

The Inter-American Commission of Women: A New International Venture

By [MUNA LEE](#)

Few international questions present such conflicting and perplexing aspects as that of the nationality of women. It is a modern question, because only within the last generation or so have women, generally speaking, begun to travel widely and carry on diverse activities in a complex and ever-changing world. Women might lose their nationality fifty years ago, as indeed they did often, without ever becoming aware of the fact. Not only were they less likely to leave their own country, but they were less likely to marry foreigners. Now they have been forced into a rude awareness of the completely chaotic conditions of existing nationality laws. A woman may find herself possessing several nationalities or none! In some countries, a married woman takes the nationality of her husband in all cases. Sometimes, she loses her nationality on marrying a foreigner, providing that her husband's country gives her her nationality. Again, she loses it only if she goes to her husband's country to live, and if that country gives her his nationality. In other countries, the law works both ways: a native woman who marries a foreigner takes his nationality; a foreign woman who marries a native man takes his nationality. But in still others the law works only one way. In other cases, which give rise to lamentable and even tragic situations, a woman has no nationality. An Englishwoman, for example, married to an Argentine, ceases to enjoy British nationality according to British law, but does not become Argentine by Argentine law; she is cast off by her own country and not accepted by her husband's.

The above merely skims the surface of the whirlpool. Little wonder, then, that when the Inter-American Commission of Women was created, the brilliant and farsighted young chairman, Doris Stevens, decided, after prolonged consultations with jurists and feminists, to make this vexed question of the nationality of women the first subject of research by the commission. More than a year ago, Miss Stevens, as chairman, began to assemble material on this subject to be presented to the first plenary session of the Inter-American Commission.

The subject of nationality is one of the three topics on the agenda of the proposed conference on the codification of international law, which has been called under the auspices of the League of Nations, to meet at The Hague in 1930. It seemed advisable that the Inter-American Commission of Women should be in a position to consider what recommendations as to nationality, if any, should be made to The Hague Conference by this official body of women, representing the twenty-one republics of the Western world. Miss Alice Paul, Ph.D., D.C.L., author of the Equal Rights Treaty, and a founder of the National Woman's Party of the United States, is chairman of the committee on nationality of the Inter-American Commission of Women, and to her indefatigable labor in research and the compilation of material is due the commission's monumental report now ready for presentation at the first plenary session. This report covers the nationality of women throughout the world. In every case, it gives actual excerpts from the law in the original language, with translation. This applies even to laws in Japanese, Greek, Siamese, Bulgarian, Russian, etc., with the original text in the original script facing the translation on the opposite page. Synopses of the laws are included also with important original chapters by Miss Paul so that the juridical information is made easily understandable to all readers, whether familiar with legal terms or not. Comprehensive tables on nationality prepared by Miss Stevens and Miss Paul are another novel and important feature of

this report which is as plain as daylight, as thrilling as an air race, and as fascinatingly involved as a detective story.

Last year, in order to inform herself for the benefit of the commission as to the plans of other women regarding nationality proposals, Miss Stevens spent three months in Europe gathering material. To this end, she conferred with Viscountess Rhondda, chairman of the Six Point Group (Great Britain); Miss Chrystal Macmillan, chairman of the Section on Nationality for the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship (Great Britain); Madame Maria Vérone, president of the Ligue des Droits des Femmes (France); the Marquesa del Ter, distinguished Spanish leader of women (Spain); Dr. Luisa Baralt, Ph.D., of the University of Havana, distinguished Cuban feminist, now living in Paris; Mlle. Hélène Vacaresco, delegate to the League of Nations (Roumania); Dr. Ellen Gleditsch, professor in the Oslo University and president of the International Federation of University Women, and other officers of the Council of the Federation of University Women; and others.

The chairman not only conferred with these women leaders, but the question of nationality was discussed at public meetings in London, Paris, and Geneva. The London meeting was held under the auspices of twenty-four affiliated societies of women of Great Britain, presided over by Viscountess Rhondda. The Paris meeting was held in the Salle des Sociétés des Savants under the auspices of the Ligue des Droits des Femmes, presided over by Mlle. Vacaresco. In Geneva, the chairman discussed the subject at a banquet given in honor of the Latin American delegates to the league, under the auspices of the Union of Societies for the League of Nations.

In September, Miss Stevens went to the meeting of the Assembly of the League of Nations in Geneva, to seek a resolution encouraging governments attending the forthcoming codification conference to include women in their delegations. She drew up a resolution which was submitted to the First Commission of the League of Nations by Ambassador Ferrara of Cuba and seconded by Sr. Diogenes Escalante, Venezuelan delegate to the League, and it was included by Mr. Rolin of Belgium, rapporteur to the commission, in his report to the commission. The resolution passed by the First Commission, and subsequently adopted unanimously by the Assembly of the League, is as follows: "7. The Assembly, considering that the question of nationality which is on the agenda of the Conference is of special interest to women, and that Article 7 of the Covenant embodies the principle that all positions under or in connection with the League shall be open equally to men and women, expresses the hope that the members of the League, when invited to the forthcoming conference, will consider the desirability of taking those considerations into account in composing their delegations."

In presenting this resolution to the Assembly for its approval, Mr. Rolin, rapporteur, made the following statement:

"Lastly, we propose that the Assembly should earn the lasting gratitude of our women colleagues by expressing the hope that—at all events with regard to one question, that of nationality—States should consider the desirability of including women in their delegations. The Committee was struck by certain communications from women's organizations, *in particular by a communication from a committee of women jurists, appointed by the Pan-American Conference on International Law*. We considered that, as regards questions of nationality which directly concern personal status and are thus of special interest to women, it was only natural that they should pay special attention to the position of their sex under international law, and that in those circumstances, in countries where women have already acquired the necessary legal knowledge, they should be called in when the question of nationality came up for discussion."

In October, the chairman conferred in Paris with Señor C. Zumeta, Venezuelan Minister to Paris, in his capacity of Venezuelan member of the Council of the League of Nations, to enlist his support in securing from the council an invitation to the Inter-American Commission of Women to send women consultants to advise on the question of nationality as it affects women at the forthcoming codification conference at The Hague.

On April 16th, Miss Stevens conferred with Dr. Gleditsch, professor of chemistry at the Oslo University of Norway, and president of the International Association of University Women, on occasion of the latter's visit to the United States. The conference was held in the Pan American Union to discuss plans of cooperation between the women of this hemisphere and the women of Europe at the forthcoming codification conference at The Hague. There were present at this round table the following persons, besides Miss Stevens and Dr. Gleditsch:

Dr. James Brown Scott (leading the discussion), president, American Institute of International Law, president, Institut du Droit International, etc.; Dr. Leo S. Rowe, director general, Pan American Union, formerly professor of political science, University of Pennsylvania; Dr. Henry B. Hazard, assistant solicitor, U.S. State Department, professor, American University, specialist on nationality; Dr. Thomas H. Healy, assistant dean, School of Foreign Service of Georgetown University, professor, Hague Academy, 1925 and 1929; Mr. William C. Dennis, ex-legal advisor to U.S. State Department, formerly legal advisor to Chinese government, professor of international law, American University, Harvard Research Committee; Miss Isabel Keith Macdermott, managing editor, *Pan American Union Bulletin*, author and editor of many Spanish textbooks, trustee of Santiago College of Chile; Dr. Alice Paul, authority on legal position of women, author of study of world law on nationality as it relates to women; Dr. Emma Wold, chairman, Committee on Nationality of Women's Bar Association, D.C., author of analysis of world law (U.S. House Document) on nationality as it pertains to women; Mrs. Burnita Shelton Matthews, attorney, author of research on legal position of women; Miss Margaret Lambie, international lawyer.

It will be seen from the foregoing that the Inter-American Commission of Women has not merely begun but has carried steadily forward the work of investigation with which it was entrusted. It will be recalled that the governing board of the Pan American Union at the meeting of April 4, 1928, created the Inter-American Commission of Women, following the terms of the resolution passed at the Sixth Pan-American Conference in Havana, Cuba.

On March 4th in Havana, Dr. Bustamante, erstwhile president of the Sixth Conference, Dr. Maúrtua of Peru, and Dr. James Brown Scott, drew up a resolution setting forth their interpretation of the official status of the commission. When this resolution was presented to the director general to the governing board of the Pan American Union at its meeting on April 3rd, the governing board passed the following resolution:

As part of its important work, the Sixth International Conference of American States resolved, "That an Inter-American Commission of Women be constituted to take charge of the preparation of juridical information and data of any other kind which may be deemed advisable to enable the Seventh International Conference of American States to take up the consideration of the civil and political equality of women in the continent."

The same resolution provided that the Inter-American Commission of Women should be composed of seven women from various countries of America, appointed by the Pan American Union, the number to be increased by the commission itself until every republic in America has a representative on the commission.

The governing board of the Pan American Union, at its meetings on April 4th and May 2nd of last year, complied with the duty entrusted to it by the Sixth Conference and chose by lot Panama, Argentina, Venezuela, Haiti, Colombia and Salvador, as the six countries from which six representatives were to be appointed who, with Miss Doris Stevens, initiator of the idea and chairman of the committee, would form the commission of seven women who in turn are to elect the representatives of the other countries of America.

The members of the board, representatives of the countries named in the foregoing paragraph, have already given the names of the women who are to represent their countries, and to conclude the intervention which the resolution of the Sixth Conference gave to the Pan American Union in this matter, there only remains to hold the meeting of the commission of seven women in order that they may take the steps which they deem expedient to complete the Inter-American Commission and perform its work.

Consequently, and in performance of the duty which the chairman of the board entrusted to us, we have the honor to propose that the governing board authorize the director general of the Pan American Union to invite the seven members already appointed on the commission of women to hold a meeting, themselves or through the medium of representatives resident in the United States, in the city of Washington on a convenient date, for the purpose of completing the organization of the commission and undertaking its work with entire independence, in order to prepare the material which the commission is to present to the Seventh International Conference of American States on the subject that it was entrusted to study.

The commissioners who have been appointed to date are Dr. Ernestina A. Lopez de Nelson for Argentina, well-known author and educator, former professor in the University of La Plata. She has been sent by her country to various international conferences, and is well known for her active interest in all movements toward the improvement of social conditions. Dr. Lopez de Nelson was for some years president of the *Club de Madres* (Mothers' Club) of Buenos Aires.

Sra. Lucila Luciani de Pérez Díaz, editor and historian, whose "Battle of Carabobo" has been crowned by the Academy of History of Venezuela, is commissioner for Venezuela. Sra. de Pérez Díaz is editor of the interesting feminist magazine *Iris*.

The representative from Panama, Srta. Clara González, L.L.B., is the first woman lawyer of her country and was founder of the Partido Nacional Feminista. Miss González was sent to the United States by her government to pursue her studies in law, and also to inspect women's prisons and juvenile courts. Plans and reforms for similar institutions in Panama are to be drawn up with Miss González' report as a basis.

Sra. María Álvarez de Guillén Rivas, commissioner from San Salvador, is a distinguished author. She won fame for a novel published anonymously and has since contributed widely to the Spanish press.

Mme. Teligny Mathon, sister-in-law of President Luis Borno, and Haitian commissioner, has always been deeply interested in social and economic questions.

Sra. María Elena de Hiestrosa, who has recently been named commissioner of Colombia, is a woman of great charm and distinction and member of a family famous in Colombian history.

Miss Stevens, chairman of the commission and representative of the United States, was called recently by a Spanish commentator “the best known feminist in the world.” Her brilliance, charm and courage have afforded texts to the journalists of all countries whose press is interested in the activities of the modern woman. “For daring, skill, and brilliant technique, her record is unequalled,” says *Time and Tide* of London. “She knows how to handle the enthusiasts and galvanize the half-hearted. She understands the importance of the press, the value of drama and the hour for swift action. But behind the understanding of propagandist technique lies the sense of spiritual conviction.”

Through the chairman, the Inter-American Commission of Women has received unparalleled honors during the first sixteen months of its existence. Miss Stevens, for example, has been asked and has agreed to give six lectures on the juridical status of women before the American Academy of International Law of Havana at its inauguration ceremonies in February 1930. She has also accepted an invitation to represent the commission on the North American committee formed for the celebration of the four hundredth anniversary of the delivery by Francisco de Vitoria of his famous disquisition *De Indis* [On the Indians; a defense of their rights against Spanish colonists] at Salamanca in 1532.

The latest in the long list of honors which have been given Doris Stevens is her appointment as secretary of sessions of the Institut du Droit International which will meet in Briarcliff in October. This is the first time that this body of distinguished international jurists have so honored a woman, and Miss Stevens' appointment comes as an impressive recognition of her dazzling work as chairman of the Inter-American Commission of Women.

One of the most interesting phases of the work of the commission is the response which it receives from all over the world; from individuals, organizations, and governments themselves. The Cuban government, for example, has assigned a suite of rooms to the commission, in the beautiful new Palace of Peace and Justice which is now under process of construction in Havana. Included in the cornerstone of this building are the eight speeches delivered by women before the Sixth Pan-American Conference—the seed from which the commission has sprung. The government of Salvador recently passed a decree, which was immediately signed by the president approving the creation of the commission, and pledging support to its programs of laying the foundations for establishing equality between men and women in the American republics.

Venezuela sent Sra. de Pérez Díaz, commissioner from that country, to the United States, at government expense immediately after her appointment so that she might familiarize herself with the work being inaugurated. The Argentine commissioner, Sra. Lopez de Nelson, has also visited Washington and conferred with the chairman. Miss González of Panama has been able to help greatly with the work of research. The chairman has been in continuous correspondence with the other commissioners, who have begun research in their respective countries.

The Pan American Union has been the headquarters of the commission, the director general having generously assigned the chairman a place in the Columbus Room.

During the summer of 1928, Mrs. Helen Archdale, distinguished British feminist, and her daughter Betty Archdale, student leader in the nationality campaign, gave invaluable help to the commission in the work of research, information, and inauguration of the work. Mlle. Fanny Bunand-Sevastos, young French feminist from Paris, also rendered valiant service during the early part of 1929, and will soon be back in Washington to help carry on the work of the commission. During the summers of 1928 and 1929, Muna Lee (in private life, Mrs. Luis Muñoz Marín), director of the Bureau of International Relations of the University of Puerto Rico, has

acted as director of the Bureau of Public Relations of the Inter-American Commission of Women. Miss Elsie Ross Shields, executive secretary of the commission since its establishment, has been responsible for its translations in Spanish, French, Portuguese and Greek. Miss Rosalmira Colomo of Mexico has been assisting with the work of the commission since March 1929.

Commissioners and members of the volunteer staff have spoken before many groups and over the radio, explaining the work of the commission; and have written innumerable special articles for leading periodicals here and abroad. The effort put forth in giving out such information about the work has been repaid a thousand times by the immediate and enthusiastic response. Distinguished editors, men and women of letters, jurists, and feminists from all over the world have sent encouragement, congratulations and approval. The responses range from India to Greece, and from Canada to the Argentine.

There can no longer remain in the mind of anyone privileged to witness the swift development of this splendid feminist activity, any lingering doubt as to whether a Pan-American movement can flourish in spite of barriers of race [ethnicity] and language. The Inter-American Commission of Women is proving every day that such barriers are imaginary; like the wall in the fairy story which is there only so long as one believes it to be there, but which can be walked through and brushed aside by the ardent spirit with an invincible ideal.

[From [*A Pan-American Life: Selected Poetry and Prose of Muna Lee*](#), edited and with biography by Jonathan Cohen, University of Wisconsin Press, 2004; originally published in *Pan-American Magazine*, October 1929.]