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A Research Essay

Beyond Words: Women, Equality, and the Early Esperanto Language Community

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Introduction

In 1906, in the Scottish city of Dundee, a young woman named Miss King founded an Esperanto club. In an era when men overwhelmingly dominated public societies and intellectual circles, the club's membership soon included men who served under her leadership.¹ On the surface, this might seem a minor anecdote in the history of a little-known constructed language. Yet, set against the backdrop of the early twentieth century—when women's roles were largely confined to the domestic sphere—it becomes a striking example of a broader phenomenon: the early Esperanto movement offered women spaces for leadership, intellectual engagement, and public presence that were, in many parts of the world, still rare.



Figure 1: Newspaper clipping regarding the formation of the Dundee Esperanto Club, c.1906.

The early decades of the twentieth century were marked by stark gender inequalities. Across Europe and much of the world, women were often excluded from universities, denied the vote, and discouraged from participating in political or intellectual life. While some reform movements—such as the women's suffrage campaigns, pacifist leagues, and educational associations—were creating new opportunities for women's participation, these spaces often remained nationally and socially bound and heavily influenced by prevailing gender norms.² It was within this context that Esperanto emerged as an unexpected site of social innovation.

Created in 1887 by Ludwik Zamenhof, Esperanto was intended as a politically neutral, easy-to-learn international auxiliary language. Its stated aim was to foster mutual understanding between people of different nations and backgrounds, avoiding the hierarchies those natural languages sometimes reinforced.³ While Zamenhof's vision was

¹ See: Figure 1

² Hogg, Heller Sallie. *The Employment of Women in Great Britain 1891-1921*. PhD thesis, (University of Oxford, 1967), pp. 83-85.

³ Garvía, Soto Roberto. *Esperanto and Its Rivals: The Struggle for an International Language* (Philadelphia, 2015), pp. 59-130.

primarily concerned with ethnic and national divisions, the movement that grew around Esperanto also cultivated—deliberately or incidentally—a degree of gender inclusivity unusual for its time. Women not only learned and used the language, but in some cases founded clubs, edited publications, led congress delegations, and created international networks of female Esperantists.

Even with the rising feminist and suffrage movements, it was often upper- or middle-class women, nobility, and aristocrats, who had relatively more time, means and access to such activities.⁴ So, why did Esperanto, a linguistic invention, become a space where ordinary women could take on visible and, sometimes, authoritative roles? How did the ideals of internationalism and equality translate into practical opportunities for participation? And who, exactly, were these women—where did they come from, what motivated them, and what did they contribute to the movement? These questions form the basis of the present study, which examines women’s participation in the early Esperanto community between roughly 1900 and the 1920s.

Previous scholarship on Esperanto has tended to focus on its linguistic features, its role in internationalist politics, or its relationship to peace movements. Studies on gender within the movement are sparse, and when women are mentioned, they often appear as peripheral figures rather than central actors. This absence in the literature is striking, given the archival evidence of women leading local groups, translating literature, engaging in public debate, and even founding international organisations such as the *Unuiĝo de Esperantistaj Virinoj* (Union of Esperantist Women) at the 21st Esperanto World Congress in Budapest 1929.

This essay argues that the early Esperanto community, while far from a utopia of gender equality, provided an unusually open arena for women’s public participation. Women’s visibility and authority varied significantly by region, social background, and the maturity of local Esperanto networks, but their contributions—whether in cultural, educational, or

⁴ Ann Taylor Allen and Anne Cova, *Introduction: Transnational Women’s Activism*, *Women’s History Review* 32, no. 2, (2023): p.167

organisational work—were integral to the movement’s development. By examining these roles through the lens of material culture, using sources such as correspondence, society records, photographic archives, address books and yearbooks, this study seeks to illuminate the lived experiences of early female Esperantists.

In what follows, I first outline the methodological approach used to identify and analyse women within archival and printed sources. Key patterns in demographics, professions, and participation are then presented, before turning to case studies of three notable figures: Ivy Kellerman Reed, Mrs. Wilbur Crafts, and Adela Schafer. Through these examples, I explore the ways in which women navigated—and sometimes reshaped—the structures of the Esperanto movement. Finally, I discuss the implications of these findings for our understanding of how language-based communities can challenge social hierarchies, before concluding with reflections on the significance of this history for contemporary debates about language and gender inclusion.

Methodology

This research draws on a combination of printed, archival, and digitised sources produced by and about the early Esperanto community between approximately 1900 and the late 1920s. The central objective was to identify women who participated in the movement and to reconstruct, as far as possible, their backgrounds, activities, and influence. The materials consulted include membership directories (*Adresaroj*), photographic albums, personal correspondence, the *Tutmonda Jarlibro* (an annual global Esperanto directory), local and national Esperanto society documents, records from the British Esperanto Association (BEA), and other contemporary publications. Many of these sources have been digitised, enabling most research without the need for physical travel to archives.⁵

The process of identifying women within these records required particular attention to linguistic and cultural cues. Esperanto names often reveal gender through suffixes such as *-ino* (indicating a feminine form), while in French-language records feminine forms

⁵ Many materials accessed through the *Digital Collections of Austrian National Library (Österreichische Nationalbibliothek)* <<https://www.onb.ac.at/en/departments/departments-of-planned-languages/digital-collections>>.

might appear with endings such as *-esse* or other gendered markers. Honorifics were also useful: titles such as *F-ino* or *S-ino* in Esperanto correspond to “Miss” or “Mrs.,” while in multilingual contexts women might be addressed as *Madame*, *Fräulein*, or similar. In cases where no explicit gender marker appeared, first names were used to infer likely gender; for example, “Maria” or “Elisabeth” could be reasonably assumed to refer to women.

Once names were identified, further information was sought on professions, family backgrounds, geographic origins, years active in Esperanto, specific activities within the movement, roles held, and any recorded legacies. Where possible, these details were cross-checked against entries in online Esperanto-specific resources, most notably the Esperanto-language *Wikipedia*. It should be noted, however, that while this step provided valuable context, the reliance on a crowd-sourced platform necessarily raises questions about accuracy, completeness, and representativeness.

A gender history approach underpins the analysis. This involves not only cataloguing the presence of women but also interrogating how their activities related to broader cultural, social, and political structures. The lens of material culture was particularly useful, as it foregrounds the tangible artefacts—postcards, photographs, letters—that capture traces of individual lives and networks often absent from formal institutional records. These items can reveal, for example, how women presented themselves, how they were represented by others, and the kinds of events and spaces they inhabited.

The research is not without limitations. The surviving documentation of the period is heavily Euro — or rather — western-centric, reflecting the centres where Esperanto first gained traction and where archival practices were strongest.⁶ The reliance on printed directories and official society records may skew the picture toward more prominent or formally recognised figures, leaving out many women who participated informally or whose contributions went unrecorded. Naming conventions also present challenges: some women may have been listed only by their initials, others by their husband’s name,

⁶ Garvía, Soto Roberto. *The Demographics of Esperantujo in Esperanto and Its Rivals: The Struggle for an International Language* (Philadelphia, 2015), pp. 95-102.

and some by positions that were not clearly gendered. In addition, the identification of women from non-European contexts proved more difficult, both because of language barriers in the sources and because Esperanto spread unevenly outside Europe during the early decades.

Despite these challenges, the methodology allows for the reconstruction of both broad patterns and individual life stories. While incomplete, the resulting dataset offers valuable insight into the demographics, motivations, and activities of early female Esperantists, forming the foundation for the analysis presented in the following sections.

Findings: Overall Trends

The women identified in the surviving records of the early Esperanto movement represent a diverse yet patterned group. While the available data cannot provide a complete statistical picture, certain demographic, professional, and geographical trends emerge clearly enough to offer meaningful insight.

Proportion and visibility

Women's names consistently appear in the printed membership lists of the *Tutmonda Jarlibro*, various *Adresaroj*, and *Congress Albumoj*, though their proportion relative to men varies greatly by region and source. For example, in the 1910 *Tutmonda Jarlibro*, none of the roughly 40 listed positions across Africa are identifiably held by women, reflecting possible social or cultural barriers in that region.⁷ Conversely, the 1908 *Adresaro* records approximately 42.45% women among 815 individuals (ID numbers 16,383–17,197), likely reflecting different patterns of female engagement in other regions.⁸ These figures should be approached with caution: informal participation and incomplete record-keeping might have led to undercounting, especially where women's involvement was less formally recognised. Simultaneously, sources focused on women's branches or formal roles may overstate their visibility in some areas. Nevertheless, the data indicate that,

⁷ *Tutmonda Jarlibro Esperantista*, 1910.

⁸ *Adresaro de la personoj, kiuj ellernis la lingvon 'Esperanto*, 1908.

despite such regional disparities, women had a continuous and sometimes significant presence within the Esperanto movement from its earliest years.

Professions and social backgrounds

Teaching was the most common profession among the women identified, reflecting broader social patterns in which education was one of the few acceptable career paths for middle-class women. At the time, women were widely regarded as physically and intellectually inferior to men and believed to lose their limited abilities after middle age. Their primary role was thus framed as wives and mothers, while those without family responsibilities were expected to channel their presumed moral and religious instincts into modest pursuits such as teaching, nursing, or charitable work.⁹

Within this context, it is unsurprising that many female members of the Esperanto community held such positions: some were schoolteachers, governesses, or nurses, while others served as headmistresses or professors—particularly in fields like languages, literature, or the arts. A smaller but noteworthy group came from academia or worked in translation, while a handful were performers, such as singers or actors, who used Esperanto in cultural events. Many of these women had ties to educated or professional families, and some from noble backgrounds had the leisure and resources to take part in an international movement. There are also records of younger women, especially students, joining as emerging Esperantists, and although fewer in number, some females were businesswomen (*komercistinoj*).

Family connections to male Esperantists often provided a pathway into the movement, particularly for wives, sisters, or daughters of prominent members. Yet, the presence of independently active women—serving as club founders, authors, and organisers—shows that female participation was not solely dependent on male relatives' involvement.

⁹ Hogg, (n.2), pp. 83-84.

Types of activities

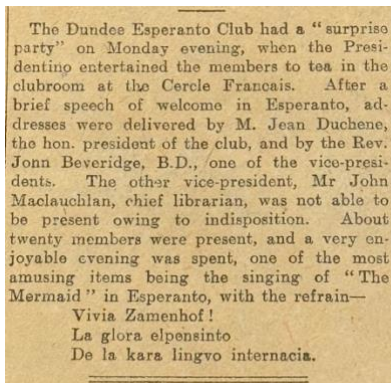


Figure 2: Newspaper clipping about Dundee Esperanto Club, early 1900s.

Women engaged in a range of activities within the Esperanto movement. At the grassroots level, they taught the language, hosted meetings, and ran correspondence networks. In cultural spheres, they translated literature, composed poetry, and gave public lectures. In organisational roles, some served as secretaries, treasurers, or presidents of local clubs. Notably, women occasionally founded and led mixed-gender groups, as in the case of Miss King in Dundee, whose leadership attracted male members into the club she had established. Others held positions in women's branches of Esperanto societies, which often functioned as auxiliary organisations but could also serve as hubs for activism, education, and international outreach.

One particularly revealing example comes from the *Tutmonda Esperantista Vegetarana Asocio* (International Vegetarian Esperanto Association), which highlights how gender roles shaped women's participation. According to Esperanto *Wikipedia*, during the First World War in 1915, the male editor of the association's periodical in Milan was forced to hand over responsibility to a Miss Maria van Rees in Utrecht, who managed its affairs until the end of 1916.¹⁰ Her case can be read in two ways: it shows, on the one hand, how women could assume authority and sustain international networks in times of crisis; yet on the other, it perhaps hints at the conditional nature of such opportunities — women often became most visible when men were absent, their leadership treated as a temporary necessity rather than a lasting recognition of their abilities.

Geographical variation

Patterns of female participation varied by region. In Western and Northern Europe, particularly in France, Britain, and Scandinavia, as well as in the United States, women

¹⁰ *Vegetarianism in Esperanto*, <<https://eo.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vegetarismo>> [accessed August 2025].

appear in greater numbers and with more documented leadership roles. Similar picture is painted for Central and Eastern Europe, especially Poland, Hungary, Bohemia, Moravia, and Russia. Outside Europe, records are sparser, but women appear in North American directories, occasionally in South American and later in North African contexts.

Challenges and distortions

The numerical representation of women in formal records may understate their real presence in the movement. As mentioned earlier, women's work was sometimes framed in male-centred terms—for example, by listing them as “*S-ino*. [husband's name]” without noting their own first names or professional identities. Additionally, formal national Esperanto associations listed in the *Tutmonda Jarlibro* tended to be male-dominated in leadership, even when women played crucial roles in local clubs or event organisation through specific parts of the world. This disparity between visibility at the grassroots and formal recognition at the national level is a recurring theme.

Cultural contributions and leadership

An important finding is that women often combined cultural and organisational roles. Translators like Ivy Kellerman Reed not only enriched Esperanto literature but also taught courses and wrote textbooks. Leaders such as Marcelle Tiard — the co-founder of the *Unuiĝo de Esperantistaj Virinoj*, and Mrs. Wilbur F. Crafts, bridged Esperanto activism with broader social movements, including feminism, pacifism, and religious outreach. These intersections suggest that for many women, Esperanto was not an isolated interest but part of a wider commitment to education, internationalism, and social reform.

Overall, the evidence shows that women were not marginal in the early Esperanto movement. They may not have achieved numerical parity with men, and their opportunities varied by region and cultural context, but their presence was consistent and, in some cases, transformative. These patterns come into sharper focus when examined through individual life stories, which reveal the depth of their commitment and the breadth of their influence.

Case Study 1: Dr. Ivy Kellerman Reed

Dr. Ivy Kellerman Reed was an American linguist, lawyer, and prominent Esperantist whose career bridged rigorous academic scholarship and active participation in the international language movement. Born on 8 July 1877 into a highly intellectual household, she was the daughter of William Ashbrook Kellerman, a botanist, mycologist, and professor at Ohio State University, and Stella Victoria Kellerman, a scientific illustrator and accomplished botanist in her own right. This environment fostered in Ivy both intellectual curiosity and a respect for scholarly precision, qualities that would later define her contributions to Esperanto.



Figure 3: Portrait of Dr. Ivy Kellerman Reed, 1910.

Kellerman Reed's educational attainments were extraordinary for a woman of her era. She earned four academic degrees in classical and oriental languages—Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, and Persian—along with fluency in over a dozen modern languages. She graduated from Ohio State University, where she was a member of Delta Delta Delta, earned a master's degree from Cornell University, and completed Ph.D. *magna cum laude* at the University of Chicago. In addition, she obtained a law degree from the Washington College of Law, signalling her belief in the power of education as a gateway to influence in multiple professional arenas.¹¹

REED, Ivy Kellerman (Mrs. Edwin C. Reed), Maryland Bld'g, Washington, D.C. Editor; b. Oshkosh, Wis., 1877; dau. William A. and Stella V. (Dennis) Kellerman; ed. Ohio State Univ., A.B. '98; Cornell Univ., A.M. '99; Univ. of Chicago, Ph.D. (magna cum laude) '04; LL.B. Washington College of Law, 1913; student Royal Univ. of Berlin, 1906 (Delta Delta Delta); m. 1909, Edwin C. Reed, Instructor in Greek, Iowa Coll., 1907; Latin, Central High School, Toledo, O., 1907-08; chairman Examination Com., Esperanto Ass'n of North America, 1909-11. Editor of *Amerika Esperantisto* since 1911. Author: *A Complete Grammar of Esperanto*; *Kiel Placas Al Vi* (translation of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* into Esperanto); *La Rego de la Ora Rivero* (translation of Ruskin's *King of the Golden River*); also short stories and verses in various magazines. Mem. Phi Beta Kappa (elected by the Ohio State Univ. from its alumni roll for class of 1898). Favors woman suffrage; took part in suffrage parades Mar. 3 and April 7, 1913 (Washington). Recreations: Dancing, tennis.

Figure 4: Factsheet about Dr. Reed, see: n.9.

Her entry into the Esperanto movement combined her scholarly skills with her passion for linguistic clarity. She authored two influential grammars—*The Complete Grammar of the International Language* (1910) and *The Practical Grammar of the International Language* (1915)—which became key reference works for English-speaking learners. She also served as editor-in-chief of *American Esperantist*, where her editorial leadership and

¹¹ Figure 4: Leonard, William John, *Woman's who's who of America: a biographical dictionary of contemporary women of the United States and Canada 1914-1915*, (New York, 1976), p. 677.

linguistic expertise earned her the affectionate praise of her peers; at one congress, the toastmaster referred to the “great Reed-ability” of the magazine, a wordplay that captured both the respect and the warmth she inspired in the community.¹²

Kellerman Reed’s contributions to Esperanto literature extended beyond grammar. She collaborated with Ralph A. Lewin to produce the famous Esperanto translation of *Winnie-the-Pooh*, and she translated Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, which was performed at the Sixth World Esperanto Congress in Washington, D.C. in 1910. This was not only the first performance of Shakespeare in Esperanto but also a symbolic moment for the movement, demonstrating the language’s capacity to convey the full range of literary expression.

Her public presence was not limited to the Esperanto stage. Kellerman Reed was also active in the American women’s suffrage movement, marching in at least two major suffrage parades in Washington, D.C., in 1913. This activism suggests that, for her, Esperanto was one strand in a broader commitment to equality, communication, and the dismantling of barriers—whether linguistic, legal, or political.

At Esperanto congresses, she was a sought-after speaker whose appearances drew prolonged applause, signalling her high standing among her peers. Her dual identity as a scholar and activist gave her a unique authority: she was able to advance Esperanto’s intellectual respectability while also embodying the inclusive, internationalist spirit that its advocates prized.

In her lifetime, Dr. Ivy Kellerman Reed demonstrated that women could not only participate in the Esperanto movement but shape its scholarly foundations, cultural output, and public image. Her work bridged the academy and the grassroots, the literary and the political, making her a model of the multifaceted contributions women could bring to a transnational linguistic project.¹³

¹² *Fifth North American Esperanto Congress in Amerika Esperantisto*, Vol 12. No.1, (August 1912), p.7.

¹³ *Creating Her Own Path: The Unique Career of Linguist Ivy Kellerman Reed* (2022), <<https://www.tridelta.org/the-trident/creating-her-own-path-the-unique-career-of-linguist-ivy-kellerman-reed/>> [accessed August, 2025]; *Ivy Kellerman Reed*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ivy_Kellerman_Reed> [accessed August, 2025].

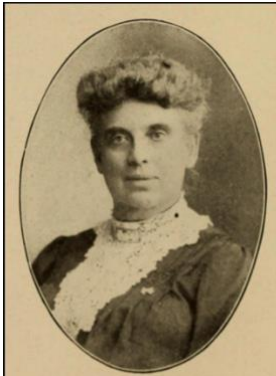


Figure 5: Mrs. Wilbur Crafts, 1908.

Case Study 2: Sara Jane Crafts (Mrs. Wilbur F. Crafts)

Sara Jane Crafts, better known in the Esperanto community under the name “Mrs. Wilbur F. Crafts,” was an American social reformer, educator, author, and lecturer whose career spanned both national and international spheres. Born in Cincinnati, Ohio, on 15 August 1845 to Jesse and Jane Timanus, she grew up in a family that valued education. After attending public schools in Cincinnati, she studied at the Ohio Wesleyan Female College and Iowa University in Grinnell, graduating into a society that afforded few professional avenues for women. Teaching was one such avenue, and between 1865 and 1874 she taught in public schools and at the Minnesota State Normal School, an institution specifically devoted to training teachers.¹⁴

In 1874 she married Reverend Wilbur Fisk Crafts, beginning a long partnership in religious, educational, and reform work. The Crafts were deeply involved in Sunday school education, travelling extensively to deliver lectures and organise programmes. Sara Jane Crafts became superintendent of the Sunday School Department of the World’s Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in 1895, placing her in the leadership of one of the most prominent women-led reform movements in the United States. Her work with the WCTU aligned with the broader temperance movement, which was closely linked to women’s suffrage advocacy in its emphasis on moral reform and social responsibility.

From the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth, Crafts’s career was defined by remarkable global mobility. Between 1880 and 1913 she travelled extensively across Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, visiting places as varied as Palestine, Australia, China,

CRAFTS, Sara Jane (Mrs. William F. Crafts), 206 Pennsylvania Av., S.E., Washington, D.C. Author, lecturer; b. Cincinnati; dau. Jesse and Jane (Means) Timanus; ed. Wesleyan Female Coll., Cincinnati, and Ia. Coll., Davenport, Ia.; m. May, 1874, Plainfield, N.J., Rev. Wilbur F. Crafts. Lecturer and teacher at Chautauquas, lecturer at State and International Sunday-school conventions; organizer International Primary Union of Sunday-school teachers. Favors woman suffrage. Associate author: *Plain Uses of the Blackboard; Childhood, The Text Book of the Age; Intoxicants and Opium; World Book of Temperance*; staff contributor to *Christian Herald*, N.Y. City. Presbyterian. Mem. Nat. Geog. Soc., British Esperanto Ass'n, Archaeological Inst. of Am., Sup't Sunday School Dept of World's W.C.T.U. In 1910 organized Sunday-schools in Iceland.

Figure 6: Factsheet about Sara Crafts, see: n.11.

¹⁴ Leonard, William John, *Woman's who's who of America: a biographical dictionary of contemporary women of the United States and Canada 1914-1915*, (New York, 1976), p. 212.

Japan, Korea, Norway, Sweden, and Iceland. These journeys were undertaken in the service of temperance, anti-opium campaigns, and Christian education, but they also brought her into contact with the internationalist ideals that underpinned Esperanto. By the time she became active in the Esperanto community, she had already acquired decades of experience in public speaking, organisational leadership, and cross-cultural advocacy.

Crafts served as vice-president of the Woman's Esperanto League of North America and was a member of both the British Esperanto Association and the Archaeological Institute of America. She edited the Esperanto column of the *Christian Herald*, through which she taught the language to readers via a series of lessons. This platform made her "well known among Esperantists" and positioned her as a bridge between the language movement and religious and philanthropic networks in the United States.¹⁵

Her public interventions at Esperanto congresses reveal both her authority and her vision for the movement. At the Fifth North American Esperanto Congress, she delivered a speech titled *Esperanto in Christian and Benevolent Work*, in which she argued for the language's potential to serve blind communities. She highlighted the prohibitive cost of producing books in Braille for each national language and explained how Esperanto could enable the creation of a single, universally accessible text for blind readers worldwide. She cited the example of the *Kapitola Klubo* of Washington, D.C., a group of blind Esperantists, and recounted her visit to an Icelandic leper colony whose members used Esperanto to correspond with the outside world. In her telling, Esperanto was not merely an intellectual pastime but a practical tool for combating isolation and fostering dignity among marginalised groups.¹⁶

Crafts's presence at the Congress also demonstrated her active role in shaping collective decisions. She brought forward proposals, such as the completion of the Esperanto Bible translation, and ensured they were formally adopted by the assembly. She was called

¹⁵ Sara Jane Crafts, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sara_Jane_Crafts> [accessed August 2025].

¹⁶ *Fifth North American Esperanto Congress in Amerika Esperantisto*, Vol 12. No.1, (August 1912), pp. 2-10.

upon to speak about her experiences in Japan, particularly regarding the country's receptivity to Esperanto and its potential role in promoting international peace.¹⁷ That her interventions were sought, and her opinions respected, suggests that she occupied a position of influence in a space often dominated by male voices.

Sara Jane Crafts exemplifies how women could integrate Esperanto into an already rich portfolio of reformist and educational work. Her leadership in religious and moral reform movements gave her the organisational skills, public platform, and moral authority to champion Esperanto as both a practical and symbolic instrument of unity. In her hands, the language became part of a broader vision of global benevolence—one that linked faith, social responsibility, and international understanding.

Case Study 3: Adela Schafer

Louisa Frederica Adela Schafer stands out as an example of how early Esperantist women blurred the lines between cultural artistry and intellectual authority. Known by her pen name *Ad. Ŝefer*, Schafer was not simply a participant but a visible organiser, teacher, and creative contributor in the formative years of the British movement. At a time when women were often expected to remain in supportive or domestic roles, she took up positions of responsibility: secretary of The British Esperantist sub-committee from its founding in 1904, elected member of the London Esperanto Club, and later representative in the English section of the international *Lingva Komitato* (Language Committee). Each of these roles placed her not on the margins but within the decision-making bodies that guided Esperanto's development.



Figure 7: Adela Schafer, (1912)

Her contributions demonstrate how women used their professional and cultural skills to shape the movement. As a trained singer and teacher, Schafer brought Esperanto into lecture halls, teachers' associations, and performance spaces. She translated hymns and

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p.7.

secular songs into the language, published a songbook in 1905, and composed the rallying anthem *Antaŭen!* — all of which made Esperanto not only learnable but singable, memorable, and emotionally resonant. Such creative interventions highlight the overlooked role of women in making the language “livable” and socially embedded.

Equally telling is her linguistic engagement. When Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* was translated into Esperanto, Schafer produced a critique noting nearly one hundred terms missing from Zamenhof’s *Universala Vortaro* (Universal Dictionary). This was not idle nit-picking: it shows a woman asserting expertise in the technical heart of the movement, vocabulary formation, an area usually dominated by male scholars. In doing so, Schafer reminds us that women were not confined to the “soft” cultural edges of Esperanto but were active participants in its intellectual construction.¹⁸

Schafer’s trajectory illustrates broader trends identified in this research: women with educational or artistic backgrounds leveraged their skills to give Esperanto both legitimacy and cultural texture. Her case complicates the idea that early Esperanto was a male-led intellectual pursuit. Instead, it reveals how women operated simultaneously as organisers, critics, and cultural producers, carving out authority in spaces where one might not expect to find them.

Discussion & Conclusion

Overall, the findings and the case studies presented here reveal that women played substantial and varied roles in the early Esperanto community. Figures such as Sara Jane Crafts, Ivy Kellerman Reed, and Adella Schafer were not simply participants—they were leaders, educators, editors, and translators, shaping the intellectual and social contours of the movement. Yet, despite these contributions, women remain underrepresented in historical records, suggesting that visibility and recognition were uneven, influenced by geography, social norms, and archival preservation.

¹⁸ Louisa Frederica Adela Schafer <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louisa_Frederica_Adela_Schafer> [accessed August 2025]

Several patterns emerge. Women often occupied roles tied to education, translation, and moral or social reform, reflecting broader opportunities that were becoming socially acceptable at the time. Yet some, like Crafts and Reed, extended their influence across international networks, challenging assumptions about the limits of women's agency in transnational spaces. This raises important questions: Why were certain roles more accessible to women, while others remained male-dominated? To what extent did their educational background, social networks, or personal convictions enable them to transcend conventional limitations?

The study also highlights variation across regions and contexts. Some women were active primarily in women-specific Esperanto groups, while others took part in mixed-gender leadership and public-facing roles. Why did these differences exist? Did cultural norms, language accessibility, or local organizational structures shape the patterns we observe? Another notable insight concerns the relationship between Esperanto and social reform. Many women combined linguistic work with moral, educational, or charitable causes, suggesting that Esperanto functioned not only as a neutral international language but also as a tool for social engagement and advocacy. This invites further reflection: Did Esperanto appeal to women because it offered a novel transnational platform for influence? Or were their activities shaped more by pre-existing reformist commitments than by the language itself?

Finally, the findings draw attention to gaps and silences in historical records. How many women contributed under pseudonyms, unpublished work, or informal networks? How might undiscovered archives or correspondence reshape our understanding of women's influence in the early Esperanto movement? What patterns or trends might remain hidden, and why have they been overlooked?

By focusing on these questions, we leave space for reflection and critical inquiry, emphasizing that the story of early women Esperantists is both revealed and yet to be fully discovered.

In light of the above, this study shows that women were not marginal to the Esperanto movement but central to its development, using the language as a means to teach, translate, organise, and advocate. Their roles illuminate how Esperanto functioned not only as a linguistic experiment but as a vehicle for cultural participation and social reform.

At the same time, the fragmentary nature of the record reminds us that women's contributions are still only partially visible. Recovering these histories matters not only for understanding Esperanto but also for rethinking how women shaped transnational intellectual and reformist networks more broadly.

The significance of this research lies less in offering final answers than in opening paths for future work. Unexplored archives and undiscovered records may yet reveal how deeply women influenced the language and the movement it fostered. In this way, early Esperantist women challenge us to see internationalism and reform through new eyes, reminding us that history is never complete, but always awaiting rediscovery.

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