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"Just as Capable": Pro Suffragio, the Egyptian Feminist Union, and the International Woman Suffrage Alliance Congress in Rome, 1923

Kara A. Peruccio

In October 1922 the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) issued a call for its next congress, to be held in May 1923. Believing that a slogan would contribute to the event's success, they chose "All roads lead to Rome." Little did the IWSA know what was to come by the end of the month. Less than one year later, women from forty-three countries descended on the Italian capital to promote, articulate, and celebrate women's global fight for suffrage and equal rights. The IWSA, founded in 1904, sought the participation of all women irrespective of geography, race, and religion, but as the planning and execution of the Rome congress showed, it consistently othered members from the Mediterranean basin, based on deep-rooted prejudices and stereotypes. Much of the organization's leadership hailed from predominantly Protestant North Atlantic countries, and numerous members expressed biases against Catholic and Muslim women. Undeterred, however, Mediterranean affiliates like the Federazione Nazionale Pro Suffragio Femminile and the Egyptian Feminist Union sought the support of and connection to the IWSA after the Fascist seizure of power in Italy and the establishment of the kingdom of Egypt, both in 1922, events that for a time made gaining the franchise seem possible.

Historiography

As one of the major international women's organizations from the early twentieth century, the IWSA, including its leaders and affiliates from around the world, has been the subject of much scholarship. Much of this work centers on specific national or regional contexts, particularly in the case of its Mediterranean affiliates. As many historians of the modern Middle East, including Margot Badran, Aslı Davaz, and Charlotte Weber, have noted, the predominantly Protestant North Atlantic leadership of the IWSA frequently Orientalized women from "the East" — whether Near, Middle, or Far.[1] Conversely, when considering the historiography of the IWSA's affiliates from Catholic-majority nations, scholars working on Catholic European contexts have examined anti-Catholic rhetoric far less than, for instance, historians of Latin American feminisms.[2] Whereas

I would like to thank Diana Moore, Jessica Strom, and Victoria Calabrese for their feedback on this article. Shukran to my research assistant and Arabic translator Khadija Embaby. Mille grazie to the Society for Italian Historical Studies and their "Marching on Rome" conference where I was able to first present this research. I am grateful to the editors, anonymous peer reviewer, and copy editors of *California Italian Studies* for helping me to improve this article.

[1] See Margot Badran, "Rosa Manus in Cairo, 1935, and Copenhagen, 1939: Encounters with Egyptians," in *Rosa Manus (1881–1942): The International Life and Legacy of a Jewish Dutch Feminist*, ed. Myriam Everard and Francisca de Haan (Leiden: Brill 2017), 184–206; Aslı Davaz, *Eşitsiz Kızkardeşlik: Uluslararası ve Ortadoğu Kadın Hareketleri, 1935 Kongresi ve Türk Kadın Birliği* (Istanbul: İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2014); Charlotte Weber, "Unveiling Scheherazade: Feminist Orientalism in the International Alliance of Women, 1911–1950," *Feminist Studies* 27, no. 1 (2001): 125–57.

[2] See Katherine M. Marino, *Feminism for the Americas: The Making of an International Human Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Megan Threlkeld, *Pan American Women: U.S. Internationalists and Revolutionary Mexico* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014). One of the only discussions of the IWSA's anti-Catholicism in relationship to Italians is Ellen Carol DuBois, "Roma 1923: il congresso della International Woman Suffrage Alliance," trans. Arnaldo Testi, *Genesis* 8, no. 2 (2009): 19–39.

much scholarship on Mediterranean history frequently utilizes binaries of East versus West, Christian versus Islamic, I argue that suffrage groups like the Pro Suffragio and the Egyptian Feminist Union's shared Mediterranean characteristics led to their marginalization within the international suffrage movement.[3] Unlike much of the IWSA's member base that gained the vote before or immediately after the First World War, Egypt and Italy experienced significant regime changes in 1922 in which male leaders initially gestured towards supporting women's equality yet, after gaining power, these new governments continued to deny women sociopolitical rights. The Pro Suffragio and Egyptian Feminist Union wanted the IWSA's support but had to confront the biases publicly expressed by delegates from majority Protestant nations. Both Italian and Egyptian figures involved with the congress confronted rhetoric about antiquity and modernity and the ways in which these Mediterranean women trailed behind Protestant movements that were perceived as more progressive and better organized.

The IWSA and Its Italian and Egyptian Affiliates

The IWSA was first established in Berlin, Germany, in 1904 by activists including Susan B. Anthony and Carrie Chapman Catt of the United States, and Millicent Garrett Fawcett of Great Britain. Two years prior, these figures felt deep frustration with the International Council of Women's hesitance to support women's suffrage. After splitting with the Council, the IWSA met to promote national suffrage activity every two years prior to the First World War and every three years thereafter. The founding members—with the exception of Australia—all hailed from majority Protestant North Atlantic states: Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United States.[4] Except for Italy, which became an affiliate in 1906, pro-suffrage organizations from around the Mediterranean would largely join after the First World War: Greece (1920), Spain (1920), Egypt (1923), and Turkey (1926).

In its earliest years, the IWSA typically only allowed one national affiliate from each member country, with some exceptions. Its Italian organization was Pro Suffragio; this group consisted of six committees based in Milan, Turin, Florence, Naples, Mantua, and Rome in addition to a central committee operating out of the capital. The presidents of these branches (as of 1921 and in order) were Dr. Margherita Ancona, Rita Jacchia, the Marchesa Angelina Altoviti Toscanelli, Melania Scodnik, Dr. Ada Sacchi Simonetta, and Dr. Beatrice "Bice" Sacchi. Nina Zenatti, Romelia Troise, Luisa Rubini, and Maria Panini Valeri served on the federation's central committee.[5] The primary interlocutor between the IWSA and Pro Suffragio was Dr. Margherita Ancona. Born in Palermo, Sicily, in 1881, she lived most of her life in Milan and taught for many years at the city's illustrious Liceo Classico Beccaria. Ancona dedicated her activism to suffrage and served as the president of the Pro Suffragio's Milan committee.[6] In her capacity as a leader within the Italian movement, Ancona frequently shared news with suffrage supporters around the world and wrote in both English and French.[7] One correspondent was Rachel "Ray" Strachey, member of the British

[3] In its own materials and historical scholarship, the group is referred to as "Pro Suffragio." I will follow this convention here.
[4] Many thanks to Nova Robinson for this geopolitical marker.
[5] *Almanacco della donna italiana: anno 1922* (Florence: Bemporad, 1922), 323.
[6] Rachele Farina, ed., "Ancona Luisa (1881–1951) e Margherita (1881–1966)," in *Dizionario biografico delle donne lombarde 568–1968* (Milan: Baldini & Castoldi, 1995), 51–52.
[7] Ancona shared an article for *Jus Suffragii* written in French entitled "Socialistes et catholiques pour le suffrage de femmes" (Socialists and Catholics for Women's Suffrage) from 16 February 1918 (found in IWSA Subject Files: Italian Articles, IWSA 1/40, Archive of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, University of Manchester Library,

National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies and an editor of its journal *The Common Cause*, who shared letters and newspapers sent from Ancona with Mary Sheepshanks, the IWSA's secretary and the editor of *Jus Suffragii* from 1914 to 1919. In a letter expressing gratitude for Strachey's correspondence, Sheepshanks remarked that she was "grieved with the [Pro Suffragio's] official correspondent as she does not send me more news."[8] Even in her unofficial capacity, the articles by Ancona that were sent to these international journals helped raise awareness and support for the Pro Suffragio's activism.

At the IWSA's 1920 congress in Geneva, the first held after the war, eight countries, including Denmark, Great Britain, France, and the United States, nominated Ancona to the executive board. She was the fourth highest voted candidate and would serve on this committee until 1929.[9] With the exception of Marguerite de Witt Schlumberger—the president of the French Union for Women's Suffrage—the rest of the executive board hailed from majority Protestant North Atlantic nations. In terms of the executive board breakdown, Great Britain had three members, the United States two (most crucially, the IWSA president), Germany two, Sweden one, France one, Switzerland one, and Italy one.[10] Although from a majority Catholic nation, Witt Schlumberger was from a French Protestant family with Dutch roots. In many ways, Ancona was a minority on the executive board; not only was she from a peripheral European geopolitical power, but she was also one of two members of Jewish ancestry.[11] During the planning of the Rome 1923 congress, it would be Ancona's "Italian-ness" that drew her into conflict with the IWSA's president, Carrie Chapman Catt.

The Egyptian Feminist Union would officially join the IWSA as an affiliate in Rome. Prior to the establishment of this group, between 1919 and 1922 its president Huda Shaʿrawi and her peers were active in the Egyptian nationalist movement, organizing boycotts of British products and public demonstrations.[12] During this period, she organized a delegation of members of the Wafdist Women's Central Committee to attend the 1920 Geneva congress. However, these activists were unable to leave Egypt due to their husbands' interference. Three years later, Shaʿrawi organized a meeting in April and declared to her peers: "It is in our interest as Egyptian women, as well as in

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Manchester, UK). In 1923, Ancona wrote a postcard to IWSA member Chrystal Macmillan in English about a book she would be sending her. Postcard from Margherita Ancona to Chrystal Macmillan, 5NMW/E/03 Collected Materials, Women's Library, London School of Economics, London.

[8] The article in question was most likely "The Italian Situation," *The Common Cause* (11 July 1919). A photograph of Ancona and the accompanying article "Unique Situation in Italy" appeared on the cover of *Jus Suffragii*'s October 1919 issue. Letter from Mary Sheepshanks to Rae Strachey, 15 July 1919, IWSA Headquarters Correspondence File: C, IWSA/2/4, Archive of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, University of Manchester Library, Manchester, UK.

[9] Ancona's departure from the IWSA board coincided with internal conflicts happening within Pro Suffragio in the late 1920s. The International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA), *Report of the Eighth Congress, Geneva, Switzerland, June 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 1920* (Manchester, Great Britain: Percy Brothers Ltd. The Hotspur Press, 1920), 47–48.

[10] While Switzerland had a large Catholic population, the Swiss organization's members were predominantly liberal, Protestant, and from the urban bourgeoisie. See Zoé Kergomard: "Swiss Association for Women's Suffrage (SVF)," in, *Historical Encyclopedia of Switzerland (HLS)*, version of 26 January 2021, hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/058044/2021-01-26/.

[11] Emma Schiavon discusses Ancona's Jewish ancestry, as well as that of many women involved in the Italian women's movement. See Emma Schiavon, "The Women's Suffrage Campaign in Italy in 1919 and *Voce Nuova* ('New Voice'): Corporatism, Nationalism and the Struggle for Political Rights," in *Aftermaths of War: Women's Movements and Female Activists, 1918–1923*, ed. Ingrid Sharp and Matthew Stibbe (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 63. The IWSA's only other Jewish executive board member in 1923 was Adele Schreiber-Kreiger of Germany.

[12] See Huda Shaarawi, *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist (1879–1924)*, trans. Margot Badran (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1986).

the interest of the Egyptian question, to attend [the Rome congress] in order to promote the status of the Egyptian woman and demand her rights."[13] The Egyptian delegation consisted of Shaʿrawi, Saiza Nabarawi, and Nabawiyya Musa. Badran rightfully notes that in 1923, the president was a widow, and her two peers were unmarried women with deceased fathers; no male familial figure would have prevented their attendance.[14]

Orientalizing the Mediterranean

The IWSA's first president Carrie Chapman Catt (1859–1947) grew up in Iowa and first became involved in the state's suffrage movement in the late 1880s. She served as the president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association from 1900 to 1904 and then again from 1916 to 1920. In her work as the IWSA's leader, Catt dedicated her efforts to expanding the international movement, often taking long trips to places in the Middle East, South America, and various parts of Europe. Like many other white American women involved in the suffrage movement, she held racist and nativist views. Historian Johanna Neuman writes that Catt, like Alice Paul, another leading American suffragist, "rebuffed repeated efforts by African-American suffragists to join the mainstream movements" in their efforts to appeal to Southern politicians.[15] Jacqueline Van Voris, in her 1987 biography of Catt, writes: "With a century of hindsight it is easy to see Carrie Chapman's views in the late 1880s as xenophobic oversimplifications that scapegoat immigrants […] Her suspicion of the alien began to dissolve only when she entered international waters."[16]

Leading both national and international movements, Catt frequently delivered speeches where she grounded suffrage struggles in different scales. Her rhetoric prior to the interwar period illustrates that she relied heavily on geographic comparisons that featured embedded civilizational and sociopolitical biases. In her presidential speech given at the IWSA's 1908 congress in Amsterdam, she declared "the agitation for woman suffrage has known no pause" and that it took place, "from Occident to Orient, from Lapland to sunny Italy, and from Canada to South Africa."[17] These comparisons reinforced a contrast between West and East and North and South and spoke to perceived political and cultural differences. Pro Suffragio came into existence in 1906, the same year Finnish women gained the franchise. Catt's geographic binaries emphasized that the South and East were more civilized, progressive places. Within the IWSA, Italy was treated as less than while Finland belonged to the more prosperous, progressive North. An affiliate's position on the map mattered, and contrasts of how they were discussed and treated emphasized that the predominantly Protestant North Atlantic was superior to the Orient or Italy.

Historian Kevin Amidon notes that in the 1920s and 1930s Catt started to employ more inclusive language within the United States, speaking out against "racist policies […] militarism, and condemn[ing] nativist rhetoric of isolationism and 'preparedness.'"[18] However, when

[13] Huda Shaʿrawi, quoted in Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 86.
[14] Ibid., 274n3.
[15] Johanna Neuman, "The Faux Debate in North American Suffrage History," *Women's History Review* 26, no. 6 (2017): 1014.
[16] Jacqueline Van Voris, *Carrie Chapman Catt: A Public Life* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1987), 16.
[17] Carrie Chapman Catt, "Presidential Address at the IWSA Congress in Amsterdam–June 15, 1908," The Archives of Women's Political Communications, Carrie Chapman Catt Center for Women and Politics, Iowa State University, Ames.
[18] Kevin S. Amidon, "Carrie Chapman Catt and the Evolutionary Politics of Sex and Race, 1885–1940," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 68, no. 2 (2007): 325.

examining the planning and execution of the Rome 1923 congress and Catt's interactions with, or even perceptions of, Italian and Egyptian members, we can see that she frequently relied upon Orientalist rhetoric in speaking of Mediterranean women. When her ship traveling to Italy passed through the Strait of Gibraltar, Catt noted as the ship passed by the Spanish coast that "one could imagine [galleons] and [giaours] and the fighting conspiring races [that] tried to best each other century after century. It all looks thoroughly disciplined now."[19] Catt referenced Lord Byron's Orientalist poem *The Giaour* (1813) in which Leila, an enslaved woman, falls in love with the titular character who is non-Muslim; when discovered, her owner Hassan throws her into the sea. The giaour kills Hassan and then moves into a monastery out of grief and remorse. For Catt, Mediterranean people were violent and intolerant.[20] Their lands trailed behind more "modern" places (read: those with Protestant values); theirs was a region to be disciplined and shaped by the West. This perspective heavily influenced Catt's attitudes towards Italian and Egyptian women of the IWSA.

Historian Ellen DuBois describes many European suffragists as having "Western prejudices" toward Latin countries, or "southerners," adding that "i paesi latini—ovvero in altri termini, meridionali—erano considerati troppo cattolici, troppo moralmente lassisti, troppo poco industriosi e troppo indisciplinati per stare all'avanguardia della libertà delle donne" (the Latin countries—in other words, southerners—were considered too Catholic, too morally lax, too lazy, and too undisciplined to be at the vanguard of women's emancipation).[21] Egyptian women and other later activists from majority Muslim countries faced similar marginalization within this transnational activist space because of perceived cultural and religious traditions. Though the IWSA welcomed members from around the world (and would particularly celebrate Egypt's joining in 1923), it often held non-Protestant members at arm's length, questioning these members' agency and ability to advocate for themselves throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Seeking international solidarity, Italian and Egyptian attendees in Rome would hear speeches and comments that both advocated for their rights and acknowledged their perceived otherness.

Why Rome?

Planning for IWSA congresses generally began a year or so in advance, depending upon the location. These week-long events often took place in countries with "an embryonic women's associative network and in which there was no chance of getting the vote."[22] For example, the IWSA initially planned to host its first congress after the war in Madrid in 1920, which certainly qualified Spain. However, national politics and disagreements among local Spanish women's groups led to a change in location to Geneva. At the end of the 1920 congress, the IWSA adopted a resolution about volunteer hosts for the next one. Two affiliates volunteered—France and Romania—and, following discussion, the IWSA declared that it accepted the "Paris invitation for

[19] Carrie Chapman Catt, diary entry, 15 October 1922, Carrie Chapman Catt Papers: Diaries, 1911–1923; Europe and South America, 1922–1923, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, loc.gov/resource/mss15404.mss15404-002_00223_00279/?sp=8&st=image&r=-0.159,0.006,1.33,0.606,0.

[20] See "The Giaour," in *The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature,* 3rd ed., ed. Margaret Drabble, Jenny Stringer, and Daniel Hahn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095851147.

[21] Ellen Carol DuBois, "Roma 1923: il congresso della International Woman Suffrage Alliance," trans. Arnaldo Testi, *Genesis* 8, no. 2 (2009): 23.

[22] Marta del Moral Vargas, "'Intercrossings' between Spanish Women's Groups and Their German, British and Portuguese Counterparts (1914–32)," *International Journal of Iberian Studies* 34, no. 3 (2021): 240.

1922 if the French Government has not meanwhile enfranchised its women. But in any case the final decision must be given a year before the Congress is due."[23]

This somewhat cynical approach meant that throughout the interwar era, the IWSA and its members with the franchise could descend upon cities like Rome (1923), Paris (1926), Athens (planned for 1932), and Istanbul (1935) and instruct members without the vote how to organize.[24] Such views ignored that fact that these Mediterranean women had long histories of women's social organizing and activism prior to their engagement with the IWSA. Yet by looking at congress sites prior to Geneva in 1920—Berlin (1904), Copenhagen (1906), Amsterdam (1908), London (1909), Stockholm (1911), Budapest (1913)—we see that these countries would grant the franchise before or immediately after the First World War. The IWSA did possess a successful record in putting pressure on host nations to help its members secure the vote. In April 1922, the central committee of Pro Suffragio met in Rome and started to plan their hosting bid for the IWSA's next congress.[25] Several months later, the August 1922 issue of *Jus Suffragii* published a piece by Ancona entitled "Italy: Trying Times for Women in Italy." Though this journal pledged neutrality on all national issues, Ancona included a critique of the Italian state, noting that the government was "bound to the political parties and the bureaucracy is anti-feminist."[26] After describing challenges suffrage supporters faced and decrying a recent bill restricting women's employment in high schools, Ancona concluded that "we are very disgusted and we fear that our enemies, even if they are defeated this time, will not cease to fight against our rights."[27] In many ways, Ancona's concerns proved true and foreshadowed some sociopolitical continuities in the transition from the liberal to the Fascist state.

Ancona was prescient in recognizing how the Mediterranean would be a major battleground for the IWSA's fight for global suffrage. She acknowledged that her concerns were not unique to Italy: "I suppose that similar conditions are to be found in other countries, but it is useful to make comparisons in order to see what can be done upon an international ground to prevent things from growing worse."[28] Her self-awareness articulated both a need and desire for the IWSA to act in solidarity. Historian Leila Rupp argued that after the First World War, with prominent North Atlantic countries giving women the vote (that is, the United States and Great Britain), the IWSA became split in to the "have and the "have-nots."[29] Many of the latter category hailed from around the Mediterranean, the geopolitical margins of the North Atlantic world. By drawing attention to Italy and making comparisons, Ancona hoped "women of more fortunate conditions" could "understand the real situation of their unenfranchised sisters."[30] In 1923, the IWSA would vocally support expanding the franchise to its peers in the Mediterranean, whether Latin or Muslim; but ultimately, they would be treated as junior, lesser members of the global women's movement.

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[23] IWSA, *Report of the Eighth Congress*, 55.

[24] The one exception in the 1920s was the 1929 congress in Berlin where the IWSA celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary. The 1932 Athens congress was canceled due to the global economic crisis. The final congress before the Second World War occurred in Copenhagen in July 1939.

[25] Comitato Pro Voto Donne Torino, *Diciassette anni di lavoro e di lotta per la causa suffragista: Comitato Pro Voto Donne; Torino, febbraio 1906–dicembre 1922* (Turin: Stabilimento Grafico Foà, 1923), 43–44.

[26] Margherita Ancona, "Italy: Trying Times for Women in Italy," *Jus Suffragii* (August 1922), 169. The article was dated 16 July 1922.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 23.

[30] Ancona, "Italy," 169.

"Hunting for Fascista"

Although historians like Van Voris and Amidon believe that Catt was less nativist due to her engagement with the IWSA, Catt's diary entries from her 1922 planning trip to Italy indicate that her xenophobic beliefs continued to her influence her views and treatment of Italian women. Figures like Ancona, with whom Catt would openly quarrel, never stood a chance of being viewed as competent and capable. At the onset of her journey by ship from New York City to Italy, Catt showed stereotypical views towards Italians, writing in her diary: "the Italian way showed itself by postponed sailing from 11 to 12, then to 3pm, and we finally got off at 5:30."[31] Upon arriving at her hotel in Naples, Catt described her room as lacking working electricity: "Italy has modern improvements, but just as we found it in 1903, they are usually out of commission."[32] This conception of a backwards, less than modern Italy dominated Catt's private and public rhetoric in relationship to the 1923 congress.

After touring Naples and the Amalfi Coast, Catt finally arrived in Rome on October 22, with a runny nose and lots of mosquito bites after her time in Southern Italy. The following day, she met with Ancona and Alice Schiavoni Bosio, the president of the congress's organizing committee and a long-time member of another major Italian women's organization, the Consiglio Nazionale delle Donne Italiane. On the twenty-fourth of the same month, Catt expressed disappointment that Ancona and Bosio failed to find an appropriate congress venue, snidely noting that "the Italian women could not comprehend our disapproval."[33] This theme of the local organizers' "incompetence" consistently dominated her diary entries. Three days later, on October 27, Catt wrote that she and her travel companion, Dutch IWSA member Rosa Manus, ordered tea for fourteen to host the Italian "Committee of Arrangements" but twenty-two women showed. According to Catt, as she brought up numerous agenda items, "they turned paler and shriveled more and more. At intervals there were sudden explosions and the entire 22 reverted to simultaneous Italian […] if they all resign tomorrow it would not surprise me."[34] DuBois rightfully argues that "Catt non si senti mai a proprio agio con le suffragiste italiane, che non corrispondevano ai suoi modelli pre-confezionati, protestanti e anglo-americani" (Catt never felt comfortable with the Italian suffragists, who did not conform to her pre-packaged, Protestant and Anglo-American models).[35] While Catt vented about her frustrations, she completely ignored the fact that this same day was the eve of the Fascist March on Rome.

On the day of the Fascist seizure of power, Catt exhibited a complete lack of concern for her Italian peers and seemed almost bemused that she was a witness to a major political upheaval. DuBois writes that it was "come se non si aspettasse di meglio" (as if [Catt] expected nothing better).[36] Her diary entry first noted that some progress was made with planning albeit, in her view, "the hall is the worst a Congress was ever held in, but it has a grand entrance."[37] She expressed

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[31] Carrie Chapman Catt, Diary Entry, 8 October 1922, Carrie Chapman Catt Papers, loc.gov/resource/mss15404.mss15404-002_00223_00279/?sp=6&st=image&r=-0.153,-0.035,1.428,0.65,0.

[32] Carrie Chapman Catt, Diary Entry, 17 October 1922, Carrie Chapman Catt Papers, loc.gov/resource/mss15404.mss15404-002_00223_00279/?sp=10&st=image&r=-0.067,0.271,0.631,0.287,0.

[33] Carrie Chapman Catt, Diary Entry, 24 October 1922, Carrie Chapman Catt Papers, loc.gov/resource/mss15404.mss15404-002_00223_00279/?sp=13&st=image&r=0.059,0.122,0.73,0.332,0.

[34] Carrie Chapman Catt, Diary Entry, 27 October 1922, Carrie Chapman Catt Papers, loc.gov/resource/mss15404.mss15404-002_00223_00279/?sp=13&st=image&r=0.059,0.122,0.73,0.332,0.

[35] DuBois, "Roma 1923," 30.

[36] Ibid., 29.

[37] Carrie Chapman Catt, Diary Entry, 28 October 1922, Carrie Chapman Catt Papers, loc.gov/resource/mss15404.mss15404-002_00223_00279/?sp=14&st=image&r=-0.034,0.002,1.087,0.495,0

additional anxieties over the congress, confirming the truth of "the report that when a thing is fixed in Italy it doesn't stay fixed and after awhile it has to be done over again." Only after this griping did Catt finally acknowledge the March on Rome. The capital was a "city under siege. No it is not war, just politics à la Italian. The Government has fallen." Although she mentioned taxis, trains, and carriages being stopped in attempts to prevent more Fascists from arriving, it did not impact her day as she planned "to work indoors anyway." She continued in the same diary: "this morning all the newspapers on the stands were seized and burned. Thus democracy in travail is trying to form a new Government. When there is a new Premier all will be well again. The people do not mind. They are used to similar manifestations. It is a comedy here." Historian DuBois generously writes that Catt was more perplexed than shocked.[38] The IWSA president only expressed some anxiety when she and her travel companions received warning that they "may get bottled up and that might prove a tragedy."[39] Catt's dismissal of the political events anticipated how Fascists and historians would speak about the event. Historian John Foot writes that many of the latter often referred to the March as "a poker game […] a farce […] a joke."[40] Catt did not speak with her Italian colleagues about their feelings; instead on the twenty-ninth, despite a dreary and rainy day, she went "hunting for Fascista" [*sic*] with Rosa Manus.[41] It did not take the two IWSA members long to find them; Catt observed in her diary that "they were everywhere singing and marching, with the populace looking on, but I could not play with them long." In using the words "hunting" and "play," Catt recalls the rhetoric of being on safari, surrounded by exotic yet deadly creatures. Her remarks appear insensitive to the plight of Italians opposed to the Fascists and reflects a genuine lack of understanding the gravity of the march.

On October 31, Catt finally met with two members from the organizing committee—Paola Benedettini Alferazzi, the founder and editor of the Rome-based *Il giornale della donna*, and Schiavoni Bosio—to continue with congress logistics. After giving one thousand dollars for press work and local organizing expenses, Catt went sightseeing with the Italian women to the Colosseum, the Roman Forum, and St. Peter's Basilica, among other sites. Benedettini then brought them to the Italian Press Association balcony so they could "watch the procession, for the Fascisti were to celebrate the great occasion of their leader called to the Premiership."[42] Witnessing the new political reality was just another tourist spectacle for Catt to consume uncritically.

"No Competent Help in Rome"

Weeks later in November at the executive board's meeting in London, Catt tried to push through a change in the congress location. Catt, however, was "alone to fight her battles" when her closest allies—Anna Wicksell (Sweden), Marguerite de Witt Schlumberger (France), and Katherine Dexter McCormick (United States)—could not attend the meeting.[43] When she recommended that

[38] DuBois, "Roma 1923," 29.

[39] Catt, Diary Entry, 28 October 1922. Catt traveled her entire European itinerary with Dutch IWSA member Rosa Manus. They also traveled with British member Margery Corbett Ashby and Mies Boissevain-van Lennep of the Netherlands.

[40] John Foot, "The March on Rome Revisited: Silences, Historians and the Power of the Counter-Factual," *Modern Italy* 28, no. 2 (2023): 167.

[41] Carrie Chapman Catt, Diary Entry, 29 October 1922, Carrie Chapman Catt Papers, loc.gov/resource/mss15404.mss15404-002_00223_00279/?sp=14&st=image&r=-0.034,0.002,1.087,0.495,0.

[42] Carrie Chapman Catt, Diary Entry, 31 October 1922, Carrie Chapman Catt Papers, loc.gov/resource/mss15404.mss15404-002_00223_00279/?sp=15&st=image.

[43] Carrie Chapman Catt, Diary Entry, November 1922 (continued), Carrie Chapman Catt Papers, loc.gov/resource/mss15404.mss15404-002_00223_00279/?sp=19&st=image&r=0.301,-0.006,0.732,0.333,0.

the congress be moved, she gave the chief reason as the "political situation." Catt had not seemed very concerned while in Rome the month prior, but she realized that she could not share her true feelings in this meeting. In her diary she confided that "it was difficult to talk plainly because Dr. Ancona […] cannot understand things out of her pale of experience, and because she like everyone else in the world is so nationalistic that every remark about Italy is regarded as an insult."[44]

Catt's evidence for Ancona's nationalism was not her use of patriotic language or endorsement of the Fascist regime's talking points. Instead, the Italian board member defended Italy against one of Catt's more outlandish excuses for moving the congress. While in Italy, Catt and her IWSA traveling companions all suffered from gastrointestinal issues, and the president presented their illness as evidence for Rome's lack of suitability. Catt remarked that "[Ancona] nearly went to war with me over my account of the epidemic of diarrhea."[45] The tension in the leadership structure of the IWSA would persist throughout the interwar era. The goal was to unite women worldwide, yet individual members also sought to inform and advocate for their own countries within this international body. Egyptian Feminist Union President Huda Shaʿrawi would become an executive board member at the Paris 1926 congress and would ultimately face criticisms over her perceived nationalism by the decade's end and into the 1930s.

Catt's diary also shows that Ancona's attitude was not her sole source of frustration with Rome, and some of her discontent had nothing to do with the political situation. Catt's private critiques were most likely the ones that drove her to speak out against holding the congress in Rome, which echoed her views about the backwardness of Italy. She complained that "there was no competent help in Rome or in Italy, that there is no public interest."[46] Moreover, she described Ancona as "too weak personally" and as coming from a weak movement.[47] Pro Suffragio joined the IWSA at its third congress in 1906, just two years after its official establishment.[48] Despite being with the international organization nearly since the beginning, it was not enough for Italian women like Ancona to gain the respect from figures like Catt. The IWSA had its hierarchy with Protestant and North Atlantic countries at the top, and Catt had her favorites even if they hailed from non-Protestant contexts.[49] While Catt had inordinate power in the IWSA because of her position within the organization, not every member of the IWSA shared her views on Ancona. While attending the 1920 Geneva Congress, María Lejárraga de Martínez Sierra, one of the founders of the Union of Women of Spain, published articles in the long-running Spanish newspaper *ABC*. She described Ancona as

> a woman of great culture and amazing common sense. A Latina of few and clear words, young, with the maturity of judgment and prudence of an old woman, straight in the paths of thought, like a conscious arrow, she is one of the women who has given me the greatest expression of simplicity, strength and efficiency in

[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid. Catt also disparaged Swiss member Emile Gourd here. There are few extant personal sources from Ancona, so we do not know her personal feelings towards Catt.
[48] The first IWSA congress was a preliminary meeting that occurred in Washington, DC, in 1902.
[49] For discussion of Catt and Rosa Manus's friendship, see Mineke Bosch and Annemarie Kloosterman, eds., *Politics and Friendship: Letters from the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, 1902–1942* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1990). Katherine M. Marino discusses the "mother-daughter" relationship between Catt and Brazilian IWSA member Bertha Lutz in Katherine M. Marino, *Feminism for the Americas: The Making of an International Human Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

the world.[50]

Martinez Sierra noted that many of the IWSA affiliates—including those from Denmark, Great Britian, Sweden, Finland, Switzerland, Italy, France, and even Catt's own America—nominated Ancona to the board.[51] Clearly other members respected her aptitude and competence.

Catt's push to change the congress location failed at the meeting. Scottish member Chrystal Macmillan, whom Catt thought to have "prepared her defenses," believed that it would be too difficult for it to be moved this late in the planning stage (a year out from the congress).[52] Catt proposed the new location of Paris but "the French are so sore over the Germans that they couldn't do it and there was literally no other place to have it."[53] After a vote, Rome remained as the location of the congress. Catt declared that she "cleared [herself] of responsibility for the success of the Congress and placed it on those who wanted it there."[54] This failure prompted several rants about her frustrations with the IWSA writ large. She described it as her "first quarrel with a Board."[55] Ultimately the congress would be Catt's last as president; in Rome she decided to resign her post.

"All Roads Lead to Rome"

The IWSA shared its call to congress in the January 1923 issue of *Jus Suffragii*. In Rome, they vowed to celebrate the passage of equal suffrage for women in the United States and Ireland, Spanish women's entry into the legal profession (surely suffrage would soon follow), and the declaration that "women from Eastern nations will set forth the great progress made in their countries."[56] The IWSA also declared that "the vote is our first objective, but much remains to be done, unhampered by shackling prejudice and sentimental taboo." The unspoken shackles embedded in this pronouncement were those of Catholic and Islamic religious traditions. The call concluded:

> Come, therefore, all who care for the honour and freedom of women, to lend your aid in the great campaign of the Latin women, and here, in the Eternal City which saw the great dawn of European civilisation affirm your belief in the greatness of woman's contribution to the ideal of a civilisation, which shall be world-wide and founded on a basis of justice and equality.[57]

This reference to antiquity not only characterized the perceived backwardness and passivity of Italian women but would also be applied to Egyptian women during some congress proceedings. The April 1923 *Jus Suffragii* issue shared "Messages from Friends" about the Rome congress. British member Margery Corbett Ashby, who would be elected the IWSA's second president in

[50] Maria Lejárraga de Martínez Sierra, quoted in Juan Aguilera Sastre and Isabel Lizarraga Vizcarra, *De Madrid a Ginebra: El feminismo español y el VII Congresso de la Alianza Internacional para el Sufragio de la Mujer (1920*) (Barcelona: Icaria, 2010), 437.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Carrie Chapman Catt, Diary Entry, November 1922 (continued), Carrie Chapman Catt Papers, loc.gov/resource/mss15404.mss15404-002_00223_00279/?sp=19&st=image&r=0.301,-0.006,0.732,0.333,0.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Carrie Chapman Catt, Diary Entry, November 1922 (continued), Carrie Chapman Catt Papers, loc.gov/resource/mss15404.mss15404-002_00223_00279/?sp=20&st=image&r=0.021,0.168,0.733,0.334,0.
[56] "Call to the Ninth Congress of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance," *Jus Suffragii* (January 1923), 50.
[57] Ibid.

Rome, shared a note. She wrote: "At the heart of the Latin tradition we can best learn the special difficulties […] Italy is throbbing with new political enthusiasm and hope. Women share this belief in the new awakening."[58] In the view of the IWSA, women in Italy and Egypt had had great opportunities for advancement during antiquity, whereas the "modern" institutions of Catholicism and Islam instead delayed women's progress in achieving rights, and therefore needed the IWSA's intervention and guidance.

After returning from the executive board meeting, Ancona most likely told her Italian peers about Catt's misgivings about Rome. As a result, Italian activists worked tirelessly to gain public support for the congress, as its success would help their domestic agenda and prove to Catt and others that the Italians were not junior figures within the IWSA. The organizing committee, which was called the Comitato Promotore, sent out a form letter to male stakeholders in Italian society and politics. This committee's membership included women involved with Pro Suffragio or other women's organizations and included Alice Schiavoni Bosio, Laura Casartelli Cabrini, Rita Iachia, Teresa Labriola, Irma Melany Scodnik, Dr. Beatrice "Bice" Sacchi, Dr. Ada Sacchi Simonetta, and Dr. Romelia Troise. They felt a need to explain the event and the international group: "abbiamo l'onore di partecipare che nel maggio 1923 si terrà in Roma il IX Congresso dell'Alleanza Internazionale Pro Suffragio Femminile. Questa forte organizzazione non è ancora molto conosciuta in Italia" (we have the honor of announcing that the Ninth Congress of the IWSA will take place in Rome in May 1923. This strong organization is not yet well known in Italy).[59] The Comitato Promotore worked to make the event exciting for the letter recipients. By attracting more attendees, especially those with political capital, they would be able to advocate for their rights. They emphasized the international caliber of those in attendance and highlighted that an "attractive characteristic" of the congress would be "le riunioni pubbliche nelle quali parleranno eminenti personalità femminili per razza, nazionalità, cultura tanto diverse […] donne di tutti i paesi di Europa, delle due Americhe, dell'Australia e perfino dell'estremo Oriente" (public meetings where eminent women of very different races, nationalities, and cultures will speak […] women from every European country, the two Americas, Australia, and even from the Far East).[60]

The letter reflected patriotic values in the immediate aftermath of a highly nationalistic party coming to power in October 1922. After all, several members of this group supported Mussolini and the Fascists, including Alferazzi Benedettini, Margherita Sarfatti, Regina Terruzzi, and Ester Lombardo. In advertising the event, the committee wanted to generate positive public opinion, highlighting the congress's place during this transformative moment in Italy while stating: "La donna, in quest'ora storica di rinnovamento sociale e morale che il mondo vive, vuole concorrere con tutte le migliori energie alla vita ed al benessere del proprio paese" (Women, in this historic hour of social and moral renewal that the world is experiencing, want to contribute with all their best energy to the life and well-being of their own country).[61] Suffrage activists often couched their terms to broadly appeal to as many people as possible, irrespective of geography or ethnoreligious affiliation. Here the Comitato Promotore used the historic moment to emphasize that as women they sought to help the country, not hinder it. This notion of a historic hour referenced not only the occasion of this international congress but also the new political reality in Italy.

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[58] "All Roads Lead to Rome: Messages from Friends," *Jus Suffragii* (April 1923), 99.

[59] Letter from Il Comitato Promotore to Ill.mo Signore, no date, Fondo Ada Sacchi Simonetta, FISEDD Corrispondenza e Varie 1923–30, box 12, folder 1, Unione Femminile Nazionale Archivio Storico, Milan.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid.

With international attention turning to Italy, Pro Suffragio would use their role as hosts to attempt to pressure the new government. Organizers also sought to present a positive outlook to the rest of the IWSA. The April 1923 issue of *Jus Suffragii* published a news brief describing Mussolini's approval of the upcoming event. The Italian leader was reported as saying: "Sono molto lieto che la Sezione Italiana dell'Alleanza Internazionale Pro Suffragio Femminile abbia ottenuto di tenere il Congresso a Roma, il che darà modo a tutte le signore straniere che interverranno di constatare che, grazie alla rivoluzione fascista, l'Italia ha ritrovato e sempre più ritroverà la una grande anima di nazione che ha millenni di storia" (I am very glad that the Italian affiliate of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance was chosen to host the congress in Rome, which will give the opportunity to all foreign women who will attend to verify that, thanks to the Fascist revolution, Italy has rediscovered and will increasingly rediscover the great soul of a nation that has millennia of history).[62] Additionally, he vowed that the government would make itself available to the organizers for whatever they needed to make the congress "solenne e proficuo" (solemn and productive).[63] The congress would be covered in the press worldwide and nationally. Pro Suffragio believed that the event could push the regime to speed up its passage of an electoral reform bill, and Mussolini sought to use the congress to show that the regime was not as anti-feminist or anti-democratic as people feared. The aftermath of the congress would be complicated.

Crossing the Mediterranean

The Egyptian Feminist Union would attend its first IWSA Congress in Rome. Just as the international organization itself worked to drum up enthusiasm and support, its affiliates also needed to reach their membership and local publics. Shaʿrawi prepared an article addressing why the organization accepted the invitation to go to Rome. Her reasons were threefold: 1) to challenge mainstream European ideas that Egyptian women were lazy, ignorant, and trapped at home; 2) for Egyptian women's representation and participation in "an honorable endeavor"; and 3) by participating in a conference with women from "all nations," the Egyptian movement will gain great benefits.[64] As the first affiliate from a majority Muslim country, the Egyptian delegation received tremendous attention from both the press and IWSA members, often facing xenophobic rhetoric. Shaʿrawi acknowledged that there was support from intellectuals but also criticism from some who believed that the Egyptian women's attendance would be transgressive and go against tradition. For those unhappy with elements of the IWSA's program, Shaʿrawi noted that the Egyptian Feminist Union's platform did not need to align entirely with the international movement. They valued transparency and invited readers with concerns to contact them.[65]

The Italian press frequently covered the Egyptian Feminist Union during its members' stay in Rome. An illustrated portrait of Shaʿrawi appeared in one publication under the title "L'Oriente al

[62] Benito Mussolini quoted in "President Mussolini and the Congress," *Jus Suffragii* (April 1923), 104. *Jus Suffragii* published a short piece in Italian (a rarity) from *L'Epoca* (2 March 1922). Normally items sent into the journal were in French or English.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Huda Shaʿrawi, Draft Article about Attending the Feminist Conference in Rome, 1923, Writings and Speeches by Huda Shaʿrawi, box 1, Egyptian Society, Arts, and Culture Collection, Rare Books and Special Collections Library, American University in Cairo (AUC). The greatest of thanks to my research assistant Khadija Embaby not only for going through the Sharʿawi Collection at AUC this past spring but also for translating Shaʿrawi's documents into English from Arabic.
[65] Ibid.

Congresso femminile" (The East at the Feminist Congress).[66] The newspaper *Il Piccolo* featured photographs of Saiza Nabarawi and Shaʿrawi (spelled "Cega Nabarouy" and "Hoda Charoni Pacha") with the headline "Per la donna nella vita politica: continua il Congresso" (For Women in Political Life: The Congress Continues) and the subheading of "Gentile femminilità mussulmana" (Fine Muslim Femininity).[67] The portrait captions described Nabarawi and Shaʿrawi each as "giovanissima" (very young) but also portrayed the latter as "elegante, quando veste all'europea non si conosce la sua origine araba" (elegant, when she dresses in the European style one does not recognize her Arab origins).[68]

The Egyptian delegates were very aware of the press coverage and how the Italian media presented them. Saiza Nabarawi recalled receiving questions from photographers and journalists "eager to provide sensational information to their readers about the delegates who came from the 'land of the crocodile.'"[69] The media asked why their appearance was not "plus brunes" (darker), whether there was mass transportation in Egypt, and about polygamous marriage. For her part, Nabarawi was stunned and mortified by the Italian press's ignorance. She believed that aside from the veils they wore, the Egyptian women were like every other congress delegate, complaining "that Egypt, whose brilliant civilization long preceded Rome's, could be, nowadays, completely ignored by this Mediterranean people!"[70] While Nabarawi's invocation of antiquity indicated her view of a shared connection between her country's northern neighbor across the sea, she also recognized that much of the rest of the world ignored recent Egyptian history and politics.

"Timorous Butterflies"

Given on the congress's second day (May 14), Catt's presidential address in Rome would be her last. This speech helped circulate and solidify ways of viewing and marginalizing Mediterranean women, especially those on the periphery of world geopolitics. Lauding the Egyptian delegation's attendance, she welcomed the delegates from "that wonderland of Egypt," evoking the idea of an exotic Orient.[71] She declared: "In ancient days there were Egyptian queens and women military leaders of great renown; why not heroines today, bearing aloft the standard of civil and political equality for modern Egyptian woman?"[72] With these words, Catt completely disregarded the record of recent activism of the Egyptian Feminist Union's membership. Not only had these members protested British imperialism prior to the organization's establishment, but they also possessed a longer history of women's social organization, whether in philanthropic, educational, or social groups.

Catt delineated a bloc of "others" based on a mutual faith tradition. She decried "Southern conservatism" (that is, Catholic or non-Protestant faiths) found in both hemispheres, namely in France, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Bulgaria, and Spanish and Portuguese

[66] This press clipping is not labeled with a source or date. Fondo Unione Femminile Suffragio Femminile, Ritaglio 1923, carteggio 54, Unione Femminile Nazionale Archivio Storico, Milan.
[67] *Il Piccolo* (17–18 May 1923), 1. Fondo Unione Femminile Suffragio Femminile – UFN Ritaglio Stampa 1923, carteggio 54, Unione Femminile Nazionale Archivio Storico, Milan. Also included in the photographs of "Gentle Muslim Femininity" was a portrait of Mithan Tata (Lam) (spelled "Nutkan A. Tala"), the first Indian woman lawyer at the Bombay High Court. She was not Muslim but Parsi, an Indian Zoroastrian sect.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Saiza Nabarawi, "Impressions de Congrès," *L'Egyptienne* (October 1929), 5, gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k9108650h.
[70] Ibid.
[71] IWSA, *Report of the Ninth Congress Rome, Italy, May 12th to 19th, 1923* (Dresden: B.G. Teubner, 1923), 31.
[72] Ibid.

America. She continued: "The Alliance extends the hand of friendship. It must continue to cry to the women of all these nations: Awake, Arise, Take Courage."[73] Once again, her comments suggest that these non-Protestant women had passively accepted their oppressed status throughout the years. While groups like Pro Suffragio and the Egyptian Feminist Union certainly wanted sympathy and support from the IWSA, they consistently faced prejudices because of their culture and religious traditions.

Lastly, Catt emphasized that education was essential to newly enfranchised women: "Very many of them, trained by the environment of their entire lives still think and move in the earlier status. They are enfranchised but not emancipated. They are timid, self distrusting and hover on the outer fringes of politics like timorous butterflies."[74] If this was how Catt viewed recently enfranchised women—those in her own home country of the United States, Ireland, multiple provinces in British India, and Sweden—what insect or organism would she use to compare her Egyptian and Italian peers, who remained unenfranchised and, in many ways, unemancipated in a broader national and political sense?

Though Catt passed the mantle of the presidency to British member Margery Corbett Ashby, the foundation was set for the next decade. The IWSA would welcome unenfranchised women's participation but would refuse to repudiate embedded, stereotypical, and prejudiced views of Mediterranean women.

Mediterranean Women at Work

IWSA members worked diligently between the congress's opening meetings on Saturday, May 12, and its farewell tea at the Villa Umberto on Saturday, May 19. Every affiliate could appoint a member to the IWSA's standing committees. These bodies focused on equal pay and the right to work; moral questions; the nationality of married women; and the economic status of wives. There were special sessions for women from enfranchised countries and those still lacking the vote. The congress also featured numerous public meetings that interested parties and the press could attend. At these events, Helen Fraser wrote, "women of East and West, North and South, of almost every race in the world demonstrated again, often with striking power and ability as well as with sanity and humour, their faith in their cause, and their belief in their great fight for equality."[75] On the evening of May 19, Catt presided over a public meeting featuring "Women of All Continents," where Shaʿrawi and Dr. Petronella van Heerden of South Africa represented Africa and Ancona spoke for Europe alongside Norwegian and Irish delegates.[76]

Like Ancona's 1919 article encouraging solidarity among this IWSA's members, Shaʿrawi similarly advocated for unity. Her speech declared her pride in conference participation, saying that she "wished to see the Egyptian woman next to her western sister."[77] Unlike Catt, whose presidential address ignored Egypt's recent political transformations, Shaʿrawi critically reminded members that recent geopolitical struggles impacted individual affiliates' interactions with their peers. Her words emphasized a transnational desire to work outside of governmental regimes: "[The Egyptian woman] would witness the German woman side by side with the French, Bolivian,

[73] Ibid., 32.
[74] Ibid., 36.
[75] Ibid., 27.
[76] Ibid., 8
[77] Huda Shaʿrawi, Untitled Ninth International Congress of the IAWSEC, Rome, Italy, 1923 Conference Speech, Writings and Speeches by Huda Shaʿrawi, box 1, Egyptian Society, Arts, and Culture Collection, Rare Books and Special Collections Library, AUC.

Indian, Irish, and British woman, all thinking and working together as one; or as sisters who are not influenced by what is happening between their governments from conflict and dispute."[78] Shaʿrawi also wanted her peers not to be guided by cultural or ethnoreligious stereotypes, noting that "the Egyptian woman is just as capable and efficient as her western peer."[79] The Egyptian Feminist Union's delegates knew that they faced significant challenges because of Orientalist discourse, yet joining the IWSA would help them pressure their national government. Unfortunately, Shaʿrawi's words would fail to make meaningful headway against long entrenched prejudices.

For the congress report published following the event's close, affiliates provided national updates that they wanted to share with their fellow members. Congress host Italy did not submit a report due to a "misunderstanding," and thus the editor compiled an update based on past issues of *Jus Suffragii*.[80] Since Ancona frequently submitted pieces to the journal, the information presented here was filtered through her perspectives and priorities. For example, the Italian report remarked on a municipal suffrage bill that passed in 1921 just prior to parliament's dissolution.[81] The update also discussed other issues Pro Suffragio engaged with, including moral questions, labor, and industry (specifically, that "custom and the antagonism of men keep women to certain work, such as tailoring, textile, tobacco and the tilling of the rice fields").[82] The Italian national update emphasized that gaining the franchise would enable Pro Suffragio to help women in fields of education, labor, and beyond.

For the Egyptian Feminist Union, the report was a significant space for members to self-represent their history, activism, and commitment to the IWSA. Nabawiya Musa, the author of the Egyptian contribution, used her statement to push back against Orientalist comments made throughout the congress. Unlike women in the West, Musa informed readers that before and immediately following the rise of Islam, Arab women "enjoyed [their] rights in full, private as well as social" and were "equal to men." She condemned "foreign domination" for their loss of rights, but argued that "if we are struggling nowadays, our struggle is only aimed at the customs which nothing sanctions or justifies, and we claim a right sanctioned by religion and our social law."[83] Whereas the IWSA, in particular Catt, blamed the repression of Catholic or Muslim women on their religious traditions, encouraging unenfranchised members of the South to "awake, arise, take courage,"[84] Musa countered by highlighting the ways in which Egyptian women throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had advocated for increased access to education and employment. If Egyptian women had struggled recently, particularly in the realm of the former, it was because of "English interference in the affairs of the country."[85]

The Egyptian Feminist Union's attendance in Rome can be viewed as a success. Throughout the IWSA's history, it passed resolutions at each congress. These declarations focused on the movement's major issues but could also directly address individual affiliates and their domestic

[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid.
[80] IWSA, *Report of the Ninth Congress Rome*, 190.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid., 190–91.
[83] Ibid., 169.
[84] Ibid., 32.
[85] Ibid., 170. Musa herself lived through these challenges; she was the first Egyptian women to earn a baccalaureate secondary degree and the first to become a school principal. See Christina Civantos, "Reading and Writing the Turn-of-the-Century Egyptian Woman Intellectual: Nabawiyya Musa's Tar'ikhi Bi-Qalami," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 9, no. 2 (2023): 6.

political situations. In 1923, the IWSA issued eighteen resolutions, including "League of Nations," "Dangerous Drugs," and even "Votes of Thanks."[86] The penultimate resolution was on "Egypt." It read:

> The Congress deplores the fact that the Government of Egypt has taken away from their girls and women the right which they have had for many years, to enter for the primary, secondary and higher examinations, and declares that the equal right of young men and women to share in all the educational opportunities of the country is an essential sign of progress and civilization.[87]

By getting this resolution passed, the Egyptian delegation demonstrated their political acumen. Where the IWSA wanted to preserve a sense of neutrality with regards to national concerns, it clearly did not take issue with calling out the Egyptian government, which appeared to be more peripheral and less of a threat than many members' immediate neighbors.

In many ways, the congress appeared to be a coup for Pro Suffragio and Italian women more broadly. Meetings were well-attended, heavily covered in the Italian press, and Mussolini made an appearance. He delivered a speech to the audience, promising greater rights for some women. *Jus Suffragii* published the entirety of his speech in its July 1923 issue and included the note that "Signor Mussolini's Electoral Reform Bill" already passed the chamber.[88] The Fascist leader declared: "The Italian public spirit and the tendency of our policy offer no preconceived opposition to the enfranchisement of women."[89] He felt "authorized" to share that the Fascist government would grant the vote shortly to several categories of women at the municipal level. He also touted some early successes of Fascist government, concluding that "I trust this Congress will mean an essential advancement of the status of women, and a new step forward in the history of civilized nations."[90]

The IWSA's board and Pro Suffragio immediately returned to work on the day after the congress's close. After naming chairs for the six different committees, the board decided to reach out to all the auxiliaries to ask them to appoint a member to each one.[91] Ancona, now the third vice president because of the voting results, proposed that they establish an unenfranchised women's committee, as one currently existed for enfranchised members. Greek board member and new recording secretary Avra Theodoropolou seconded; however, Swiss member Emilie Gourd, also unenfranchised, opposed the measure. The board decided to revisit the resolution at the next board meeting after the enfranchised members' committee was determined.[92]

Almost simultaneously, members of the Pro Suffragio met with Giacomo Acerbo, Mussolini's undersecretary and the architect of the law bearing his name, which would enable Fascists to gain control of Parliament in 1924. In a letter to her sister dated 20 May 1923, Beatrice "Bice" Sacchi

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[86] Ibid., 78–79. The first thanks were given to "His Excellency Signor Mussolini" for his service as the congress's "honorary president" and for "his encouraging speech." Gratitude was also offered to "His Holiness the Pope," the Italian state railways (for fare concessions), the choir "who charmed us with their singing," and the caretakers of the hall, among others.

[87] Ibid., 77.

[88] Benito Mussolini, "Speech of Signor Mussolini," *Jus Suffragii* (July 1923), 149.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Ibid.

[91] The committees were Equal Pay, Nationality of Married Women, Family Endowment, Illegitimate Children, and Equal Morals. The board determined that the last one, headed by Uruguayan member Dr. Paulina Luisi, would also have four members handpicked by its chair.

[92] IWSA, *Report of the Ninth Congress Rome*, 83.

shared information about the meeting with Acerbo. The "committee" consisted of Rita Jacchia (Turin), Ancona (Milan), Sacchi (representing Mantua for her sister), Benedettini (president of the Roman committee), Dr. Romelia Troise (of the Pro Suffragio's central committee), and Professor Regina Terruzzi (the government's delegate). Despite having an appointment for noon, the committee waited an hour and a quarter for the official.[93]

Acerbo informed them that the president of the Gran Consiglio del Fascismo (Mussolini) had every intention of conceding the electorate "senza l'eleggibilità" (without electability).[94] The Fascist government did not trust or want women to stand as candidates and raised concerns about their suitability for holding office. Beatrice Sacchi questioned the government's credibility because of this hesitation. She observed that "ci potevano essere donne dotate di competenze preziose che non si potevano trasmettere ad un uomo, le quali sarebbero state utilissima in un Consiglio comunale e il timore dell'eleggibilità era veramente incomprensibile anche in un primo passo" (there could be women endowed with valuable skills that could not be passed onto a man, which would be very useful in a municipal council and the fear of electability was really incomprehensible, even at a preliminary stage). Additionally, she reported that Rita Jacchia "ebbe osservato scherzando che S.E. l'on. Mussolini, che rimproverava alle donne elettrici di votare per gli uomini; ora ci avrebbe messo in condizione di non poter votare che per gli uomini" (remarked jokingly that his excellency, the honorable Mussolini, who reproached female electors for voting for men, now would put us in the position of being able to only vote for men). With the Turin suffragist's remarks, according to Sacchi, Acerbo "si arrese e disse che avrebbe proposto al Pres. del Consiglio di non fare opposizione all'eleggibilità" (gave up and said that he would propose to the President of the Consiglio not to oppose electability).[95] In spite of this meeting and Mussolini's public remarks, Pro Suffragio consistently sent in missives to *Jus Suffragii* noting that there were delays in formalizing this law throughout the year and into 1923.

Conclusion

On the final day of the congress, the IWSA decided that the delegates would march from the venue to the Italian Ministry of the Interior. IWSA officers were at the front of the march, followed by women serving in their national parliaments, enfranchised women, and finally unenfranchised members at the end. Mona L. Siegel writes that having Italian women marching in the rear was "precisely the point," for it showed that Italy trailed behind its peer nations.[96] Though attempting to score political points against the Fascist government, this processional order also revealed much about the IWSA's values and internal solidarity. In Rome, Pro Suffragio and the Egyptian Feminist Union presented themselves as competent, capable, and enthusiastic allies within the international suffrage movement. Italian women were optimistic that they would gain the franchise; after all, Mussolini promised it with the eyes of the world on Rome. The Egyptian delegation returned to Cairo with support from the IWSA and plans to petition their own government for greater rights. Yet throughout the rest of the 1920s, Italian and Egyptian women continued to face discrimination from the IWSA because of their ethnic, religious and cultural status. Ancona and Shaʿrawi advocated for sisterhood before an organization that purported to offer it; instead, they would find

[93] Letter to Ada Sacchi Simonetta from Beatrice Sacchi, 20 May 1923, Fondo Ada Sacchi Simonetta, FISEDD Corrispondenza e Varie 1923–30, box 12, folder 1, Unione Femminile Nazionale Archivio Storico, Milan.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Mona L. Siegel, *Peace on Our Terms: The Global Battle for Women's Rights After the First World War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 243.

themselves consistently marginalized and ultimately ignored.