

November 2009

The Local is Global: Broker for Human Rights “Florence Kitchelt, Connecticut Peace Activist and Feminist,” 1920-1961

Danelle L. Moon

San Jose State University, danelle.moon@ucsb.edu

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Recommended Citation

Danelle L. Moon. "The Local is Global: Broker for Human Rights “Florence Kitchelt, Connecticut Peace Activist and Feminist,” 1920-1961" *34th Annual Meeting of the Social Science and History Association* (2009).

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Danelle Moon
WAWH
Santa Clara University
May 2, 2009

“Lobbying for Human Rights: From the League of Nations to the Equal Rights Amendment—The Case of Florence Kitchelt, Connecticut Peace Activist and Feminist”

Preface: **This presentation** is part of a larger biographical book project that will look at the life of twenty-year peace activist and life-long feminist Florence Kitchelt. I hope to demonstrate that there is a need to study regional activists in context to the larger social movements, which in turn, will lead to a more nuanced historical analyses that extends beyond the traditional framework of the feminist divide.

Florence Kitchelt stands out as an important historical figure in the history of the women’s movement because of her success forging a new path to bring together the different factions of the women’s movement. Unlike many of her contemporaries she shifted her view opposing the Equal Rights Amendment to become an equal rights supporter in the 1940s and 1950s. Twenty years working for the League of Nations Association taught her to think globally, but to act locally, and her identification with the ERA at the end of her life reflected her commitment to universal equality and human rights. More importantly, the U.N. Charter on Human Rights provided the global justification for passage of the ERA and Kitchelt offered a fresh approach to the equal rights movement. She understood the complication of labor equity for women and the need to look both at gender differences and the application of law.

Florence Kitchelt stands out as important mid-century reformer for a number of reasons: 1) She understood well the importance of compromise and used her skills at coalition building to produce results, a skill she learned in the suffrage movement and carried through as peace activist; 2) She was a prominent member of the opposition and provided important regional leadership where women and men could work together to support the ERA; 3) She offered an alternative strategy that broke the deadlock between social feminists and equal rights supporters and offered a new template for supporters of the ERA; 4) Kitchelt's campaign for the ERA helps us understand the conflicts between feminist factions and the challenges that equal rights supporters faced in the post-war years. Moreover, this study raises new historiographical questions that look at the fluidity of feminist environment in the 1940-1950s, and continuity of internationalism in shaping U.S. social policies related to women.

Who Was Florence Kitchelt:

Born in 1874 to a middle class Rochester, New York family, Florence Ledyard Cross Kitchelt, entered social work following college. Molded by the values of her parents and in the spirit of the progressives of the time, Kitchelt spent her lifetime as a social and

political activist “branded with the principle of doing her duty.”¹ Following graduation from Wells College in 1897 Kitchelt held a brief position as the librarian of the George Jr. Republic school, a reform community and school for working-class children. Kitchelt’s passion for social justice began with settlement house work in Rochester, New York and New Haven, Connecticut. Working with the Italian immigrant community in Rochester, she developed empathy for the working poor, and provided important support to the Italian immigrant community. In 1910 she played a key role in the final arbitration of the Rochester Strike of 1910, one of the largest strikes in the state, demonstrating early on her mediation skills. During this same time period she married socialist labor leader and lithographer, Richard Kitchelt, and the two celebrated their marriage ceremony with family, friends, and residence from the Italian settlement community. The Kitchelt’s frequently lived apart during the early years of their marriage, but by the 1920s made a permanent home together in New Haven, Connecticut. The Kitchelt’s marriage was as a true partnership based on mutual respect and a shared belief in gender equality, yet unconventional for the time. They spent the next 47 years together, and though they never had children, they remained close ties with their families.

¹ Florence Kitchelt typescript note attached to a letter from her cousin Darwin, c. 1960, Florence Kitchelt Papers, SCHL, Box 8, folder 268; Herbert Janick, “An Instructive Failure: The Connecticut Peace Movement, 1919-1939,” *Peace & Change* 9(175).

Typical of her generation, she moved from social reform to promote the state and national suffrage. In 1915, she accepted a paid recruiter position in the Connecticut Woman Suffrage Association, where she provided important leadership as the legislative secretary. Following the suffrage victory in 1920, she became the Citizenship Director, of the CLWV and built an educational program that became a national model. In 1923 she resigned from the CLWV to accept a paid position with the CLNA, where she played a key role as secretary and executive director in the organization from 1924 through 1943. Following her resignation from the CLNA and short-term work with the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies (1939-1942), she spent the remainder of her life supporting the passage of the ERA through the Connecticut Committee for the Equal Rights Amendment. In 1956 she and Richard Kitchelt sold their home to the Unitarian Church and moved Wilberforce, Ohio, where they lived with Kitchelt's younger sister, Dorothy Zeigler. Florence Kitchelt died in 1961.²

While Florence Kitchelt identified as a social feminist, she could hardly be described as ordinary. A white, middle class, college educated female, she followed the standard path toward

² Danelle Moon, "A Pocket of Quiet Persistence—In the Age of the Feminist Doldrums?: Florence Kitchelt and the Connecticut Committee for the Equal Rights Amendment, 1943-1961," *Connecticut History* Vol. 45, no. 2 (Fall 2006), 204; Janick, "Connecticut Peace," pp. 12-18; On the strike see Florence Kitchelt Papers, SCHL, box 1, folder 8.

social work and suffrage. Yet, unlike many of her contemporaries, she choose to marry at age 35, she identified politically as a socialist, she had to work to sustain herself, and she distinguished herself as a paid social activist rather than as a philanthropist. She also never described herself as a feminist and purposely avoided this label because she believed it was misunderstood. Kitchelt's gradual acceptance of the ERA illustrates her willingness to think outside of the box to improve women's lives, and by the last phase of her life, she hoped to inspire younger women to become politically active, and her commitment to human rights motivated her to support the ERA after many years of opposition.³

To fully understand the context of Kitchelt's progression toward the ERA, it is important to get a sense of her personality and her prominence as a suffrage and post-suffrage leader, and later as peace activist. As a member of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, she participated in suffrage parades from New York to Washington D.C., and in 1918 she accepted a paid-position as the legislative secretary of the Connecticut Woman Suffrage Association, where she practiced her skills in public speaking and directed the general field work for state and national suffrage. Following the suffrage victory, Kitchelt participated in the formation of the Connecticut League of Women Voters, and she

³ Moon, "Feminist Doldrums," pp.204-208.

served as one of the organizations first education directors. In this position, she helped organize education program across the state, and she authored some of the curriculum to help women understand the legislative process of a bill. For example, in 1920 she produced “The Mechanism of Law-Making in Connecticut,” a graphic pamphlet illustrating how a bill passed through the Connecticut legislature to become a law, and reprinted in 1927. Through the work of the LWV, she forged a non-partisan pathway for women independent of the political party system. In 1921 Good Housekeeping recognized her political talents in the article “Laying Politics Bare.” In this article, the author Ruth E. Finley, praised Kitchelt for success in building an political educational program for new female voters. As described in this article, Kitchelt’s “...ability, tact, fearlessness, accompanied by an unsuspected spark of wickedness, have made her handling of the delicate, nonpartisan [sic] campaign meeting a real art.” Kitchelt, according to Finley held her ground, despite her small frame and demure, Madonna-like presence.” Indeed, other editorials describing her work in the peace movement would similarly describe her small stature and feisty personality.⁴

Kitchelt’s life would soon take another turn in 1924, when she left her post as education director to pursue a paid position with

⁴ Ruth E. Finley, “Laying Politics Bare,” Good Housekeeping (October 1921), pp. 69, 101, 105-106. Florence Kitchelt Papers, SCHL, Box 1, folder 1.

Connecticut League of Nations Association. For the next twenty years, she focused her energy on international governance and world peace. Kitchelt's early career as a settlement house worker, labor negotiator, and leader in the suffrage movement and later the LWV, provided her with specific skills in organizational management, public speaking, and political advocacy she needed to promote international peace in the state. Again, this is an area where she appears to be a quite ordinary social activist, except that she moved fluidly between organizations, and used her social connections to build collaboration between sometimes disparate groups. She relied on the art of art of compromise and persuasion to build support for the League of Nations and World Court.

The Connecticut League of Nations Association (CLNA) formed in 1924. Josepha Whitney, a founding member of the Women's Peace Society and state suffragist, held the first meeting at her home. Whitney also had a hand in hiring Florence Kitchelt the same year. As organizers in the suffrage movement and the League of Women Voters, both women brought important organizational skills and were seasoned lobbyists in state politics.⁵ Moreover, the LWV identified early on with the League of Nations and World Court, and their study platform included international affairs.⁶ At the national convention on April 21, 1925, Carrie Chapman Catt offered her own 14 points speech to promote the League of Nations, wherein she outlined the causes of

⁵ Carole Nichols, "Votes and More for Women: Suffrage and After in Connecticut," *Women & History* Vol. 5 (The Institute for Research in History and the Haworth Press, Inc., 1984): pp. 34-41.

⁶ Janick, "Connecticut Peace," pp. 12-13; Moon, "Florence Kitchelt," pp.203-208; Carole Nichols, "Votes and More," pp. 34-41.

war and solutions for peace. She supported global arbitration and disarmament, and believed in the moral force of the people to enforce peace. A founding member of the NCCW, Catt provided a study program for league members that covered topics on war and peace, which focused on education and outreach to the membership and for other peace organizations. Catt's leadership in the NCCW and the LWV influenced state and local LWV branches to promote the League of Nations. The CLWV and the CLNA provided a platform for women in the state to engage in local and international politics, while providing an important base for the peace movement in the state. Kitchelt expanded on many of Catt's ideas as she launched the education campaign in the state for the CLNA.⁷ Drawing from her experiences as an educator of the legislative process and women's activist, she offered expertise as a legislative specialist and administrator of education and outreach programs, and she helped form the Connecticut Council on International Relations (CCIR) in 1927; a separate organization designed to promote peace education as an alternative for those who were cool to the notion of the League of Nations. On the legislative front, she served both organizations and applied what she had learned during her legislative days working for suffrage and later the CLWV. For example, in 1938 she took the lead in producing congressional charts and wrote several news articles highlighting the 'Congressional Questionnaire' responses of the democrat and republican candidates in each district. This work mirrored her earlier success in producing a model document to explain the legislative bill process to new female voters.⁸

⁷ Carrie Chapman Catt, "Mrs. Catt's 14 Points as offered at the convention of the National League of Women Voters, Richmond, VA, April 21, 1925," Kitchelt, Yale, box 7, folder 55.

⁸ Janick, Connecticut Peace Movement, p.12; Minutes of the Executive Committee Meeting, CLNA, October 28, 1938, Kitchelt, Yale, box 21, folder 260; Nichols, "Votes and More," 34-41; Moon, "Florence Kitchelt," 203-209.

Kitchelt played a significant role in building state awareness of the international issues surrounding the League of Nations and World Court. She demonstrated her commitment to preserving world peace through education programs that included support for the Emergency Peace Campaign, Model Assemblies, and disarmament conferences. Kitchelt worked collaboratively with peace organizations and civic/political organizations to establish educational programs for local high school students and the community. This work included organizing state peace conferences, parades, peace plays, and radio broadcasts, as well as producing publications and curriculum that supported these efforts. Kitchelt delivered more than 180 speeches between 1928 and 1929, and organized rallies in nine cities.⁹

Peace organizations benefited the rise of student anti-war protest in this period, and organizations like the CLNA targeted their programs to high school and college age students. Model Assemblies offered students the opportunity to dramatize their own assemblies or produce verbatim assemblies using the original speeches from Geneva. Starting in 1928, Yale University hosted a number of these assemblies in the state. According to the *Yale Daily News*, the third annual “Model Assembly” took place in Woolsey Hall. The purpose of the assembly is to reproduce the actual assembly of the League of Nations in Geneva. The conference brochure entitled “*Model Assemblies of the League of Nations, what they are and how to give,*” touted the benefits of the program: “...students learn to study for themselves the “new method of conducting world affairs” by reproducing the Assembly at work. Aside from its value visualizing the League’s work, it serves to illustrate the broader idea that nations may solve their problems by conference instead of conflict.” By far the “Model Assembly” programs proved to be the most successful of the LNA and in the state. In 1930-1931, some 45 model assemblies were organized with approximately 7,200 students in attendance across the U.S.¹⁰ In New

⁹ Ibid. p.13; Eichelberger, *Organizing for Peace*, 55-61; Connecticut Branch League of Nations, An Abbreviated History, 1936, Kitchelt, Yale, box 21, folder 261; League of Nations Association report [n.d., 1935-36], Kitchelt, Yale, box 18, folder 200; Janick’s analysis paints a less positive picture of the CLNA signature campaign, remarking that it fell short by 50% in 70 cities in 1934; however by 1935 it surpassed the quota. See Janick, “Connecticut Peace,” p. 15.

¹⁰ Educational Department League of Nations Association, Inc. Report on Model Assemblies September 1930-June 1931, Kitchelt, Yale, box 9, folder 77; *Yale Daily News*, April 28, 1930, pg. 1, Kitchelt, Yale, box 9, folder 76; *Model Assemblies of the League of Nations, what they are and how to give*, 1928, Kitchelt, Yale, box 9, folder 78; Nellie L. Jackson, “The First Inter-High School Model Assembly of the League of Nations, Vol. XX, no. 1, pp.34-35, Kitchelt, Yale, box 9, folder 77.

England students from including Amherst College, Mt Holyoke College, and Yale University dramatized the real life responsibilities of the League and Nations and learned about conflict resolution and disarmament.¹¹

While Kitchelt work closely with local and national peace leaders to build these programs she maintained regular correspondence with international peace leaders. For example, in 1924 she traveled to Geneva to see first hand world governance in action, and she quickly became a regional expert and developed education programs and conferences focused disarmament. Mary Dingman, President of the Disarmament Committee of the Women's International Organizations in Geneva worked closely with Kitchelt in providing education resources and visited New Haven as a keynote speaker. Kitchelt kept Dingman informed on the progress of these local efforts, and in May 1932 wrote that the May 18 conference had 1000 attendees, which included three "...negro groups representing Abyssinia, Liberia, and Haiti; Italians came as Italy and Albania; Poles came as Poland, etc.. One of the achievements was that the Conference in Geneva became a reality to many people who knew very little or nothing about it. Our audience was not composed of the intellectually elite but of Mr. And Mrs. Average Citizen."¹² The program of the disarmament conferences similarly dramatized the inter-working of the League assembly in Geneva, and as in the above example, the participants represented different national delegates and included a mock roll call, and delegate vote.¹³ Through film, radio and passion plays the CLNA offered community programs designed to increase awareness and support for the League of Nations and World Court. For example, the program "*War, Peace, and the Worker,*" featured topics on international labor, the good neighbor policy toward immigrants, peace and working man, and narratives relating personal experiences from war service in WW I. Other radio programs featured local

¹¹ Florence Kitchelt to Marie-Louise Pusch, Feb. 7, 1930, Kitchelt, Yale, box 5 folder 45.

¹² Mary Dingman to Florence Kitchelt, April 21, 1932, Yale, box 5, folder 45; Mary Dingman to Florence Kitchelt, April 21, 1932, Yale, box 5, folder 45.

¹³ Rachel Nason to the Connecticut Council on International Relations, March 14, 1932, Kitchelt, Yale, box 5, folder 39; World Disarmament Conference convened by the League of Nations in Geneva, Feb. 2, 1932, Prepared by Rachel Conrad Nason for the CT Council on International Relations, New Haven, May 18, 1932, Kitchelt, Yale, box 5, folder 39.

scholars and student organizations, including the Christian Youth Works for Peace, the YWCA, and American Student Union.¹⁴

Transition to Equal Rights:

As we have seen, Kitchelt's work took several turns over the course of her life. From 1923 to 1942, she transitioned her work from suffrage to peace, and returned to women's rights issues at the end of her life. Her work on the Connecticut suffrage campaign and success in developing educational materials for the Connecticut LWV educational program, earned her national recognition as an important leader in the LWV. Despite the failure of the League of Nations to secure peace, international peace activism continued on several fronts, and the disparate branches of U.S. feminists vied to control national equality legislation. The wedge between these two factions focused on protective labor legislation for women and children. The LWV strongly advocated for gendered labor legislation based on the biological differences of men and women, and had the support of American labor. It should be remembered that LWV worked hard to build cross-class alliances with working class women, but their position against the ERA became increasingly difficult to justify in the international women's movement, where the National Women's Party (NWP) had secured support for an international equal rights platform. The Inter-American Commission of the Pan-American Conference in 1930 and in 1933 the Seventh Pan-American Conference in Montevideo, Uruguay raised international support for equal rights for men and women. However, the U.S. delegation, influenced largely by the LWV, voiced the only opposition to the women's equal nationality treaty. The LWV position became increasingly difficult to justify with advances in equal rights policy in the international setting. During the inter-war years, the

¹⁴ "War, Peace, and the Worker Radio Program," Station WICC, League of Nations Association, 1936, "Youth Radio Program," Station WICC, League of Nations Association, 1936, Kitchelt, Yale, box 18, folder 200; On the peace caravans, Chase Kimball raised the funds for the youth caravans and provided advise on the caravan routes in the state. See CLNA Minutes of the Executive Committee Meeting with Petition Workers, Hartford, June 14, 1934, Kitchelt, Yale, box 21, folder 260. and helped organized the caravan.

LWV and NWP continued to wrestle each other to control international and national equality legislation.¹⁵

Reconfiguring the ERA Campaign

Against the backdrop of international events and the continued feminist divide over the equal rights legislation, Florence Kitchelt joined the NWP to support the ERA. In her opening letter she explained that she had been a longtime opponent of the ERA based on her commitment to protective legislation—the standard social feminist position—but now believed that it was time to promote human equality. Soon after, she forged a new organization, the Connecticut Committee for the Equal Rights Amendment (CCERA), a separate and independent organization from the NWP. It was her vision to build a rainbow coalition of men and women who supported the ERA. She consulted with the NWP frequently, though in contrast to the NPW position, she developed her own publicity and offered a different campaign position that embraced gender differences while supporting equal rights for men and women.

During these years Kitchelt's campaign focused on developing new converts to the ERA through constant letter writing, newspaper editorials and magazines, making contact with prominent people, and organizations. She tried to win over the LWV without success, though she made progress with other national women's organizations and regularly communicated with worked hard to influence national leaders who continued to oppose the ERA based on the old argument of protective legislation. Between the years 1946-1948, the U.N. movement to support human rights, created a new opportunity for Kitchelt to promote the ERA. Eleanor Roosevelt served as the U.S. representative on the U.N. Commission on Human Rights and she co-authored the Declaration of Human Rights. Kitchelt capitalized on Roosevelt's work to convince Alice Hamilton, the first female faculty member of Harvard Medical School and long-time opponent of the amendment, to endorse the ERA based on the principles of the Charter. By 1952, Hamilton acknowledged that the ERA would not impair labor protections for working women, followed one week later by Eleanor Roosevelt on the floor of the United Nations,

¹⁵ Danelle Moon & Kathryn Kish Sklar, "How Did Florence Kitchelt Bring Together Social Feminists and Equal Rights Feminists to Reconfigure the Campaign for the ERA in the 1940s and 1950s? (Binghamton, NY: State University of New York at Binghamton: 2009 anticipated publication date).

made clear that she no longer opposed the passage of an equal rights amendment. This final acknowledgement gave Kitchelt's campaign a small boost.

Another important development that influenced the short-lived success of the CCERA came after the NWP membership schism that resulted in the exodus of several core members. Several of these women found a new home with the CCERA and Kitchelt emerged as an important regional leader. She worked closely with Alma Lutz, and developed collaborations with Anna Kelton Wiley, Caroline Babcock, Jane Grant, Jeannette Marks, and Laura Berrien—once loyal members of the NWP. Together these women forged sister organizations in Massachusetts and New York.¹⁶

During the 1940s and 1950s Kitchelt succeeded in forging a new path to bring together the different factions of the women's movement, though her victory was incomplete, and by the time of her death in 1961, old hostilities continued on. Nevertheless, her activism came full circle by the time she retired at age 82. Unlike many of her contemporaries her views on the feminist divide evolved as did her views on protective labor legislation. Twenty years working for the League of Nations taught her to think globally, but to act locally, and her identification with the ERA at the end of her life reflected her commitment to universal equality and human rights. As a humanist and feminist, equality crossed gender, race, class, and geographic boundaries. More importantly, the U.N. Charter on Human Rights provided the global justification for passage of the ERA and Kitchelt offered a fresh approach to the equal rights movement. She understood the complication of labor equity for women and the need to look both at gender differences and the application of law. As she predicted to Alice Paul in 1948, it would take a younger generation of women to work through these differences and secure Congressional support for the Amendment. Indeed, the second wave movement leaders would confront the same issues articulated by Kitchelt, and her effort to reconfigure the ERA campaign in the 1940s and 1950s is an important part of the history of equal rights.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid; Moon, "Quite Persistence," pp. 215-220.

¹⁷ Eichelberger, *Organizing for Peace*, pp.119-135; Moon, "Florence Kitchelt," pp. 209-221; Moon & Sklar, ERA; See Dorothy Sue Cobble's work on the second wave movement and role of labor in promoting the ERA: Cobble, Susan. *The Other Women's Movement; Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton University Press, 2004).

her effort to expand support of the ERA through the Connecticut Committee for Equal Rights (CCERA) and her effort to reconfigure the campaign for ERA in the 1950s. She used this organization as a vehicle to challenge the ideological divide between social feminist opponents and equal rights proponents. A life member of the League of Women Voters, she shared the early belief that the ERA would eliminate needed protective labor legislation for women. At the same time, she identified as an internationalist, which over time the LWV's position opposing the women's equality nationality treaty helped to set the stage for Kitchelt's decision to join the National Women's Party and to work toward building a new coalition that would embrace adoption of a constitutional Amendment that would mirror the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This document reinforced her belief in sexual equality, and occupied the remainder of her life as she promoted passage of the ERA. It was her hope that the U.S. would ratify the Charter.

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