

AN EMPIRE OF WOMEN.
THE ASSOCIATION DES FEMMES DE L'UNION FRANÇAISE
AND THE FRENCH CIVILIZING MISSION IN THE 1940s AND 1950s

ANNA NASSER*

ABSTRACT

This contribution examines the role of the *Association des Femmes de l'Union Française* (AFUF), an imperial and reformist women's organization, in reshaping the civilizing mission of the French empire and its gendered dimension between 1946 and 1956. The article retraces AFUF's origins and expansion in the empire, particularly in French West Africa. It shows how it was integrated within the establishment of social services and how its importance decreased over time. This work argues that women's organizations had a crucial role in supporting the French administration in late colonial social policy concerning healthcare and education services. While participating in the production of a gendered late imperial reformism, women's organizations like the *Association des Femmes de l'Union Française* also nuanced and, in part, *challenged the gendered norms of late colonial policy*.

Keywords: French Empire, Imperial Feminisms, French West Africa, Women.

On the 19th of May 1945, the officials of the department of Information charged of French West Africa (AOF) collected a private dispatch sent by Mr. Cognac of Bingerville. Addressed to Raymond Koaussi Goffry, a teacher of the École Normale de William Ponty, the letter concerned the problem of “the backwardness of indigenous women”.¹ It contained extracts of a treatise on women's education:

* Scuola Superiore Meridionale. Address for correspondence: anna.nasser@unina.it.

¹ Lettre de COGNAC à Raymond Kouassi Goffry, date de l'interception 19 mai 1945, 17G415 Archives Nationales du Sénégal (ANS).

Today, therefore, a poorly assimilated civilization is offering native women a thousand opportunities for a free life, and whether we like it or not, the street has turned in a certain direction. [...] This difficulty has evolved from the moment when the white man, moved by compassion for the suffering of our companions, resolved to emancipate them. [...] The government, for its part, must never abandon the promise that colonizing is civilizing. To fully achieve this goal, it needs a fairly broad overview (man's masterpiece is to last), a detailed practical program, persistent ideas, constant surveillance and frequent updates to keep track of progress. [...] Giving us the opportunity to do better means preparing to judge us better, and acting on our wives means improving the social unit that is the family.²

This exchange, written during a moment of political turmoil due to the "colonial crisis"³ that the French Empire was experiencing and after the granting of voting rights for women of the Four Communes in Senegal,⁴ emphasized some of the issues that later shaped the creation of the *Association des Femmes de l'Union Française* (AFUF) and the new social policy of the French Union: the control of women's education as a means of governing social chaos and directing the process of civilization and maintenance of the Empire.

Indeed, the political and social relevance of women's education and societal position was becoming a burning issue in the French Empire – in the *métropole* as in the overseas territories. Among other processes and reforms, the acquisition of voting rights for metropolitan women in 1944 and the extension of citizenship to all the former colonial subjects in 1946 had paved the way for a new action on women, placing them at the center of French social policy in the 1940s and 1950s. In this paper, I will discuss the role of the *Association des Femmes de l'Union Française* as one of the actors in charge of defining and "governing" the social position of women in the French Union, the new political and institutional form of the French Empire between 1946 and 1958.

Much has been written about the issue of governance and on colonial government and governmentality.⁵ For the French case, many historians have focused on the issue of policing, surveillance, and identity identification of colonial subjects and citizens.⁶ Others, like Jennifer Boittin, have

² *Ibid.*

³ Note de Henri Laurentie au ministre Giacobbi, 20 juin 1945, 72AJ/535 Archives Nationales de France (ANF).

⁴ FRANSEE 2018, chapter 4.

⁵ On governmentality see SCOTT 1995.

⁶ BLANCHARD *et al.* 2017; DALBERTO and BANÉGAS 2021.

highlighted the attempts of French colonial institutions to govern women's lives, control their movements, and impose specific gendered notions of femininity, and the resistance these attempts fostered.⁷

Historians of the late French Empire have underlined how imperial reformism has been a key policy to reframe the civilizing mission and promote a wider process of democratization of certain rights, all the while preserving the imperial structure.⁸ But differently from historians of the British Empire,⁹ historians of the late French Empire and decolonization have often overlooked the gendered dimension of late imperial reformism and its imperial aims. In this way, the 'social position of women' as one of the primary domains of colonial intervention and the role of women's organizations have not been widely discussed.

Moreover, only a few works have addressed the involvement of the *Association des Femmes de l'Union Française* in imperial reformism.¹⁰ Some works have stressed the emancipatory activism of some of its members in developing an antiracist or decolonial ideas of citizenship – in particular Eugénie Éboué-Tell and Jane Vialle.¹¹ Yet, the female emancipation and antiracism prompted by the AFUF was envisioned in the very limited framework of the empire, and not at the expenses of imperial domination.¹² This further calls into question the position and the engagement of French and African women and of the AFUF in reformist imperial projects and fosters the need to recast its activities in French West Africa.

To analyze the role of women's organizations within the Empire as participating in a gendered reformism as a form of government of local populations becomes crucial for two main reasons. First, it suggests that "political rationalities" of the French imperial nation-state were not autonomous but relied on several intermediary bodies, who participated in shaping them.¹³ In this way, imperial reformism was the result of the co-production of different gendered norms, even emancipatory ones,

⁷ BOITTIN 2022.

⁸ COOPER 2014.

⁹ BUSH 2014.

¹⁰ The most completed work is indeed that of BARTHÉLÉMY 2022.

¹¹ DUNSTAN 2021; JOSEPH-GABRIEL 2020: chapter 3.

¹² Barthélémy is indeed more reluctant and considers that of the AFUF a form of imperialism. BARTHÉLÉMY 2022: 88.

¹³ While it is not the aim of this essay to question understandings of colonialism based on the concept of governmentality, the coproducing dimension of social policy suggests that linear and top-down understandings of colonial power should be further questioned. See SCOTT 1995; STANZIANI 2023: 98-99.

that still re-asserted imperial hierarchizations. It is in the tension between gendered emancipation and imperial maintenance that it is possible recast women's participation and to further explore their activism in the "cracks" of colonial and patriarchal orders.¹⁴ Second, it highlights how gendered notions of the subject for reform and development have shaped late French social policies. Therefore, by looking at the *Association des Femmes de l'Union Française*, I aim to discuss how women's organizations engaged with colonial civilizing discourses and policies on women's social role in the 1940s and 1950s, and how they applied and challenged them in French West Africa.

1. THE COLONIAL AND IMPERIAL DISCOURSE ON WOMEN'S EDUCATION

Colonialism and imperialism have been considered primarily a male enterprise for a long time.¹⁵ Nevertheless, imperial administrations in France and in other empires have been constantly concerned with women's position and their role in colonial societies. Similarly, women's engagement in colonial ventures was not new.¹⁶ In the French case, the liaison between imperialism and liberal forms of feminism had been formalized in 1931, with the hosting of the Congress "*Les États Généraux du Féminisme*" on "*La femme française dans la France coloniale*" during the International Colonial Exposition of 1931.¹⁷ The event, sponsored by the *Conseil National des Femmes Françaises*, aimed at proving "the national value of women",¹⁸ in line with the struggle for voting rights.

While metropolitan women of the 1930s were mainly concerned with the *coloniales*, educated and white French women entrusted with the civilization of the '*milieux indigène*' and the improvement of the conditions of local women,¹⁹ some women active in the colonies pushed at the center of their own engagement the position of the 'native' woman. For instance, Germaine Le Goff, the future headmistress of the *École Normale des Jeunes*

¹⁴ NDENGUE 2016: 71-85.

¹⁵ KNIBIEHLER and GOUTALIER 1985: 17.

¹⁶ BURTON 1994; CHAUDHURI and STROBEL 1992; CLANCY-SMITH and GOUDA 1998; EICHNER 2022; HA 2014; LEVINE 2004; MIDGLEY 1998.

¹⁷ CONSEIL NATIONAL DES FEMMES FRANÇAISES 1931, *États généraux du féminisme. Troisième session, 30-31 mai 1931. Compte rendu des séances du congrès*, Paris: Le Conseil.

¹⁸ GOUTALIER 1989: 269.

¹⁹ It is worth stressing the similarity between the role of the *coloniales* in civilizing the natives and that of social workers in civilizing working-class families in the métropole. HORNE 1998: 33.

Filles de Rufisque,²⁰ vehemently protested the absence of education of women stating that educating the woman, “the linchpin of indigenous society”,²¹ had to be the first goal of the French administration, at least if it wanted to succeed in its civilizational project. To her, women had to be educated to become righteous wives and mothers for new colonial élite of native doctors, accountants and officials. Through the making of educated and devoted wives, the risk of destabilization of the African family could be controlled for, as Jennifer Boittin has highlighted, these women would “literally reproduce the French mores they studied in school as children”.²²

While the issue of equalizing men and women’s education, “to avoid a fatal imbalance in society and of the indigenous family”,²³ had been discussed also at the Brazzaville Conference in 1944, it was only at the end of the war that women’s organizations became active subjects in implementing social policies. In continuity with previous forms of imperial feminisms, their activism attempted to develop better conditions for African women. Yet one difference was crucial: if before the stabilizing and civilizing role of African women was to be mediated by French women, the formal acquisition of citizenship had made African women themselves be seen as social actors in this enterprise to balance and develop the African society.²⁴

In line with the hegemonic maternalistic thought of post-war years, legislators of different political parties and groups considered all women apt to undertake *en masse* their ‘natural’ socializing task. If before the war familistic and maternalistic ideals had shaped the politics of the III Republic and of Vichy,²⁵ in the postwar these had to be combined with the new political position of French women who had accessed voting rights. In metropolitan France, this idea had taken the form of “population-conscious post-war developments”²⁶ and reforms. Yet, differently from metropolitan women, African women were considered lacking the instruments to take care of their children and fulfil their role appropriately. Child mortality rates in French West Africa during the postwar reinforced the idea that African women were not able to provide and take care for their children

²⁰ The École Normale des Jeunes Filles de Rufisque was one of the first institutions of higher education open to women; BARTHÉLÉMY 2003.

²¹ Germaine Le Goff, *Nécessité d’éduquer la femme indigène*, s.d. (ca. 1934), O212 ANS.

²² BOITTIN 2022: 103.

²³ Lettre du ministre des Colonies à le Commissaire de la République au Togo, 3642/EJ, 29 juin 1945, O157 ANS.

²⁴ Recommandations de la conférence annuelle des directeurs de l’enseignement en Afrique Noire, 23-28 juillet 1951, O666 ANS.

²⁵ BARTON 2020: 185; CHAPERON 2000: chapter 5.

²⁶ OFFEN 2000: 383.

without the proper education. Indeed, still by the mid-1950s, child mortality rates were a severe matter for colonial administrators. While in France the rate settled around 35%, in the overseas territories it was consistently higher.²⁷

What enforced the idea that African women were crucial agents but still needed to be educated for their role was not only depopulation, but a more general discussion on the role of African women in their societies. Motherhood was “considered essential to the health of the nation, a vocation to be taken seriously”.²⁸ Certainly, essentialist definitions of womanhood that considered women as primarily mothers were at play also in metropolitan France. Nevertheless, when it came to native women, these ideas were reframed to fit colonial hierarchies: colonial difference could not be entirely erased and played a role in shaping the policies for women’s social education.²⁹ In fact, according to local administrators, the space of the *autochtones*, was “naturally undisciplined”.³⁰ Hence, the explicit aim of French social policy was to ‘govern’ the African social space.

The case of native women constituted a specificity on its own in colonial and gendered hierarchies, discourses, and practices. Colonial stereotypes on African women were not dismissed: they were considered conservative and resistant to evolution by nature, as well as extremely powerful because of the double influence as wives and mothers that they exerted in several realms – included those “reserved to men”.³¹ All the while, as the post-war civilizing mission was defined along the lines of modernization and reformism, schooling and education in general had been enhanced. This was also a result of the growing pressure that international organizations were putting on imperial powers for what concerned the economic and social conditions of local populations in territories they administrated. In other words, imperial officials faced the conundrum of improving women’s conditions without enhancing their emancipation, which they considered one of the factors that caused disruption of social ties and communities. In this sense, girls’ and women’s education was both an imperative and a risky policy. It had to be sponsored, but colonial officials feared that schooling alone could make women cut ties with their traditional societies or become

²⁷ Ministère de la France d’Outre-mer 1960, *Outre-mer 1958. Tableau économique et social des États et territoires d’Outre-mer à la veille de la mise en place des Nouvelles institutions*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France: 98-99.

²⁸ PEARSON 2018: 37.

²⁹ CHATTERJEE 1993: chapter 2.

³⁰ L’Inspecteur Général du travail p.i. de l’A.O.F. à le directeur général de l’intérieur, 592 IGT/AOF, Dakar, 28 juin 1950, 1H 121 ANS.

³¹ DULPHY, *La femme pivot d’évolution des sociétés d’outre-mer*, 1954, 19760149/83 ANF.

wary towards domestic work and moral norms.³² Social education, thus, proved to be a fruitful resolution.

Women's evolution had to be governed and their education controlled. All native women had to be educated morally, to reproduce the fictive figure of "mother-wife-educator"³³ to maintain ties to their communities. Only some of them, and mostly the women of local élites, would have access to schooling, to make them apt to future mid-level works useful to the general evolution of African society – as teachers, nurses, mid-wives, secretaries, stenographers and social workers.³⁴ More than their metropolitan counterparts,³⁵ African women were subjects to be governed for a 'correct' reproduction of society. Following the idea that women's education was a way to influence the family, the basic institution of society, and thus society as a role, what official policies pursued was the production of proper wives for educated African men and mothers for children.

The involvement of women, either educated native women as social workers and nurses or French white women, was the result of the ability of women's organizations and individual women to promote the idea that women were more apt to pursue educational activities and that native women were able to influence the African family³⁶ – thus to be active subjects of the imperial enterprise and not only passive recipients. To do so, the imperial administration needed to form female intermediaries, to "transform [*African women*] from relentless enemies of our action to propagandists of our cause".³⁷

What the discussions of imperial administrators and reformers reveal is that education was not only framed as a developmental matter, but also as a societal one embedded in specific gendered terms.³⁸ Women's education, then, was not directed at women *per se*. Women were mediators,³⁹ and agents of a long-term strategy for countering the undesirables 'side effects'

³² DULPHY, *Le problème de l'Évolution de la Femme*, 19760149/86 ANF.

³³ LEBEAUME 2014: 183.

³⁴ Recommandations de la conférence annuelle des directeurs de l'enseignement en Afrique Noire, 23-28 juillet 1951, O666 ANS.

³⁵ Similar projects were enacted towards metropolitan women in the postwar years, DUCHEN 1994: 68-69.

³⁶ Note de Poinsot pour le Haut-Commissaire de l'AOF, 12 juin 1953, O655 ANS.

³⁷ Formulaire de rapport annuel sur la protection de l'enfance et de la jeunesse, 4968, 6 mai 1949, 1AFFPOL346 Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer (ANOM).

³⁸ For a discussion on the connection between cultural and social reproduction, Bourdieu, in JENKS 2003: 63-99.

³⁹ DULPHY, *La femme pivot d'évolution des sociétés d'outre-mer*, 1954, 19760149/83 ANF.

of modernization in the overseas territories.⁴⁰ The search for social and political stability was crucial for a political system such as the one of the IV Republic that was characterized by instability, internal contrasts, and weak governments. This was even more needed in the overseas space, where post-war processes of urbanization, and thus proletarianization, and of institutional and political reforms were challenging the maintenance of the French Empire as a system of hierarchical relationships of domination, but could not be completely rejected.

2. THE AFUF: CREATING AN EMPIRE OF WOMEN IN METROPOLITAN FRANCE

It was in this context that the *Association des Femmes de l'Union Française* was created. In fact, a vast galaxy of para-public and private pro-imperial organizations were in place to support, direct and organize specific social actions in the territories along the lines defined by the French administration. Only some had a particular focus on women's social education and even fewer perceived African women as both agents and subjects of imperial maintenance.⁴¹ Among those, the AFUF stood out because of its explicit attempt to reconnect women from France with their "sisters" from the overseas territories to enhance their cooperation.⁴² It aimed to unite all the women of the French Union,⁴³ and was categorized as a "colonial organization" by the French administration.⁴⁴

Its imperial dimension was clearly stated in its statutes, where the organization defined its purpose in developing equality between the citizens of the Union, the improvement of cultural and social conditions of women, children and the family in the French Union and to facilitate the relationship between women from the territories and the *métropole*.⁴⁵ The members of the organization mainly belonged to the French and colonial bourgeoisie: especially in the first years, the majority of the women active were wives of colonial administrators, of deputies or of industrialists. Some had important administrative and political positions, such as Jane Vialle who was a senator in the *Conseil de la République* and Marie-Hélène

⁴⁰ Note pour Dulphy, 21 mai 1954, 1AFFPOL240 ANOM.

⁴¹ For example, the Red Cross, Christian missions, and other smaller women's organizations.

⁴² On the idea of sisterhood of the AFUF, BARTHÉLÉMY 2022.

⁴³ Vialle, "Éditorial", *Les Femmes de l'Union Française d'outre-mer et métropole*, Bulletin Mensuel, from now on AFUF Bulletin, 1, 1946: 3.

⁴⁴ Dossier Associations coloniales, AFUF, AGEFOM406/6 ANOM.

⁴⁵ Statutes of the AFUF, 20 décembre 1948, *AFUF Bulletin*, 1, 1946.

Lefauchaux who was a councilwoman in the Assembly of the French Union. Others were middle-class women who had spent part of their lives in the overseas territories, and a minority were social workers or students.

More than “a critical mass of women” from the empire,⁴⁶ it was the symbolic representation of the different territories of the French Union that was dear to AFUF members, and the fundamental characteristic of the directory board in Paris – or at least of the first one established.⁴⁷ While not many, some women from the overseas territories were participating in the Parisian board of the organization. This mixed composition was rather unique among French women’s organizations, but in line with the aims of the AFUF. The middle- and upper-class dimension of the organization was reflected in its size as well as in the activities they carried out in metropolitan and overseas France. In 1949, the AFUF had around 400 members in metropolitan France,⁴⁸ and its expansion in the territories was not even. In fact, some local branches reached up to 240 members, others to around 20, and others again were composed only of “correspondents” with the executive committee in Paris.

The Parisian board carried out several activities. It organized parties, public events, and conferences on the conditions of overseas women,⁴⁹ to collect funds for their activities and to make new contacts with influential personalities of the French cultural, political, and social landscape. AFUF’s interest in “inspiring and orientating”⁵⁰ women’s evolution and in developing a feminine élite in the French Union motivated its lobbying activity to promote women’s scholarships,⁵¹ and to support its *protégés* in their request for scholarship renewal.⁵² To do so, it operated as a connecting organism between scholarship students and the institutions issuing grants,

⁴⁶ Joseph-Gabriel’s account of Vialle’s activism, while extremely interesting, seems to suffer from a lack of contextualization of AFUF’s activities among colonial and imperial organizations. JOSEPH-GABRIEL 2020: 100.

⁴⁷ For a detailed discussion of the members of the first AFUF directory board and the changes: BARTHÉLÉMY 2022: 82-83; NASSER 2023. Article V, Récépissé du 2 mai 1946 des statuts de l’AFUF, le 19 avril 1946, 352W132-14809 Archives de la préfecture de police de Paris (PPP); Statuts et brouillon de bureau de l’Association des Femmes de l’Union Française, s.d., c.a. 1946, 72AJ/535 ANF.

⁴⁸ Renseignements sur l’AFUF, 954.AS, 19 mars 1949, 80W51-14809 PPP.

⁴⁹ BARTHÉLÉMY 2022: 160.

⁵⁰ Marie-Hélène Lefauchaux, *Note sur la 3ème session de la Commission du Statut de la Femme de l’Organisation des Nations Unies*, Mars 1949 et Avril 1949, FRMAE NOUI, 372QO/397 Centre d’Archives Diplomatiques de la Courneuve (CADC).

⁵¹ “Bourses d’études”, *Paris-Dakar*, 30 septembre 1947: 2.

⁵² Lettre de l’AFUF à le recteur de l’Académie, 3 février 1954, O718.502 ANS.

between the overseas territories and metropolitan France.⁵³ Moreover, its members participated in French institutions and in official organisms, as the *Conseil supérieur consultatif des affaires sociales* – a stable task-force charged with the coordination of private and public social initiatives in the overseas territories, where they represented women's organizations.⁵⁴

One of AFUF's main activities in the *métropole* was the management of its *foyer* and the reception of overseas students – an activity inspired by other imperial and colonial welfare reformist projects. In fact, it acquired an hotel for overseas students, and managed another one. The purchase of the hotel was the result of a long-time plan,⁵⁵ and the outcome of the ongoing cooperation between French and British administrators on overseas students.⁵⁶ The support of overseas students, and particularly of women, was in line with the organizations' imperial and colonial reformist roots. The fact that it was the only organization hosting overseas female students made it well-known in France. For this reason, soon it become one of the main organizations promoted by the Ministry of National education,⁵⁷ and was considered one with a crucial expertise on overseas women.

According to AFUF women, native women had to be enabled to ensure civilization and evolution in the empire. For this reason, they had to be educated on their role as mothers and some, among the educated ones, had to get their training as nurses, mid-wives, and social workers in the *métropole*, to later return to the territories and improve sanitary and social conditions. It evident, in this idea, the explicit support of the forms of social development promoted by colonial officials for the 'evolution' of French West Africa. While some of its members challenged the exclusionary politics of French Republicanism as a form preventing progress and by placing women at the center,⁵⁸ this was done within the boundaries of

⁵³ "L'Association des Femmes de l'Union Française... au Laos, au Cambodge, au Cameroun... au Dahomey", *France-Dahomey*, 9 septembre 1949, 37: 2. Journal Officiel (JO) de l'Afrique Équatoriale Française, 15 décembre 1948: 1670-1671.

⁵⁴ JO de la République Française, Lois et Décrets, 20 avril 1952: 4167. Modification de l'arrêté du 15 juillet 1951 instituant un conseil supérieur consultatif des affaires sociales d'outre-mer, 20130014/76 ANF.

⁵⁵ Note de Lucienne Laurentie sur le foyer d'outre-mer, s.d., c.a. 1946-1947, 72AJ/535 ANF.

⁵⁶ Lettre du directeur de la délégation du Haut-Commissaire de l'AOF à Paris à le Haut-Commissaire de l'AOF, 933, 7 avril 1953, O668 ANS; Lettre de Henri Laurentie à Madame la Présidente de l'Association des Femmes de l'Union Française, 5426, 29 avril 1946, 1AFFPOL1296 ANOM.

⁵⁷ "Circulaire du 28 novembre 1952", *Bulletin officiel de l'éducation nationale*, 44, 4 décembre 1952: 3269-3270.

⁵⁸ JOSEPH-GABRIEL 2020: chapter 3.

a reformed empire. Already in 1948, the organization exhorted young overseas women to accomplish their task of “making [their] sisters back home understand the vital role played by women in the development of a people, of a country”.⁵⁹ Its unequivocal devotion to the cause of the French Union made public commentators praise its initiatives. Its foyer was applauded as the place where young women “came from the farthest reaches of what was once the Empire to share the benefits of Western culture and civilization with their metropolitan sisters in France”.⁶⁰

Through their lobbying for specific scholarships for women, the enhancement of students’ reception in France and their conception of the social role of women and of the family, the AFUF became a crucial gear of the reshaped developmentalist postwar imperial policy. This attention towards students anticipated the changes in the French administration, and made the AFUF a strategic infrastructure both for the support of imperial politics, including the control of overseas students in France, and the enhancement of women’s conditions. Whilst its aims were not completely identical to the ones of the imperial administration, its work was perceived as valuable by liberal and conservative imperial reformers because of the focus on trainings for professions that were deemed essential in the overseas territories.⁶¹

For this reason, territorial governments supported AFUF’s work by issuing funds directly to the main branch in Paris, suggesting they cared the most about students’ reception in the *métropole*.⁶² Indeed, AFUF women urged territorial and federal governments for financial support. The replies to their quests varied from territory to territory and depended heavily on AFUF members’ personal contacts and on the willingness of local colonial administrators to support the organization. In addition to this, the AFUF collected funds through subscriptions, irregular donations in cash or goods,⁶³ and other public aids. For instance, in 1947 it obtained

⁵⁹ VIALLE, “Éditorial”, *AFUF Bulletin*, 8, 1948: 2.

⁶⁰ “Les jeunes filles d’outre-mer peuvent aujourd’hui venir en France pour étudier avec leurs sœurs métropolitaines”, *Climats*, 20 avril 1950, 227: 7.

⁶¹ Direction Générale de la Santé Publique de l’AOF, *Protection de la mère et de l’enfant africains – puériculture – continuité et progression des efforts*, in Lettre de Le Rouzic à le Haut-Commissaire de l’AOF, 1310/Tech, 10 avril 1951, 1H102 ANS.

⁶² AFUF, dossier 500/6, 18G 207 ANS. The AFUF also received funds from extra-AOF territorial governments: 20.000 francs in 1950 and 1951 from French Somalia; 100.000 and 50.000 francs from Guyana in 1949 and 1950; it received 10.00 francs from French Polynesia in 1950, and several funds from the territories of Oubangui-Chari and Gabon, and from the AEF federation. All these pieces of information are reported in territorial budgets and JO of the territories.

⁶³ Lettre du service social colonial à l’AFUF, 29 avril 1947, 1AFFPOL2546 ANOM.

grant of 3.000.000 francs through the F.I.D.E.S.⁶⁴ These funds were used for the purchase of a hotel for students,⁶⁵ but also signal the intimate relationship of the organization with State-led programmes for imperial reforms.

3. GOVERNING WOMEN IN THE EMPIRE

AFUF women often claimed to be representing all the women of the French Union. While this assertion was an exaggeration, it had a kernel of truth. Because of its activities and the position of its members within the networks and structures of the imperial administration, the organization was able to engage some women of the local élites, in particular the ones with full citizenship.⁶⁶ Moreover, it had spread in an arterial way in the empire,⁶⁷ setting foot in many of the territories of West and Equatorial French Africa, as well as in Cambogia, Madagascar, the Antilles, and other French possessions. According to its bulletin, and for what concerns French Sub-Saharan Africa, the AFUF claimed to have representatives in Dakar, Rufisque, St. Louis, Niamey, Porto-Novo, Cotonou, Ouidah, Pérakou, Save, Abome, Abidjan, Grand Bassam, Bingerville, Conakry, Bamako, Colocani in 1946. It created a local branch in Tananarive in 1947, and several others in Porto-Novo (Dahomey), Phnom-Penh (Cambodge), Fianarantsoa (Madagascar), Pointe-Noire (Moyen-Congo), Lomé (Togo) in 1948.⁶⁸

These contacts were established through the travels of individual members of the Parisian committee, oftentimes dictated by their institutional and public roles. AFUF women travelled in order to consolidate the relationship with the existing local branches, to further expand their activities action in the overseas territories, and to engage with the local imperial administration. While being fairly known in the *métropole*, the organization was not extensively acknowledged by local colonial officials, except for the ones posted in the towns where its members were active. This was due to its *modus operandi* in developing its networks. As a matter of fact, AFUF women mostly directed their communications to governors and high commissioners, or travelled through official channels within

⁶⁴ The Fonds d'Investissements pour le Développement Économique et Sociale (FIDES) was credit-based program for the economic and social development in the overseas territories.

⁶⁵ Rapport au comité directeur du FIDES, 5 août 1947, 1FIDES11, ANOM.

⁶⁶ For the discussion on citizenship in the French Union see COOPER 2014.

⁶⁷ COOPER 2002: 61.

⁶⁸ BARTHÉLÉMY 2022: 177-178.

the French administration.⁶⁹ Moreover, due to the number of private organizations active in the overseas territories, AFUF women sometimes operated under bigger organizations active in social work, such as the French Red Cross,⁷⁰ or in official projects carried out by the local social affairs services.

In general, the main task of local AFUF groups was to identify possible scholarship recipients and collect their documentation for the Parisian bureau. The women in Paris had the last word on the matter,⁷¹ and ruled over the other local branches reproducing a properly colonial hierarchy in the organizational management. Thus, scholarships were a highly centralized and controlled activity of the organization. Differently, the other local activities were defined by the local branches and mainly concerned women's social education.⁷² The heterogeneity of the local branches and the even more differentiated structure of colonial services in the overseas territories influenced AFUF's activities, and prevented the Parisian committee from enforcing a standardized action in the imperial setting.

In the territories, AFUF groups engaged in several social and cultural activities, in the blurred space between charitable and professional organizations that was left unclear by the imperial administration until the mid-1950s. In general, AFUF's activities revolved mostly around the education of women as mothers and wives, focusing on housekeeping, home economics, hygiene, and childcare. This realm of intervention was explicitly conceived as a tool for moral evolution. As one member of the AFUF, Laure Léopold, explained during a radio interview: "when the house is clean and tidy, the children washed and healthy, we have already taken a step towards intellectual and moral progress".⁷³ AFUF members in the overseas territories also organised classes on child nutrition and medical consultations.⁷⁴ Sometimes they oversaw the delivery of milk, the

⁶⁹ The folder on the AFUF in the Archives of the AOF only collects communications about the Parisian bureau: Dossier 500/6, 18G207 ANS.

⁷⁰ The relationship between the AFUF and other organizations is unclear. In certain territories they collaborated with the administration, missionary institutions, and other charitable organizations as the Red Cross: Lettre à M. le gouverneur du Soudan Français, a/s candidature bourse assistante sociale Mlle Sy, s.d., ca 1953, O655 ANS. According to Pascale Barthélémy, who is currently working on the private archives of Pâquerette de Quénétain, president of the AFUF branch of Conakry in 1951, this was not the case in French Guinea, where the AFUF and the Red Cross were in competition. See also Barthélémy 2019: 208-215.

⁷¹ "L'A.F.U.F. Outre-Mer", *AFUF Bulletin*, 4, 1948: 4.

⁷² "L'Association des Femmes de l'Union Française... au Laos", *France-Dahomey*: 2.

⁷³ Union française du 25 février 1949, in *Union française: magazine de la France d'Outre-Mer*, enregistrement 25/02/1949, Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (INA), PHD85024878.

⁷⁴ "L'Association des Femmes de l'Union Française... au Laos", *France-Dahomey*: 5.

famous *goutte de lait*, flour, and other disposable goods. In French Guinea the AFUF had a day-care center,⁷⁵ and managed a community restaurant for workers.⁷⁶ In other territories, AFUF groups cooperated with the local services to assist children in schools, organized the weighting of children,⁷⁷ and joined official committees for emergency relief.⁷⁸ All these activities fit within the general aim of the administration to pursue a controlled development of local societies in French Africa. According to the reports of the colonial administration, AFUF's role was not only of aid, but also of "surveillance" over local women,⁷⁹ placing them in line with official health and social services.⁸⁰

Overall, the most developed branches were the ones of Bamako, Conakry, Tananarive and Porto-Novo.⁸¹ The case of the AFUF branch of Porto-Novo (Dahomey) is an interesting one. It allows to highlight the activities and the place of the AFUF within the renewed civilizing mission of the Empire, to emphasize the attempt of control that the colonial State was pursuing through private institutions, and to discuss how the organization reshaped its predetermined role. In Porto-Novo, the local branch functioned as an ideal AFUF group – as it was also recognized by the Parisian directing committee.⁸² It organized events and parties to engage local colonial society,⁸³ carefully mixing local and imperial cultural elements. It created a space for French administrators and local élites in which to reproduce a metropolitan environment, with champagne glasses, dances, and *divertissements*.

There, French white women and local educated women engaged in the organization, representing and promoting the new middle class that AFUF's reformers wanted to support. They reproduced an imperial "class alliance"⁸⁴ that, while not completely breaking the hierarchies of

⁷⁵ Gouvernement de la Guinée Française 1952, *Compte définitif des recettes et des dépenses. Exercice 1950*, Conakry: Imprimerie du Gouvernement: 58.

⁷⁶ Rapport sur la protection de la collectivité de la famille et de l'enfance dans les territoires d'outre-mer, 1951, O663 ANS.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ JO de Madagascar, 21 décembre 1957: 2023.

⁷⁹ Rapport sur la protection maternelle et infantile, Dahomey, Mars 1950 1H102 ANS.

⁸⁰ Note de Dulphy concernant les modalités de collaboration entre le service de santé et le service social en matière d'action médico-sociale outre-mer, 31 juillet 1952, 1H121 ANS.

⁸¹ On Bamako see BARTHÉLÉMY 2022: 187-193.

⁸² "L'AFUF outre-mer", *AFUF Bulletin*, 4, 1948: 5.

⁸³ Bioukou, "Gala de l'Association des Femmes de l'Union Française à Porto-Novo", *France-Dahomey*, 3 mai 1952, 36: 3.

⁸⁴ BARTHÉLÉMY 2022: 163.

the imperial setting, relied on existing articulations of race and status to encourage unity among the élites. For the same reason, the AFUF of Porto-Novo also organized meetings between European and African women, and in the 1950 it proudly announced to have reached 240 local members.⁸⁵ By developing a sense of unity among the members of a fictive imperial middle-class,⁸⁶ both French and local, these activities served to strengthen the ties of the Union as an imperial association.⁸⁷ Indeed, shared cultural references and engagements created a social bond among middle-class French women of the AFUF and women of the new local élite, frequently employed in the administration. This proved even more effective in a context like Dahomey, where schooling rates were higher than in other territories, and the *créole* élite supported the civilizational attempts of the French administration. French officials, because of the demands of this élite, promoted a general reinforcement of home economics.⁸⁸

In Porto-Novo, AFUF's activities revolved around nutrition consultations and childcare courses, where AFUF women also gave out flour and milk as a reward for the women who came to their classes. These actions were supported by the local sanitary and healthcare services: a doctor and a visiting nurse participated in every medical examination.⁸⁹ In addition, the branch of Porto-Novo was able to collect territorial funds for its activism and even build its own nursery.⁹⁰

Concerning AFUF's engagement in women's education, the activities in Porto-Novo show the interaction between private organizations and the French administrations. Colonial reports on the AFUF reveal a strand of continuity with previous engagements of para-public organizations, operating in "porous borders between surveillance and assistance".⁹¹ Local officials praised the work of the AFUF, reporting how "70 women have been surveilled and assisted in this way".⁹² This, however, was not all. While AFUF women in Porto-Novo were indeed part of the imperial attempt to

⁸⁵ "L'Association des Femmes de l'Union Française. Avis", *France-Dahomey*, 13 Janvier 1950, 123: 2.

⁸⁶ On middle-class see DEJUNG *et al.* 2019: 1-39.

⁸⁷ I am directly drawing from Bourdieu's reading of Durkheim in seeing culture as a national, in this case imperial, and social aggregative factors. BOURDIEU 2021: 84-85.

⁸⁸ BARTHÉLÉMY 2022: 103; RONEN 1974: 55-76.

⁸⁹ Rapport sur la protection maternelle et infantile, Dahomey, Mars 1950 1H102 ANS.

⁹⁰ JO du Dahomey, séance du 28 avril 1951: 3.

⁹¹ BOLLENOT 2022: 115.

⁹² Rapport sur la protection maternelle et infantile, Dahomey, Mars 1950 1H102 ANS; Lettre du Médecin-Lieutenant-Colonel Hochstetter à le Médecin-Général, Porto-Novo, 1 janvier février 1950, 1H102 ANS.

control the lives of local African women and to govern social evolution, they also reshaped the forms of such development. They organized sewing and stenography classes in which a few dozen women participated. Indeed, while in their discourses and in line with the administration AFUF women in France promoted the role of African women as wives and mothers, some AFUF members in the territories knew that African women were also active in the world of work as sellers and in the jobs related to the administration, as secretaries and typists.

The focus of professional classes, in Dahomey as in other AFUF branches,⁹³ suggests that while the Parisian branch of the AFUF continued to conceive African women's training as depending on the *métropole* – hence the attention to scholarships for a few deserving women who were ready to do their part as social workers, nurses, and midwives – certain local branches went beyond that framework. Classes on stenography directly challenged the assumed sphere of activity in which African women were deemed to remain, nuancing AFUF's vision of the domains in which women's emancipation and independence had to be achieved. At the local level, in the empire, the engagement of local AFUF women had started to challenge the desired idea of women's education promoted by the French administration, and to define it as something not only pertaining to social education but as well attaining to the domain of work.

4. THE END OF THE AFUF

Between 1946 and 1956, the AFUF had a crucial role in enforcing African women's education – both with the aim of making them devoted wives and trained mothers, and of pursuing their professional education. However, since the mid-1950s, its importance in the infrastructure that supported imperial maintenance started to decrease. While it remained active in small groups until the beginning of the 1960s and continued to be part of imperial networks in the *métropole*,⁹⁴ it lost its primary role in supporting French imperial and social action in the overseas territories. By 1960 it had changed its name into *Association Française pour l'Union des Femmes* and redirected its objectives towards national activism, with

⁹³ On Conakry see BARTHÉLÉMY 2019: 208-216.

⁹⁴ Note d'Avril 1957 sur la protection maternelle et infantile dans les territoires d'outre-mer, 1AFFPOL2296 ANOM; *Bulletin de l'Association des Surintendantes d'Usine et de Services Sociaux*, 18 février 1958: 5.

a focus on the integration of former overseas women in metropolitan France.⁹⁵

This was the result of several factors. First, territorial governments had grown wary of the scholarship system. Before, education in the *métropole* had resolved the lack of professional institutions in AOF, making it necessary to send students to France so that native men and women could study and speed up a “real and intimate penetration of the African environment”.⁹⁶ Yet, the scholarship system was not perfect and the conditions of African students in France haunted the minds of colonial administrators. According to them, students in the *métropole* often became prey of “subversive ideologies”,⁹⁷ meaning communism and anticolonialism. In addition, it was hard to bring students back to the territories after they had finished their studies.⁹⁸ Regardless of the procedures enforcing their return, students continued to remain in France. Overall, the idea that sending students to France was only a temporary solution and that it was necessary to establish trainings *in loco* became widespread among administrators between the beginning of the 1950s and 1956.⁹⁹ With the enhancement of administrative decentralization as a result of the *loi-cadre* of 1956,¹⁰⁰ and in parallel to a growing support from international institutions in the realm of schooling and professional education, territorial governments diminished their support to metropolitan enterprises. While the AFUF had had a role in protecting female students from “the promiscuities”¹⁰¹ of Paris and in countering communist understandings of anticolonialism, as radical anticolonial groups called out,¹⁰² it was not sufficient anymore.

⁹⁵ Association Française pour l’Union des Femmes, n. 11, ca 1960, Centre d’Archives pour la Recherche et l’Histoire des Femmes (Brussels), ICW 1273.

⁹⁶ Note de Poinsoy pour le Haut-Commissaire de l’AOF, 12 juin 1953, O655 ANS.

⁹⁷ Note du Haut-Commissaire de l’AOF à le délégué de Haut-Commissaire de l’AOF à Paris, 907 INT/AP2, 9 décembre 1950, 17G269 ANS.

⁹⁸ Conférence sur la protection maternelle et infantile, Dakar, Octobre 1957, 1H103 ANS.

⁹⁹ Lettre du secrétaire d’état à la France d’Outre-mer à le Haut-commissaire en AOF, 1275/SE, 20 mai 1950, 1H121 ANS.

¹⁰⁰ For a discussion on the *loi-cadre* see Cooper 2014: chapter 5.

¹⁰¹ Rapport à le Haut-Commissaire de l’AOF, confidentiel, 26 février 1952, 17G269 ANS.

¹⁰² The polemic between the AFUF and anticolonial and communist students’ groups in the *métropole* is well reported in the press of the time, reaching even the debates of the City Council of Paris and of the Assembly of the French Union. Échange et discussion sur la proposition de résolution de M. Saïdou Djermakoye, Séance du 30 décembre 1949, *Annales de l’Assemblée de l’Union Française, Débats. Session de 1949*, p. 1472-1473; Tract édité par des étudiants, lettre du 1 juin 1951, PPP, GA295-274859.

Secondly, the professionalization of social workers made governmental social action more directed, organized, and controlled.¹⁰³ As a result, territorial governments had started to enforce stricter oversight of private metropolitan organizations, and created autonomous structures, such as cultural and social centers. Metropolitan organizations were mainly left out of the decision-making organisms, even if cooperation was possible.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, the establishment of instruments like the *cahiers* or *fiches de santé* and of official check-ups as proofs for obtaining social subsidies and family allowances directly challenged the role of the AFUF in promoting those services,¹⁰⁵ marginalizing the organization.

The reinforcement of medical procedures and specific documentation was in line with the new direction of the civilizing mission of the French Empire, that by the mid-1950s was becoming more a matter of development and less about charitable social activities. In fact, in the 1940s ideas of development and civilizing mission were understood both in their economic and social dimensions, enabling organizations that lacked a proper training to operate. However, by the mid-1950s indicators of development had become more based on social sciences, statistics, and expertise.¹⁰⁶ AFUF women had been able to promote their experiential expertise for long, but by the mid-1950s it was not enough anymore. In the transition from civilizational 'evolution' to development, the AFUF lost its place as an imperial agent producing and reproducing gendered definitions and practices of the imperial social life. Social sciences, rather than what could be considered amateurism,¹⁰⁷ dictated the possibilities of social action and had become an integral part of the government of what remained of the former French Empire.

The experience of the AFUF is an interesting entry point in the discussion on the role of the French Empire in governing local populations and the social space of the empire, especially for what concerns late imperial policies. AFUF's overseas activism presents one of the ways in which French imperial reformism operated in the entangled space of the

¹⁰³ Bulletin Centre culturel et universitaire d'outre-mer, 9, 1956, Dossier 236/7, 18G207 ANS.

¹⁰⁴ AFUF Bulletin, 6, 1958, Dossier 500/6, 18G207 ANS; "Journées ménagères. Union Française. L'évolution du Service Social en AOF", *Nos voisins, nos amis* 39, 1956: 16-17.

¹⁰⁵ Carnet de Santé – Protection maternelle et infantile, Santé Publique de la Cote d'Ivoire, 1954, 1H103 ANS; Lettre du M. le Professeur Senecal, chargé de la protection maternelle et infantile à Dakar, à M. le directeur du service de Santé, n. 394, Dakar le 27 décembre 1955, 1H103 ANS.

¹⁰⁶ Conférence sur la protection maternelle et infantile, Dakar, Octobre 1957, 1H103 ANS.

¹⁰⁷ Centre de protection maternelle et infantile. Lettre du directeur de la délégation à M. le HC de l'AOF, n. 341 ACS MX, 27 janvier 1959, Dossier 213/6, 18G207 ANS.

métropole and the overseas territories. It further suggests how women's organizations participated in and challenged the gendered dimension of late imperial reformism when it came to promoting women's behaviors, ideals, and actions that reproduced and enforced a specific position of women within the social hierarchies of the Empire.

In this sense, some women's organizations had a primary role in cooperating with colonial officials by complementing missing services *in loco* and enforcing segments of the postwar civilizing mission. But the actions of the AFUF also show the different domains of what government of the empire meant. While the attempt of surveillance was evident and shall not be denied, government as a form of command also meant the enhancement of sanitary and educational programs, and of benefits for local populations with the aim to govern their evolution. To do so, the French Empire had necessarily to rely on a plurality of bodies and organisms that, sometimes, had the possibility to further shape their action according to their own needs and intents. As it seems clear, imperial government as a form of control was oftentimes more fragile than it appeared, and it relied on a multiplicity of figures, individuals, and organizations, among which women's organizations.

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