

“Millions of working housewives”: the International Co-operative Women’s Guild and household labour in the interwar period

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ABSTRACT



The article focuses on household labour as one of the key agendas of the International Co-operative Women’s Guild (ICWG) and on the contributions Central and Eastern European countries made to this agenda in the interwar period. I argue that ICWG women made household labour a policy issue in its own right and provided space for debates between women of diverse ideological positions coming from different political and economic systems and national contexts. Zooming in on key publications and paying attention to the organizational dynamics and complex relationship between communists and social democrats in the ICWG, I first explore how the ICWG discussed household labour and the solutions it offered to reduce the burden of such work. In the second part of the analysis, I argue that because it was crucial to their work, ICWG women inserted aspects of household labour into international discussions on women’s and/or labour-related issues. By doing so, they tried to 1) establish themselves as experts on household labour-based issues and 2) advance how topics such as popular nutrition and maternal deaths were approached in international settings.

KEYWORDS

International Co-operative Women’s Guild; cooperatives; household labour; women’s activism

All the many housewives who work in the cells, so to speak, of our economic organism – the homes – must be united and educated by our Guild. That is to say that we want to unite and educate half mankind and train them for common work inside and outside the house [...] it is a question also of freeing the housewives from all prejudices, of protecting them against all prejudices which hinder their public work and of securing them that recognition from the community which today is wanting, for the housewife’s work is still always regarded as an inferior economic service in the life of nations. (Freundlich 1927, 1)

This is how Emmy Freundlich, a president of the International Co-operative Women’s Guild (ICWG) and one of the leading Austrian social democrats in the interwar period, greeted her fellow cooperative women at the international conference held in Stockholm in 1927. The quote (and its authorship) touches upon two issues I address as relevant for this article. Out of the many angles, perspectives, and valuable research topics on the International Guild and its activism, I pull out and search for links between 1) the

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contributions of Central and Eastern European countries to the international women's cooperative movement, and 2) the centrality of household labour in the ICWG's work during the interwar period.

The international cooperative movement was the only interwar pillar of the international social democratic movement that had a women's organization (ICWG) with a strong Soviet branch. Emmy Freundlich, the ICWG's long-time president and one of the most influential cooperative women at the international level, came from the Austrian cooperative movement. Other Central and Eastern European countries also joined the ICWG and brought the particularities of their respective national political and economic contexts to the organizational agenda of the ICWG in the interwar period. Therefore, I analyse the work of the ICWG, but I am not looking *only* at contributions by women from Central and Eastern Europe. However, I do pay special attention to the presence of Central and Eastern European countries in the movement, as well as the dynamics between communist and non-communist women in the ICWG because these were important factors in shaping the organization's work.

Second, I analyse household labour as a crucial theme in the International Guild's work. I argue that the ICWG made household labour a policy issue in its own right and transgressed the boundaries of consumer cooperation at the international level in the way it approached the issue during the interwar period. By focusing on key ICWG publications, I first address how household labour was discussed in meetings of the ICWG and which solutions were offered by whom. In the second part of the analysis, I situate the International Guild's work in the context of the lively universe of interwar international organizing. I argue that because it was crucial to their work, ICWG women inserted aspects of household labour into international discussions on women's and/or labour-related issues, especially in the League of Nations and the International Labour Organization. By doing so, they tried to 1) establish themselves as experts in household labour-based problems and solutions; and 2) advance how topics such as popular nutrition and maternal mortality were approached in international settings during the interwar period.

The International Guild and its Central and Eastern European affiliations

The following section provides a brief history of the International Guild and Central and Eastern Europe's affiliations and connections with it. Diversity both in terms of organizational models and ideologies has been one of the historical hallmarks of the cooperative movement. There are different approaches to categorizing types of cooperatives, and the distinction between them is not always clear. This article focuses on the international women's cooperative organization that brought together mainly women from consumer cooperatives during the interwar period. In his essays on global labour history, Marcel van der Linden defines "mutualism" and explains that it encompasses "all voluntary arrangements, in which people make contributions to a collective fund, which is given, in whole or in part, to one or more of the contributors according to specific rules of allocation" (Van der Linden 2008, 81). Consumer cooperatives, as a form of mutualism, are considered one of the strategies "for individuals and households to cope with conditions of scarcity, especially as regards basic foodstuffs and other essential supplies," but in many cases, the cooperatives also

met other consumer needs and went beyond them by focusing on education, connection with local communities, and other activities (Hilson, Neunsinger, and Patmore 2017, 8). The consumer cooperative movement began growing in Europe starting around 1860. By the end of World War One, it had spread across Europe, and in the interwar period, the movement was strong in parts of Central and Eastern Europe (Hilson 2017; Hilson, Neunsinger, and Patmore 2017, Hilson et al., 2018).

Historically, the consumer cooperative movement depended to a great extent on women because due to the gender division of labour, it was they who did the purchasing in cooperative stores. This argument about women's crucial role in the consumer cooperative movement, sometimes supported by numbers, was repeatedly trotted out by women advocating for the international organization of cooperative women in the interwar period. For example, in the same 1927 speech quoted above, Emmy Freundlich stated that statistics from some larger shops in Vienna showed that women were responsible for 80 percent of all purchases (Freundlich 1927, 1). However, although women were an important part of and played a major role in the consumer cooperative movement, historical scholarship on cooperative women has remained scarce. One of the most researched cooperative women's organizations has been the English Women's Co-operative Guild, founded in 1883 (Blaszak 1986, 2000; Cohen 2020; Gaffin 1977; Gurney 2020; Scott 1994, 1998, 2007). Because the English Guild has received the most scholarly attention and was also unquestionably influential at the international level, it is not surprising that what we know about the history of the ICWG is often filtered through the lens of the English presence and work in the ICWG (Black 1984; Hellawell 2021). Scholarship that has not focused on the experience of English women in the ICWG is quite limited. Two notable exceptions are a piece that focuses more generally on women in international cooperative organizing (Gómez Urquijo 1998) and one that sheds light on the Central and Eastern European and communist presence in the ICWG (Zemzyulina 2017).

Long before their organization into a separate women's branch, women were active in and contributed to the cooperative movement at the international level. But these contributions have not been extensively addressed in the scholarship on the men-dominated international cooperative organization, the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA). Women, specifically women in the British movement, participated in discussions and meetings dedicated to the idea of international cooperative organizing, and they attended the first ICA congress in London in 1895 (Gómez Urquijo 1998, 36; Rhodes 1995, 20; Watkins 1970, 32). The first step towards establishing an international women's cooperative organization was taken when women representatives from the cooperative movements of Austria and England met at the ICA Congress in Glasgow in 1913 (Freundlich 1936a, 12; Webb 1927, 169). However, these early efforts were stymied by the First World War. Consequently, the first international meeting took place at the ICA Congress in Basel in 1921; Austrian and English organizations had organized the event. Invitation letters were sent to twenty-nine countries, and in the end, forty women from seven countries (Austria, Czechoslovakia, England, Holland, the Soviet Union, Switzerland, and the United States) attended the conference and formed a preparatory committee that was supposed to lay the foundations for the women's international organization. Emmy Freundlich was elected president, and A. Honora Enfield from the English Guild was chosen to be the secretary of the new committee (Cohen 2020, 213–215; Enfield 1921,

1932; Preparatory Committee 1921). From 1921 to 1924, the committee took preparatory steps, and the International Co-operative Women's Guild was founded at a conference held in Ghent in 1924.

The International Guild was an organization with its own rules, governing bodies, and subscription fees, but it still maintained close financial ties to the ICA. The International Conference (held at the same time as the ICA's Congress) was the "highest governing authority," and the Central Committee administrated the ICWG's affairs (ICWG 1924a). Conferences took place in Basel (1921), Ghent (1924), Stockholm (1927), Vienna (1930), and London (1934). The 1937 conference in Paris was the last interwar conference, and the first conference after the conclusion of the Second World War took place in Zurich in 1946. For the national organizations to be fully accepted as members of the International Guild, they had to either be completely autonomous organizations with their own subscriptions and memberships or organizations of women already holding positions within mix-gender cooperative societies. The ICWG accepted both options under the condition that organizations had their own rules and governing bodies (Freundlich 1924, 6–7; ICWG 1924a). Many countries could not meet this requirement and, therefore, could not join the ICWG in the 1920s. However, one of the ICWG's main activities in the 1920s was advocating for the establishment of national women's guilds that could, later on, join the international organization.

Except for Austria, Central and Eastern European countries did not have fully affiliated representatives in the International Guild until 1927, when the Czechoslovakian branch was fully accepted as the eleventh member. The Soviet branch became a member in 1929, the German organization in Czechoslovakia joined in 1930, and Bulgaria joined in 1931. The Ukrainian guild of Poland, which was unique in that it was formed as a section within the bigger women's organization and represented women mostly from rural producer cooperatives, became an affiliate of the ICWG in 1933. Finally, Poland joined in 1936 (Committee 1930, 1934, 1937; GEC-Verband 1937; Freundlich 1936a; ICWG 1928). However, this does not mean that these guilds had no say in the ICWG prior to their formal affiliation with it. Delegations from Central and Eastern European countries that were not fully affiliated (they lacked voting rights) attended the ICWG's conferences. Also, some of them were first co-opted members, i.e. their representatives attended Central Committee meetings before being accepted to full membership.

To get a full picture of the International Guild's outreach, it is useful to look outside the official body and membership. The ICWG made a significant effort to correspond with cooperative women all over the world that were still unaffiliated with the international organization. Although it was often the case that many countries would not respond to the questionnaires sent by the ICWG, the ICWG did include progress in other countries in its reports on certain topics. For example, a report discussing the issue of low prices versus high dividends included information collected from the cooperative association of Yugoslavia, although Yugoslavia joined the ICWG only after World War Two, in 1951 (ICWG n.d.-a, 2). The president and secretary of the ICWG also took trips to countries that were not (fully) affiliated in order to connect with cooperative women. Emmy Freundlich visited Germany and Czechoslovakia and held a series of lectures there (Committee 1924, 2). In 1925, A. Honora Enfield travelled to the Soviet Union as a part of a delegation of the British section of Workers' International Relief (ICWG 1926, 4), and in 1928, she took an extended trip to Hungary, Yugoslavia, Romania, Poland, and the Soviet

Union (Enfield 1928). Critical engagement with these trips and a decolonial analysis of other possible problematic zones in the International Co-operative Women's Guild's work is outside the scope of this article, but they are, in any case, important topics for further research.

Household labour—How to ease the burden

From the very beginning, the aims of the International Guild were to “unite the co-operative women of all lands a) for the development of the spirit of Co-operation, b) for the furtherance of the principles and practice of Co-operation, c) for the raising of the conditions of home life, d) for International Peace” (Freundlich 1936a, 14–15). So, the ICWG's agenda revolved around the economy and ideology of cooperation, improvements in the sphere of household labour, and peace. ICWG women also dealt with women's political and civil rights. On top of these goals, the ICWG vigorously advocated for more women to be appointed to administrative and decision-making positions within the cooperative movement. It also used its international platform to ask all affiliated organizations to send help in crises such as the Russian famine, the invasion of the Ruhr, or the struggles in the mining industry in England in 1926 (Committee 1927, 8–9).

The International Guild also extensively promoted and engaged in educational activities. It advocated for the inclusion of women's pages in the cooperative press and the organization of schools and seminars, exhibitions, and demonstrations (ICWG 1924b). At the same time, the ICWG participated in knowledge production for these events through its reports, pamphlets, and booklets. Typically, it would disseminate questionnaires on certain topics, collect and publish the responses it received from national guilds, advocate for the campaigns based on those findings, and then report on these campaigns and activities conducted at the national level.

Household labour was central to the International Guild throughout its existence, not only in terms of its activism – which will be thoroughly discussed in the rest of this article – but also in terms of its identity and positioning. ICWG women undoubtedly considered household labour as *work* and as one of the core problems of working-class housewives' lives. However, sources reveal some ambiguities in how the ICWG women conceptualized and represented themselves and “the housewife.” They claimed they represented “millions of working housewives and mothers” (ICWG 1927c). From conference files, reports, and publications, it is often very unclear whether they addressed mainly working-class non-employed homemakers or working-class wage-earning women who also performed household labour. Sometimes these ICWG materials were very explicit in claiming that they represented non-employed married homemakers, but then they had entire discussions in which they elaborated on the problems of wage-earning women with regard to household labour. Finally, sometimes they would simply use the term: “the housewife” and remained ambiguous about its precise meaning. The analysis of these ambiguities and the many ways “the housewife” was conceptualized is outside the scope of this article, but I find these issues indicative of the ICWG's multiple approaches to household labour.

In the following subsections, I first analyse the major general debates within the International Guild regarding household labour and the ways in which the presence of Central and Eastern European countries and social democratic and communist women

shaped these disputes and their outcomes. Second, I examine how the ICWG used household labour as a foundation to claim expertise in an international setting and as a way to advance international discussions on other women's and labour-related issues.

The ICWG's publications and discussions

Scholars who research the English Guild have explored its focus on the housewife (mainly a non-wage-earning woman) and her rights as a working-class woman both in the domestic and public sphere. But not much has been written about the International Guild's activism around relieving women of the hardships of household labour in the interwar period, although it was indeed an international organization in which household labour was a crucial part of the agenda.

"The raising of the conditions of home life" was among the aims listed in the International Guild's rules, and the issue of household labour was taken up by it from the very beginning. In the interwar period, the ICWG addressed numerous topics belonging or connected to the sphere of household labour, such as price reductions, low prices versus high dividends, health and nutrition, maternal death rates, laundries, labour-saving devices, family allowances, leisure time for women, etc. Thus, the ICWG participated in a much broader interwar debate on women and social reproduction, but it was unique in the variety of answers it gave to some key questions, namely: What are the means to reduce the household labour burden of women? How can this sphere of life be reshaped?

In this subsection, the article zooms in on the ICWG's key publications on household labour and addresses the following questions: How did the ICWG women conceptualize, present, and discuss household labour? What kind of solutions did they offer to lessen the burden, and what roles did different economic and political systems, national contexts, and ideological positions play in formulating those solutions?

The Family Wash and the drudgery of doing laundry

In the period between 1921 and 1924, "the reform of domestic work" was among the subjects the ICWG placed on the agenda for discussion and inquiry by national guilds (Committee 1924, 3–4). The 1924 conference in Ghent did not directly discuss household labour, but an extremely lively conference in Stockholm in 1927 raised a specific issue in the sphere of household labour: laundry. The conference file for Stockholm is richer than other conference files in the U DCX Hull History Centre's collection. It contains more material about discussions and voting than others, which provides a glimpse into both the angles and positions taken on the topics discussed in and the organizational dynamics of the ICWG. In the conference report, the topic of laundry was framed as "the drudgery of the washing-day," and the Stockholm conference was characterized as "probably the first time that working women have met to discuss internationally the problems of their home life" (ICWG 1927a, 2).

The Family Wash—the ICWG's international study on washing clothes presented and discussed in Stockholm – confirmed the ICWG's stance on household labour as hard work that should not be devalued and should be reduced with the goal of women's increased participation in public life. It was a detailed study of doing laundry and the categorization of that work. It brought to light the reality of women's household labour in many

countries (questionnaires were sent to twenty-two countries, but not all replied) during the interwar period. At the very beginning, washing clothes was described as the part of woman's work that was "the most burdensome to herself and the most upsetting to her family." Yet, it was stated that laundry was among those problems that could be easily solved through joint effort, so women could gain the "strength and leisure which she so much needs if she is to take her place in the wider life of the community" (ICWG 1927b, 1). The report distinguished between washing done at home (in the kitchen, outdoors, in special washhouses or wash-kitchens), with the help of labour-saving devices, in public laundries, and in cooperative laundries. It outlined problems concerning all the steps in the process: washing, bleaching, drying, and ironing. In the end, the study came up with a blend of solutions, varying from better equipment to a cautiously framed socialization of laundry – while highlighting advocacy and education as the main methods. It called for:

- (1) The provision in all new housing schemes of electrically equipped wash-houses attached to each block of dwellings for the common use of the tenants.
- (2) Where such houses are not available the establishment of public wash-houses under public or co-operative control.
- (3) The consideration by co-operative societies of the desirability of opening laundries to which members can send their clothes.
- (4) The stocking and hiring out of labour-saving appliances by co-operative societies.
- (5) Extended electrical facilities to make possible the use of up-to-date machinery.

It further urges co-operative women's organisations in all countries to bring these matters to the attention of the appropriate public authorities and of their co-operative movements, and to educate women in the possibilities and advantages of using labour-saving appliances individually or in common. (ICWG 1927b, 16)

The Stockholm conference brought to light the dynamics between communist and non-communist women in the organization. One of the guests at the conference was Hertha Sturm, the representative of the International Women's Secretariat of the Communist International. She wanted to give a speech in which she was critical of the ICWG: "The Guild has not yet broken through the narrow limits of the purely cooperative movement in order to establish jointly with the other workers' organisation a wide front for a fight against the offensive of the world's capital" (Sturm 1927, 2). However, she was not allowed to deliver that speech at the conference. In the correspondence between Sturm and the ICWG following the conference, ICWG secretary Enfield claimed that only representatives of the ICA were allowed to address the conference and reminded Sturm that the invitation she had received made this point clear. Enfield also informed Sturm that the speech could not be included in the protocol of the conference because the protocol contained only speeches that had been delivered at the conference (Enfield 1927). However, a copy of Sturm's speech was preserved in the conference file for Stockholm.

The Soviet Union was very active at the Stockholm Conference, discussing topics, (unsuccessfully) proposing amendments, and voting against almost all resolutions, together with two out of the three delegates from Czechoslovakia's newly accepted branch, Marie Vobecká and Betina Kaninská. In the official conference report, the delegations from Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union were described as those who were

singing “the International as a fitting termination to two days of strenuous work” (ICWG 1927a).

The Soviet Union expressed its disagreement with *The Family Wash* study as well. In her speech, Soviet representative Kravtschenko first praised *The Family Wash* for providing a lot of examples and rich evidence of the hardships women suffered from doing laundry. Here and elsewhere, communist women always thought of wage-earning women when talking about household labour: “The washing tub and the cooking pot devour the last bit of the free time that wage labour allows working women. They devour their last strength and rob them of their health” (Kravtschenko 1927, 1). While acknowledging that *The Family Wash* did not completely overlook the economic aspect of household labour, the Soviet Union was critical of the ICWG’s proposed solutions: “The problem of creating social washing facilities accessible to the broad masses cannot be solved by educating women or by appealing to the good will of the authorities. This problem can only be solved through the class struggle, the struggle between capital and labour” (Kravtschenko 1927, 2).

The Soviet Union advocated for more initiative from cooperatives in creating washing facilities and for closer collaboration with trade unions and workers’ parties on this and other issues. The speech emphasized that this collaboration was the only way to overthrow capitalism (Kravtschenko 1927, 2). The Soviet branch, therefore, was a very active part of the ICWG, but it supported the ICWG’s proposed measures only to a certain degree. Although their amendments to the resolutions in 1927 were not accepted, the Soviet women were given an opportunity to present their solutions to the problem(s) of household labour in an essay they submitted to the next conference, which was held in Vienna in 1930.

Are the Mothers of the Future at home or not?

Mothers of the Future was a key publication, consisting of three papers written by authors from Central and Eastern Europe that were submitted to the International Guild’s Vienna Conference in 1930. It helps paint a picture of the debates that were going on in the ICWG at the time about potential solutions to the overwhelming household labour connected to motherhood. The publication indicates the ICWG’s willingness to present and discuss communist positions in the social democratic organization, but it also demonstrates how the much wider international debate on women’s unpaid labour (Keating 2022; Zimmermann 2016) unfolded in one of the women’s organizations that claimed to represent housewives. The first paper “State Allowances for Mothers at Home” was written by Marie Nečásková, a representative of Czechoslovakia. Helen Butuzova from the Soviet Union authored the second paper entitled “Communal Services for Mothers at Work.” The last paper, “State Allowances or Communal Services: Which Do Women Want?” was prepared for the ICWG’s Committee by Emmy Freundlich. In the introduction to the publication, it was stated that the papers by Nečásková and Butuzova expressed the opinions of the writers and not of the ICWG Committee.

It is notable that the author of the first paper in *Mothers of the Future*, social democrat Marie Nečásková, was a part of the Czechoslovakian delegation at the Stockholm conference in 1927, and she did not support the Soviet Union’s ideas at that conference, unlike the other two (communist) delegates from Czechoslovakia. This case is one

example that shows that national delegations consisted of delegates from ideologically diverse backgrounds and reveals that alliances in the ICWG were sometimes built along ideological rather than national lines.

Nečásková addressed several labour-related issues in her 1930 account of the status of women and family allowances, directly referring to women engaged in gainful employment and, at the same time, romanticizing the role of stay-at-home mothers. She started her paper by explaining how proletarianization placed onto women “a three fold burden, to be wage-earners, mothers, and housewives” (Nečásková 1930, 3). She briefly pointed out how women earned less than men in factories as well as in administrative posts, and then turned to the compatibility of wage work and motherhood. She discussed several ways to help wage-earning mothers handle wage labour, households, and children. First, she praised the policy of granting maternity leave for six weeks before and six weeks after giving birth but claimed that even if this policy was adopted, children needed their mothers longer than just the first six weeks. She was sceptical about establishing communal services such as restaurants or common kitchens. Homes for children were unacceptable to Nečásková because they could ruin family life and deny children their right to a mother’s irreplaceable presence (Nečásková 1930, 7). In the end, she advocated for securing state allowances for mothers that should be paid directly to mothers, not fathers. The idea behind this position was that working mothers should be guaranteed economic independence to be able to dedicate parts of their lives to motherhood and not have to engage in wage work (Nečásková 1930, 8). The issue of family allowances that Nečásková brought up here was widely discussed and taken up by many organizations during the interwar period. There was, for example, a very lively debate on the issue in the labour movement in Britain (Thane 1991, 107–114), and the lack of support for such a policy by the international social democratic labour movement was among the reasons the International Labour Organization did not transform it into an international instrument in the interwar period (Zimmermann 2016, 39–43).

In her paper, Soviet representative Helen Butuzova approached the issue from a different perspective than Nečásková, advocating for the socialization of household labour not only through the creation of communal services but also by overthrowing the capitalist system and building a socialist world. She first gave an overview of the progress on women’s political and economic rights in the Soviet Union since the October Revolution and said that “the change from domestic to socialised economy frees the woman and places her on a footing of equality with the man” (Butuzova 1930, 10). She proceeded by listing everything the Soviet Union had done for the protection of mothers and children. However, she emphasized that what distinguished the Soviet Union from other countries was that this system was directed “not only to caring for the health of the women and children (the struggle against infant mortality, medical aid to women at confinement, &c.) but to creating conditions for the participation of women in industry, in the class struggle, in the building up of a new cultural life without any injury to the biological functions of the mother” (Butuzova 1930, 11).

Butuzova considered the consumer cooperative movement, which boasted the involvement of eight million women in the Soviet Union, to be responsible for “the Socialist reorganisation of daily life” through its establishment of laundries, restaurants, creches and kindergartens, etc (Butuzova 1930, 12). Her paper directly criticized what she called the “reformist women’s [organizations]” conceptualization of family allowances. She

claimed that the idea that women should give up paid work and be employed in households “leads to the enslavement of women to domestic drudgery, their isolation from public and political life, their eternal economic dependence upon their husbands, the impossibility of raising their cultural level” (Butuzova 1930, 14). However, Butuzova was also critical of women’s participation in paid labour in capitalist systems and concluded her paper by raising the issue of women’s double exploitation – at home and the workplace – and by advocating for overthrowing capitalism as the only way to secure women’s emancipation (Butuzova 1930, 14–15).

In the final paper, Emmy Freundlich listed various factors to be taken into account on the topic of family allowances versus communal services. She warned that neither of the two papers represented the International Guild’s position, and also explained that the ICWG would try to collect as much data as possible and study the issue further (Freundlich 1930, 16). Although extensive research was a part of the ICWG’s typical repertoires of action, in this case, the decision of postponing the formulation of an organizational position was probably influenced by the wider international debates on the subject. Freundlich’s paper did not discount the idea of family allowances, but it was very cautious about its applicability and tackled the question of to whom the allowances should be paid. Freundlich also introduced a third idea: easing the burden women bear in the household by making “labour-saving devices” more accessible to women and leaving them to decide:

Would they prefer to keep the system where each household does its own housekeeping or would they rather have communal houses where all the families are supplied with meals from one large kitchen and where one central organisation provides for all the family needs? Or, again, would they prefer to keep the small individual houses and make more use of labour-saving devices? Here habit, tradition, and personal inclination count for much. The question of cost, both to the family exchequer and the national exchequer must also be taken into consideration. (Freundlich 1930, 20)

At the beginning of the 1930s – the period when the most intense international debate on women’s unpaid labour took place, and after the Vienna conference – the ICWG continued to work on the issues raised in *Mothers of the Future*. Outlining necessary activities, the organization developed a five-step approach. As was usual for all important topics, the first step was collecting information from the national guilds: on family allowances; different kinds of communal services including childcare facilities, laundries, and public kitchens and restaurants; statistics on the employment of married women; and the effects of household labour and “other employment” on women’s health. The second step was to prepare a survey based on the data collected and points for discussion that could be used by cooperative women in their speeches or published in the press. In the third step, national branches were supposed to organize discussions and send reports to the International Guild; in turn, the ICWG was supposed to, in the fourth step, prepare a report to be presented at the next international conference. The fifth and final step was to promote the issue via the press and other means (ICWG n.d.-b). The ICWG sent the questionnaires to the national guilds to investigate the types of communal services that existed in various contexts as well as people’s experiences with different forms of family allowances. However, the study was not completed, so the idea for the next conference was to look at the issue from a different angle and discuss “the question of what the Co-

operative Movement itself can do through social services and enterprises, protection of the housewife's interests, increase of her purchasing power, &c., to relieve her of needless labour and raise her economic status" (Committee 1934, 17). In her letter read at the ICWG's Central Committee meeting in 1932, the Soviet representative also suggested having a subject connected to everyday life at the subsequent conference (Committee 1932, 7). The next two ICWG conferences, in 1934 and 1937, however, did not pay much attention to household labour, probably because, as Freundlich phrased it, the "PROMOTION OF PEACE has come to be more and more in the forefront of the Guild's activities" (Freundlich 1936a, 24).

As mentioned above, women's household labour was a topic taken up by social democratic organizations in the interwar period, and the International Guild collaborated with them. The issue was brought up at the Fourth International Women's Conference of the Labour and Socialist International (LSI) in Vienna in 1931 at which Emmy Freundlich represented the ICWG. At the beginning of her speech at the LSI conference, Freundlich claimed that "We are discussing to-day for the first time the subject of what attitude we Socialist women are adopting towards the household and the housewife. While at previous conferences we have discussed questions and reached conclusions concerning women in employment, we have never yet dealt with this question" (International Women's Committee of the LSI 1932, IX.48). Similar to what she advocated for in *Mothers of the Future* a year earlier, in her speech she emphasized the necessity of "very earnest, critical and well-considered" preliminary work before drafting a "Socialist programme for the housewife" (International Women's Committee of the LSI 1932, IX.48–49). It was the same conference at which socialist women in the LSI withdrew the idea of family allowances; the same was done by the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) a year later (Zimmermann 2016, 42). The Vienna conference also benefitted from the participation of women from Eastern Europe in terms of how they "brought novel urgency to issues such as the need to create international policies that protected agrarian workers and the struggle against fascism" (Ghit 2021).

The Housewives' Programme

In her 1936 book, Emmy Freundlich emphasized that the ICWG was "the first international women's organisation to draft a Housewives' Programme" (Freundlich 1936a, 23). Although previous subsections on *The Family Wash* and *Mothers of the Future* revealed tensions between different ideological stances and possible solutions to the problems associated with household labour, the *Housewives' Programme* shows that ICWG women managed to come up with an organizational document on this issue. The programme was adopted by the ICWG Committee in 1933 and was later used for international advocacy. It emphasized the twelve most important points for securing housewives' well-being. In the first place, it called for "1. Recognition, both in the family, socially, and at law, of the work of the woman in her home as a valuable social and economic service" (Committee 1933).

It continued with measures such as social insurance for housewives, education in the domestic economy, women's participation in the work concerning housing reform and other cooperative matters, the technical help cooperatives and local authorities could provide in connection to household labour, etc. It ended with calling for the global cooperation of housewives on the issue of peace. Regarding

the sphere of household labour and the position of women in households and their right to vacation, the programme also called for “7. Recognition of the right of mothers and housewives to freedom and holidays, and to all such provisions as may help to preserve their health and lighten their duties” (Committee 1933).

As this subsection shows, the ICWG stood at the core of debates concerning how to unburden working-class women of their household labour and how to address that work. It also provided a platform for the discussion of multiple approaches, from multiple ideological stances, to the issue.

International connections: expertise and the advancement of discussions

This subsection focuses on the ICWG’s role in interwar international organizing. It shows that ICWG women used their close links to the reality of household labour as the basis to claim their expertise on the issue at the international level. They also pushed to include the topic in international discussions on other women’s and/or labour-related issues – such as popular nutrition or maternal death rates – to advance those discussions and achieve results.

The *Housewives’ Programme* was used to advocate on the topic of nutrition at the international level. In 1935, the International Guild tried to get placed on the Committee of Experts established by the League of Nations and International Labour Office, which was charged with studying the issue of improving workers’ nutrition. From the beginning, Emmy Freundlich claimed that the chances of getting onto the Committee were small, but that she was promised that the ICWG women’s voices would be heard (Freundlich 1935). In the memorandum sent to the League of Nations and the International Labour Office, Freundlich presented the ICWG as an organization composed of mainly housewives and advocated for examining the conditions of household labour, promoting rationalization, and ensuring education in rationalization as some of the key steps for improving popular nutrition (Freundlich 1936b, 2). This is where she introduced the *Housewives’ Programme*, which should “be used by the League as the basis for a further inquiry into what women can do in this matter of improving popular nutrition” (Freundlich 1936b, 17). In the memorandum, Freundlich offered the League and the ILO the ICWG’s help with improving nutrition as the ICWG had already done a great deal of important and pioneering work on the issue. The rich data collected from the national guilds by the ICWG proved useful in this endeavour. Since improvement in the sphere of household and women’s education on rationalization were emphasized as crucial for improving nutrition, Freundlich presented some of the national guilds’ successes in dealing with these issues:

The Polish Guild did excellent work for the establishment of mechanised wash-houses in order to save the housewife labour, while the Bulgarian co-operative women arranged special courses that proved most successful in bringing new methods to the notice of women even in the remote villages. The same thing is true of the Guild of Polish Ukraine, where a special campaign has been carried through to bring the women on the land and the towns-women - all members of the Guild - into direct touch with one another in order that they may trade together. (Freundlich 1936b, 14–15)

As expected, Freundlich did not succeed in getting appointed to the committee, but she claimed the ICWG put significant effort into staying in contact with the departments of the League and the ILO working on the issue (ICWG 1939, 2). As this example of the successes of

Central and Eastern European national guilds indicates, approaches to the hardships caused by household labour were influenced by the diversity of economic and political systems as well as the national contexts from which ICWG women came. By collecting data on household labour state by state and presenting national guilds' various efforts to lighten the burden of this labour, including activities carried out in non-urban areas, the ICWG women broadened the scope of consumer cooperation at the international level and advanced a number of international discussions.

The International Guild brought up the topic of household labour in the international discussions on maternal death rates in a highly distinctive way. The goal was to push the League of Nations to conduct thorough worldwide research on maternal mortality; to make sure that women's perspectives were represented; and to ensure that reasons beyond narrowly construed medical causes were included in the inquiry. First, the ICWG women began their investigation and asked the national guilds to answer a list of questions about "home and working conditions" that could have an impact on maternal mortality (ICWG 1931). Among other things, it raised the question of help for pregnant women who performed work in the household: "9. Had she any help in the home during pregnancy, e.g. with washing and ironing? with other housework? was it regular help? from whom? how often?" (ICWG 1931, 1). The inquiry was not particularly successful because the collected data was insufficient, but the ICWG used information from other available studies to draft the *Memorandum on Possible Contributory Causes of Maternal Mortality and Ill Health* (Committee 1934, 21).

In this memorandum, which was sent to the Reporting Committee on Maternal & Infant Welfare of the League of Nations in 1932, the ICWG first established its expertise as an organization that represented working-class mothers and then praised national guilds for bringing attention to this issue (ICWG 1932, 1). It advocated for an investigation into other possible factors that contributed to the maternal mortality rate: the burden of household labour and poor housing, mental health issues, inadequate nutrition, and the lack of sunlight and fresh air (ICWG 1932). It called for an inquiry into all these problems and, at the same time, displayed its knowledge regarding household labour, households, and housing in general:

While household duties necessarily vary with the economic circumstances of the family, they may impose upon the expectant mother tasks which tax her strength as much as many kinds of industrial occupation, as for instance carrying heavy vessels of water from the well of lifting them from the stove, or carrying refuse a long distance to be emptied. A particularly exhausting task for the pregnant woman is the mangling of the clothes, which increases with the family and in some circumstances involves labour that could hardly be called light even for healthy men. Again continual cooking for a large family, especially where it means constant stooping over a hot fire, often deprives the expectant mother of any inclination for food herself, and undermines her health in this way. In this connection too, the house itself is a factor, for a badly planned, and badly equipped house can make the housework so much more laborious that it becomes an injurious influence on that account. The continual running up and down entailed by long flights of stairs, for instance, obviously increases the tendency to bad feet and varicose veins which some mothers never lose in after-life. Moreover, damp, dark and ill-ventilated houses must adversely affect the mother's general health, while lack of sanitation seriously adds to the risk of infection. (ICWG 1932, 2-3)

What is striking in this approach is that the International Guild took into account many aspects of household labour that could have an impact on the maternal death rate. In addition to pointing out the physicality of household labour and the consequences of poor housing, the ICWG elaborated on the "nervous and psychological causes" of the high maternal death rate

connected to women's work in the household and their role as mothers, having in mind different types of both homemakers and wage-earning women:

Household duties often make adequate rest impossible. Mothers of families, who must be the first to get up in the morning and the last to go to bed at night, seldom have a minute to themselves to sit down and rest their overstrained nerves. In many cases too, they have the double burden of housework and industrial or agricultural employment, while the general insecurity of their lives - sudden unemployment, eviction from their homes, accidents to husband or relatives and the constant dread of these things - means a state of nervous tension which must be detrimental to health. (ICWG 1932, 3)

Therefore, the ICWG recognized that the mental burden and emotional aspects of household labour were important topics that should be included in international debates and could advance the discussion on women's health. The ICWG also briefly tackled the issue of reproductive rights and (un)wanted pregnancies. "The question too, of whether a woman wants to become a mother must greatly affect her mental condition during pregnancy" (ICWG 1932, 3). The memorandum was discussed by other actors involved in the discussion, such as the Medical Women's Federation from England. Its Maternal Mortality Committee agreed with the ICWG about the influence of mental stress but disagreed with the ICWG's idea that housework as such, during otherwise normal pregnancies, might be connected to maternal mortality rates (Maternal Mortality Committee n.d.).

Conclusion

Although the interest in the history of consumption, and as a consequence also the history of the consumer cooperative movement, has started to grow since the late 1980s (Hilson 2011, 204), even the most recent studies on the global history of consumer cooperation often overlook gender as a relevant category of analysis. This neglect has been explained by the tendency of sources to favour "institutional histories" over the work of those who were important for the movement in terms of being the key customers of cooperatives and rank-and-file members, but who were nevertheless far from decision-making positions (Hilson, Neunsinger, and Patmore 2017, 10–11).

This article also contributes to institutional (consumer) cooperative history but focuses specifically on women's international organizing. It focuses on household labour as one of the key agendas of the International Co-operative Women's Guild (ICWG) in the interwar period. It explores the ICWG's activism regarding household labour, placing the contributions of Central and Eastern European countries at the forefront of the analysis. I claim that the ICWG made and treated household labour as a policy issue worthy of discussion at the international level and in other international settings beyond the cooperative movement. Although the article does not delve deeply into how the international debate was translated and adopted at the national and local levels, it does reveal the ICWG's role in bringing together women from different political and economic systems and national contexts. The ICWG also provided a platform for debate between communist and social democratic women in the interwar period, which made it a unique social democrat labour organization in that era.

I aimed to decentre the gender and labour history of international cooperation and answer the overall question: What does the history of international organizations look like if we decide to write it as if a focus on Central and Eastern European countries is the most

common way of writing this history? In so doing, this article contributes to overcoming Western biases in knowledge production. Indeed, I consider my analysis an exercise in what we can gain from writing “general” history from the margins from the very start; that is, by not separating out Central and Eastern European countries, treating the region as an appendix to a bigger story, or inserting it as an addendum after the “general” history has already been written. At the same time, decentring this history does not mean that I have ignored the fact that the ICWG, similar to all other international organizations, was a hierarchical organization and, consequently, that world’s unequal political and economic power relations shaped its work.

This article speaks to a much broader history of communist and social democratic women’s often demanding collaboration in the International Co-operative Women’s Guild in the international interwar context. It also provides insight into the complex alliances in the ICWG that followed the communist ideological line and communist contributions to the international cooperative movement. More research is needed on these topics, as is a critical engagement with the unequal power relations present within the organization; the role of Central and Eastern European – and also non-European – countries in broadening the scope of ICWG’s activism; the organizational and other changes in the ICWG in the post-World War Two period; the ICWG’s approaches to gender roles and the gender division of labour; and the effects of ICWG activism and its position in and relationship with the women’s, cooperative, and broader labour movements.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant agreement No. 833691).

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