

## **Intrepid Crusader: Ghénia Avril de Sainte-Croix Takes on the Prostitution Issue**

*Karen Offen  
Stanford University*

The early French Third Republic was replete with energetic women – intellectuals, artists, journalists, actresses, teachers, organizers, feminists – who forged careers in public life. They actively operated as citizens, often without benefit of formal education and in every case without the vote. Most of them were well known in their time, even famous but have fallen (or been shoved) into oblivion in the historiography of the Third Republic. They deserve better than that. This article will explore the public career of one such woman.

Ghénia Avril de Sainte-Croix (1855-1939) – to whom I will refer by her pen name, Savioz, or after her marriage in May 1900 as Mme Avril – was one of the six initial organizers of the Conseil National des Femmes Françaises (CNFF) in 1900-1901. She served it as secretary-general first under Sarah Monod then under Mme Jules Siegfried, whom she succeeded as president from 1922 until 1932. She was also extremely active in the International Council of Women (ICW), chairing its committee on the "'White Slave Traffic' and Equal Moral Standard" from 1904 on. She then served the ICW as vice president for several decades, working hand-in-glove with the longtime

president, Lady Aberdeen.<sup>1</sup> From 1922 until 1936, Savioz also formally represented a coalition of international women's groups on the first advisory committee to the League of Nations devoted to examining and ending the international traffic in women and children in accordance with the international Convention of 1921. She was knowledgeable, outspoken, and an excellent organizer. By the mid-1920s, she was regarded as "the foremost feminist in France."<sup>2</sup>

In what follows, I will survey and analyze Savioz's particular contributions from the late 1890s into the early 1930s to three closely linked issues: (1) combating government-regulated prostitution, particularly in France, that is to say the licensing of prostitutes by the morals police who also officially sanctioned brothels; (2) working for economic alternatives and job training for down-and-out young women who were about to fall into prostitution, notably through her philanthropy, the Oeuvre Libératrice; and (3) seeking an end to the international traffic in women and children, not only in France, but globally through the Fédération abolitionniste internationale (FAI; also known as the International Abolitionist Federation, IAF), where she ran the French section in Paris, and at the League of Nations.<sup>3</sup> Throughout this period Mme Avril addressed

---

<sup>1</sup> Her earliest ICW committee reports along with her reports on CNFF activities in France can be consulted in *International Council of Women, Report for 1905-1906* (1906) and *Report for 1907-1908* (1908).

<sup>2</sup> See my article "France's Foremost Feminist, or Who in the World is Madame Avril de Sainte-Croix?," *Bulletin des Archives du Feminisme* 9 (2005): 46-54.

<sup>3</sup> The research for this article relies primarily on her many, scattered publications: articles in the press (many of which are preserved in a series of scrapbooks), speeches at congresses, published conference proceedings, brochures, and one book. I have worked over

these issues as an investigative reporter, issuing questionnaires and tabulating responses, participating actively in and reporting on national and international congresses of many organizations, and taking a lead role in formal commissions of inquiry at the national and international levels.

### **Combating government-regulated prostitution**

This part of the story begins in Paris at the feminist congress of 1896, following which Savioz paid a visit to the Saint-Lazare prison with a group of other women. She was utterly appalled at what she saw. Shortly following the launch in late 1897 of the all-women's daily *La Fronde* by Marguerite Durand, Savioz published a series of three important articles, "Les Femmes à Saint-Lazare," and

---

the sources available at the Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand (Paris) [hereafter BMD], the Musée Social (Paris), the Archives du Féminisme (Angers), the archives of the League of Nations (Geneva), the Hoover Institution (Stanford), and the papers of the International Council of Women at the Centre d'Archives pour l'histoire des femmes (CARHIF) (Brussels) [hereafter ICW-CARHIF]. I have unearthed and catalogued a number of shorter publications as well as collecting available photographs. To date (Aug. 2005), no single stash of personal archives has been located. However, copies of letters addressed to Mme Avril de Sainte-Croix seem to be scattered through various files in the BMD, e.g., those of Clémence Royer. A bigger problem has been to locate letters from Savioz to others. A truly comprehensive treatment of Mme Avril's contribution solely on the prostitution question would require a systematic scan of the publications and congress proceedings of numerous national and international organizations, including the FAI, founded 1875 and based in Geneva; the French section of the FAI, based in Paris; the International Society for the Suppression of the White Slave Traffic; the Union Temporaire contre la Prostitution Réglementée et le Traité des Femmes (often referred to as the Union Temporaire), along with a multitude of women's associations besides the CNFF and ICW and also the records of the Oeuvre Libératrice. In this paper I have only skimmed the surface.

followed them with a second set, "La Serve" ("the female serf"), in mid-January 1898.<sup>4</sup> Later that year, she went to London for the congress of the International Abolitionist Federation (FAI/IAF). There she met the renowned English abolitionist Josephine Butler, the founder and spirit of the FAI, and was (as she later put it) "conquered by her goodness, her grace, by the way she incarnated purity and feminine softness."<sup>5</sup> An incident that particularly impressed Savioz was Butler's heartfelt welcome at that 1898 congress to the exiled Louise Michel whom Savioz had taken to the congress at Michel's request, following their meeting at the home of the Russian anarchist prince, Kropotkin.<sup>6</sup> Despite the deep contrast between Butler's Bible-based religiosity and Savioz's freethinking nature and their differing approaches to the label "feminist,"<sup>7</sup> Butler

---

<sup>4</sup> Savioz, "Les Femmes à Saint-Lazare," *La Fronde* 7, 8, 9 (15-16-17 Dec. 1897), all appearing on p. 2, under the editorial rubric "La Tribune de La Fronde." These were followed by "La Serve," *La Fronde* 44, 45, 46 (21, 22, 23 Jan. 1898) and by "A l'Académie de Médecine," *La Fronde* 111 (30 Mar. 1898), concerning Dr. Laborde's proposal to suppress the government regulation of prostitution. See also her series on "La traite des blanches," in June and Sept. 1899 concerning the conferences in London and Geneva.

<sup>5</sup> Tribute to Josephine Butler by G. Avril de Sainte-Croix on the centennial of Butler's birth in *Bulletin abolitionniste*, numéro spécial (Apr. 1928): 5-7. I am grateful to Anne Summers for this reference. Mme Avril was one of five designated speakers at the Geneva celebration of Butler's centennial. Her topic, "La Grande Croisade," emphasized the progress made in the 1920s alone. See the report from the *Journal de Genève* (19 Apr. 1928), BMD, Avril de Sainte-Croix [hereafter AdeSC] scrapbooks/clippings, microfilm reel 6.

<sup>6</sup> Tribute to Josephine Butler.

<sup>7</sup> In a letter to the Swiss feminist Emma Pieczynska, written from London, 7 Aug. 1900, Josephine Butler, referring to the Boer War, insisted that she was equally compassionate about injustice done to men (including those of the darker races) and to women. This, she said, partially explained "why I don't like the word 'feminist,' even if that

became not only a great role model for Savioz but also a close friend and mentor until Butler's death in 1906.<sup>8</sup>

Savioz returned to London in June 1899 to participate in an international congress on the White Slave Trade as well as a major feminist congress organized by the International Council of Women and chaired by Lady Aberdeen; that September she participated in the Geneva conference of the FAI, which she reported for *La Fronde*.<sup>9</sup> It was there that she met a number of Swiss feminists such as Emma Pieczynska and Helene de Mulenin and again attracted the attention of Josephine Butler.<sup>10</sup>

At the International Congress on the Condition and Rights of Women, held in Paris in September during the Universal Exposition of 1900, Savioz (who had recently married the civil engineer François Avril) presented a

---

seems unreasonable. I prefer the broader label abolitionist." Letter (evidently in the Bibliothèque Publique et Universitaire de Genève), quoted in Anne-Marie Käppelli, *Sublime Croisade: Ethique et politique du féminisme protestant, 1875-1928* (Carouge-Geneva: Editions Zoé, 1990), 33.

<sup>8</sup> See her tribute to Josephine Butler in the *International Council of Women Report for 1907-1908*, 62. From the evidence I have gathered to date, it appears that the Swiss-born Savioz fell heir to the mantle of the feisty Swiss-born Parisian Emilie de Morsier (1843-96), who had been active in the earliest campaigns of Butler's Fédération Continentale (subsequently the FAI). A key player in the Oeuvre des Libérées de Saint-Lazare, an organization dedicated to helping women released from prison, and organizer of the 1889 Congress on Oeuvres et Institutions féminines, Morsier was also involved (as, some say, was Savioz) in the Protestant-dominated Conférence de Versailles (founded 1891) and in Maria Deraismes' Société d'Amélioration. See Käppelli's chapter on Morsier in *Sublime Croisade*.

<sup>9</sup> *La Fronde*, 24 Sept. 1899.

<sup>10</sup> See two letters from Josephine Butler to her sister Hatty, enthusiastically praising Mlle de S.C.'s speech at the Geneva meeting of FAI, 1899, in the Butler collection at the Women's Library (formerly the Fawcett Library), London.

report on the twinned subjects of the double sexual standard and regulated prostitution. In the course of her report, she thanked Marguerite Durand for having the courage to publish her earlier articles on this subject "that no other paper would publish."<sup>11</sup> Invoking history from ancient to modern times Savioz insisted that the only role of the police was to "prevent scandal on the streets" and that, in going beyond this, the state violated Articles one, five, six, and seven of the Declaration of the Rights of Man regarding liberty, equality, and morality as they concerned women. Since women did not yet have the vote, she asserted that politicians only accorded these injustices "a relative importance." No woman could ignore this outrage; women must begin to fight back:

We do not want a woman, whoever she is, to be subjected to laws of exception. Like man, she is a human being with a right to her integral autonomy, and we protest against every kind of regulation that, under the pretext of safeguarding the health of men, or even the family, sanctions and consolidates the principle of a double morality for the two sexes.<sup>12</sup>

This argument, based on women's human rights and a higher morality and phrased in strong language, was in line with the approach of Josephine Butler. In keeping with a practice that would become her signature, she reeled off a list of violations of women's rights: the practices of the

---

<sup>11</sup> "Rapport de Mme Savioz de Sainte-Croix," *Congrès International de la Condition et des Droits des Femmes* [Proceedings] (Paris: Imprimerie des Arts et Manufactures, 1901), 97-111; quotation on p. 107; subsequently republished as *Une Morale pour les deux sexes* (Paris: Imprimerie Paul Dupont, 1900). An autographed copy dedicated to Louise Michel is in the collection of the International Archive for Social History (Amsterdam); thanks to Marilyn J. Boxer for this information.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

British Army in India, the Heintze Law in imperial Germany; various abuses from Holland and the Netherlands Indies, from Belgium, Italy, Switzerland, Russia, and the United States.

Between 1900 and 1914 Savioz published a series of articles and tracts in addition to her articles in the press.<sup>13</sup> Of particular interest is *La Serve*, a reprint of a speech she had given at the FAI congress of 1900. In this dramatic presentation, pulling out all the stops, Savioz emphasized the broad support for the abolition of regulated prostitution in France, in particular that **all** the women's groups – the feminist groups – and their publications were now united in opposing this reprehensible practice. Like Butler, she claimed the moral high ground:

From the standpoint of individual freedom, [regulated prostitution] is, first and foremost, a violation of rights. No one has the right, at any price or under any pretext, to place women outside the law: to turn them into slaves, restrained by degrading measures in order to assure the security of whoever uses them, to put them, without any recourse, at the mercy of pimps or traders licensed by the government. Justice must be neither behind the times nor intermittent; it must be complete and equal for all.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> "Le Féminisme à l'Exposition universelle," *Revue de Morale Sociale* 8 (Dec. 1900): 505-12; "Le Mouvement abolitionniste en France," *Bulletin Abolitionniste* 12 (Dec. 1902): 146-8; and *L'Esclave blanche (discours prononcé le 15 avril 1913)* (Paris: Alliance nouvelle/Fédération abolitionniste, 1913). Copies of the latter can be consulted at the BMD and the Musée Social and also on microfilm in the "History of Women" collection from Research Publications, Inc., n.s. 1508, no. 6300.

<sup>14</sup> *La Serve: Une iniquité sociale* (Paris: Imprimerie Paul Dupont, 1901). *Congrès international de la Fédération abolitionniste*, 7. This text is available at the BMD and also at the Musée Social; the BMD has a signed presentation copy offered to Marguerite Durand. I have slightly revised the translation in Jennifer Waelti-Walters and Steven C.

Savioz never minced words:

By regulating prostitution the State is thrice guilty. First it aims a serious blow at a woman's freedom by registering her as a prostitute; second, it destroys the principle of equality by punishing her for what is considered a pardonable offence in her accomplice; and finally, it is harmful to morality and creates pimping because of the registration that authorizes a woman to do business with her body.<sup>15</sup>

She went on to insist on the hypocrisy of certain nations that sent delegates to congresses on the "white-slave trade" while selling "licenses at home to the meanest white-slavers, which without the system of regulation, could not exist." And she added, "We have seen young French women sold like cattle to foreign countries, at prices varying from eighty to three hundred francs."<sup>16</sup> She went on to cite letters from former prostitutes and from reputable men opposed to the practice of state-regulated prostitution, each one more eloquent than its predecessor, and she concluded simply by thanking the many supporters of deregulation.

In 1902, Savioz again addressed the "White Slave Trade," arguing that such trade was necessarily predicated on the existence of state-regulated prostitution. In an important article in *La Grande Revue* (August 1902), she brought her reportorial skills to bear on the traffic from Poland, Russia, and the Ukraine (as reported by Prince Serge Wolkonski, the Russian delegate to the London

---

Hause, eds., *Feminisms of the Belle Epoque: A Historical and Literary Anthology* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 171.

<sup>15</sup> *La Serve*, quoted in Waelti-Walters and Hause, 171.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 172. She was referring to Senator René Bérenger, who headed the French delegation to the Congress on the White Slave Traffic.

congress of the Society for the Suppression of the White Slave Trade) to South Africa and South America via the ports of Genoa, Bordeaux, Le Havre, and Southampton and also via the Suez Canal. She noted that in a number of places, including Hungary, Galicia, and southern Russia, it was young Jewish girls who were targeted for export. In the Netherlands, she reported that there were four "French Houses" (*Fransche Huizen*) whose fleshly offerings were all from France and where girls were sold from one house to another. Calling for an international agreement to staunch this flow of human flesh and to punish those who profited from the trade (rarely the women), she reported on recent discussions at a meeting of opponents of the "white slave trade" in Paris. She insisted that no measures would be effective as long as states such as France persisted in sustaining sponsorship of regulation and refusing to allow discussion of the morals police regime. One day, she maintained, the dire consequences of the French regime would be recognized as outweighing its supposed advantages – that day would be a great victory for justice.<sup>17</sup>

In 1904, the Combes government appointed Savioz, now an established authority on the subject of regulated prostitution and the traffic in women, to the Extraparliamentary Commission assigned to investigate the morals police (1904-1908). She was the first woman ever appointed to such a governmental body.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Savioz, "La Traite des blanches," *La Grande Revue*, Aug. 1902, 281-94 in BMD, AdeSC scrapbooks/clippings, reel 5 (also includes clippings of articles from *Le Siècle*, 3 Aug. 1902 and *Le Jour*, 5 Aug. 1902, both with core excerpts from the longer article).

<sup>18</sup> Subsequently Mme Avril de Sainte-Croix was invited to serve on the Coulon-Chavagnes independent Commission (1905-07) that undertook a study of France's disadvantageous marriage laws with an eye to a total overhaul of the hundred-year-old Civil Code as it

**Working for economic alternatives  
for down-and-out young women**

Savioz founded the Oeuvre Libératrice in 1900. Its intention was not to "rescue" prostitutes or to provide shelter for women leaving prison but rather to prevent young women from registering as prostitutes or to extract those who had recently registered, often under threat, by providing them with lodging, job training, and health care for three months. Her philosophy, which postulated a single (strict) standard of morality for women and men, was closely connected to current concerns about women's employment: she advocated raising women's wages – in particular, equal pay for equal work – to relieve them of the necessity of selling their bodies. By 1920 the Oeuvre Libératrice was operating three or four centers and had attracted financial aid from U.S. as well as French supporters. This organization still exists in Paris today.<sup>19</sup>

**Seeking an end to the international  
traffic in women and children**

Circa 1900, Mme Avril became secretary general of the French section of the FAI for which she prepared and published the annual reports. In the interest of brevity, I will skip several decades to her important work on the prostitution issue in the 1920s, this time in the international arena.

Mme Avril's activity at the League of Nations in the 1920s was unprecedented. Given her long experience and expertise on the issues of regulated prostitution and the traffic in women, she was nominated by the ICW

---

concerned the civil incapacity of wives. Her contributions to both these commissions remain to be investigated.

<sup>19</sup> The work of the Oeuvre Libératrice also deserves investigation by historians.

(representing a cluster of international women's organizations) to serve on the League's Permanent Advisory Committee on Traffic in Women and Children. She was duly appointed in April 1922.<sup>20</sup> This woman, who did not have the vote in her own country, had achieved one of the first official appointments to an advisory committee in the most important international organization of the post-war period.<sup>21</sup> It has to be said that she owed no thanks to the French government for this distinction! In fact, France continued to refuse ratification of the Geneva Convention of 1921, claiming that the question of the traffic in women and children was strictly an internal matter, and it refused until the early 1930s to appoint a woman to the French delegation to the League.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Correspondence concerning her appointment including a copy of the official letter from Dame Rachel Crowdy, dated 13 Apr. 1922, can be consulted at the League of Nations archives, 12/20293/13720, in Box 648. The first meeting took place on 28 June 1922 in Geneva. In 1937 the permanent assessor position on the Committee on the Traffic was suppressed; see the letter from Katherine Bompas to Mme Avril, 9 Apr. 1937, ICW-CARHIF A273.

<sup>21</sup> See her report dated 26 June on behalf of the Representatives of the Women's International Organization in the League of Nations archives, 12/21445/13720, in Box 648.

<sup>22</sup> On this point, see Molly McGregor Watson, "The Trade in Women: 'White Slavery' and the French Nation, 1899-1939," (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1999), 118-22. Watson approaches the "trade in women" discursively as a "signifier" and an "empty category" – a focal point for cultural anxieties of all kinds. Although the dissertation contains a great deal of important information, the author does not focus on the vital role played by Mme Avril de Sainte-Croix either in formulating the feminist discourse on the traffic in women or in mobilizing women's political action to halt it. For a convenient chronology of international action concerning the traffic in women see Ki-Tcheng, "La Femme et la Société des Nations" (Thesis, Faculty of Law, University of Paris, 1928; published in Paris: Les Presses

This advisory committee on the traffic in women was established at the recommendation of a 1921 League of Nations international conference. It was mandated to include not only government representatives but also assessor (voting) members who would represent an international women's organization as well as the several international societies concerned with the protection of girls.<sup>23</sup> In short, not all members were to be nominated by governments. Thus NGO's concerned with women's affairs acquired a pivotal status at the League.<sup>24</sup> Mme Avril also served as an assessor member for the League's Commission on the Protection of Children and Youth and as a delegate to the League's subcommission on social questions.<sup>25</sup> She

---

Modernes, 1928), ch. 4. Germaine Malaterre-Sellier was the French government's first female appointee.

<sup>23</sup> The latter included the Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls, the International Catholic Association for the Protection of Girls, and the Federation of National Unions for the Protection of Girls. *League of Nations. Second Assembly 1921. Meetings of the 5<sup>th</sup> Commission: Humanitarian Questions*, 441.

<sup>24</sup> The appointment of women to advisory and other committees was apparently an alternative to a failed effort by some (mainly British) feminists to establish an International Women's Bureau comparable to the International Labour Organization within the League (an objective put forward by some feminists in 1919 at the Paris Peace Conference). Many women active in international women's organizations, including the American Carrie Chapman Catt (president of the International Woman Suffrage Association, or IWSA) and Mme Avril de Sainte-Croix, opposed the women's bureau concept, opting instead for a League employee dedicated to women's interests and the inclusion of women in League committees. The controversy over the Women's Bureau is another story that deserves to be told. Dame Rachel Crowdy became the staff point person for the women's associations in the League Secretariat.

<sup>25</sup> She worked on issues associated with prostitution and trafficking such as child labor, the age of consent in penal law (the Convention of 1910 stipulated twenty years; the Convention of 1921 raised it to

was by no means the sole woman serving in such capacity at the League, but by all accounts she was one of the most effective. Already in the early 1920s, she was praised in these terms: "Mme De Sainte-Croix is probably the best known and most respected social worker in France. She has the ear of the highest French statesmen, and is esteemed not only for her practical work, but also for her wit, for she is a brilliant conversationalist."<sup>26</sup> In the early 1930s she often chaired meetings of the Liaison Committee of Women's International Organizations when its members met in Geneva.<sup>27</sup> As a result of her work in these various capacities, she became a great advocate of women police agents.<sup>28</sup>

---

twenty-one), immigration and emigration issues, and women agents in the morals police.

<sup>26</sup> D. M. Northcroft, *Women at Work in the League of Nations* (London: Page, 1923), 21-2. *Women at Work* became an annual publication.

<sup>27</sup> Minutes of the Liaison Committee for 1930 and 1933, on file in the archives of the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam. On the work of the Liaison Committee, see *Liaison Committee of Women's International Organisations: An Experiment in Co-operation, 1925-1954* (London, n.d. [1954?]), obtained from the Library of Congress.

<sup>28</sup> The issue of women police was evidently on the agenda at the 1926 Paris congress of the International Woman Suffrage Association. Mme Avril spearheaded the campaign for women police agents in France in 1927-28 (see BMD scrapbooks, reel 6). Her interest is documented in a remarkable photo, probably taken during the 1926 IWSA Congress, in which she is flanked by a girl scout executive (Dame Katherine Furse) and two English women police officers. This photo was reproduced in several publications, including *La Française*, 17 Sept. 1927 (BMD scrapbooks, reel 6) and in *Le Mouvement féministe* (Geneva), in conjunction with an article by the editor Emilie Gourd; copies are on file at the Gosteli Archive and the BMD. Mme Avril was also in contact with the American feminist Chloé Owings

One of the tasks Mme Avril undertook for the Advisory Committee on the Traffic in Women was to report annually to the committee on the activities and concerns of the international women's organizations. Her reports, all published in French and in English translation as official League documents, are very interesting reading.<sup>29</sup> Here she put her early experience as an investigative journalist to excellent use. In her first report (1922), she underscored the ICW's decades of concern for the linked questions of regulated prostitution and the traffic in women, noting that already in 1904 the ICW had established a permanent committee (which she chaired) on the traffic and the single moral standard (*unité de la morale*). She also pointed to the fact that early on the ICW had changed its terminology from the "white slave trade" to "traffic in women:" "By this change of title the International Women's Council wished to emphasize its determination to fight against the traffic in women, of whatever colour or race they might be." She underscored that, as of the early 1920s, young women traveling alone on emigrant ships and passenger steamers were most vulnerable to solicitation by male procurers for "good jobs" when they arrived at their destinations; already, she reported, effective work had been done to protect them in railway stations and ports. In 1913 the ICW had taken the lead in gathering information on supervision in maritime transport and by 1922 had collected a significant amount of information from its affiliates, which led to a proposal "to organize a female control organisation

---

who had published a book on women police in 1925; thanks to Sara Kimble for this information.

<sup>29</sup> The reports are published in appendix to the minutes of the Advisory Committee. They become longer and longer over time – an excellent source of information on the state of these issues in a wide range of countries.

which would be independent of the shipping companies as well as of the police authorities." The dignity of all women, Mme Avril argued in closing, "is lowered by the moral degradation of their most unfortunate sisters."<sup>30</sup>

Her 1923 report raised objections to one well-intentioned proposal for another international Convention to prohibit the "employment" of foreign women in licensed brothels; the international women's organizations objected strongly to this, as – among other things – it would raise complicated legal issues including those of "nationality" and age. But, Mme Avril argued on behalf of the international women's organizations, moral considerations were even more important, and attention should instead be focused on the abolition of licensed houses, "a market in which the trafficker is always sure to be able to dispose of his 'human merchandise,' since the proprietor is always in need of young and fresh employees in order to retain his clients." The licensed house "is the principal cause of the traffic."<sup>31</sup> Cutting off the supply, plus getting governments out of the business of prostitution, would go a long way in addressing the problem.<sup>32</sup> Mme Avril underscored the

---

<sup>30</sup> League of Nations. *Advisory Committee on the Traffic in Women and Children, Minutes of the First Session held at Geneva from June 28<sup>th</sup> to July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1922*. Annex 9 [C.T.F.E. 106. 1922 IV] C. 445. M. 265. 1922. IV, 46-7.

<sup>31</sup> *League of Nations. Advisory Committee. . . . Second Session, 22-27 March 1923*, Annex 4 [C.T.F.E. 140], 43-4.

<sup>32</sup> Studying the issue of prostitution in Europe, Abraham Flexner of the Bureau of Social Hygiene in New York devised a supply-demand analysis. But he acknowledged in his conclusion that choking off the supply of girls and young women did nothing to decrease men's demand. See his book, *Prostitution in Europe* (New York: Century, 1914; translated by H. Mindo as *La Prostitution en Europe* (Paris: Payot, 1919). Mme Avril referred to this book in her 1923 report (p. 45) as an excellent source on the traffic, in particular "the complicity of proprietors and traffickers, and often the collusion of those whose duty

coordination efforts by the ICW and the YWCA's committee on emigration to investigate the emigration/immigration situation in a number of countries in the Baltic, central and eastern Europe, and the Near East.<sup>33</sup>

The 1924 report emphasized the efforts made by women's organizations to provide clubs, canteens, and other facilities for young working women. The most important task, Mme Avril reported, would be to coordinate "the efforts of societies engaged in assisting women who go abroad in search of a living which they cannot find in their own country." A Cuban delegate's suggestion that girls traveling be required to obtain a certificate of good conduct was not favorably viewed by the international women's organizations, which thought that such a measure should, if anything, apply equally to underage boys, who were also at risk. In this report, Mme Avril called for the prosecution of procurers as well as the abolition of licensed brothels.<sup>34</sup> In 1925, even though Mme Avril could not be present for the Advisory Committee meeting (which conflicted with the quinquennial meeting of the International Council of Women in Washington, D.C., where she represented the CNFF as its president), she filed two reports. The first summarized specific measures adopted or projected in various countries in connection with emigration, and her findings reiterated her earlier argument that there must be tighter coordination developed between the various

---

is to control them." See also Flexner's summary, "The Regulation of Prostitution in Europe," *Social Hygiene* 1:1 (Dec. 1914): 15-28.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. Three more women joined the advisory committee in 1923: Grace Abbott, (U.S.A.), Dr. Paulina Luisi, (Uruguay), and Dr. Estrid Hein (Denmark) who became vice-chair. All were governmental appointees, although the U.S. was not a member of the League.

<sup>34</sup> *League of Nations. Advisory Committee. . . . Third Session, 7-11 April 1924*, Annex 6 [C.T.F.E. 140], 81-82. [C. 217. M. 71. 1924. IV.]

international associations with regard to measures taken prior to, during, and following up female emigrant travel.<sup>35</sup> The longer report, concerning international women's organizations' actions in response to a pointed appeal, complimented the efforts of these groups in pressuring governments to ratify the Convention of 1921 and in assuring its pending ratification by others. It also summarized reports from specific countries, including most European countries but also South Africa, Canada, and the U.S.A., and re-emphasized the need for tighter collaboration between and among the international groups and with the Advisory Committee.<sup>36</sup> Such reports continued through 1931, and along with others reproduced alongside the minutes of the Committee, constitute a rich, though neglected, resource for historians.

Mme Avril's 1926 report pointed to significant progress on the coordination effort and to the success of lobbying efforts, especially in France. It presented several important new initiatives: a campaign for women police agents (in which, as noted above, she took a leading role); a campaign against "scandalous posters and announcements in newspapers, which constitute direct invitations to debauchery;" and action on the legal age of consent. Increasingly, she could report, governments were turning to the women's organizations for assistance.<sup>37</sup> By 1927, her report emphasized efforts not only to make the work of the Advisory Committee and the Commission better known in

---

<sup>35</sup> *League of Nations. Advisory Committee. . . . Fourth Session, 20-25 May 1925, Annex 9e, 108-9.*

<sup>36</sup> *League of Nations. Advisory Committee . . . . Fourth Session, 20-25 May 1925, Annex 7, 80-85. [C. T. F. E. 234].*

<sup>37</sup> *League of Nations. Advisory Commission for the Protection and Welfare of Children and Young People. Traffic in Women and Children Committee. Minutes of the Fifth Session, 22-25 March 1926, Annex 6, 86-90. [C.T.F.E. 289].* Note the slight change in name of these bodies.

national settings, but also to move on a number of fronts concerning the suppression of the traffic, the expulsion of foreign prostitutes and measures to assist them, the harmonization of the civil and penal codes concerning the age of consent and the age of marriage, and the campaign for women police agents. This report included information from Argentina, Australia, South Africa, and Uruguay. Though still predominant, women's organizations in European countries were no longer the only ones responding to Mme Avril's questionnaires and circular letters. The circle had widened dramatically in the 1920s.<sup>38</sup> Through her activities as an international vice-president of the ICW and her committee position at the League, Mme Avril de Sainte-Croix had become the spider at the center of a web of international communications, fostering research by women in local and national organizations on social issues of great importance and communicating the results to people who had the possibility to take action.

Two massive reports were published in 1927-1928, the first by the Committee, and the second by one of its members, H. Wilson Harris. The first, the *Report of the Special Body of Experts on Traffic in Women and Children*, provided massive data from a wide range of countries.<sup>39</sup> Mme Avril was not a member of the team that prepared this report, though doubtless the research team utilized her

---

<sup>38</sup> *League of Nations. Advisory Commission for the Protection and Welfare of Children and Young People. Traffic in Women and Children Committee. Minutes of the Sixth Session, 25-30 April 1927, Annex 4, 105-13. [C.T.F.E. 327].*

<sup>39</sup> *League of Nations. Report of the Special Body of Experts on Traffic in Women and Children. Parts I (50 pp.) and II (226 pp.) (Geneva, 1927). [C. T. F. E./Experts/55.]* Copy in my possession. This report was commissioned at the behest of Grace Abbott, a member of the advisory committee, and financed by a special grant from the Bureau of Social Hygiene in New York City.

earlier reports. The second, Harris's *Human Merchandise: A Study of the International Traffic in Women*, was dedicated to Josephine Butler.<sup>40</sup>

In September 1927, the question of the traffic came to the floor of the League's Eighth Assembly, which authorized the Committee on the Traffic in Women and Children "to examine as soon as possible the question of the desirability of recommending to all Governments the abolition of the system of the licensed house."<sup>41</sup> The minutes of the subsequent meeting (mid-March 1928) of the Committee on the Traffic in Women and Children are, thus, particularly interesting. A certain M Bourgeois<sup>42</sup> had been named to the committee to represent France, and he put up a rather half-hearted defense of the licensed house, whereupon Mme Avril and H. W. Harris both jumped at the opportunity for rebuttal. Mme Avril politely argued that the question was no longer one of public health and public order: "it was a question which touched the whole position and dignity of women." "It ha[s] been abundantly shown," she argued, "that women had only one opinion on the subject, and that they regarded this question as not a matter of sentiment but one of justice," and she invoked Josephine Butler – whose centenary was being celebrated that year. Both Bascom Johnson and H. W. Harris seconded and supported Mme Avril, remarking also that all five assessors on the committee were "all against the system, and the

---

<sup>40</sup> H. Wilson Harris, *Human Merchandise: A Study of the International Traffic in Women* (London: Ernest Benn Ltd., 1928). Harris, a staunch opponent of the traffic, continued to refer to the "White Slave Traffic," even though he acknowledged (42-3) its inapplicability and remarked that the League of Nations had dropped the qualifier "white."

<sup>41</sup> Quoted by Harris, 249.

<sup>42</sup> This was not Léon Bourgeois, who had been active in establishing the League of Nations; he had died in 1925.

voluntary associations were united on the subject." "The system [of licensed prostitution]," Harris insisted, "was contrary to morality and degrading to women, and it was the organised opinion of women throughout the world that [it] should be abolished."<sup>43</sup> The Spanish delegate subsequently reported that Mme Avril "had been accorded an interview with the King of Spain and he had professed himself to be an abolitionist. In his country the licensed house was a dying institution."<sup>44</sup> It was a glorious day for Josephine Butler and for Mme Avril de Sainte-Croix.

Even more glorious were the days of the Eighth Session, in April 1929, when members of the Committee on the Traffic in Women and Children heaped praise on Mme Avril for her efforts and effectiveness. Her report indicated that, thanks in no small part to the interventions of the women's organizations, many governments were acting to abolish government-licensed brothels, to raise the age of consent, to inaugurate women police, and to patrol ports and ships. The campaigns of the international women's organizations were paying off, even in – indeed, especially in – France.<sup>45</sup>

Perhaps most telling were the remarks of the Danish delegate, Dr. Estrid Hein, who insisted on Mme Avril's role in getting all the important international women's organizations on board to address the issue of the traffic

---

<sup>43</sup> *League of Nations. Advisory Commission for the Protection and Welfare of Children and Young People. Traffic in Women and Children Committee. Minutes of the Seventh Session, 12-17 March 1928, 27-8, 30.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>45</sup> *League of Nations. Advisory Commission for the Protection and Welfare of Children and Young People. Traffic in Women and Children Committee. Minutes of the Eighth Session, 19-27 April, 1929. [C.294.M.97. 1929. IV.] Annex 6: "Report of the International Women's Associations for 1928," 116-26. [C.T.F.E. 415].*

and licensed houses. Drawing on the metaphor of the new medium of radio, Hein proposed that Mme Avril "acted as an international broadcaster of the Committee's ideas and had her own wave-length." She thought that the efforts of Mme de Sainte-Croix "perhaps reached further than any film could reach."<sup>46</sup> In 1930 the representative of the Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls and Women, Mr. Cohen, seconded Hein's repeated praise by emphasizing the influence of Mme Avril's work "not only in France, but all over the world."<sup>47</sup> Mme Avril did indeed practice an effective global citizenship through and with the help of the seven international women's organizations she represented and – it has to be said – commandeered. Reports from women's organizations all around the world suggest that the campaign against regulated vice and the traffic in women was becoming increasingly effective. Moreover, women's organizations affirmed the need for the League's Committee of Experts to extend its investigations to the Far East, and by the early 1930s Mme Avril's reports included extensive accounts from India and China. By 1930-1931, she had turned her attention to other related factors such as obscene publications (addressed by the League of Nations Convention of 1923) and the questionable moral character of beauty competitions, which were popping up everywhere like mushrooms. Unlike some shriller advocates of "social purity," Mme Avril's call for a single moral standard neatly sidestepped the otherwise

---

<sup>46</sup> *League of Nations. Advisory Commission for the Protection and Welfare of Children and Young People. Traffic in Women and Children Committee. Minutes of the Eighth Session, 19-27 April, 1929, 27. [C.294. M.97. 1929. IV.]*

<sup>47</sup> *League of Nations. Advisory Commission for the Protection and Welfare of Children and Young People. Traffic in Women and Children Committee. Minutes of the Ninth Session, 2-9 April, 1930, 31.*

burning question of who was ultimately responsible for prostitution – men's desire or women's "sexuality." Her focus was at once practical and political: to get governments out of the prostitution business, thus eliminating a pernicious model that had spread to many other countries and localities throughout Europe and well beyond. She had mastered the art of consolidating women's voices worldwide in the pursuit of women's dignity and freedom to lead an independent life. Josephine Butler would have been extremely pleased with her disciple's achievements.

### Conclusion/Coda

In France, the struggle against licensed houses continued under the leadership of the Union Temporaire Contre la Prostitution Réglementée et la Traite des Femmes, headed by Mme Avril's protégée, Marcelle Legrand-Falco.<sup>48</sup> By 1931 Strasbourg had decommissioned its brothels, but Paris continued to resist. Finally, following the Occupation, the Paris city government also got out of the business of regulating prostitution, thereby signaling the end of a seventy-year long campaign.

In our own time, despite the successes of the interwar and postwar periods, the world traffic in women and children for purposes of prostitution is in resurgence and seems to be growing even stronger and more efficient.<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Legrand-Falco's papers are at the Musée Social.

<sup>49</sup> See Kathleen Barry, Charlotte Bunch, and Shirley Castley, eds., *International Feminism: Networking Against Female Sexual Slavery* (New York: International Women's Tribune Center, 1984); Kathleen Barry, *Female Sexual Slavery* (New York: NYU Press, 1984); Sietske Altink, *Stolen Lives: Trading Women into Sex and Slavery* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1995); and Kathryn A. Farr, *Sex Trafficking: The Global Market in Women and Children* (New York: Worth Publishers, 2004). A random survey of the recent press throws up

Mme Avril, what would you say to us about that? Would you be terribly disappointed to learn that the measures against the traffic and licensed houses that you endorsed and fought for and the League enacted seem to have never existed? How would you advise us to proceed? My guess is that she would say, "Roll up your sleeves, unite the world's women, and get to work."

---

articles such as Peter Landesman, "Sex Slaves On Main Street," *The New York Times Magazine*, 25 Jan. 2004; Carol Mithers, "The Garden of Evil: Rescuing the World's Girls: Part 2," in *O. Magazine* (Oprah Winfrey's publication), Nov. 2004; and Andrew Cockburn, "Humans in Chains," in the SAS airline magazine *Scanorama*, July/August 2005. Virtually all of these books and articles tell the same story: the trade is alive and well, and billions of dollars are made off human (principally female) flesh by a "mafia" of traffickers, often associated also with the drug trade.

*Proceedings of the Western Society for French History*