 1969 decision, Australia could not ratify the 1951 ILO Convention until its terms ‘exist in law and practice throughout Australia’, and the 1972 decision still left mandated equal pay incomplete; a single adult minimum wage was not conceded till 1974, and, at last, in December of that year, Australia ratified the ILO Convention on Equal Remuneration for Men and Women Workers for Work of Equal Value.

Norris’s persistence in the campaign for equal pay, as well as for access of married women to paid work, and for improving conditions of women in the workforce generally, was also evident in a long-running, and ultimately successful, battle with the Department of Labour and National Service for a consultative committee on women’s employment to be established alongside the research-focused Women’s Section (later the Women’s Bureau and itself the result of earlier NCWA lobbying) and to be chaired by a woman. The campaign ran through Norris’s NCWA presidency (1967–70) and produced the promise of a subcommittee of the all-male National Labour Advisory Council. Although this new Committee on Women’s Employment was expected to have a majority of women members selected from a range of interest groups, it would therefore, as a NLAC subcommittee, be chaired by a male. Norris’s protests elicited a retort from the minister that women needed to work harder to get the employers and unions to select them as representatives on the advisory council. Though the fledgling committee seems to have died with a change of minister and the NCWA campaign with
Norris’s presidency, Norris’s side of the four-year correspondence indicates both vision and determination in pursuit of women’s rights. She persisted with the issue in another role as the chair of the UNAA National Status of Women and Decade Committee, which succeeded the UNAA International Women’s Year committee in 1976. Among the achievements for women listed in one of its pamphlets was the establishment of the Women’s Employment Committee of the NLAC, though apparently still without a mandated woman chair.

Though Ada Norris supported the council movement’s equality agenda from the outset, much of her subsequent knowledge and leadership on these matters was nurtured by her appointment and experience as Australia’s official delegate to the UN Status of Women Commission (CSW) over an unprecedented three sessions from 1961 to 1963 (15th, 16th and 17th sessions). The Status of Women Commission was established as a sub-commission of the Commission on Human Rights in February 1946 but, on the request of its first chair, it became a fully fledged commission four months later, ‘dedicated to ensuring women’s equality and to promoting women’s rights’. Norris was selected by the Australian government from the nominees supplied by major women’s organisations, the method employed from 1948 until the late 1960s. The sessions in which she participated were notable for resolutions and action on the political education of women; recommendations (eventually agreed to by the UN General Assembly) on the minimum age of marriage, consent to marriage and registration of marriages; a series of international seminars on family law (at which Australia was represented by Dame Roma Mitchell, a former NCWA convener of laws); studies undertaken on the effects of dissolution and annulment of marriages and judicial separation; and resolutions in conjunction with ILO reports on discrimination in employment and access of women to various occupations. On this last issue, the particular emphasis of the CSW was on discrimination against the right of married women ‘to work in all branches of employment and occupation’, expansion of opportunities in accordance with qualifications, and access of women to training. The commission in those years also looked to improve educational opportunities by increasing access of women, especially in developing nations, to the teaching profession and by applying the UNESCO convention for providing ‘full opportunities for young persons of both sexes to take the same courses of study’, with the pre-eminent aim of eliminating illiteracy among women. Included among the projects ranked as ‘high priority’ were also progress on equal pay, and an issue of equal longevity in the annals of the international women’s movement—the nationality of married women. On this last question, Ada Norris was delighted to report that Australia had finally ratified the UN Convention on the subject.
in March 1961. And on access of Australian women to teaching and of students to the same courses of study regardless of gender, she was happy to say there were no legal barriers, though student choice of courses tended to be culturally determined by their sex. But, in relation to the other issues, notably equal pay and the right of married women to work, she embarked on concerted campaigns to ensure Australia conformed with CSW resolutions. Both issues were regularly brought before the prime minister and passed by the NCWA triennial conferences in 1962 and again in 1964 at the end of Norris’s term at the CSW. Norris’s role in the equal pay struggle has already been canvassed, and the bar on employment of married women in the Commonwealth public service was finally removed in 1966 after the minister for labour and national service, William McMahon, in an address to the 1965 NCWA conference, conceded that he had changed his mind about married women’s roles.

Ada Norris’s interest in matters international was evident at least from the time she became ICW vice convener of migration at the end of 1950, and, during her NCWV presidency, she revived the Pan Pacific Women’s Committee in time for Victorian women to participate in the first post-war Pan Pacific Women’s Conference, held in Christchurch, New Zealand, in January 1952. It proved to be the state forerunner of the Pan Pacific Women’s Association of Australia (later Pan Pacific and Southeast Asian Women’s Association of Australia) formed two years later. Norris’s experience at CSW sessions expanded this interest in the region and her expertise was recognised by the American Academy of Political and Social Science, which selected her to write an article on ‘Women’s Political Participation in the South Pacific’ for the academy’s special issue of its Annals on ‘Women around the World’, published in January 1968. As she later recalled,

out of the Status of Women work came an interest in New Guinea. I went off to Geneva in 1961 with a government brief on what we were doing for the women in Papua New Guinea. It wasn’t a great deal so I decided that I would have to go up and see for myself so in the middle of the year in ’61 I went up to New Guinea … checking on what we were doing on the Status of Women and made some very substantial recommendations on what we ought to be doing.

At the 17th CSW session in 1963, the status of women in UN trust territories was listed as a matter of ‘high priority’ for ensuing sessions. In her Annals article, Norris devoted special attention to Papua New Guinea, arguing that education and participation in community projects were the principal means by which the ‘gap between the rate of advancement of men and women’ could
Indeed, one of Norris’s initiatives as NCWA president was to foster the opportunities of New Guinea women for higher education by establishing an appeals committee in 1969 to raise funds for the construction of a women’s hall of residence at the University of Papua New Guinea. ‘We got the money’, she told her interviewer in 1980, ‘The government of course, put in the greater part of the money but voluntary effort had to get a certain proportion’. They raised ‘about 67,000 dollars’, a quarter of the amount required, one of their strategies being to consult the Papua New Guinea telephone book: ‘we checked on all the Australian companies which had branches or something in New Guinea and we found them most generous with the money’.  

On the hall’s completion in April 1973, Ada Norris performed the opening ceremony. Reflecting on how the project had come about, she acknowledged a certain amount of serendipity but also pointed to the need to seize opportunities:

Now, if I hadn’t gone to that meeting in Geneva, where there was an item on the agenda saying “Women in Trust and Non-self-governing Territories”, I would never have been interested in New Guinea … all the time there are small things, some things that come along that you take on something extra … you see one thing leads to another.

Engagement in the CSW stimulated Norris’s wider United Nations activism in Australia too; she was president of the UNAA Victoria division from 1961–71, and, with her ICW contacts, and her experiences on CSW and as NCWA president, she was an obvious choice to chair the UNAA’s national committee for International Women’s Year 1974–76 and, subsequently, its Status of Women and Decade Committee until 1980. This was no easy task. With members and affiliates representing a million Australian women of many beliefs and opposing political persuasions, its meetings must have frequently been a challenge to chair—Women’s Liberation and Women’s Electoral Lobby delegates sat in the same room as those from the Liberal Party women’s section, the Girl Guides and the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union. But Norris’s work and broad knowledge won respect, and, drawing on her international information networks, she devised the objects, terms and conditions of the National Women’s Advisory Council (based on the Canadian model) and successfully lobbied for its establishment, achieved in 1978, to ‘give women a consultative voice at Federal Government level and to work towards the implementation of the Government’s policy of providing equality of opportunity for all women’. Pressure from Norris’s committee also saw the creation of the Office of Women’s Affairs, though she failed in
her repeated attempts to have its name changed to the Office of the Status of Women on the grounds that “‘Women’s Affairs’ reeks of the old-fashioned concept of “a Woman’s place”’ and that the ‘first objective [of the office] … equality between men and women—is surely related to equality of status and not to matters of purely female concern, which, in the context of equality, can be matters of a biological nature only’.  

In April 1983, when the newly elected Hawke Labor government announced its intention to introduce legislation ‘dealing with discrimination on the basis of sex or marital status’ and ‘to ratify the United Nations Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women’ (CEDAW), Ada Norris’s life work reached fruition, for she suffered a disabling stroke the following year. She had written an article in CEDAW for the NCWA Quarterly Bulletin in July 1983, explaining the Convention’s significance in the context of the long historical struggle of women from ‘utter inferiority, often reinforced by religious sanctions’, through to the UN’s announced determination ‘to implement the principle of the equal rights of men and women as laid down in the Charter’. These were formulated specifically in the 1967 Declaration on Discrimination Against Women. CEDAW had been ratified by twenty nation states in September 1981, and Norris hoped that it would then come into effect, realising the Charter’s statement. Though there was still much to do, Ada Norris’s quiet satisfaction with the Australian government’s announced intention was manifest. Under her signature, in bold, was the simple statement: ‘The N.C.W.A. in accord with the firm policy of the I.C.W. welcomes the ratification of the U.N. Convention’. This was entirely consistent with Norris’s personal style—restrained and patient but determined and persistent.

Conclusion

The honours were many: an Order of the British Empire in 1954; a Commander of the Order of St Michael and St George in 1969 (the first Australian woman so appointed); and Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1976. She was also awarded the UN Peace Medal in 1975 and, in 1980, the University of Melbourne admitted her to the degree of Doctor of Laws honoris causa. She was an inaugural entry in the Victorian Honour Roll of Women in 2001. Jessie Scotford, who succeeded Norris as NCWA president in 1973, penned an obituary in the NCWA Quarterly Bulletin, concluding ‘we shall not see your like again’. She wrote of her predecessor’s vision, her articulateness, and, above all, her ‘logical and unshakable determination’. Scotford regarded Norris as her mentor, especially
in the ICW and other international forums, and Norris’s entry in the Victorian Women’s Honour Roll for 2001 also notes that she was a ‘great mentor’ and especially ‘generous in her support for younger women’. 68 Norris herself said of her decision to retire from the UNAA Status of Women and Decade Committee in 1980:

I felt it was time that some of the younger people chaired these things, actually I turned it over to a woman who I think is about a quarter of a century younger than I am. I think that is a good thing. I think that is what you need to be able to do. 69

But, by the 1970s, many younger women were of course going in different directions, with Women’s Liberation and the Women’s Electoral Lobby arising in part out of frustration with the gradualism and apparent conservatism of the NCWs. Yet Norris worked with them in the UNAA Status of Women Committee and, though she did not always agree with their views, she found common ground. As her son-in-law noted:

Indeed so much is it the case that women have achieved what Ada wanted women to achieve, and so much has that come to be accepted, that other women in their turn now aspire to further goals which were not particularly within Ada’s sights … And so it is that the part which Ada played, and which others who worked with her played, may come to be overlooked … So much of what was achieved is now simply taken for granted … That is the measure of what Ada and her colleagues achieved. 70

In 1951, Norris paid tribute to the women on whose work she was building. The new wave of feminist activists of the 1970s and 80s were not so cognisant or appreciative of the battles Norris and her generation had fought and the incremental gains they had made. These women’s voices had been silenced in the historical literature their daughters and granddaughters imbibed, with its emphasis on exploration, war and the conflict between the dominant forces of labour and capital. That many of the concerns of Norris and her peers were not so very different from their own often went unrecognised by the younger generation of radical feminists in their new stress on sexual freedom and the oppressive nature of the family for women. It has thus taken three decades of scholarship to recover and restore to the historical record the innovativeness and significance of the leadership women such as Ada Norris showed in an otherwise overwhelmingly masculinist public sphere.


Interview with Dame Ada Norris by Dr Amy McGrath, 28 August 1980, at Toorak, Victoria, for the Oral History Program of the National Library of Australia (hereafter Norris interview).


Norris interview.

Ibid.


Scotford; Balmford.


I am using the term National Council of Women of Australia (NCWA) for the sake of consistency. The organisation was more commonly known as the Australian National Council of Women (ANCW) before 1970.


Scotford.

*NCWV, Annual Report 1951*, 7–8. Norris’s own account of the origins of this enterprise shows a combination of inspiration and serendipity. Charged with stating at a meeting of the combined centenary and Commonwealth jubilee commemoration committee what contribution the Council was going to make to the celebrations, she spontaneously responded that they would ‘establish some piece of social work in memory of the pioneers of this country’, without having any idea of what it might be. It was some months before the idea was developed and that was only as a result of the Council’s invited guest, a recently elected woman local councillor, having to rush off
to an emergency meeting before speaking but leaving her audience with a hurried piece of advice: ‘Well, if you want to get into local government, work for old people’. Stepping into the breach, Norris told delegates of her recent encounter, while researching homelessness, with ‘The Age of Opportunity’, a handbook of the Old People’s Welfare Council in Great Britain. In light of the press response the next day, it was clear the NCWV had found its project. See Norris interview.

Norris interview.

Norris interview; Andrea Lofthouse, *Who’s Who of Australian Women* (Sydney: Methuen Australia, 1982).


Norris, *Champions of the Impossible*, 133.

Balmford; Norris, *Champions of the Impossible*, 91.

‘The Commonwealth Immigration Advisory Council’, August 1965, Box 4, MS 90/190, Papers of Mrs J.G. Norris, University of Melbourne Archives (UMA) (hereafter Norris Papers). This document includes terms of reference, a brief history, functions and a list of the 28 members; see also NCWV, *Annual Reports*.


Norris interview.

Commonwealth Advisory Council on Immigration, Minute no. 727, 5–6 April 1956, Box 6, Norris Papers; Report by Norris on resolutions of the 1958 biennial conference of the ANCW to the Commonwealth Advisory Council on Immigration, 5–6 November 1958, Box 8, Norris Papers; Letter ANCW President to Mr Downer, Minister for Immigration, 24 October 1958, in NCWA Mixed Correspondence 1937–60, folders 8–14 NCWA Correspondence, MS 5193, NCWA Papers, National Library of Australia (NLA).


Boxes 4, 5 and 6, Norris Papers.


Tavan, chapters 5 and 6.


Ibid., 158.

See Papers/Proceedings from the seminar, ‘Migration in the Balance’, 21 September 1971, Box NS325/14, NCW of Tasmania Papers, Archives Office of Tasmania.


Ibid.

41 Norris, *Champions of the Impossible*, 104–05.
42 Ibid., 141–2.
46 Norris, ‘Equal Pay Review’.
47 Norris, *Champions of the Impossible*, 140–1, 145.
50 Norris wrote detailed reports for the Department of External Affairs on each session, and the discussion here draws principally on those reports.
51 ‘Short History of the Commission on the Status of Women’, pdf downloaded from CSW website at
58 Norris interview.

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Norris interview.
Scotford; ‘Dame Ada Norris, DBE’.
Dame Ada Norris to Prime Minister, 8 August 1977, Box 23/58, Norris Papers; Dame Ada Norris, Chairman UNAA National Status of Women Committee, to the Hon. R.J. Ellicott, Minister for Home Affairs, 13 September 1979, Box 23/58, Norris Papers.
Ratification took place the following month. Twenty-five years later, in 2008, another Labor government ratified the optional protocol.
Balmford.
Scotford; ‘Dame Ada Norris, DBE’.
Norris interview.
Balmford.