

Capsule History of the General Federation of Women's Clubs

The General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC) – the world largest and oldest nonpartisan, nondenominational woman's volunteer service organization – was founded in 1890. GFWC traces its roots back to Jane Cunningham Croly, an accomplished New York newspaperwoman, who wrote under the pen name of Jennie June. Indignant that she and other women were denied admittance to a banquet honoring Charles Dickens in 1868 at the all-male New York Press Club simply because they were women, she determined to organize a club for women only. The name chosen for this club was the Sorosis, a Greek word meaning “an aggregation; a sweet flavor of many fruits”. Although the founder originally supposed they were starting a new movement, they became aware over the years of the existence of other women's clubs that had formed independently to meet the needs of women in the expanding country.

As Sorosis approached its 21st year, Mrs. Croly proposed a conference in New York that brought together delegates from 61 women's clubs. On the last day of the conference, the women took action to form a permanent organization. A committee to draft a constitution and plan of organization to be ratified the following year was chosen, with Sorosis President Ella Dietz Clymer as Chairperson. The constitution was adopted in 1890, and the General Federation of Women's Clubs was born. The U.S. Congress chartered it in 1901.

Ella Dietz Clymer gained a particular place of honor in Federation history as the author of the GFWC motto, “Unity in Diversity”. Speaking to the delegates at the first conference, she said, “We look for unity, but unity in diversity. We hope that you will enrich us by your varied experiences...” The aptness of the motto is evident in the diverse interests of the GFWC members, who have implemented a broad range of programs and projects tailored to meet the needs of their communities. It set the tone for the flexibility that has allowed GFWC to grow and adapt to the changing and diverse lifestyles and concerns of women throughout a century of volunteer work.

At first, women's clubs joined the General Federation directly, but they later came into membership through state federations that had begun forming in 1892. GFWC also counts international clubs among its members. Although women's clubs were founded primarily as a means of self-education and development of women, gradually the emphasis of most local clubs changed to one of community service and improvement. GFWC programmatic areas of activity include the arts, conservation, education, home life, international affairs, and public affairs, as well as various special projects. The Federation also has a distinguished record of legislative activity on issues of historical importance, beginning with the establishment of a national model for juvenile courts and service in the forefront of the conservation movement resulting in the establishment of the first Forest Reserve in 1889. GFWC turned the tide for passage of the Pure Food and Drugs Act, and supported legislation of the eight-hour workday and the first child labor law. In addition, as early as 1944, GFWC endorsed a resolution supporting equal rights and responsibilities for women.

The small banding together of existing clubs that began in 1890 has grown into the largest organization for women volunteers in the world. GFWC now numbers 300,000 members in 8,000 clubs across the United States, with additional millions of members in 40 countries.