Entry type: Organisation
Entry ID: AWE0993

The National Woman’s Christian Temperance Union of Australia

(1891 -)

Born	18910101
Occupation	Lobby group, Religious organisation, Women's Rights Organisation

Summary

The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union of Australasia (later renamed the National Women’s Christian Temperance Union of Australia) was formed in May 1891 at a meeting held in Melbourne for the purpose of federating the existing Colonial Unions. This was probably the first interstate gathering of women’s organisations held in Australia and the Union was the first national women’s organization in the country. The first branch of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) had been formed in Sydney in 1885. Although the primary objective of the organisation in Australia, and worldwide, is the prohibition of, and/or individual abstinence from, alcohol, the Union has been involved in a broad range of social and political reform activities. It was particularly active in the campaign for women’s suffrage in Australia from the 1880s, and the National Union included a Suffrage Department from its inception. The National Union functions as a coordinating body for the various State Unions, and sends representatives to international gatherings of the World’s Woman Christian Temperance Union.

Details

While the first local Union in Australia was formed in Sydney in 1882, the growth of the WCTU in Australia was strongly influenced by visit of Mary Leavitt, the first world missionary of the American Union, who arrived in Australia in 1885 and immediately set about forming local branches. During her visit, she formed five branches in Queensland, one in New South Wales, one in South Australia and three in Tasmania. Although not all of these groups thrived, the movement was reinvigorated by visits from the American Union's second world missionary, Jessie Ackerman, in 1889 and in the 1890s. Jessie Ackerman particularly ensured that women's suffrage was high on the agenda in the early activities of the Australian Union.

Although in some ways a conservative organisation which promoted 'traditional' family values and roles for women, the Union was also a progressive force in many ways. Under its broader agenda of 'home protection' and the promotion of a healthy lifestyle, and in its belief that the dangers of alcohol could not be tackled in isolation, the WCTU pursued a wide-ranging reform agenda mostly relating to the welfare of women and children. Importantly, influenced by its sister organisation in the United States, the Union became a major supporter of the campaign for women's suffrage in Australia as it was believed that power at the ballot box was the only way to achieve their goals. It was also an early advocate of equal pay.

By 1900, the Constitution of the National Union clearly outlined how these issues were intertwined for the Union:
'We believe in total abstinence for the individual, prohibition for the state and nation, equal standard of purity for men and women, equal wages for equal work without regard to sex, the ballot in the hands of women, arbitration between nations … [the] Holy Bible as our standard faith.'

The Union consistently encouraged women to take on an active role in public life. WCTU members generally were middle- and lower middle-class women, many from non-conformist churches, usually 'respectable' married women with children. While at its most influential in the years up to WWI, the movement continues today.

Recent priorities for the Union include: protection of the home from alcohol and other drugs; age of consent; euthanasia; pornography; prevention of prostitution and brothels; control of violence and sex in the media; moral standards; youth unemployment; youth suicide; gambling and the social issues arising from gambling; literacy and crime; Aboriginal equality; equal opportunity for both men and women; law and the status of women; women and ageing; health issues especially in regard to foetal alcohol syndrome and foetal effects syndrome; international relations and peace; and social welfare including alcoholism and smoking addictions with women.

In 2003 the total national membership was 4,000 across the Unions in each state a Circle Union in the Northern Territory.

For further details of the broader activities of the WCTU see the entries for each state Union.

Published resources

Journal Article
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Book
For God Home and Humanity: National Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Australia: Centenary History 1891-1991, Pargeter, Judith, 1995

Isabel, Harry, Millicent K. (Millicent Kate), 1991

Newsletter
The White Ribbon Signal: Official Organ of the Woman's Temperance Union of Australia, 1931-1994

Our federation: Monthly official organ of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Australasia Publication Details Adelaide : , 1898-1903. Physical Description 6 v. : ill., ports. ; 28 cm., 1898-1903

Edited Book
Title Pioneer Pathways: Sixty years of citizenship, McCorkindale, Isabel, 1948

Pamphlet
Guard Your Race, Bromham, Ada, [1943]

The Latest Prohibition Facts for poll 1st September, 1928 : vote out the liquor bar, 1928

Methods of work, Woman's Christian Temperance Union, Ackerman, Jessie A., 1893?

Report
Report, balance sheet and minutes of the national convention/National Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Australia, 1891-

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

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

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