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The Australian Women’s Conference for Victory in War and Victory in Peace

(1943 - 1943)

Born	19431119, Sydney New South Wales Australia
Died	19431122, Sydney New South Wales Australia
Occupation	Conference, Feminist conference

Summary

The Australian Women’s Conference for Victory in War and Victory in Peace was held in November 1943, organised around the theme ‘A War to Win, a World to Gain’. In a feat of organisational excellence, given the restrictions placed on interstate travel during war time, ninety-one women’s organisations from around Australia met in Sydney, Australia, to discuss post war reconstruction and the ‘problems that will effect women and children in the post war period.’ The Australian Women’s Charter, which documents the resolutions brought forward during the conference and is considered a landmark feminist manifesto, was an important outcome of the conference.

Details

Described as ‘the largest and most representative feminist conference held until that time’, the 1943 Australian Women’s Conference for Victory in War and Victory in Peace brought together representatives of over ninety women’s organisations across a range of political ideologies to consider the problems of post war reconstruction, and the role of women within the ‘new order’ when peace returned. Organised by the President of the United Associations of Women, Jessie Street, the conference, held in Sydney, New South Wales in November 1943, has been referred to as ‘the high point of feminist solidarity and political mobilisation in the twentieth century’. Organised at a time when planning for peace was a politically bi-partisan priority, the conference addressed the complexity of women’s lives and interests but focused on one over-riding question: how would these 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.

The conference did not emerge from a vacuum. As early as 1941, the United Associations of Women (U.A.) had begun discussing the needs and roles of women in post war reconstruction. A Women’s Forum for Social and Economic Reconstruction was established; this forum held several important discussions. In 1942 the U.A. called a conference to consider ‘problems concerning women under war conditions’. Given the wide ranging subject matter which included: the status of Australian girls marrying American troops; the need for canteens in factories and schools; the provision of crèches and kindergartens etc. for the children of working women; the investigation of conditions surrounding rationing and the brownout, the conference attracted a lot of attention and left a lot of matters unresolved.

The women of the U.A decided that a national conference was required. A separate committee, comprised of women from the U.A., as well as non-members with connections to a wide range of women’s groups, set about organising the conference. Preparation for the conference included consulting with as many women’s organisations as possible prior to the conference, in order to amass the resolutions which, when adopted, became the Australian Women’s Charter.

After the conference, 20,000 copies of the Charter booklet were distributed to individuals and organisations in Australia and overseas. The Australian Women’s Charter Movement was established to provide concrete follow-up activity based on the resolutions outlined in the Charter. State conferences were organised, charter deputations lobbied members of the federal parliament on specific points and a follow up conference was organised in 1946. Representations of fewer organisations attended this conference, held in Sydney, New South Wales, in August 1946, however, there were a number of overseas delegates in attendance. Nevertheless, while it is true that the 1943 conference reflected the politics of unity that accompanied some forms of war-time political activism, the 1946 conference reflected the changes in the global political climate that developed in the post war period. Representatives of some of the more conservative women’s organisations had difficulty finding common ground with women like Jessie Street, president of the U.A., given their leftist connections. Maintaining a united feminist front became increasingly difficult as the world plunged into a new, cold war.

In order to demonstrate the extent of unity amidst diversity that was present at the conference, the following list names all the organisations that were represented at the conference:

New South Wales:

Austral India League
Australian Institute of Sociology
Australian Railways’ Union – Women’s Auxiliary
Australian Labor Party (Official)
Australian Labor Party (State)
Australian Labor Party (Concord West Branch)
Australian Federation of Women Voters (N.S.W. Committee)
Australian Association of Scientific Workers (N.S.W. Division)
Australian Women’s Party
Amalgamated Hospital Employees’ Association
Amalgamated Engineering Union
Board of Social Studies
Balmain Council – Alderman Gallimore
Bankstown Women’s Committee
Communist Party
Care of the Child in Wartime Committee
Commonwealth Temporary Clerks Association
Council for Women in War Work
Christian Social Order Movement
Domestic Employees’ Union
Fellowship of Australian Writers
Friendship with Russia League

Federation of Infants' School Clubs
Friday Club
Girls Friendly Society
Glebe Council – Alderman Pitt
Greenwich Women's Committee
Guildford Comforts Fund
Granville Mothers' Club
Hairdressers' Union
Hotel, Club and Restaurant Employees' Union
Humane Movement
Ironworkers' Union
Municipal and Shire Council Employees' Union
National Council of Jewish Women
New Education Fellowship
Our New Order
Presbyterian Women's Federation
Printing Industries Union
Roseville Group, United Associations of Women
Recreation and Leadership Movement
Seamen's Union, Women's Auxiliary
Sheet Metal Workers' Union
Sydney Women's Cooperative Guild
Teachers' Federation
Textile Workers Union
Travellers' Aid Society
United Associations of Women
Women's Christian Temperance Union
Watson Labor Women's Auxiliary
Widows of the A.I.F. Association
Women for Canberra
Y.M.C.A.

Country

Newcastle Housewives Association
Newcastle Social Hygiene Committee
Women' Auxiliary, Coal and Shale Employees Federation, Newcastle
Crippled Children Society, Newcastle
Newcastle Trades Hall Council
Katoomba P. & C. and Mothers' Clubs
Katoomba Crippled Children's Society
Katoomba R.S.S.I.L.A., Women's Auxiliary
Katoomba Congregational Church, Women's Guild
Lithgow Child Care Committee
Democratic Housewives Association, Wollongong
Goulburn A.R.U. Women's Auxiliary
West Maitland Branch, United Associations of Women

Queensland

National Council of Women
Y.W.C.A.
Women's Auxiliary, Townsville Trades and Labor Council
Women's Auxiliary, Maryborough Trades and Labor Council
Federated Clerk' Union
Storemen and Packers' Union
Town and Country Women's Association

Victoria

Women’s Christian Temperance Union
Council for Women in War Work
Communist Party
Munitions Workers Union

Tasmania

Housewives Association
R.S.S.I.L.A. Guild of Remembrance
National Council of Women
Council for the Mother and Child
Women’s International League

South Australia

Adelaide Jewish Women’s Guild
Jewish Red Cross Society
Women’s Christian Temperance Union
League for the Protection of Aboriginal Women
Communist Party

West Australia

Hotel, Club and Caterers’ Union
Council of Churches
Housewives Association

Published resources

Resource Section
DRB Mitchell to Director, Commonwealth Investigation Branch, 7 June 1941, National Archives of Australia, http://www.uncommonlives.naa.gov.au/detail.asp?exID=93&iID=346&eID=&lID=3&cID=36

Jessie Street (left) with delegates to the second Australian Woman's Charter conference in Sydney in 1946., National Archives of Australia, http://www.uncommonlives.naa.gov.au/detail.asp?iID=367&lID=3&cID=29

Jessie Street, National Archives of Australia, 2018, http://www.naa.gov.au/collection/snapshots/uncommon-lives/jessie-street/life.aspx

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

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

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

Archival resources

State Library of Western Australia
Records, 1960-1991 [manuscript]

Mitchell and Dixson Libraries Manuscripts Collection
United Association of Women - Records, ca.1930-1970

National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection
Papers of Jessie Street, circa 1914-1968 [manuscript]

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